

Gene variant tied to Parkinson's may also show a way to beat it

What makes each person genetically susceptible to nonfamilial Parkinson's disease is different. Using genetic data it is possible to test for types of dysfunction in the cell that are hallmarks of the disease. This will help identify environmental factors that influence the risk of developing it

Matthew Farrer

Parkinson's disease is a neurodegenerative movement disorder that progresses relentlessly. It gradually impairs a person's ability to function until they ultimately become immobile and often develop dementia. In the U.S. alone, over a million people are afflicted with Parkinson's, and new cases and overall numbers are steadily increasing.

There is currently no treatment to slow or halt Parkinson's disease. Available drugs don't slow disease progression and can treat only certain symptoms. Medications that work early in the disease, however, such as Levodopa, generally become ineffective over the years, necessitating increased doses that can lead to disabling side effects. Without understanding the fundamental molecular cause of Parkinson's, it's improbable that researchers will be able to develop a medication to stop the disease from steadily worsening in patients.

Many factors may contribute to the development of Parkinson's, both environmental and genetic. Until recently, underlying genetic causes of the disease were unknown. Most cases of Parkinson's aren't inherited but sporadic, and early studies suggested a genetic basis was improbable.

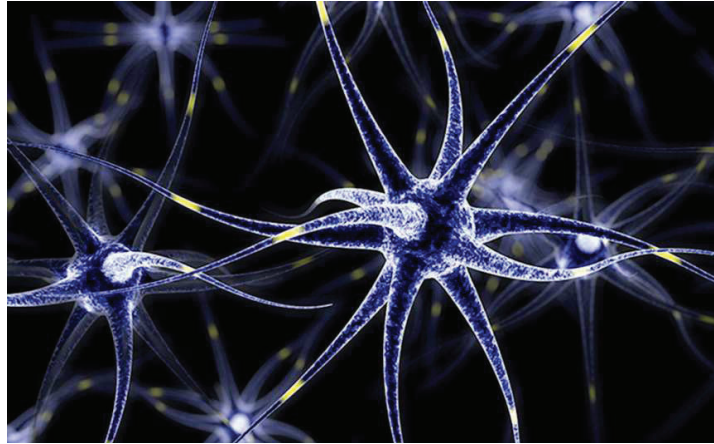
Nevertheless, everything in biology has a genetic foundation. As a geneticist and molecular neuroscientist, I have devoted my career to predicting and preventing Parkinson's disease. In our newly published research, my team and I discovered a new genetic variant linked to Parkinson's that sheds light on the evolutionary origin of multiple forms of familial Parkinsonism, opening doors to better understand and treat the disease.

Genetic linkages and associations

In the mid-1990s, researchers started looking into whether genetic differences between people with or without Parkinson's might identify specific genes or genetic variants that cause the disease. In general, I and other geneticists use two approaches to map the genetic blueprint of Parkinson's: linkage analysis and association studies.

Linkage analysis focuses on rare families where Parkinsonism, or neurological conditions with similar symptoms to Parkinson's, is passed down. This technique looks for cases where a disease-causing version of the gene and Parkinson's appear to be passed down in the same person. It requires information on your family tree, clinical data and DNA samples. Relatively few families, such as those with more than two living, affected relatives willing to participate, are needed to expedite new genetic discoveries.

"Linkage" between a pathogenic genetic variant and disease development is so significant that it can inform a diagnosis. It has also become the basis of many lab models used to study the consequences of gene dysfunction and how to fix it. Linkage studies, like the one my team and I published, have identified pathogenic mutations in over 20 genes. Notably, many patients in families with Parkinsonism have symptoms that are indistinguishable from typical, late-onset Parkinson's. Nevertheless, what causes inherited



In the U.S. alone, over a million people are afflicted with Parkinson's, and new cases and overall numbers are steadily increasing. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Parkinsonism, which typically affects people with earlier-onset disease, may not be the cause of Parkinson's in the general population.

Conversely, genome-wide association studies, or GWAS, compare genetic data from patients with Parkinson's with unrelated people of the same age, gender and ethnicity who don't have the disease. Typically, this involves assessing how frequently in both groups over 2 million common gene variants appear. Because these studies require analysing so many gene variants, researchers need to gather clinical data and DNA samples from over 100,000 people.

Although costly and time-consuming, the findings of genome-wide association studies are widely applicable. Combining the data of these studies has identified many locations in the genome that contribute to the risk of developing Parkinson's. Currently, there are over 92 locations in the genome that contain about 350 genes potentially involved in the disease. However, GWAS locations can be considered only in aggregate; individual results are not helpful in diagnosis nor in disease modeling, as the contribution of these individual genes to disease risk is so minimal.

Together, "linked" and "associated" discoveries imply a number of molecular pathways are involved in Parkinson's. Each identified gene and the proteins they encode typically can have more than one effect. The functions of each gene and protein may also vary by cell type. The question is which gene variants, functions and pathways are most relevant to Parkinson's? How do researchers meaningfully connect this data?

Parkinson's disease genes

Using linkage analysis, my team and I identified a new genetic mutation for Parkinson's disease called RAB32 Ser71Arg. This mutation was linked to Parkinsonism in three families and found in 13 other people in several countries, including Canada, France, Germany, Italy,



Linkage between a pathogenic variant and disease development is so significant that it can inform diagnosis. It has also become the basis of many lab models used to study the consequences of gene dysfunction

Poland, Turkey, Tunisia, the U.S. and the U.K.

Although the affected individuals and families originate from many parts of the world, they share an identical fragment of chromosome 6 that contains RAB32 Ser71Arg. This suggests these patients are all related to the same person; ancestrally, they are distant cousins. It also suggests there are many more cousins to identify.

With further analysis, we found RAB32 Ser71Arg interacts with several proteins previously linked to early- and late-onset Parkinsonism as well as nonfamilial Parkinson's disease. The RAB32 Ser71Arg variant also causes similar dysfunction within cells.

Together, the proteins encoded by these linked genes optimize levels of the neurotransmitter dopamine. Dopamine is lost in Parkinson's as the cells that produce it progressively die. Together, these linked genes and the proteins they encode and regulate specialised autophagy processes. In addition, these encoded proteins enable immunity within cells.

Such linked genes support the idea that these causes of inherited Parkinsonism evolved to improve survival in early life because they enhance immune response to pathogens. RAB32 Ser71Arg suggest how and why many mutations have originated, despite creating a susceptible genetic background for Parkinson's in later life.

RAB32 Ser71Arg is the first linked gene researchers have identified that directly connects the dots between prior linked

discoveries. The proteins encoded bring together three important functions of the cell: autophagy, immunity and mitochondrial function. While autophagy releases energy stored in the cell's trash, this needs to be coordinated with another specialized component within the cell, mitochondria, that are the major supplier of energy. Mitochondria also help to control cell immunity because they evolved from bacteria the cell's immune system recognizes as "self" rather than as an invading pathogen to destroy.

Identifying subtle genetic differences

Finding the molecular blueprint for familial Parkinson's is the first step to fixing the faulty mechanisms behind the disease. Like the owner's manual to your car's engine, it provides a practical guide of what to check when the motor fails.

Just as each make of motor is subtly different, what makes each person genetically susceptible to nonfamilial Parkinson's disease is also subtly different. However, analyzing genetic data can now test for types of dysfunction in the cell that are hallmarks of Parkinson's disease. This will help researchers identify environmental factors that influence the risk of developing Parkinson's, as well as medications that may help protect against the disease.

More patients and families participating in genetic research are needed to find additional components of the engine behind Parkinson's. Each person's genome has about 27 million variants of the 6 billion building blocks that make up their genes. There are many more genetic components for Parkinson's that have yet to be found.

As our discovery illustrates, each new gene that researchers identify can profoundly improve our ability to predict and prevent Parkinson's.

(Matthew Farrer is a professor of neurology, University of Florida. This article is republished from The Conversation.)



A 'Coral Fort' that researchers are using to protect laboratory-grown coral off the coast of Fort Lauderdale, Florida. AP

Scientists grasp at straws to save corals from fish

Associated Press

Researchers trying to prevent predatory fish from devouring laboratory-grown coral are grasping at biodegradable straws in an effort to restore what some call the rainforest of the sea.

Scientists around the world have been working for years to address the decline of coral reef populations. Just last summer, reef rescue groups in South Florida and the Florida Keys were trying to save coral from rising ocean temperatures. Besides working to keep existing coral alive, researchers have also been growing new coral in labs and then placing them in the ocean.

But protecting the underwater ecosystem that maintains upwards of 25% of all marine species is not easy. Even more challenging is making sure coral grown in a laboratory and placed into the ocean doesn't become fish food.

Marine researcher Kyle Pisano said one problem is predators like parrot fish attempt to bite and destroy the newly transplanted coral in areas like South Florida, leaving them with less than a 40% survival rate. With projects calling for tens of thousands of coral to be planted over the next decade, the losses add up when coral pieces can cost more

The cage consists of a limestone disc surrounded by eight vertical straws. The device doesn't have a top, because the juvenile coral needs sunlight and the fish don't face downward to eat

than \$100 (Rs 8,300) each.

Mr. Pisano and his partner, Kirk Dotson, have developed 'Coral Fort', claiming the small biodegradable cage made in part with drinking straws boosts the survival rate of transplanted coral to over 90%.

The fish eventually lose interest in the coral as it matures, but scientists need to protect the coral in the meantime. Stainless steel and PVC pipe barriers have been set up around transplanted coral in the past, but those barriers needed to be cleaned of algae growth and eventually removed.

Mr. Pisano had the idea of creating a protective barrier that would eventually dissolve, eliminating the need to maintain or remove it. He began conducting offshore experiments with biodegradable coral cages as part of a master's degree program at Nova Southeastern University. He used a substance called polyhydroxyalkanoate, a biopolymer derived from the fermentation of canola oil. PHA biodegrades in the ocean, leaving only water and carbon dioxide. His findings were published last year.

The coral cage consists of a limestone disc surrounded by eight vertical plastic brand drinking straws. The device doesn't have a top, Mr. Pisano said, because the juvenile coral needs sunlight and the parrot fish don't generally want to position themselves facing downward to eat.

Mr. Dotson, a retired aerospace engineer, and Mr. Pisano formed Reef Fortify Inc. to further develop the patent-pending Coral Fort. The first batch of cages were priced at \$12 (Rs 1,000) each, but the two believe that could change as production scales up.

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

Eighty years since the chance discovery of LSD

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

On April 16, 1943, 80 years ago this day, the Swiss chemist Albert Hoffman accidentally ingested a small quantity of LSD and discovered its unique effects on the human psyche, cognition, and perception. What does LSD stand for?

QUESTION 2

Hoffman had synthesised LSD five years prior by using water molecules to break down molecules of an organic compound produced by a fungus called _____. Fill in the blank. Hint: Ingesting this organic compound leads to a condition in humans called St. Anthony's fire.

QUESTION 3

For some time, researchers believed that LSD's effects mimicked those of

schizophrenia, and thus the compound was held to be psychotomimetic.

Around the mid-century, which English psychiatrist coined the term "psychedelic" to refer to LSD's effects, once it became clear they differed from those of schizophrenia because they could be psychologically beneficial?

QUESTION 4

Psychedelic substances are also called serotonergic hallucinogens because they activate receptors in the body just the way the neurotransmitter serotonin does, heightening the resulting symptoms. But LSD is unusual among psychedelics because it also stimulates the receptors of which other neurotransmitter?

QUESTION 5

Name the program of illegal human

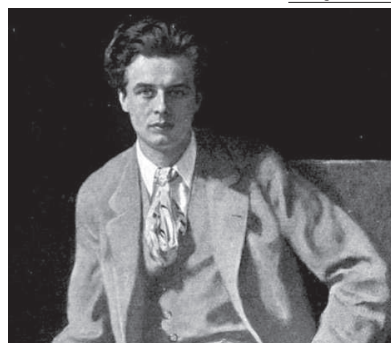
experiments the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) conducted from 1953 to 1973 in which it used psychoactive substances including LSD to inflict psychological torture to force confessions from people during interrogations.

Answers to April 11 quiz:

- Unit used to measure the solid angle - **Ans: Steradian**
- Unit used to measure capacitance - **Ans: Farad**
- Unit used to measure the density of magnetic flux - **Ans: Tesla**
- Unit used to measure radiation by its effects on biological tissue - **Ans: Sievert**
- Unit used to measure the catalytic activity of an enzyme - **Ans: Katal**

Visual: **W.E. Weber**

First contact: K.N. Viswanathan |
Muhammed Shahid Suri | Appa Rao M.V. |
Jyoti Prakash Gultali



Visual: Name this famous English writer who, after trying LSD, joined as an advisor to researchers at Harvard University in the 1960s working on similar drugs. PUBLIC DOMAIN

Please send in your answers to
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Pitch for continuity

BJP manifesto is as focused on achievements as on promises

In its manifesto for the 2024 general election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has sought a popular mandate for a third consecutive term under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The party’s campaign is based primarily on its track record of the previous two terms. It has underscored its achievements in terms of the advancement of a core ideological agenda and governance promises, while making the case for a third term. The special status of Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 was undone, and the Ram temple in Ayodhya was inaugurated during the second term of Mr. Modi. A third component of the core programme of the BJP, namely, implementation of a Uniform Civil Code, has been promised in the third term. The manifesto has a catalogue of measures already implemented by the BJP, which include the ongoing free grain scheme that covers two-thirds of the population, piped drinking water, and other anti-poverty programmes, particularly in housing. The manifesto claims that 25 crore people have been lifted out of poverty during the last two terms of governance. Criminalisation of triple talaq is also cited as an achievement. The manifesto cites the expanded representation of Other Backward Classes, tribal communities and Dalits in government – 60% of the outgoing Council of Ministers, according to the manifesto – as proof of the commitment to social justice.

In its pitch for a third term, the BJP argues that continuity of a strong, stable government is essential in steering the country through a period of global instability. It also promises the implementation of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the law for women’s reservations in the third term. The party steers clear of any view regarding the demand for a caste census – which is a promise in the Congress manifesto – but makes a mention of the 10% reservation that it implemented for the Economically Weaker Sections. The key new promise that it makes for a third term is a health-care guarantee worth up to ₹5 lakh for senior citizens. In a notable departure, there is no reference in the manifesto for a National Register of Citizens, a contentious topic. Apart from the emphasis on Mr. Modi’s personal appeal – the entire manifesto is titled ‘Modi’s Guarantee’ – the BJP is making an appeal to the Gramin, Yuva, Annadata, Nari and Middle Class (GYANM) segment, which refers to rural areas, youth, farmers, women and the new middle class. The manifesto documents the BJP’s strategy and vision which indicates continuity in the trajectory of India set during the last 10 years. After two terms, the BJP had to necessarily recount its welfare schemes and other achievements, but as a party in power, its promises should have been more substantive. The voters will necessarily weigh the promises in the backdrop of the achievements.

Two-horse race

Karnataka is seeing a straight contest between BJP and Congress

Almost a year since the Siddaramaiah-led Congress rode to power in Karnataka with a thumping majority of 136 seats out of 224 in the State Legislature, the party is banking on the widespread appreciation for implementing its ‘five guarantees’ that it had promised in order to take on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Janata Dal (Secular) (JDS) alliance in the general election. While the polls to the Lok Sabha are in the backdrop of the Rameshwaram Cafe blast in Bengaluru on March 1, that left nine people injured, the incident has had little impact on the ground, with even the BJP, which has alleged that it is a case of a ‘law and order’ failure, treading carefully to avoid giving it communal undertones. It is a difficult lesson the BJP is likely to have learnt from its performance in the Assembly elections on May 10, 2023. Its governance was marked by months of communally polarising government orders and issues, beginning with the hijab ban in February 2022 soon after Basavaraj Bommai replaced the hugely popular party veteran B.S. Yediyurappa as Chief Minister. This was followed by the repeal of the 4% reservations for Muslims in State government jobs and educational institutions, and distributing this quota equally between Vokkaligas and Veerashaiva-Lingayats. The repeal, in the form of a government order on March 27, came weeks before the Assembly elections in May. Yet, the Congress bettered its 2018 Assembly poll performance by four percentage points, garnering an impressive 43% vote share, while there was no change in the BJP’s vote share of 36%.

The Congress’s ‘five guarantees’ have resulted in tangible benefits for more than two-thirds of the State’s population, going by government claims. But the party’s attempt to make the ‘denial of Karnataka’s central pool of funds’ a poll issue has had little resonance. The BJP has witnessed steady success in the Lok Sabha polls in Karnataka, bettering its 2014 record of 43% by 8.4 percentage points in the 2019 general election, crossing the half-way mark at 51.4%, and winning 25 of the 28 seats. With the JD(S) steadily losing ground and vote share and being viewed as representing only one community, the Vokkaligas, it has been relegated to being allotted three seats in the BJP-led alliance. This general election would thus be a direct contest between the BJP and the Congress. But it appears unlikely that the BJP, now the principal Opposition in the State, will be able to replicate its performance in 2019.

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) years are often, in mainstream media, lauded as years with a generous welfare agenda. But do budgetary allocations in the Union Budget corroborate this assessment?

We try to answer this by looking at the trend in welfare spending over the past 20 years. We compare expenditure on what we label “NDA schemes” with United Progressive Alliance (UPA) or “UPA schemes”.

Contrasting models?

For the UPA decade (2004-2014), we include five major programmes as “UPA schemes”. These are the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) 2005 and four schemes of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) 2013: the Public Distribution System (PDS), Mid-Day Meals (MDM), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and maternity entitlements (provided through the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) that operationalised very belatedly in 2017).

For the PDS, we use the food subsidy. Apportioning the food subsidy into a consumer-, producer- (i.e., the farmer’s share, who sells wheat and rice at minimum support prices) subsidy and administrative costs is not straightforward. However, halving the food subsidy (as an approximation of the consumer subsidy) does not make much of a difference.

During the NDA period (2014-2024), the Bharatiya Janata Party funded the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) from 2014, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban (PMAY-U) from 2015 and PM-Awas (rural) the following year along with Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana. The PM-Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-Kisan) and Ayushman Bharat were initiated in 2018, while the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) was in 2019. The total budget for Ayushman Bharat from 2019-24 was ₹32,000 crore, i.e., half the annual expenditure on PM-Awas, averaged over the same period. Including it does not change the broad results, which is why we exclude it.



Reetika Kherra

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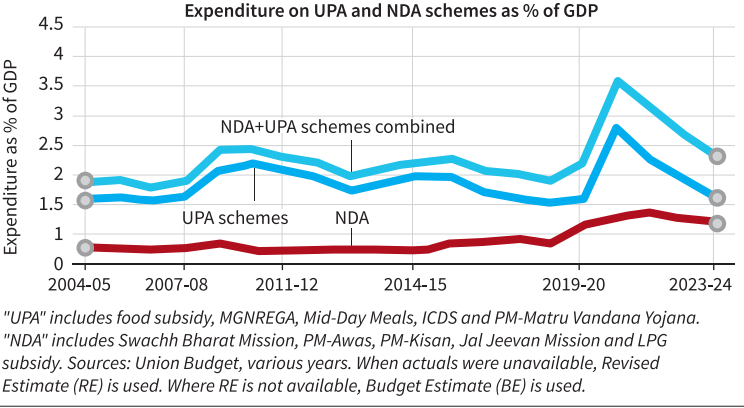
Md. Asjad

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The NDA government has managed to project itself as a big welfare spender by renaming pre-existing UPA programmes but has been underfunding them without any compensatory social assistance of its own

The state of welfare

Notwithstanding the Modi government’s shrill rhetoric, welfare spending (as % of GDP) has stagnated during its term



New data law, a barrier to journalistic free speech

In August 2023, India got its first comprehensive data protection law, the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023. The government is in the process of framing rules and regulations to operationalise the law and the process is expected to be done after the general election. The law is largely based on users giving consent for the processing of their personal data. It provides basic rights such as access to and erasure of data, places some obligations on companies, and establishes a complaints body for grievance redress. However, the law might have an invisible impact on journalistic free speech.

Typically, data protection laws exempt journalistic activities from privacy obligations such as notifying users and taking their consent before using their personal data. Three previous drafts of the DPDP Act had exemptions for journalistic activities, but the final law withdrew such an exemption. The Editors Guild of India also pointed to this risk and in a letter to the government, requested that journalistic activities be exempted from the DPDP Act.

An impediment

Now you may ask, what does privacy have to do with journalistic free speech? Imagine that you are a journalist writing about a Member of Parliament (MP) and his performance. For your story, you use information from their lives such as the meetings they held, where, and with whom, the towns, villages, and cities they travelled to. How often did they use a private jet or a chartered plane? What about their financial background and also the investments made by their close family members? Most of this information is not available in the public domain and needs a lot of research. All this information about an MP is their ‘personal data’, which is data



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In the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, the removal of ‘journalistic exemption’ highlights the need for more robust public consultation

protected under the DPDP Act. Consequently, any journalist who wishes to use this data will have to get their consent before publishing the story. Even after publication, the MP can exercise their right to erasure and request journalists to delete such stories.

Further, the DPDP Act empowers the government to call for information from any data processor in India. Depending on how this provision is interpreted and applied, this may impact the confidentiality that journalists must maintain for their sources and research documents. Taken together, this need for journalists to get consent before publishing their story, the potential for the subject to rely on the right to erasure to have the story deleted, and the power of the government to call for information would likely impede a journalist’s ability to discharge their role as the fourth estate – of holding the state accountable.

If this is a well-identified challenge, then why did the government remove such an exemption from subsequent drafts? This remains unclear. Three previous drafts of the DPDP Act, one released by an expert committee on data protection (2018), the other by the government (2019), and the third released by a Joint Parliamentary Committee in 2021, contained clear exemptions for journalistic activities. In two subsequent drafts of the DPDP Act (2022 and 2023), the exemption given to journalistic activities was withdrawn without reasons being given.

No clarification

This instance of the end stage removal of the clause for journalistic exemption points to the need for adopting a more robust and transparent public consultation process around proposed laws. One of the primary ways to get feedback on

available). The proportion of households practising open defecation has halved (from 39% to 19%) and those residing in ‘pucca’ homes barely changed (from 56% to 60%).

It is precisely because the NDA lacked imagination that during COVID-19, it fell back on UPA initiatives, including NREGA which was mocked in 2015 by the Prime Minister as a symbol of the Congress’s failures.

The NDA’s fraught relationship with UPA schemes is evident in the case of the PDS/PMGKAY too. The NFSA 2013 mandated 50% coverage in urban areas and 75% in rural areas (i.e., 800 million in all), providing five kilograms a person a month at ₹2-₹3 a kg (for wheat and rice, respectively) for those covered by the PDS.

From April 2020 to December 2022, the government doubled people’s entitlements (from five kilograms each month to 10 kg, providing the extra five kilograms free) as COVID-19 relief. When the COVID-19 top up was discontinued in 2023, to blunt the blow, the original NFSA entitlement (five kilograms for ₹10-₹15) was made free. This repackaged PDS, that saved each person an additional ₹15 a month at most, was renamed PMGKAY.

Facts aside, the current expanded coverage of 800 million through the PDS that a UPA legislation (the NFSA 2013) enabled, is now associated much more with the BJP than the Congress. This is astonishing because the NDA’s failure to conduct the 2021 Census has excluded millions from the PDS. Estimates based on population projections show that applying NFSA mandated coverage ratios (50% in urban and 75% in rural areas) to the 2021 population would have added more than 100 million to the PDS.

State initiatives

The silver lining is that several State governments, especially those ruled by regional parties, have stepped up to the plate. For instance, while the Union government has barely increased per child cooking costs for school meals, even poorer States such as Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha provide for eggs a few times a week in the MDM and ICDS.

Similarly, the central contribution to some social security pensions (for the elderly, widows) has stagnated at ₹200 per month since 2006. Meanwhile, most States provide a top up and several have increased coverage. Odisha’s Madhu Babu Pension Yojana supports 58% of pensioners in the State. Odisha and Tamil Nadu provide higher amounts (₹10,000 and ₹18,000, respectively) as maternity entitlements to pregnant women than the Centre’s PMMVY (₹5,000-₹6,000).

The NDA government has managed to build a reputation as a big welfare spender by renaming pre-existing programmes (MDM/POSHAN, PDS/PMGKAY), while underfunding them without any compensatory social assistance of its own. In an Orwellian world, “war is peace”, “freedom is slavery”, so under the NDA’s, “guarantee is precarity” and “welfare is self-care”.

a law is to institute an ‘open and transparent’ public consultation model. Although the Indian government released three separate drafts of the data protection law for public consultation, none of the comments received on the drafts has ever been released in the public domain. This impedes the ability of citizens to understand what different stakeholders were saying and who was finally heard in the final formulation of the law. The government has also conducted invite-only town halls to gather feedback on drafts of the DPDP Act.

The withdrawal of exemptions for journalistic activities was not discussed in such town halls. And, no clarification was provided by the government for its withdrawal. Unfortunately, these consultations and town halls are often not conducive to enable open debate and deliberation on the proposed law and its provisions.

An appeal

Legally then, what are the solutions we can envision? In addition to enabling an open and transparent consultation process, the government can swiftly remedy this problem via rules under the DPDP Act. Under the Act, the central government has the power to exempt any data processor or ‘classes’ of data processors from any provisions of the law. These give wide powers to the government to single-handedly provide and take away an exemption – but it is the quickest route available in this case. Although an exemption for journalistic work should form part of the core text of the law, the government must use this rule to exempt journalistic entities, including citizen journalists, from any obligations under the DPDP Act. This will ensure that the DPDP Act does not have negative consequences on journalistic free speech in India.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Think and vote

General election 2024 has a deeper implication due to the Bharatiya Janata Party’s socio-political agenda. It looks like it is another war of independence because of the divisive and hate politics of the BJP, which is dangerous for the unity and integrity of the nation. Democratic values are in

great danger. Secularism is fading fast. One government at the Centre with no rights for the States will hamper the growth and development of States. On the one hand, the BJP buys off its opponents, failing which cases are filed against them. Instrumentalities of the government such as the ED

and CBI are used towards party ends. On the other hand, the BJP has successfully weaponised Hindutva for electoral gains. The reality is that Hindutva is being used as a smoke screen to hide the crony capitalist policies of the BJP. The real issues facing the nation are unemployment, inflation, poverty, wealth

and income inequality, religious polarisation, caste discrimination among others which can never be tackled with the BJP’s agenda. It is imperative that people mobilise themselves to think and act not merely in terms of their perception of one leader but on the basis of which leader will be able

to meet the aspirations of the people while uniting the country as a whole. Else, we would be fast heading to one man rule, and not a constitutional form of governance.
N.G.R. Prasad,
Chennai

‘Ageless Dhoni’
Julius Caesar came, he saw

and he conquered Pharnaces II. M.S. Dhoni came, he saw and he conquered Wankhade against Mumbai Indians with his swashbuckling four-ball 20 runs laced with a hat-trick of sixes. And, CSK won by 20 runs (‘Sport’ page, April 15).
K. Pradeep,
Chennai

India’s Arctic imperative

In December 2023, when four Indian climate scientists arrived in Oslo to begin acclimatisation for India’s maiden winter expedition at the Arctic, they had little idea of what lay ahead. Himadri, India’s research station in the International Arctic Research Base at Svalbard in Norway, had until then hosted missions only in the summer. A winter expedition entails living in the intense cold (as low as -15 degrees Celsius) after a period of rigorous acclimatisation. More concerning for Indian researchers was the daunting prospect of polar nights.

Growing interest in the Arctic
In March 2024, India’s first winter experience at the Arctic came to a successful end. While the scientists will doubtless be proud of their feat, India’s long reluctance to embark on an all-year Arctic mission calls for introspection. For over a decade, India’s National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research saw no reason for a winter mission to the Arctic. What changed Indian policy, ostensibly, was scientific data showing that the Arctic was warming faster than previously thought. When facts tying catastrophic climatic occurrences in India to the melting of Arctic Sea ice emerged, decision-makers felt compelled to act.

Second, New Delhi is seized of the opening up of Arctic Sea routes, primarily the Northern Sea Route, and would like to route Indian trade through the region. This might help India reduce costs for shipping companies along with time, fuel, and security costs for transmitting goods.

The third reason is geopolitics. China’s growing investments in the Arctic have raised concern in India. Russia’s decision to grant China expanded access to the Northern Sea Route has deepened this anxiety. India’s increasing focus on the Arctic comes at a time of heightened tensions in the region, fuelled by the Russia-Ukraine conflict and



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While the Indian government seems keen to benefit from seabed mining and resource exploitation in the Arctic, it ought to unequivocally back a sustainable mode of extraction

exacerbated by the suspension of various regional cooperative forums. There are concerns about the potential repercussions of these tensions, especially given Russia’s growing reliance on its nuclear deterrent on the Kola Peninsula. For India, which aims to maintain constructive relations with both western nations and Russia, these developments carry significant strategic implications.

To be sure, India is no newcomer to the Arctic. Its involvement in the region goes back to 1920, with the signing of the Svalbard Treaty in Paris. In 2007, India undertook its first research mission to investigate Arctic microbiology, atmospheric sciences, and geology. A year later, India became the only developing country, aside from China, to establish an Arctic research base. After being granted ‘observer’ status by the Arctic Council in 2013, India commissioned a multi-sensor moored observatory in Svalbard in 2014 and an atmospheric laboratory in 2016. The work at these stations focuses on examining Arctic ice systems and glaciers and the consequences of Arctic melt on the Himalayas and the Indian monsoon.

Even so, the issue of Indian engagement in the Arctic divides the country’s academic and policy communities. Opinions are split over the potential impacts of the changing climate in the Arctic on India’s economy. The concern primarily stems from mining in the region for fossil fuels, an area where India has yet to articulate a clear economic strategy. The proponents of economic exploitation in the Arctic advocate a pragmatic approach in the region, especially around oil and gas exploration, and mining. The sceptics warn about the potential environmental consequences and underscore the need for a more balanced policy framework that recognises the negative aspects of maritime resource exploitation.

Potential for collaboration
Norway, the present chair of the

Arctic Council, has close ties with India. Since the late 1980s, the two countries have collaborated to investigate changing conditions in the Arctic and Antarctic, as well as their impact on South Asia. As climate change ends up more deeply affecting the Arctic and the South Asian monsoon, these efforts have accelerated over time.

India’s present policy is to cooperate with Arctic countries in green energy, and green and clean industries, as a way of bolstering its ‘responsible stakeholder’ credentials. With Denmark and Finland, for instance, Indian collaboration has come in areas such as waste management, pollution control, renewable energy, and green technology. Many believe a partnership with Norway could be transformational for India as it would enable greater Indian participation in the Arctic Council’s working groups, tackling issues such as the blue economy, connectivity, maritime transportation, investment and infrastructure, and responsible resource development. While the Indian government seems keen to benefit from seabed mining and resource exploitation in the Arctic, it ought to unequivocally back a sustainable mode of extraction.

Understandably, a partnership with Norway is likely to be focused on scientific research and climate and environmental protection. These are two of the six pillars that comprise India’s Arctic Policy (the other four being economic and human development; transportation and connectivity; governance and international cooperation; and national capacity building). India would perhaps still look to explore economic opportunities in the Arctic. Norway could, then, help India design a sustainable policy that accommodates the needs of both the scientific community and industry. As global geopolitical tensions are also mounting in the Arctic, finding constructive and non-sensitive ways to alleviate pressure will be in the interest of both India and Norway.

The Next-Gen steps up in J&K

The BJP’s main plank is dynasty politics, but the regional parties are unfazed

STATE OF PLAY

Peerzada Ashiq
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This is an election of many firsts in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). It is the first parliamentary election after the State of J&K was bifurcated into the two Union Territories, and its special constitutional status scrapped, on August 5, 2019. This is also the first election in which the next generation of influential families in the region – the Abdullahs, Muftis, and Azads – are plunging into politics, even as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) continues to attack the practice of dynastic politics, a strategy which it hopes will help it keep these political families in J&K at bay.

The reins of the National Conference (NC), a party which was founded by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah in 1939, has remained firmly with the Abdullahs for more than nine decades despite the efforts by rivals, both within and outside the party, to dislodge them. The name Abdullah remains the pivot of the party.

However, successions have never been a cakewalk. Sheikh Abdullah’s son, Farooq Abdullah, succeeded him as the leader of the party in a formal ceremony on August 21, 1981, at Mujahid Manzil in Srinagar’s downtown area. But given the souring of relations between the Abdullahs and the Gandhi family then, there were apprehensions that the Congress-led Centre would remove Sheikh Abdullah as J&K’s Chief Minister.

Since the 1980s, there has been no formal succession of the Abdullahs in J&K. Dr. Farooq Abdullah’s son Omar Abdullah saw a subdued entry into politics in 1998, at a time

when J&K was in the grip of militancy. Mr. Omar Abdullah became India’s youngest minister at the age of 29 and held the portfolio of Minister of State, Commerce and Industry, in 1999 under the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The NDA believed then that only the Abdullahs could save Kashmir from separatists and militants.

Cut to 2024. Zahir and Zamir Abdullah, Mr. Omar Abdullah’s sons, were conspicuous at the NC’s iftar party thrown for local journalists. The two of them joined the evening prayers and helped their father place *traams*, copper plates from which four persons eat – a marker of traditional Kashmiri hospitality. Both the sons hold law degrees and have begun expressing their political views. Commenting on a recent speech by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Jammu, promising to restore Statehood, Mr. Zahir Abdullah wrote on social media, “Yet again, vague and ambiguous timelines (from the PM).”

When People’s Democratic Party (PDP) president, Mehbooba Mufti, who is the daughter of former Union Home Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, was jailed on the eve of August 5, 2019, in Kashmir, her daughter Iltija Mufti became the face and voice of the party. Ms. Iltija Mufti’s plunge into politics is complete now. She has been visiting residents and getting feed-

back on various issues in the remote areas of south Kashmir, where her mother is taking on political stalwarts such as the NC’s Mian Altaf and the Democratic Progressive Azad Party’s Ghulam Nabi Azad. By speaking about issues faced by rural women and employing social media to connect with the youth, Ms. Iltija Mufti is clearly preparing to take up a bigger role within the party.

Similarly, Mr. Azad’s son, Saddam Nabi Azad, has been canvassing for his father on-line and offline.

These developments have brought the dynasty debate into focus once again. The reason the BJP is unable to make a dent despite its accusations of dynasty rule resonating with voters is that the party has failed to bring in a new crop of politicians to take on these families. The leaders propped up by the BJP through the panchayat and municipal elections in the past five years have failed to infuse new blood into the party or emerge as alternatives to these families.

On the other hand, the Abdullahs and Muftis have captured the discourse by defending J&K’s intra-regional identity and fighting for the restoration of autonomous status to J&K. This has struck a chord with the people and diffused the BJP’s dynasty narrative. The only worrying sign for them is the murmurs within their parties about the need to create a more competitive and democratic space for non-family members.

Responding to accusations of dynasty politics, Dr. Farooq Abdullah recently said, “Dynasts may be the case in Bollywood and business. In politics, people and votes propel a leader... A leader has to connect with the people and garner support to win elections.”

What share of global CO₂ emissions come from aviation?

Aviation accounts for 2.5% of global CO₂ emissions. But it has contributed around 4% to global warming to date

DATA POINT

Hannah Ritchie

Flying is one of the most carbon-intensive activities, yet it contributes just 2.5% of the world’s carbon emissions. How does this add up? Well, nearly everyone in the world does not fly. Studies estimate that just 10% of the world flies in most years. But as incomes rise, this will change.

Increased demand and technological improvements have driven the change in aviation emissions over the last 50 years. Total CO₂ emissions are often explained through the “Kaya identity” – how many people there are, their income, the energy efficiency of economies, and the carbon intensity of energy. We can use a similar framework to understand the drivers of aviation emissions.

This article looks at historical changes in aviation demand, efficiency, and its contribution to climate change. Most of this work is based on an excellent paper by Candelaria Bergero and colleagues and another by David Lee and colleagues. To calculate carbon emissions from aviation, we need to know three metrics. Aviation demand: how many passenger and freight kilometers; energy efficiency: how much energy is used per km; carbon intensity: what fuel is being used, which tells us the carbon emitted per unit of energy. Multiply these metrics together, and we get CO₂ emissions.

Chart 1 shows trends in these relevant metrics since 1990. For now, let’s ignore the period of the pandemic and focus on the trends up to 2019. Between 1990 and 2019, both passenger and freight demand approximately quadrupled. In 2019, passengers travelled more than 8 trillion km, which is about the same as a light year.

At the same time, flying has become more than twice as energy efficient. Travelling one passenger-km in 1990 used 2.9 megajoules

(MJ) of energy. By 2019, this had more than halved to 1.3 MJ. This efficiency has come from improved design and technology, larger planes that can carry more passengers, and a higher ‘passenger load factor’. Empty seats are less common than in the past.

The carbon intensity of that fuel – how much CO₂ is emitted per unit – has not changed at all. We used standard jet fuel in 1990 and we are using the same today. It has not become any cleaner. Biofuels and other alternatives are just a tiny fraction of global demand.

If flying has become more than twice as energy efficient, and the carbon emitted per unit of energy has not changed, then it follows that the carbon efficiency of travelling one km is also more than twice as high. In 1990, one passenger-km would emit 357 grams of CO₂. By 2019, this had more than halved to 157 grams. How have the changes in demand and technology affected CO₂ emissions?

If demand has quadrupled, but aviation has become twice as efficient, then emissions will double. The gains in efficiency have partly counteracted the emissions from increased demand. In 1990, global aviation emitted around 0.5 billion tonnes. In 2019, that was around 1 billion as shown in Chart 1.

Global CO₂ emissions from aviation have quadrupled since the 1960s. To examine a longer-term perspective, the recent data was extended back to 1940 (**Chart 2**). Emissions have quadrupled since the mid-1960s.

Aviation’s share in global emissions has been calculated using the time series above and total CO₂ emissions data using the Global Carbon Project. In 2019, aviation accounted for 2.5% of CO₂ emissions from fossil sources and land use. This share fluctuated from 2% to 2.5% since the mid-1990s but with a marked increase since 2010 (**Chart 3**).

Dr. Hannah Ritchie is the Deputy Editor and Science Outreach Lead in OurWorldInData

Polluted skies

Hannah Ritchie (2024) - “What share of global CO₂ emissions come from aviation?” Published online at OurWorldInData.org.



Chart 1: The charts show year-wise global aviation demand, energy efficiency and CO₂ emissions

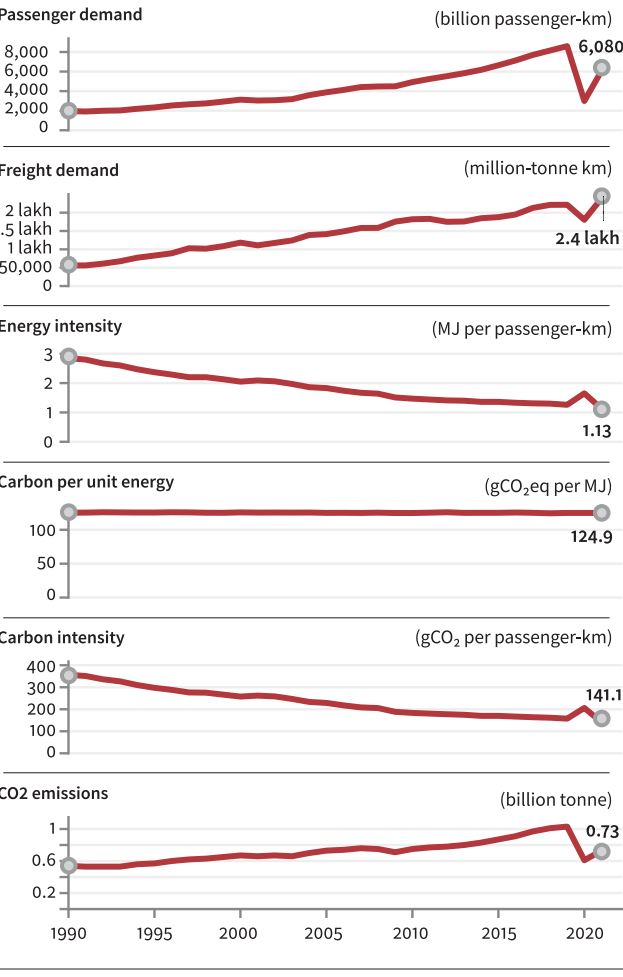


Chart 2: The chart shows global CO₂ emissions from aviation

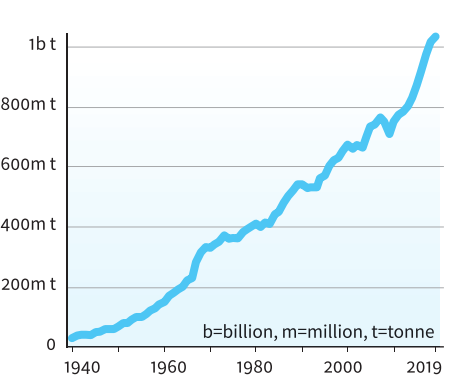
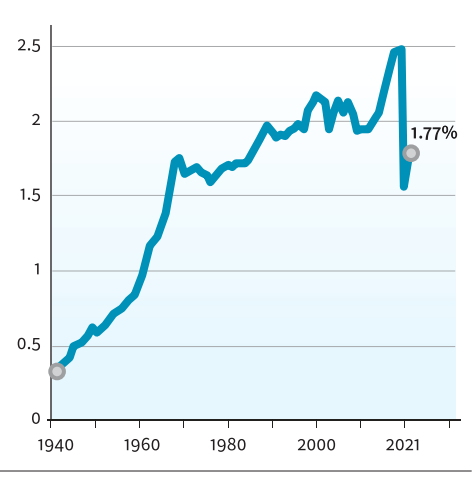


Chart 3: The chart shows aviation’s share in global CO₂ emissions



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 16, 1974

Railmen decide to go on indefinite strike from May 8

New Delhi, April 15: Following the deadlock at to-day’s talks with the Railway Board on the railwaymen’s demands, the National Co-ordination Committee of Railway Unions has decided to launch an “indefinite strike from May 8.” The Co-ordination Committee, after over six hours of deliberations, to-night called upon the three Railway federations and other Railway unions to serve a 14-day notice on the Railways on April 23 for the strike from May 8.

Meanwhile, the Railway Minister, Mr. I.N. Mishra, has conveyed to Mr. George Fernandez that the Member (Staff) of the Railway Board, Mr. G.P. Warriar’s talks with the Negotiating Committee earlier in the day, were not the “last words” and that he (Mr. Mishra) would like to meet him (Mr. Fernandez) and other members of the Committee on the afternoon of April 18. Though the date for the proposed indefinite strike has been fixed by the Co-ordination Committee, the time from which the strike should commence is to be decided to-morrow.

Mr. Fernandez, after his discussion with the Railway Board Member, Mr. Warriar, had written to the Railway Minister, Mr. Mishra, pointing out the “dead end” reached in the talks since the Government’s position on all the demands “was totally negative.” “We have certain just and legitimate demands and your Ministry’s response is a flat ‘no’ to all our demands. The National Co-ordination Committee is due to meet at 3 p.m. to-day and we would have appreciated knowing from you whether Mr. Warriar’s word is the last word. And if it is not, then how and where do we go from here?” Mr. Fernandez in his letter asked Mr. Mishra.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 16, 1924

Lake levels of Victoria Nyanza

In a geographical memoir by O.E.P. Brooks, the author has set forth that the variations in the lake levels of Victoria Nyanza from 1896 to 1922 and those of Albert Nyanza from 1904 to 1922 as recorded by tide gauges, have occurred more in accordance with variations in sunspots than with those of rainfall. As most of the rain is removed by evaporation and as evaporation is highest during the periods of minimum sunspots, the lake levels are then lowest. He points out the level was highest in 1917, a year of maximum sunspots and there was no increase of rainfall to account for the high level.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Worth of poll related seizures made by EC authorities

4,658 in ₹ crore. Out of the total recoveries, the cash component stands at over ₹395 crore, while liquor stands at more than ₹489 crore. About 45% of the seizures are of drugs (₹2,069 crore). PTI

The funds the U.S. will grant Samsung to set up chip plants

6.4 in \$ billion. The grants to semiconductor giant Samsung are for producing cutting-edge chips in Texas. Currently, the U.S. is highly dependent on Asia for chips and is vulnerable to shocks in semiconductor supply chains. AFP

Compensation Odisha fishermen demand for ban on fishing period

15,000 in ₹. Fishermen under the banner of the Odisha Traditional Fish Workers Union (OTFWU) demanded compensation for the two-month marine fishing ban imposed on Monday. PTI

Amount Nigeria's anti-graft agency recovered in probe

28.88 in \$ million. Nigeria's anti-corruption agency recovered the amount after launching an investigation into alleged fraud at a government ministry responsible for tackling poverty. REUTERS

The level at which the rupee settled against the dollar on Monday

83.44 The rupee declined six paise against the U.S. dollar, in line with deep losses in equity markets and an elevated dollar amid geopolitical tensions. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Siachen: 40 years of Op Meghdoot

April 13, 2024 marks four decades since the Indian Army pre-empted Pakistan and occupied the Siachen glacier on the Saltoro ridge, overlooking the Nubra valley in the Karakoram ranges. While a ceasefire is in place, the operation continues to this day

FULL CONTEXT

Dinakar Peri

“The land is so barren and the passes so high that only the best of friends and fiercest of enemies come by” – reads a Ladakhi saying at Kumar post on the Siachen Glacier located at an altitude of 15,632 feet. The saying captures the conflict on the icy glacier between India and Pakistan. April 13, 2024 marks four decades since the Indian Army pre-empted Pakistan and occupied the glacier on the Saltoro ridge, overlooking the Nubra valley in the Karakoram ranges. Extreme weather is the biggest enemy on the glacier. Around 1,150 soldiers have lost their lives, majority of them to the vagaries of extreme weather.

Conflicting claims

Siachen, in Balti language means “land of roses” – ‘Sia’ is a kind of rose species that grows in the region and ‘Chen’ means “in abundance”. However, it is known for being the world’s highest and coldest battlefield. It sits at a very strategic location with Pakistan on the left and China on the right.

Siachen is a legacy of the Partition between India and Pakistan. While the Line of Control (LoC) was delineated and accepted by both sides upto NJ-9842 as part of the 1972 Simla agreement, the glacier itself was left unmarked. India claims the area based on the Jammu and Kashmir Accession Agreement of 1947 and the Karachi Agreement of 1949, which define the ceasefire line beyond NJ-9842 as running “Northwards to the glaciers”. On the other hand, Pakistan interprets it as ‘North-Eastwards’ to claim the area beyond the Saltoro Ridge and beyond Siachen as its own. This would give Pakistan direct connectivity to China as well as strategic oversight over the Ladakh region and the crucial Leh-Srinagar highway, posing a serious threat to India.

The genesis of Operation Meghdoot

In the 1970s and 1980s, Pakistan began allowing foreign mountaineering expeditions, resorting to cartographic aggression, to add credence to its claims. Following intelligence inputs of imminent military action by Pakistan in early 1984, India moved to pre-empt it.

Mountaineering expeditions led by Col. Narinder ‘Bull’ Kumar to the Siachen glacier and Saltoro range as Commandant of the High Altitude Warfare School (HAWS) in the early 1980s helped immensely in the planning process leading up to Operation Meghdoot. Based on these recce reports, the Indian Army launched ‘Operation Meghdoot’ on April 13, 1984 to capture the 76.4 km-long glacier. This was accomplished after a platoon of 4 Kumaon led by then Captain Sanjay Kulkarni (retired as Lt Gen) planted the Indian flag at Bilafond La at an altitude of 18,000 feet. Personnel from the Ladakh Scouts were also deployed via Cheetah helicopters by the Indian Air Force (IAF).

Although the operation began in 1984, IAF helicopters were already operating in the glacier with the first landing of a Cheetah helicopter in October 1978. Additionally, in preparation for the operation, IAF’s tactical and strategic airlifters, An-12s, An-32s and IL-76s transported stores and troops and air-dropped supplies to high altitude airfields, from where Mi-8, Mi-17, Cheetah and Chetak helicopters ferried men and material to the icy heights on the glacier, far above the limits helicopters were



Cold battlefield: An IAF aircraft flies past as Operation Meghdoot marks 40 years of the Army's presence in the Siachen glacier, in Ladakh on April 13. ANI

meant to be operated. Soon, about 300-odd troops were positioned on the strategically important peaks and passes of the glacier, the IAF recounted in a statement on Operation Meghdoot.

In June 1987, Indian troops captured the Quaid post at 21,153-feet under Operation Rajiv. The post was later renamed the Bana top, in honour of then Naib Subedar Bana Singh (later Subedar Major and Hony Captain) from 8-Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry (JAK LI) who was also conferred the Param Vir Chakra, India’s highest wartime gallantry award for leading the attack in an impossible situation by scaling a 1,500 foot ice wall.

From 1984 to 2003, both sides were exchanging fire regularly. The guns finally fell silent in 2003 after the ceasefire agreement along the LoC and the 110km long Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) in Siachen. While the LoC has flared up on multiple occasions, ceasefire along the AGPL has held since. Operation Meghdoot continues to this day, becoming the longest continuing operation in the world.

A test of endurance

The actual Army posts are located at heights of 18,000 feet and above, with the Bana post being the highest on the glacier and Indira Col the highest point. At 18,000-19,000 feet, Indian and Pakistani posts face each other; however, at 20,000 feet and beyond, it is only India.

Operations on Siachen remain a test of human endurance and skill. It was especially so in the early days of Operation Meghdoot with limited high altitude clothing and equipment. While in the initial months, IAF operations saw the employment of helicopters and transport aircraft, the fighters entered the fray when a detachment of Hunter aircraft from the No. 27 squadron commenced operations in September 1984 from the high altitude airfield at Leh. In the next couple of years, the Hunters flew over 700 sorties from Leh carrying out fighter sweeps and simulated strikes to keep the adversary at bay. Later, live armament sorties were carried out at the high altitude firing range at Kar Tso, south of

Leh, according to the IAF. The IAF inducted the Cheetah helicopters in the glacier in 2009. Cheetah is a Cheetah helicopter with a re-engineered engine offering better reliability and load carrying capability at high altitude.

Recent developments on the glacier

A lot has changed over the last four decades, especially in terms of technology, improvement in facilities and logistical support to ensure smooth operations and save lives. Some of the major improvements have been in the areas of habitat, communications, mobility, logistics and medical support and green initiatives.

The glacier is also bearing the brunt of climate change.

In 2015, the snout, which is the starting point of the glacier at the base camp, had receded by over a kilometre from where it originally was in 1984.

Elaborating on major enhancements in the last five years, officials say that mobile and data connectivity has improved considerably. “The introduction of VSAT technology has revolutionised communication on the glacier, providing troops with data and internet connectivity. This leap in technology has enhanced real-time situational awareness, telemedicine capabilities, and the well-being of our soldiers by keeping them connected with their families,” one official said.

In addition to All-Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) and ATV bridges improving mobility across the glacier, the induction of Chinook heavy-lift helicopters and logistic drones has significantly improved the supply of essential provisions to personnel deployed in posts that are cut off during winters. New logistics chains also means fresh rations and vegetables for forward posts. The availability of special clothing, mountaineering equipment, advanced rations and timely weather updates ensure that soldiers are better prepared to withstand temperatures that fall to -60 degrees.

Today, nearly all the aircraft of the IAF including Rafale, Su-30MKI, Chinook,

Apache, Advanced Light Helicopter Mk III & Mk IV, Light Combat Helicopter Prachand, MiG-29, Mirage-2000, C-17, C-130 J, IL-76 and An-32 operate in support of Operation Meghdoot, the IAF said. Helicopters continue to remain the lifeline on the glacier supporting troops in remote posts. IAF’s 114 helicopter unit along with the Army aviation continues to play a stellar role.

On the medical front, in addition to telemedicine nodes established by the ISRO for forward posts, the medical facilities in Partapur and Base Camp boast some of the best medical and surgical specialists in the country, Army officials say it includes state-of-the-art high altitude pulmonary oedema (HAPO) chambers, and oxygen generation plants besides life support systems.

What next?

Siachen along with Sir Creek have often been referred to as “low-hanging fruits” in the India-Pakistan conflict, especially considering the much more complicated Kashmir issue.

India and Pakistan have had dialogues on Siachen at the level of Defence Secretaries. On occasions when demilitarisation of the glacier was mooted, India while expressing willingness has called for authenticating the 110 km AGPL as the first step, which Pakistan has refused.

In January 2020, then Army Chief Gen. Manoj Mukund Narvane termed Siachen as the place from where a collusive threat from China and Pakistan was maximum while stressing on the importance of keeping that particular area always in India’s possession.

Siachen overlooks Shaksgam valley which is part of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) and adjacent to Siachen was ceded by Pakistan to China in 1963 – a year after the India-China war. The 2020 standoff with China in Eastern Ladakh and the continuing tensions all along the Line of Actual Control has only further complicated any settlement of Siachen.

Siachen is probably not so ‘low hanging’ any more.

THE GIST

Siachen is known for being the world’s highest and coldest battlefield. It sits at a very strategic location with Pakistan on the left and China on the right.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Pakistan began allowing foreign mountaineering expeditions, resorting to cartographic aggression, to add credence to its claims over the glacier. Following intelligence inputs of imminent military action by Pakistan in early 1984, India moved to pre-empt it.

In January 2020, then Army Chief Gen. Manoj Mukund Narvane termed Siachen as the place from where a collusive threat from China and Pakistan was maximum while stressing on the importance of keeping that particular area always in India’s possession.

BUILDING BLOCKS

How does hydrocarbon extraction happen?

Hydrocarbons are found in underground reservoirs created when a more resistant rock type overlays a less resistant one, in effect creating a lid that causes hydrocarbons to accumulate below it

Vasudevan Mukunth

Over millennia, mighty geological processes in the earth’s crust heated and compressed together pieces of life-forms that had been dead for a while. Eventually, this mulch of organic matter accumulated as hydrocarbons inside rock formations. The two Industrial Revolutions were the result mainly of people finding a way to extract these hydrocarbons and using them to drive many great engines, whose foul breath polluted the air and water and eventually gave us global warming.

Where are hydrocarbons located?
The most common forms in which these hydrocarbons exist in subterranean rock formations are natural gas, coal, crude oil, and petroleum. They are usually found in underground reservoirs created when a more resistant rock type overlays a less resistant one, in effect creating a lid that causes hydrocarbons to accumulate below it. Such formations are important because otherwise, the hydrocarbons would float to the surface and dissipate. Experts use the tools, methods, and techniques of the field of petroleum geology to assess these rocks, including to check for their porosity and permeability. If a rock formation is highly porous, it could hold a larger quantity of hydrocarbons. Similarly, the more permeable a rock is, more easily the hydrocarbons will flow through it. The primary source of hydrocarbons in this rocky underground is called kerogen: lumps of organic matter. Kerogen can be deposited from three possible sources: as the remains of a lake (lacustrine), of a larger marine ecosystem, or of a terrestrial ecosystem. Rocks surrounding the kerogen can become warmer, more compact over time, exerting forces on the kerogen that cause it to break down. Lacustrine kerogen yields waxy oils; marine kerogen, oil and gas; and terrestrial kerogen, light oils, gas, and coal. The rock containing the kerogen is called the source rock, and petroleum geologists are tasked with looking for it, understanding its geophysical and thermal characteristics, and characterising its ability to yield hydrocarbons. They also undertake modelling activities informed by observational data and dig smaller exploration wells to estimate the amount of hydrocarbons there, and report it to the relevant regulatory body. Once a particular location is determined to be a profitable source of hydrocarbons, drilling can begin.

How are the hydrocarbons accessed?
Drilling and reservoir engineers are responsible for extracting as much of the hydrocarbons as is gainful without damaging the reservoir, to which end they deploy a variety of methods. The first task is to create a production well, the principal hole through which the reservoir will be drained to the surface; its location is chosen to maximise the amount of drainage. The well is created with a drilling machine. The drill consists of the drill pipe, the drill collars towards the bottom, and the drill bit at the bottom. The drill bit is the object that



The outline of an oil pump. ISTOCKPHOTO

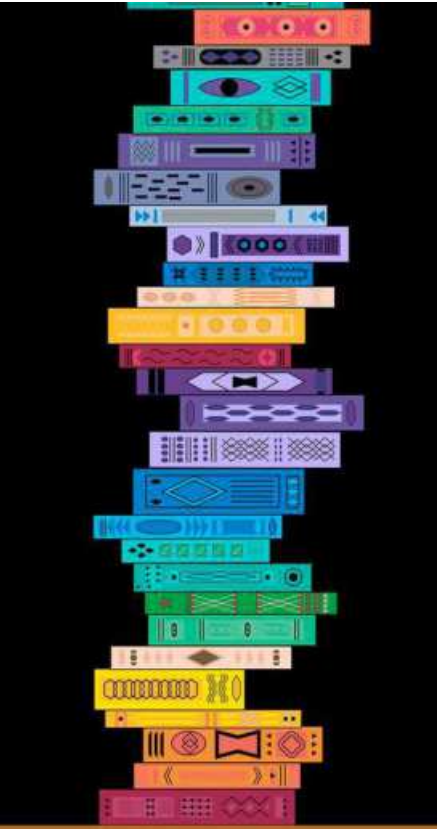
breaks through the rock, creating a hole as it tunnels further down. Once the tunnelling is underway, engineers lower steel casings that are slightly less wide than the hole itself into the tunnel, and pump cement slurry in the gap between the outer edge of the tunnel and the casings. As the cement solidifies, it protects the upper parts of the tunnel from caving in and prevents fluids in the surrounding soil from entering the well. The tunnel is also filled with drilling fluid, which reaches and swirls around the drill bit. Its primary purposes are to keep the bit from overheating and to bring the pieces of rock being cut away with it when it is pumped to the surface, where they can be removed from the tunnel. The pressure at which the drilling fluid is delivered needs to be carefully controlled or it could force the hydrocarbons in the source rock to rush into the gap between the casing and the drill string (pipe + collar + bit) and erupt on the surface like a volcano of oil.

Modern drilling setups include mechanical valves called blowout preventers to trap the gushing in the borehole, and manage the equipment already inside as necessary. The process of recording the rock cuttings by depth and studying their properties is called mud-logging. As the drill bit descends, the length of the drill pipe is increased by tacking on extensions; it can also be pulled up if it needs replacing. Today, all of these processes are conducted by sophisticated drilling rigs, which also come with generators and batteries to power various steps of the drilling process. These rigs can also be installed offshore, with additional facilities to boost their stability and aid extraction through the water column.

How are the hydrocarbons extracted?
Once the production well has been drilled, it has to be prepared to drain the hydrocarbons – a step called completing. Here, engineers remove the drill string

out of the borehole and punch small holes into the casing. More often than not, the pressure inside the well is sufficiently lower than in the surrounding rock for the hydrocarbons to start flowing into the well and rise up on their own. And as they rise, they are forced to exit at the top via a narrower tube – which is installed to, among other things, encourage the fluids to flow in only one direction (out). The flow of hydrocarbons ends the completion stage and begins the production stage, when the most important aspects of the extraction operation are the systems at the well’s head controlling its outflow using valves. Sometimes, the pressure difference may be too low to bring the hydrocarbons to the surface. A common solution in some oil-rich sites is to use pump jacks, facilities seen dotting the American midwest with a hammer-shaped piston moving up and down in languid fashion. They draw mechanical power from, say, an engine to lift up hydrocarbons from the bottom of a well. Some long-standing wells may require additional components or having old ones replaced to get more hydrocarbon out of them; these tasks are called workovers. The production profile of a well can be split into three phases: primary, secondary, and tertiary, depending on the methods required to maintain production. The primary phase banks on natural processes, like pressure differences between the reservoir and the well and less dense compounds floating to the top. Secondary interventions are concerned with inducing artificial pressure in the rock to maintain the differential (for example, by injecting water into it or diluting the hydrocarbon mix to help it flow better). The tertiary phase is focused on forcing the remainder into the well. Steam injection is a common example of such an enhanced recovery method. An on-site gas turbine generates electricity while its waste heat is routed to a steam generator. The resulting steam is pumped into the rock: its heat makes heavy-oil hydrocarbons less viscous and more willing to flow while its pressure pushes them out. When recovering petroleum, for example, the well may yield about 15%, 45%, and 15% of its hydrocarbon volume in three respective phases.

What happens when a well is depleted?
As the extraction rates indicate, a well needn’t be fully depleted before the extraction process ends. The process’s economics matter greatly: the contractor may stop extraction if it’s no longer profitable to keep extracting from a well. A well thus abandoned needs to be plugged so that its contents – both the hydrocarbons and the gases accumulating in the borehole– don’t escape into their surroundings. These plugs can be temporary, in case the project proponent wishes to recommitment it later, or permanent. A common issue with improperly plugged wells is that the plugs deteriorate and fail, either because of quality issues or due to nearby disturbances. The most exhaustive way to conclude operations at a well, whether on land or offshore, is to decommission it, but this process is expensive and often commercially infeasible for the proponent. Improperly abandoned wells are a major source of methane emissions – to go with the emissions released during the production and use of various components required to extract hydrocarbons. One 2018 study estimated that 9,000 oilfields in 90 countries released 1.7 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide in 2015 alone.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

“Grin like a Cheshire cat (C. N. Bhagavan, Hyderabad).”
“It means ‘to be constantly smiling widely for no apparent reason’. It has a connotation of ‘smugness or vacuousness.’ The expression dates from the 18th century and was popularised by Lewis Carroll through his *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. When Alice asked the Duchess why the cat grinned so broadly and inscrutably, the Duchess said, “It’s a Cheshire cat and that’s why”. The Cheshire cat in the book used to disappear, leaving behind its grin! It is believed that in the 18th century, Cheshire cheese was sold in the shape of a cat with a grin on its face. From this we get the expression.”
“Finger (C. Jeyaraj, Madras).”
“In Indian languages, no distinction is made between ‘fingers’ and ‘toes’: ‘finger’ is used for the movable parts at the end of the hands as well as the feet. In English, ‘toe’ refers to the movable parts at the end of the feet. The names of the fingers are: thumb, index finger or forefinger, middle finger, ring finger, little finger. Sometimes the little finger is called ‘baby finger.’ It is also called ‘pinkie’ by Scots and Americans.

There are no special names for the toes. They are numbered one to five. You refer to the big toe, second toe, third or middle toe, fourth toe, little or baby toe. In Latin, ‘index’ means ‘the forefinger.’ The fourth finger was used as the ring finger by the Romans and the Greeks as they thought that a nerve ran through it to the heart.”
“Letter of the 6th instant (A. G. Manoj Saldana, Shimoga).”
“ ‘I received your letter of the 6th instant’ means ‘I received your letter dated 6th of this month’. ‘Instant’ means ‘of the current month’. This was being generally used in commercial correspondence, though now it is rarely used in English-speaking countries. It is widely used in India in private and business correspondence. Like Indian English, there is also Indian business English and it has an archaic flavour.”
“Putsch (G. Sedouram, Pondicherry).”
“ It means ‘a sudden, secretly planned attempt to remove a government by force.’ The ‘u’ is pronounced like the ‘u’ in ‘put’ and tsch’ like the ‘ch’ in ‘touch.’ It is a German word.
The current topic of discussion is the *putsch in the Soviet Union.*”
Published in *The Hindu* on September 17, 1991.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Charlie Chaplin was born on this day in 1889. A quiz on the life of the English comic actor, filmmaker and composer

Radhika Santhanam

QUESTION 1
In the 2000s, declassified British archives showed that this well-known author had secretly accused Chaplin of being a communist. An adjective derived from this author’s pen name is used to describe totalitarian and authoritarian social practices. Name this author.

QUESTION 2
Name the title of Chaplin’s first war film, a comedy set in France, which starred his half-brother.

QUESTION 3
Chaplin was prosecuted in 1944 under this Act in a case stemming from a paternity suit involving the actor Joan Barry. This Act made it a federal crime to transport women across federal state

lines for prostitution, debauchery, or even sex between unmarried persons. What is the name of this controversial Act?

QUESTION 4
Long after the shift to sound, Chaplin continued to make silent movies. Name one such successful film in which Chaplin’s character befriends an alcoholic millionaire.

QUESTION 5
A French journal, named after a Chaplin film, closed in 2019 after 74 years. Its founders were two existentialist French philosophers, a couple who never got married. Name the two philosophers and the Chaplin film which inspired them to name their journal.

QUESTION 6
Chaplin’s first talkie was a satire of two dictators. Name them.



Visual question:
This is a statue of Charlie Chaplin in the city where he was born. Which famous character of the comedian does it portray?

Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz: 1. The ports the Titanic called on before disaster struck. **Ans: Cherbourg (France) and Queenstown (Cobh) in Ireland**
2. Survivors were picked up by this ship. **Ans: Carpathia**
3. The relevance of J. Bruce Ismay with respect to the Titanic. **Ans: He was the chairman of White Star Line that operated Titanic and was branded a coward for taking a lifeboat ignoring women and children**
4. The novel written by Morgan Robertson. **Ans: Futility, or the Wreck of the Titan**
5. Lifeboats on the Titanic had a total capacity to take on these many passengers. **Ans: 1,178**
6. The significance of the words “Hard astarboard! Stand by the engines!”. **Ans: The last words reportedly spoken by Titanic’s crew before the giant vessel started going down**
7. The explorer who discovered the wreck of the Titanic in 1985. **Ans: Robert Ballard**
Visual: Name the organisation. **Ans: International Ice Patrol**
Early Birds: K. N. Viswanathan| Jyot Prakash Gulati| Rajeev Jain| Saheni George| Prashant Nain

Word of the day

Surfeit:

the state of being more than full; the quality of being so overabundant that prices fall; eating until excessively full

Synonyms: overabundance, excess, glut, oversupply

Usage: Last summer, we had a surfeit of mangoes.

Pronunciation: bit.ly/surfeitpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /sɜːˈfiːt/

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



WORDLY WISE
AN EYE FOR AN EYE ONLY ENDS UP MAKING
THE WHOLE WORLD BLIND.
— MAHATMA GANDHI

The IndianEXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

STEP BACK NOW

Israel and Iran have both crossed red lines. The ball is now in the Netanyahu government's court

THE ATTACK ON Israel — Iran launched over 300 missiles and drones on Saturday — could mark either an ominous chapter in an escalating conflict, or lead to a much-needed pause in a region rocked by violence. The unprecedented attack on Israeli soil — the last time a similar strike took place was during the first Gulf War — was a response to the airstrike, allegedly by Israel, on an Iranian consulate building in Damascus. Several people were killed in that attack, including senior officers of the Revolutionary Guard. Nearly all of the missiles and drones launched by Iran were neutralised by Israel's missile defence systems as well as those of friendly nations and there has been minimal damage to property and no loss of life. Iran's mission to the UN stated that the attack was a proportionate response under the Charter for Self-Defence and that Tehran considered “the matter concluded”. The ball is now in the Benjamin Netanyahu government's court.

The fact remains that red lines have been crossed. Thus far, the conflict between Israel and Iran has been carried out largely through proxies and attacks on each other's personnel on foreign soil. With the attack on the Iranian mission and the missile attacks, there is a danger of an all-out conflict between the two regional powers. The perils of such a conflict have been recognised by the US and other Western countries. US President Joe Biden has made it clear that the US will not back Israel in offensive operations against Iran and G7 countries, and while condemning the attack, has flagged the dangers of an escalation. The Netanyahu government, however, has been sending mixed messages. Over the last two days, it has hinted that it could “retaliate”, though it would do so in a time and manner of its choosing. Some are viewing the missile attack as a failure of Israel's “deterrence” policy — this constituency might demand reprisals. The prime minister was deeply unpopular in Israel before the October 7 attack by Hamas. The failure to bring back the remaining hostages and the prolonged conflict have put Netanyahu in the dock once again. His increasing dependence on the conflict and the country's far-right to stay in power means that the Israeli government might act in dangerous and unpredictable ways.

The attacks on civilians in Gaza, expansion of the conflict to the West Bank and now the possibility of a wider regional conflict have isolated Israel internationally. The gains of the Abraham Accords, which saw moderate Arab nations willing to deepen ties with Tel Aviv, have been squandered by the prolonged conflict and callousness towards humanitarian concerns in Palestine. It is time the government listens to its friends. India's statement in the aftermath of the attacks puts forth the view of many in the global community: “We are seriously concerned at the escalation of hostilities between Israel and Iran which threatens the peace and security in the region... We call for immediate de-escalation, exercise of restraint, stepping back from violence and return to the path of diplomacy.”

FARM TALK

On agriculture, BJP's manifesto skirts populist promises, while Congress manifesto doesn't. Both lack a larger vision

ONE IS PROMISING what is probably a pie in the sky and the other more of the same. That, perhaps, is also reflective of the two rivals' relative self-confidence. The BJP's 2024 Lok Sabha election manifesto is shorn of populism when it comes to farmers. It talks about a continuing increase in minimum support prices (MSPs) of crops “from time to time” (which the Narendra Modi government has anyway been doing) and providing “sustained financial support for our farmers” through the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (without specifying whether or by how much the current Rs 6,000 annual transfer under it will be raised). The 2024-25 interim Budget, unlike the one five years ago, did not announce any hike in the PM-Kisan scheme payout or other giveaways. The Modi government didn't see any need for these before the model code of conduct came into effect, nor does the BJP feel the need now.

The protests against the three farm laws were one of the most serious challenges the Modi government had to face in its 10 years. It was forced to repeal them. The BJP manifesto's merely reiterating the government's existing or proposed programmes — including the not-so-far-successful ones, like making India “atmanirbhar” (self-reliant) in pulses and edible oils, establishing clusters for production of essential TOP (tomato, onion, potato) vegetables and promoting natural farming — may demonstrate its conviction of returning for a third term. The manifesto is, however, silent on the farm laws. The party clearly does not want to rock the political boat, or commit to things it does not consider feasible to deliver.

On the other hand, in its manifesto, Congress has pledged to give a “legal guarantee” to MSP. How this would be done — making it a right for farmers to receive and obligatory for the government to ensure MSP — is not spelt out. As most economists have argued, a “legal MSP” is neither fiscally nor physically sustainable. How credible the promise is to the farmers themselves also remains to be seen. That said, there are good things in both manifestos. The Congress has promised to “double” the funding for R&D in agriculture in five years, while the BJP has stressed on technological interventions to enable more accurate assessment of crop loss and faster payouts under the PM Fasal Bima Yojana. Unfortunately, what is missing in both documents is a vision for Indian agriculture. Producing more from the same or less quantity of water, nutrients and energy requires politically-sensitive input pricing decisions. But that may be too much to expect from election manifestos.

THE NOT NICE APE

Bonobos can be violent. It turns out that the evolutionary jigsaw is more complex than it was made out to be

SCIENTISTS TRYING to understand why human societies are both altruistic and competitive often turn to insights from primatology. For long, human capacity for aggression was explained as evolutionary preconditioning. In his 1982 classic, *Chimpanzee Politics*, Dutch primatologist Francis de Waal described the brutality with which the humans' closest ancestors raided and ambushed other members of their species. A decade after the publication of *Chimpanzee Politics*, scientists began to fill in more blanks. Research on bonobos revealed that these primates are predisposed to co-operation, tolerance and negotiation. The more than 98 per cent genetic affinity with these laidback apes, it appeared, had hardwired humans for empathy and selflessness.

It turns out that the evolutionary jigsaw is a little more complex. A study published last week in *Current Science* shows that bonobos live a more aggressive life than their reputation suggests. The research led by University of Boston anthropologist Maud Mouginit revealed that these apes are nearly three times as violent as chimpanzees. Bonobo aggression usually involves a male attacking another male. Chimps, in contrast, gang up against their victim. And the nicer bonobos do not fare well when it comes to getting partners.

Mouginit and her colleagues do not completely overturn earlier theories. Their research aligns with the current thinking which holds that, unlike chimps, bonobos rarely use coercive mating strategies. But this is because the females don't hesitate to quell male aggression when it's directed at them, even though they like their suitors to be feisty. Conflicts aren't decided by sharing partners as the “hippie ape” theory had assumed. The findings also challenge the belief that bonobos took the evolutionary route to cooperation. Animal societies do have similarities with those of humans. Merely underlining shared ancestry, however, doesn't do justice to the complexities of human — and ape — behaviour.



P R KUMARASWAMY

THE MAGNITUDE OF the missile attack on Israel by Iran in the early hours of Sunday was unprecedented, even by Middle East standards. The Islamic Republic fired over 300 long-range projectiles, including drones and ballistic missiles, at the Jewish state. In recent years, similar missile and rocket attacks have been carried out by militant groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah. This is the first time Israel has faced a direct missile attack from a state since the Iraqi Scuds in January 1991.

The unprecedented volley of long-range projectiles from Iran was supposed to be a response to the killing of Mohammad Reza Zahedi — a senior Quds Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in Damascus on April 1. There were disputes over the exact structure, which Israel supposedly attacked; whether the building was within the Iranian embassy in Damascus, as Tehran claims, or outside the compound, as Western critics have argued. Even before the long-range projectiles reached Israel, the Iranian mission in New York invoked the rights under Article 51 of the UN Charter and declared that Tehran “does not seek escalation”.

As President Joe Biden pointed out, the physical damage of the missile attacks was minimal as the Israeli defensive mechanism was successful in intercepting them. Israeli officials proudly declared that they were able to intercept 99 per cent of the Iranian missiles. A seven-year-old Bedouin girl was injured in the Negev by shrapnel and an airbase in the south suffered minor damages. In the immediate sense, Israel has “won” the missile attack and in the words of President Biden, “Israel demonstrated a remarkable capacity to defend against and defeat even unprecedented attacks.”

Anticipating the Israeli response, Iran was quick to declare that the missile attacks were in response to the attack on its mission in Syria and that it wished to close the matter.

Spectre of retaliation

Netanyahu is unlikely to let Iranian attacks pass — not responding will be admission of Israeli weakness

This time is different. Though the physical damage was limited, the Iranian missile attacks have crossed a significant redline. They signalled the failure of Israeli deterrence. That Iran could attack the Israeli mainland indicates not only the logistical capabilities of the Iranian arsenal but also its political determination to challenge Israeli deterrence. It also signals Iranian readiness to face a possible Israeli response.

At the same time, it also warned that in case of “any further provocation by Israel”, Iran's response would “assuredly and decisively be stronger and more resolute”. Several states, led by the US, expressed their anguish over the attack and condemned it. At the same time, they are urging Israel to be measured in its response and avoid escalation.

Israel has been extremely sensitive about its security, especially of the homeland. Despite frequent bouts of violence, Israel proper has been free from enemy attack. This changed in the 1980s when non-state actors like Hezbollah and Hamas entered the scene. Since then, Israel proper — not the occupied territories — has become the main battleground.

Moreover, October 1973 was Israel's last war with an enemy state. Conflicts during the past five decades have been with militant non-state actors. Though Iraq fired 42 scuds in January 1991 during the US-led campaign for the liberation of Kuwait, the physical damage and military consequences were limited. The overwhelming American military campaign against Iraq prevented Israel from responding to these attacks; there were, however, murmurs that the Scud attacks undermined Israeli deterrence.

This time is different. Though the physical damage was limited, the Iranian missile attacks have crossed a significant redline. They signalled the failure of Israeli deterrence. That Iran could attack the Israeli mainland indicates not only the logistical capabilities of the Iranian arsenal but also its political determination to challenge Israeli deterrence. It also signals Iranian readiness to face a possible Israeli response. The unprecedented attacks could be a precursor to similar and larger attacks. The Iranian offence would also stir similar military responses from other adversaries of Israel as and when they develop sufficient military capabilities. Not responding to Iranian attacks will be

an admission of Israeli weakness, both political and military. Thus, no leader — democratic or authoritarian — could accept the barrage of over 300 missiles and be content with public statements of condemnation. Political inaction is suicidal even for authoritarian rulers.

If the past is an indication, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will respond to the Iranian missile attacks. Netanyahu, not known for using diplomatic options, will respond sooner than later. A symbolic response will be inadequate both politically and militarily. Several allies of Israel are unable and unwilling to join hands with an offensive Israeli response. Already, President Biden declared that the US will not be a party to any aggressive response to the Iranian attacks. Hence, Israel will have to act alone and without any support from its allies.

Direct military action has proved to be ineffective in the Gaza Strip, and the cost of an aggressive strategy will be higher vis-à-vis Iran. Distance and Iranian defences minimise the possibility of direct Israeli attacks against Iran's military installations.

Thus, Israel might settle for its time-tested strategy of targeting key personnel — military as well as political — in the Iranian establishment. Attacking Iranian figures in third countries, like Syria and Lebanon, might be easier, but their propaganda utility is limited. Both to maximise the effects and reestablish a modicum of deterrence, Israel will act inside Iran as it did against key nuclear scientists in recent years. However, the outcome of such a robust Israeli response is uncertain, probably worse and even be counterproductive. But one thing is certain: Bibi will respond and respond forcefully to the Iranian missile attack.

The writer teaches contemporary Middle East at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi



TRISHA GUPTA

WITHIN THE FIRST few minutes of *Laapataa Ladies*, a young bride trips and nearly falls — clearly not yet used to wearing a veil that covers her face and therefore, her eyes. An older woman promptly slips in a comment: “*Ek baar ghoonghat le liya toh aage nahi, neeche dekh ke chalna seekho*” (“Once you've worn the veil, you better learn to walk looking down, not ahead”).

Kiran Rao's second film, 14 years after 2010's *Dhobi Ghat*, is a tapestry of such “homespun” truths. In any society, idioms warn against common misfortunes or help people deal with them. Idioms are crucial in creating the setting of *Laapataa Ladies*: The fictional Hindi-belt state of Nirmal Pradesh, around 2001. As Phool Kumari (Nitanshi Goel) sets out for her new home, her husband Deepak (Spارش Shrivastav) advises her to take off her gold. “*Jewar chori, do dukh paana. Chhota dukh chori, bada dukh thaana*,” (“Being robbed of jewellery makes one sad, but visiting the police station makes one sadder.”) he proclaims. The experience of police malfeasance is lodged so deep in the veins of North Indian life that it is now folk wisdom.

What makes Rao's script rare for mainstream Bollywood, though, is her attempt to take viewers from this sort of wisdom, offering commentary on an unjust world, to the sort that can see beyond it. The film's embodiment of the latter is Manju Maai (Chhaya Kadam), at whose tea stall the lost Phool finds herself, literally and metaphorically. Like the older women in Phool's family, Maai has seen life. But unlike them, she's not blinkered by the domestic.

For the sheltered young woman (like the sheltered schoolboy hero of Gulzar's 1977 classic *Kitaab*), four days at the railway sta-

FEMINISM WITH A LIGHT TOUCH

Draw of ‘Laapataa Ladies’ lies in its optimistic depiction of a contested milieu

tion are a crash course in worldliness. Learning to trust the young men who give her shelter, or discovering her skills can earn money are revelations for Phool, as for most Indian women brought up to blindly trust men in their own family while distrusting every man (or woman) outside it. Maai's words offer the necessary corrective to that social brainwashing, humorous in tone but almost clunkily feminist in content — joking about the large-scale “firaad” that tells women they're dependent on men, or suggesting that a *suhaagraat* and jewellery might be all husbands want from weddings.

Maai may be wrong about Deepak, but she's right about there being something very wrong with Indian matrimony. Shaadis on screen, though, usually press some invisible feel-good button on the Indian psyche. The recent uncovering of social ills in *Made in Heaven* (2019, 2023) or marital frauds in *Wedding.com* (2023) are exceptions.

These new narratives are largely urban and realist. And while our melodramas used to show poverty-stricken fathers of daughters made to stoop low by greedy fathers of sons, those tragedies offered no justice. Bride-takers gloat and bride-givers suffer; such ordinary tragedy can only be accepted. It takes comedy for everyday villains to get their comeuppance.

Yet making people laugh about serious things is rare, on screen as in life. When heroines teach dowry-seeking bridegrooms a lesson, like Sonam Kapoor in *Dolly ki Doli* (2015) and Parineeti Chopra in *Daawat-e-Ishq* (2015), the films don't run. Consumerist greed is so normalised in post-liberalisation India that even nice guys assume dowry is

their due. In the 2020 show *Panchayat*, various harmless men in a UP village calculate “appropriate” demands based on their salaries. Visiting city-slicker Abhishek (Jitendra Kumar) declares he's anti-dowry. But when a visiting groom demands his new swivel chair, Abhishek has to bend with the bride-givers. Dowry wins.

That spoiled-child *dulha* is a ridiculous version of the masculinity that arises from treating boys as prizes and girls as burdens. *Laapataa Ladies* offers a villainous version: A *dulha* who's killed one wife marrying a second for a free slave, with a dowry. Because it's a comedy, we needn't weep or rage. But also because it's a comedy, we have the joy of seeing this vile man robbed of social power legally — best of all, by the police he thinks are on his side.

The draw of *Laapataa Ladies* lies in its sweetly optimistic depiction of a bitterly contested milieu — perhaps deliberate in times when the Hindi belt seems like a war zone. Rao occasionally tempers her Doordarshan nostalgia and almost teacherly tone with self-reflexive humour, like when one character asks another if she's been watching too much *Krishi Darshan*. But try as the film might to laugh at it, it is in the state — embodied in Ravi Kishen's eventually law-abiding policeman — that *Laapataa Ladies*' optimism really resides. However fictional, Rao's film is a throwback to the memory of a more benevolent, constitutionally-bound state — as well as an unspoken plea for its continuation.

Gupta is a Delhi-based writer and critic, and Professor of Practice at the Jindal School of Journalism and Communication



APRIL 16, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

ARSON IN PUNJAB

TERRORISTS SET ON fire 31 railway stations spread over nine districts of Punjab, in what the police described as a major pre-planned action. (According to a PTI report, the number of railway stations burnt was 37). A Punjab police spokesman said the terrorists in groups of six to 15 struck at the wayside railway stations and burnt records, looted cash and escaped.

ASSASSINATION PLAN

THE SECRETARY OF the Shiromani Akali Dal, Gurcharan Singh, has hatched a conspiracy to get Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his chief

lieutenants assassinated. The murder of Surinder Singh Sodhi in a hotel is part of the conspiracy. Rachpal Singh, personal assistant to Bhindranwale, played a tape-recorded “confessional statement” made to the “men of Bhindranwale” by one Baljit Kaur who is allegedly involved.

SRI LANKA'S CLAIM

SRI LANKA PRESIDENT Junius Jayewardene has expressed resentment at what he sees as India's attempts to “bully” his government. “The Indian government keeps saying: Don't enter into this pact. But why should they tell me what I should or shouldn't do? That goes

against my grain, what I learnt from Mahatma Gandhi and others including Mrs Gandhi's father, Jawaharlal Nehru”. He did not think India would invade his country, but if it did, that would be “the end of Tamils in his country.”

ZIA'S REFERENDUM CALL

PAKISTAN PRESIDENT ZIA ul Haq said that, if necessary, he might hold a national referendum to determine whether the people wanted the Western form of democracy or an Islamic system of government. He reiterated his resolve to implement the August 12 plan and bring in the Islamic form of government in the country.

THE IDEAS PAGE

Religion is for adults only

Law that mandates registration of a child's religion at birth damages the democratic fibre, promotes patriarchy and majoritarianism



ASHOK LAL AND NASEERUDDIN SHAH

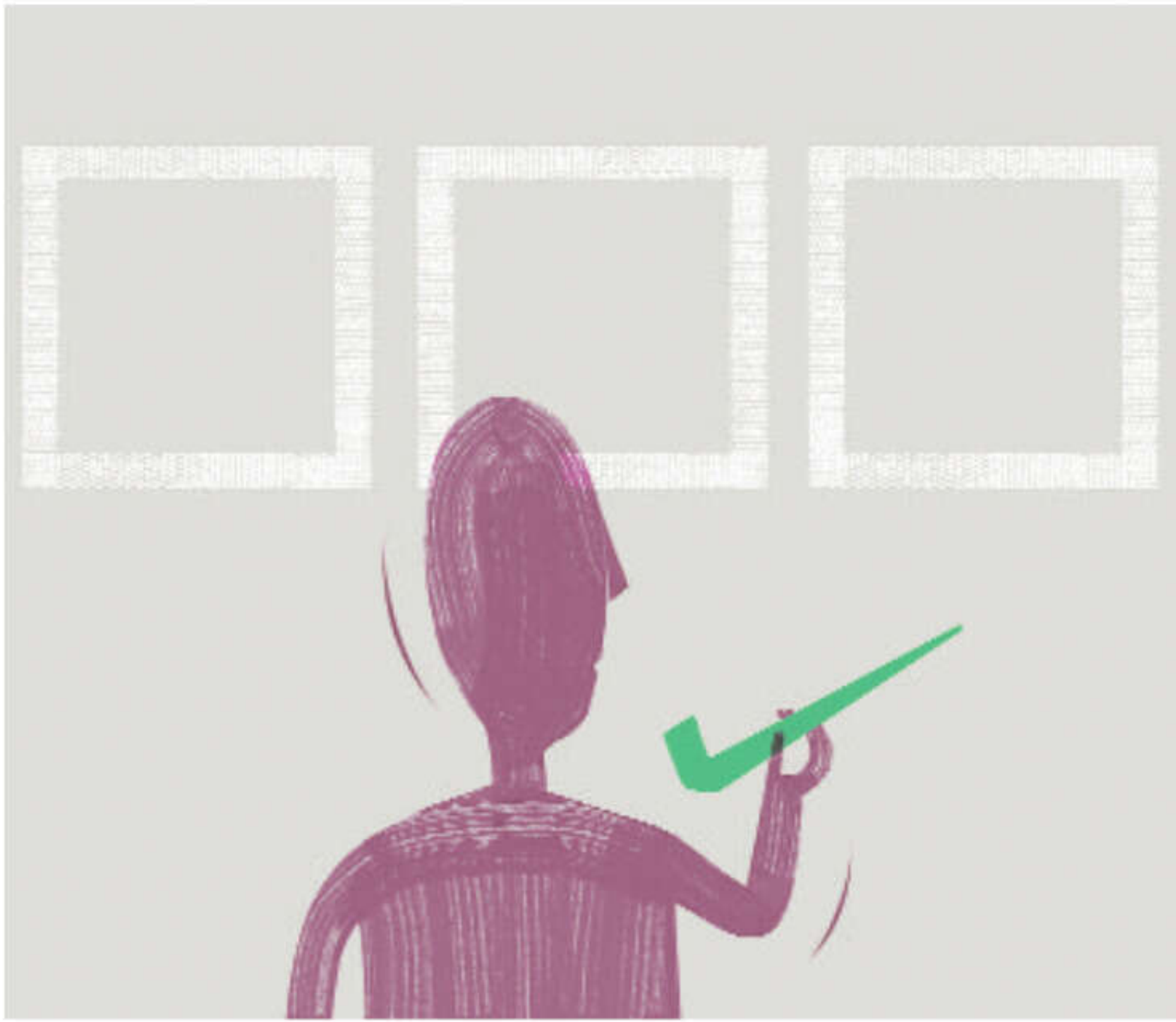
THE LEAD HEADLINE of a prominent newspaper on April 5 reads, 'Government to record parents' religion to register births'. The Registration of Births and Deaths (Amendment) Act, 2023, was passed by Parliament on August 11 last year. This Act mandates the maintenance of a birth and death database at the national level, which may be used to update various databases, including the National Population Register (NPR), electoral rolls, Aadhaar number, ration card, passport, driving licence, property registration, and others as may be notified. The Amendment also mandates the registration of the religion of the parents, if they belong to different religions, against the column of the child's religion. This, deceptively, gives the law a liberal look. To us, labelling a child's religion at birth is a retrogressive and dangerous practice.

Let us clarify the title: By adult, we don't mean the legal age for voting or marrying. An adult here means an individual who has grown up enough to develop an individualistic moral framework. Religion refers to organised religions.

In legal terms, "adult" encompasses traits that are physical in nature. However, religion is quasi-metaphysical. To club it with the acquired DNA of the child imposes restrictions on their freedom and threatens to retard their growth. It is, in that sense, a violation of human rights. It is also a dangerous law because it damages the democratic fibre and promotes communalism, patriarchy and majoritarianism. The fact that some states have passed a law against "love jihad", a romantic association or marriage of a Muslim male with a Hindu girl, points out that the provision may not be an innocent one. At the very least, it is patriarchal.

First, the question of human rights. A child supposedly has to grow to adulthood to make an informed choice about voting or marrying. There is no law, though, which compels anyone to vote or marry. The adult child has the freedom to refrain from making a choice. However, organised religion imposes, sometimes surreptitiously, but often directly, dos and don'ts, as also rights and wrongs. The hapless child has no choice but to accept the mythological "truths" and the traditional "wisdom" of the parents and other elders, and social pressures — the so-called "sanskaar" or expected norms, rituals and rites. Such subtle but intense brainwashing interferes with the child's innate scientific temper, spiritual and individualistic growth.

Research shows that 80 per cent of a child's brain development occurs within the first 1,000 days of life. The ambient orthodox, even liberal, surroundings during this period account for the child's life-long and indelible attitudes — and they could be grossly retrogressive, repressive, even inhuman. The impact of the environment shapes a child's development based on their own



CR Sasikumar

moral framework for what is right and wrong. Physical and mental impairments caused by DNA can potentially be recognised and corrected by technological or medical sciences, but the impairments caused by prejudices and predetermined "truths" to one's belief system, humaneness, sensitivity, and behaviour tend to be permanent. The beliefs and persuasions that a child is born into become their reality, their truth.

In his journey, after the age of 30, it dawned upon Gautama Buddha that: "The life I have yet to live, / If it must be a mirror of my Self, / Then break free I must from my own boundaries / from the shelter of my illusory certainties."

Had Gautama not attained spiritual maturity, he would have remained unaware of being ensnared in a web of beliefs and intuitions not truly his own, failing to recognise their misalignment with his authentic self. Consequently, the world would have been denied access to a humane life philosophy that has provided solace and direction to countless individuals worldwide. While not everyone can emulate Gautam Buddha, societal norms and the law should not present insurmountable barriers to a child's potential to forge their own unique path.

An established religion can exhibit extreme cruelty towards individuals of a scientific bent of mind, free thinkers and intellectuals. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, had branded the Italian physicist and astronomer Galileo as a heretic and subjected him to punishment. In 1633, the Church accused Galileo of endorsing the be-

The environment in which a child grows up holds the power to mould their mindset and, by extension, influence the world around. However, this influence can carry a dual nature, posing a significant risk of the child either perpetuating or falling victim to divisive ideologies such as communalism, casteism, and violent expressions of hatred, all under the guise of self-righteousness.

lief — deemed false and contrary to religious scriptures — that the Sun is the centre of the world and stationary and that the Earth orbits around it. Ironically, Galileo's groundbreaking discoveries not only laid the groundwork for the theories of Newton and Einstein but also paved the way for the development of modern physics as we know it today.

The phrase "The Child is father of the Man", originating from William Wordsworth's poem 'My Heart Leaps Up', transcends mere poetic expression. It encapsulates the profound truth that children play a foundational role in shaping successive generations. The environment in which a child grows up holds the power to mould their mindset and, by extension, influence the world around them. However, this influence can carry a dual nature, posing a significant risk of the child either perpetuating or falling victim to divisive ideologies such as communalism, casteism, and violent expressions of hatred, all under the guise of self-righteousness. Such tendencies can foster majoritarianism and desensitise individuals to social and economic inequalities. Even well-intentioned parents, entrenched in inherited beliefs spanning centuries, may inadvertently stifle the true essence of their child. Furthermore, lawmakers have the potential to perpetuate and institutionalise such forms of cruelty.

Lal is an author, theatre and cine personality and Shah is a Hindi/Urdu playwright, poet and author. The lines quoted above are from a poem by Lal

No longer a shadow war

Iran-Israel conflict could be imperilled by mutual lapses in judgement



RAMIN JAHANBEGLOO

IRAN'S UNPRECEDENTED DRONE and missile offensive against Israel on Saturday has brought the long-running shadow war between the two countries into the open. For more than four decades, Tehran and Tel Aviv have been confronting each other indirectly through Iran's proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Though the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has, in the past, ordered its proxy militias to launch acts of terrorism against Israeli citizens and interests in the region, the Iranian regime never admitted having been involved directly in a conflict with the state of Israel. Similarly, Israel neither confirmed nor denied its role in the killings of the Iranian nuclear scientists, three years ago.

More recently, Iranian authorities did not spell out clearly their role in the attacks initiated by Hamas on Israel on October 7. The Hamas and Hezbollah leaders were careful to not mention the Iranian role in this operation. However, the Iranian state has benefited from the Gaza conflict and the chaos in the Middle East to strengthen its hegemony in the region.

Iran has never considered itself a passive player in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Three weeks ago, senior Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad officials travelled to Iran, likely to discuss their ongoing confrontation against Israel in the Gaza Strip and across the Middle East, with Iranian officials. In February, the head of Iran's Quds Force visited Beirut to discuss the possibility of a joint

operation with Hezbollah in Lebanon. This was after Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant had indicated Israel's plans to increase attacks on Hezbollah in the event of a possible ceasefire in the Gaza conflict. As a result, over the past months, Iran has been mindful that a wider war between Israel and the Lebanese Hezbollah could lead to strikes on Iran's nuclear installations.

Iran's nuclear programme continues to remain largely unchecked, creating additional complexities and problems for the Americans, Europeans and the Middle Eastern countries already embroiled in the Gaza crisis. Iranian officials have repeatedly insisted that Tehran is not seeking an atomic bomb and that the only thing that could provoke it to develop one would be an Israeli attack on Iran. However, Israelis continue to believe that there is no other way to contain Iran's nuclear programme except through military intervention.

As for Iran, despite its past "prudent" tactics regarding Israel, the situation in Gaza and beyond has been highly critical. The Iranian regime has had to constantly assure Iranians and the regime's proxies in the Middle East that it had not lost the game against Israel in this. Therefore, the more the war in Gaza dragged on, the chances of a direct conflict between the two countries increased.

It is interesting that Israel did not publicly claim responsibility for the April 1 attack against the Iranian Consulate in Damascus and did not notify Washington of the strike.

The urgency for Iran to retaliate for the attack on its consulate in Damascus could have been avoided had the UN Security Council condemned the strike. In response to the Israeli attack, the naval forces of Iran's Revolutionary Guards seized a Portuguese-flagged vessel connected to Israel near the Strait of Hormuz. In addition to this, Iran's drone and missile attack against Israel was the only way for Iran's Supreme Ruler, Ayatollah Khamenei, and the IRGC to not lose face in the great power conflict in the Middle East.

The Iranian strategy towards the Middle East is overdetermined by its desire for hegemony over the region, including the Palestinian territory. Iran considers itself a model state, with a special task to create geopolitical changes in the Middle East. Since 1979 and the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, and his successor, Khamenei, have helmed a foreign policy in which Iran acts as the self-appointed leader of the world's Shia Muslims. It aspires to direct influence in Palestinian, Iraqi and Lebanese politics. The IRGC relies upon its subordinate element, the Quds Force, which according to Khamenei, is committed to "establish popular Hezbollah cells all over the world". Iran's response to regional challenges and opportunities in the aftermath of its war with Iraq involved an offensive and defensive strategy that included the creation of a network of proxies. This vast network of allies and proxies was built and maintained by the Quds Force, led

by Qassem Soleimani after 1998.

The Syrian conflict served as a powerful test of Iran's external military doctrine. Consequently, the Iranian regime used the US's alleged role in the assassination of Soleimani as a new source of legitimacy for the IRGC. By driving religious and nationalist sentiments and turning attention away from the failings of the Shiite leaders in Baghdad and Lebanon, it gave a lifeline to the Iranian leadership and its allies in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria.

In the past few years, Israel and the US have been dealing with most of Iran's proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. While the Houthis no longer have the upper hand in the conflict in Yemen, the Lebanese Hezbollah will also have many difficulties in securing the support of the non-Shiite Lebanese population if it enters into a war with Israel.

At this stage, Tehran does not support any widening of the conflict with Israel, especially because its young population does not seem ideologically inclined to war. Yet, it also seems to believe that the Netanyahu government's failures have restricted Israel's options in case of a confrontation with Iran. Iran and Israel will remain the two great military powers in the Middle East. In case their conflict escalates into a war, both could be handicapped by the lack of common sense.

The writer is director, Mahatma Gandhi Centre for Nonviolence and Peace at OP Jindal Global University

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Addressing climate change requires more aggressive progress from the big emitters outside the club of the rich... If China faced penalties, as well as incentives to clean up, this picture would change more quickly. No one wants to be banned from the clubhouse."

— THE WASHINGTON POST

Empowerment over entitlement

BJP's Sankalp Patra 2024 champions atmanirbharta while the Opposition's manifestos aim to cement a dependency on state



ABHINAV PRAKASH

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi has unveiled the BJP's Sankalp Patra for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, a manifesto that, unlike those of other parties, holds significant weight and is treated with sustained commitment beyond the electoral season. It not only outlines the party's governance philosophy but also charts a strategic vision for the nation's future.

These are not mere electoral promises but reflections of a profound commitment to national rejuvenation, ideological consistency and civilisational renaissance. The manifesto has been a testament to BJP's resolve even when it was a peripheral figure in Indian politics, having committed to transformative policies such as making India a nuclear power, abrogating Article 370, banning Triple Talaq, and the reconstruction of the Ram Mandir, all of which it ultimately delivered.

Sankalp Patra 2024 outlines short-term policy measures and schemes that the party aims to implement, seamlessly integrating these with their overarching objectives for the nation's social, economic, and political development. It not only reflects the party's commitment to transformative governance and enhanced welfare models but also illustrates the synergy between their immediate plans and long-term visions, presenting a coherent roadmap for India's future.

It sharply contrasts with the welfare rhetoric of the opposition alliance and highlights the distinct perspectives the BJP holds regarding Indian polity and socio-economic challenges. The opposition alliance is committed to reviving the outdated socialist welfare model, merely tweaking it slightly and further burdening it with financially unsustainable promises of direct income transfers.

Unlike the freebies model of the Opposition, the BJP's approach is to invest in human capital and expand the horizon of opportunities for the masses. Unlike the irresponsible promises with serious fiscal stability implications, the Modi government aims to empower the poor by aiding capacity building. Its policies are based on objective criteria and are backed by adequate provisioning. Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana ensures affordable housing for the poor; Pradhan Mantri Sahaj Bijli Har Ghar Yojana provides electricity to households; Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana provides LPG cylinders; Har Ghar Jal Yojna provides piped drinking water to households; Swachh Bharat Abhiyan provides sanitation. All these policies for public provision of private goods are aimed at ensuring basic necessities to the deprived sections to enable them to strive for a better future.

The provision of LPG cylinders, toilets, and safe tap water drastically reduces the disease burden and morbidity. It also reduces the associated financial burdens and frees women from drudgery, enabling them to participate in economic activities and take advantage of government schemes to promote women's entrepreneurship, self-help groups, etc. Instead of making unsustainable promises, like cash transfers of 1 lakh to women, Sankalp Patra seeks to

strengthen the existing efforts at self-reliance. It promises to make 3 crore Lakhpati Didis — a self-help group member who earns an annual household income of Rs 1 lakh. Already, nine crore women have been mobilised into more than 83 lakh SHGs under the Aajeevika Yojna. More than one crore women (34 per cent) have been mobilised in the last three years, and more than nine crore rural women have already become Lakhpati Didis.

Rather than succumbing to the allure of offering free electricity, the Sankalp Patra 2024 promises a transformative approach through the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana, which facilitates the installation of rooftop solar electricity units. This initiative not only promises to alleviate household electricity expenses but also opens avenues for income generation by allowing families to sell surplus power back to the grid. Such a strategy is poised to invigorate the entire solar energy sector, creating extensive employment opportunities in service and repair, in stark contrast to the unsustainable financial burdens imposed on power companies and government budgets by populist freebie politics.

These measures enhance the productivity of the populace, imbuing them with dignity and a secure future. BJP stands in sharp contrast to the culture of freebies promoted by the AAP and now zealously adopted by the Congress party, which prioritises short-term relief over long-term empowerment.

The Opposition's manifesto aims to cement a perpetual dependency on the state and politicians, whereas Sankalp Patra 2024 champions self-reliance (Atmanirbharta) and prosperity. In agriculture, for instance, the opposition's policies have narrowed the focus to merely supporting minimum support prices (MSP), while the BJP adopts a comprehensive strategy aimed at modernising and diversifying the sector to enhance the income of farmers and farm labourers.

Moreover, the BJP envisions transforming India into a robust manufacturing hub, maintaining a delicate balance between environmental sustainability and worker welfare. It is determined to industrialise India and create mass prosperity, thus reversing the impact of de-industrialisation India suffered under colonial rule and lost opportunity under socialist dystopia. Higher, stable, broad-based, and sustainable economic growth is an important cornerstone of the decolonisation process, which is the historical role of the BJP in the Amrit Kaal of Bharat.

The Sankalp Patra 2024 reflects a profound trust of the BJP in the wisdom of the electorate, who are increasingly resistant to the superficial allure of freebies and short-term gains. This confidence is manifested in the document's focus on long-term structural transformations and substantial investments in social, physical, and digital infrastructures. It outlines ambitious goals such as achieving energy independence through solar and nuclear power, expanding the high-speed rail network, advancing the Green Hydrogen mission, pursuing a manned moon mission, and intensifying efforts in research and development alongside implementing the Uniform Civil Code and advocating for One Nation One Election.

These and other such Sankalps underscore a vision that is both aspirational and transformative, laying the foundation of Viksit Bharat by 2047.

The writer is National Vice President of BJYM, BJP's Youth Wing

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A NEW SCREEN ICON

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Babasaheb & the new Dalit cinema' (IE, April 15). The growing presence of BR Ambedkar on screen is a welcome trend as it reflects increasing Dalit assertion. Ambedkar played a pivotal role in drafting our Constitution. Only recently have filmmakers of regional cinema begun to represent his politics and discuss his tireless efforts towards Dalit empowerment. Hindi filmmakers need to follow in the footsteps of their brethren. While portraying episodes from the life of Ambedkar, such movies could make us an egalitarian and just society.

SH Quadri, Bikaner

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Babasaheb & the new Dalit cinema' (IE, April 15). The rise of Dalit cinema has occurred through a few conscientious directors and producers. With a humble beginning in regional languages like Tamil and Marathi, it has now expanded to reach a large Hindi audience and spread further through new audio-visual technologies, OTT platforms and social media. Dubbing the movies in multiple languages and using subtitles radically enhanced the reach as well. These films

have great potential to spark societal dialogue on caste biases and conflicts and can serve as a catalyst for reflection and social change.

LR Murmu, New Delhi

CHALLENGE THE BJP

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Freeze frame' (IE, April 15). The observation here that India needs a strong Opposition to keep the ruling dispensation within ethical limits is appropriate. The Indian National Development Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) is indulging only in criticism of Modi, not the BJP, instead of posing a conscientious challenge to his party. At the surface level, the alliance partners appear to be united. But in fact they have serious internal ramblings. An example is the AAP and Congress' tie-up in Delhi and Punjab. Voters are aware of the promises made in the manifesto and the fact that the Opposition (Congress) has not fulfilled those in the states they are in power. There is still time to make an effort to achieve political gains by evading crackdowns and other tactics employed by the ruling party to weaken the Opposition.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi



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Tamil Nadu’s decentralised industrialisation model

The state’s cluster capitalists and ‘entrepreneurs from below’ explain in part its success in achieving industrialisation and diversification beyond agriculture



HARISH DAMODARAN

TAMIL NADU, which votes on April 19, is India’s No. 1 state in terms of economic complexity, measured by the diversity of its gross domestic product (GDP) and employment profile.

The table shows that the farm sector’s share in TN’s gross value added (GVA) and in its employed labour force is well below the national average. Lower dependence on agriculture is matched by higher shares of industry, services, and construction in TN’s economy relative to all-India.

Gujarat is more industrialised than TN, with the factory sector generating 43.4% of the state’s GVA, and engaging 24.6% of its workforce (as against 22.7% and 17.9% respectively in TN). But in Gujarat, agriculture accounts for a higher share of GVA (15.9%) and workforce (41.8%) than in TN (12.6% and 28.9% respectively). That makes its economy less diversified and balanced vis-à-vis TN’s.

Another indicator of economic complexity is agriculture itself. About 45.3% of TN’s farm GVA comes from the livestock subsector, the highest for any state, and well above

the 30.2% all-India average. TN has India’s largest private dairy company (Hatsun Agro Product), broiler enterprise (Suguna Foods), and egg processor (SKM Group), as well as the country’s “egg capital” (Namakkal).

Cluster-based industrialisation

TN has just a handful of large business houses with annual revenues in excess of Rs 15,000 crore — TVS, Murugappa, MRF, Amalgamations, and Apollo Hospitals. In turnover, they are not in the league of Tata, Reliance, Aditya Birla, Adani, Mahindra, JSW, Vedanta, Bharti, Infosys, HCL or Wipro.

The economic transformation of TN has been brought about by medium-scale businesses with turnover between Rs 100 crore and Rs 5,000 crore (some, like Hatsun and Suguna, have graduated to the Rs 5,000–10,000 crore bracket). Its industrialisation has also been more spread out and decentralised, via the development of clusters.

Some of these clusters — agglomerations of firms specialising in particular industries — are well known: Tirupur for cotton knitwear (exports of Rs 34,350 crore and domestic sales of Rs 27,000 crore in 2022–23); Coimbatore for spinning mills and engineering goods (from castings, textile machinery, and auto components to pumpsets and wet grinders); Sivakasi for safety matches, fire crackers, and printing; Salem, Erode, Karur, and Somanur for powerlooms and home textiles; Vaniyambadi, Ambur, and Ranipet for leather.

Many cluster towns are hubs for multiple

SECTOR-WISE SHARES OF GVA & WORKFORCE: 2022-23 (%)

	Gross Value Added*		Workforce	
	All-India	Tamil Nadu	All-India	Tamil Nadu
Agriculture	18.19	12.55	45.76	28.87
Industry**	18.80	22.69	12.27	17.88
Construction	8.84	11.70	13.03	18.04
Services	54.18	53.05	28.94	35.21

*At Basic Prices; ** Includes manufacturing, mining, electricity and utilities. GVA is GDP net of product taxes and subsidies. Source: National Accounts Statistics and Periodic Labour Force Survey.

industries. Thus, Karur has powerlooms, bus body builders, and even makers of mosquito and fishing nets (one of them, VKA Polymers, is a major exporter of insecticide-treated bed nets). Dindigul has spinning mills and leather tanneries. Namakkal is as famous for layer

drilling services contractors take their truck-mounted rigs all over the country to dig up to 1,400 feet. Dhalavaipuram, 10 km from Rajapalayam, specialises in nighties and ladies innerwear. Natham, next to Dindigul, produces low-priced men’s formal shirts.

Most of these clusters have come up in small urban/peri-urban centres, providing employment to people from surrounding villages who might otherwise have migrated to big cities. They have also created diversification options outside of agriculture, reducing the proportion of the workforce that is dependent on farming.

Tirupur’s knitwear industry employs some 800,000 people, including migrants from several states. KPR Mill Ltd, with Rs 4,740 crore sales in 2022–23, has 21,819 permanent em-

EXPLAINED
ECONOMICS

ployees — more than 84% of whom are women — at its garmenting, knitting, spinning, and processing facilities in Tirupur and nearby areas of Coimbatore and Erode districts.

Entrepreneurship from below

TN’s early industrialists were mainly Nattukottai Chettians and Brahmins.

Prominent Chettians included Annamalai Chettiar (from whom the MA Chidambaram and Chettinad groups descended), AMM Murugappa Chettiar (Murugappa Group), Karumuttu Thiagaraja Chettiar (textile magnate) and Alagappa Chettiar (textiles, insurance, hotels, and education).

The big Tamil Brahmin-owned houses included TVS, TTK, Amalgamations, Seshasayee, Rane, India Cements, Sanmar, Enfield India, Standard Motors, and Shriram. A more recent name is the business software solutions company Zoho Corporation of Sridhar Vembu.

The drivers of TN’s more recent decentralised industrialisation have, however, been entrepreneurs from more ordinary peasant stock and provincial mercantile castes.

Coimbatore’s spinning mills, foundries, machining and pumps & valves, textile equipment, and compressor making units were mostly started by Kammavar Naidus. The promoters of Suguna Foods, CRI Pumps, Elgi Equipment, and Lakshmi Machine Works too, are from this community.

The cluster capitalists of Tirupur, Erode, Salem, Namakkal, Karur, and Dindigul are mainly Kongu Vellalar or Gounders. This is a

community to which the owners of the Coimbatore-based Sakthi and Bannari Amman groups — and politicians such as former Chief Minister Edappadi Palaniswami and BJP state president K Annamalai — belong.

Sivasaki’s fireworks, matches, and printing industries have been built largely by Nadars. But this belt in southern TN — also covering Virudhunagar, Srivilliputhur, Watrap and Rajapalayam — has produced entrepreneurs from other communities as well: Raju (Ramco Group and Adyar Ananda Bhavan), and Udayar (Pothys). Many from here have also gone on to create successful product brands: Hatsun (‘Arun’ ice-cream and ‘Arokya’ milk), VVV & Sons (‘Idhayam’ sesame oil), and Kaleesuvvari Refinery (‘Gold Winner’ sunflower oil).

The remarkable thing about TN’s entrepreneurial culture is its percolation among diverse communities and in a range of industries. That includes Christians (MRF, Johnson Lifts, and Aachi Masala Foods) and Muslims (Farida Group). CavinKare’s CK Ranganathan, a Mudaliar, was selling ‘Chik’ shampoo in single-use sachets well before the likes of Hindustan Unilever latched on to the idea. Ranganathan’s brother, CK Kumaravel, runs Naturals Salon & Spa that has nearly 700 hair and beauty care outlets across India.

This “entrepreneurship from below”, combined with high social progress indices from public health and education investments, probably explains TN’s relative success in achieving industrialisation and diversification beyond agriculture.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

EVEN IF CONVICTED, TRUMP COULD BE PRESIDENT AGAIN. HERE’S WHY

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, APRIL 15

DONALD TRUMP, THE Republican presidential candidate, became the first former President to face a criminal trial on Monday, when he appeared in a New York court on charges that he illegally covered up a hush-money payment to adult film star Stormy Daniels. Will a conviction hamper his bid to become President again?

What is the current trial about?

The trial relates to a \$130,000 payment made by Trump’s then lawyer Michael Cohen to Daniels in October 2016, during the final weeks of his first presidential campaign, in exchange for Daniels’ silence about an alleged sexual encounter with Trump in 2006. In 2018, Cohen testified that Trump had falsely classified the purpose of this payment by labelling it as a legal expense.

Prosecutors thus concluded that the money given to Daniels was “an improper donation” to the Trump campaign, made to silence a potential sex scandal. Making a false entry in company records is a misdemeanour as per New York law, but falsifying records to conceal another crime — in this case violation of election law — is a felony.

If convicted, what punishment is Trump looking at?

The prosecution has charged Trump with 34 counts of felony — which he has pleaded not guilty to — for falsifying business records. The maximum sentence for each charge, according to New York law,

is four years imprisonment. First-time offenders (like Trump), however, are rarely sent to prison solely for the falsification of records.

A fine, probation, and in the worst-case scenario, home confinement, are all more likely punishments Trump will receive if convicted. Even if imprisoned, Trump is likely to still be released on bail during any appeal.

But can Trump still be President if convicted?

There is no legal provision barring Trump from becoming President, even if he is convicted. According to the US constitution, the only eligibility criteria to become President is age (minimum 35 years old), birth (“natural born” citizen), and residence (must have lived in the US for at least 14 years). In theory, Trump could even be sworn in from prison if he were to win the election. While states could try to keep Trump off the ballot by passing laws requiring a clean criminal record, such legisla-

tion is unlikely to stand in courts. Trump has long leveraged criminal cases against him. According to his campaign filings last year, he saw a surge in donations every time he was indicted.

Nonetheless, a conviction is a very different matter. A Reuters/Ipsos poll this month found a firm majority of voters viewed the New York criminal charges against Trump as serious, with a quarter of Republican respondents saying that they would not vote for Trump if he were convicted of a felony crime by a jury.

(WITH INPUTS FROM REUTERS)

EXPERT
EXPLAINS



BISWAJIT DASGUPTA

THE TRANSFORMATION of India’s Look East policy into a robust Act East policy, a realisation of the critical importance of ocean power, and the rapid enhancement in the capabilities of the Chinese PLA Navy, have brought a degree of seriousness to the imperative of developing Indian island territories in general, and the Andaman and Nicobar group in particular.

The recent thrust on developing strategic infrastructure, both civilian and military, on the islands is welcome — and decades overdue. The neglect of this strategic island group betrays a lack of strategic maritime vision in the decades since Independence.

What is the strategic importance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands?

The islands are located 700 nautical miles (1,300 km) southeast of the Indian mainland. The Malacca Strait, the main waterway that connects the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, is less than a day’s steaming from Port Blair.

Sabang in Indonesia is 90 nautical miles southeast of Indira Point (on Great Nicobar island), and Coco Island (Myanmar) is barely 18 nautical miles from the northernmost tip of the Andamans. Should Thailand build the Kra Canal connecting the Gulf of Thailand with the Andaman Sea, its mouth would be about 350 nautical miles east of Port Blair.

The islands share four of India’s international maritime zone delimitations with Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. They also give India substantial ocean space under the United Nations Conference on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS) in terms of exclusive economic zone and continental shelf.

In the foreseeable future, a serious challenge could emanate from a build-up of Chinese maritime forces at the eastern choke points of the Indo-Pacific, namely the Malacca (between Sumatra and the Malay peninsula), Sunda (between Java and Sumatra), Lombok (between Bali and Lombok), and Ombai-Wetar (off East Timor) straits.

Change (IPCC), a UN body that assesses the science related to climate change.

The reports show that senior Swiss women — especially those over 75 — are more prone to heat-related medical problems such as heat cramps and heat strokes.

What did the court say?

A 17-judge panel of ECHR noted that Article 8 of the convention “encompasses a right for individuals to effective protection by the state authorities from the serious adverse effects of climate change on their lives, health, well-being and quality of life”.

The Swiss government, however, violated the law as it did not enact adequate laws to

combat climate change impacts, according to the court. It also failed to meet its greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reduction goals.

Why is the ruling significant?

The Swiss government is now obliged to update its climate change policies. However, the ECHR cannot tell authorities what kind of policies to implement.

Nonetheless, the judgment could have far-reaching implications. The ECHR’s verdict is

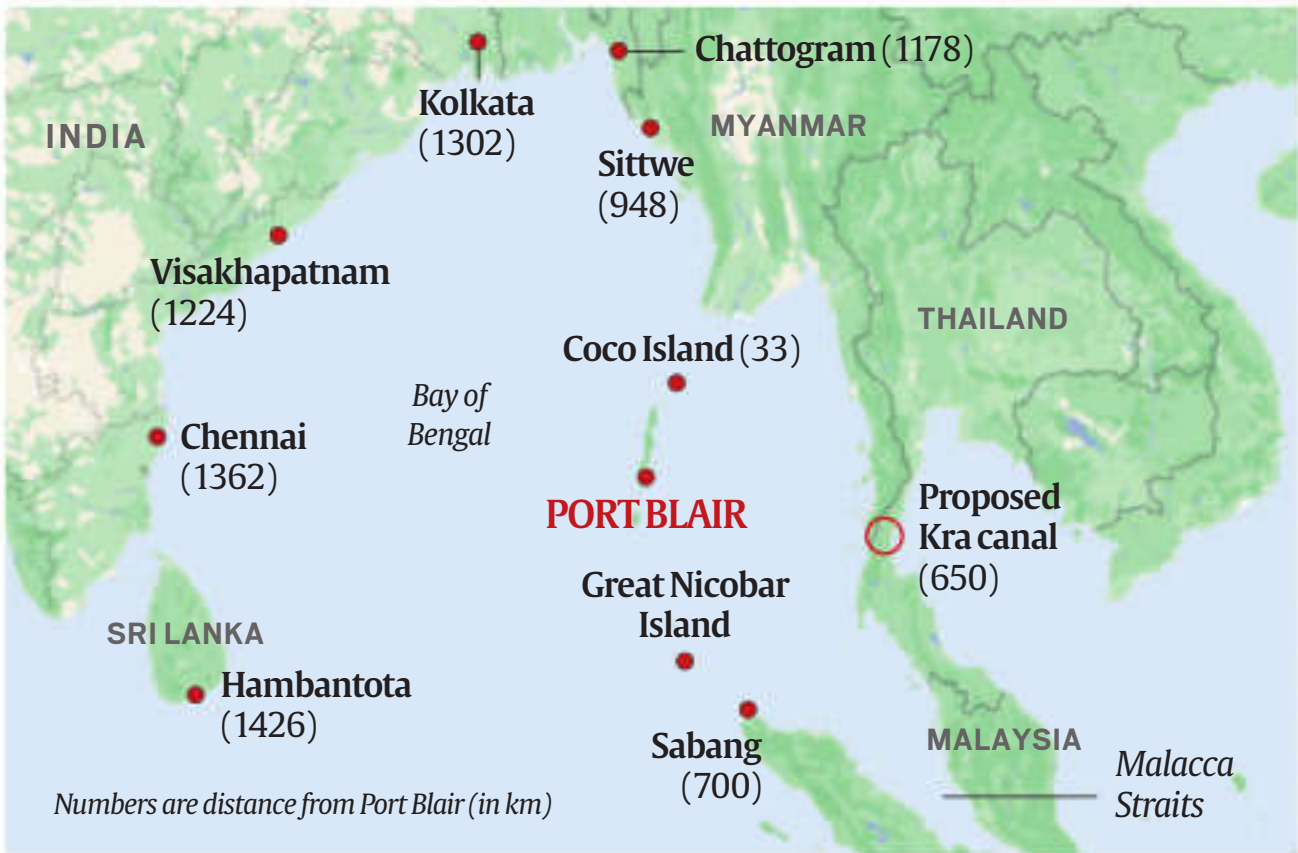
applicable in 46 member states, including all of the EU, plus the UK and various other non-EU countries. This means that any climate and human rights case brought before a judge in Europe’s national courts will now

EXPLAINED
LAW

A&N Islands, through a strategic lens

The new thrust on developing strategic infrastructure, both civilian and military, on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is decades overdue. Here’s what needs to be done, how, and why

Vantage location in Bay of Bengal



The A&N Islands should be the first line of offence against any attempt from the East to undermine India’s maritime security. While some effort was made to leverage this locational advantage with the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) being constituted as a tri-services command in 2001, subsequent efforts have been grossly inadequate.

Why has the pace of developing strategic infrastructure in A&N been slow?

First, it is fairly recently that political decision-makers have realised that the islands are strategically critical for India’s security. The reasons behind the realisation include the unprecedented expansion of the PLA Navy.

Second, the distance from the mainland and difficulties of developing infrastructure have been used as an excuse to delay and stall various projects.

Third, complex procedures for obtaining environmental clearances even for small projects have been a dampener. Regulations on the conservation of forests and native tribes have complicated issues of land acquisition.

Fourth, the development of islands and strategic infrastructure is a multi-dimensional project involving several ministries, departments, and agencies, that presents significant coordination challenges.

Finally, the conflict between a long-term strategic vision and immediate political gains has often tilted in favour of the latter.

What should strategic infrastructure development in these islands focus on?

The first requirement of maritime security is to keep the vast area around the islands under surveillance. The security of all 836 islands, both inhabited and uninhabited, must be ensured against attempts at their occupation or use by entities engaged in unlawful activities.

Second, a strong element of deterrence must be ensured against any naval misadventure from the East.

Third, infrastructure that can bolster India’s maritime economy must be built on the southern group of islands that is strategically located vis-à-vis the main shipping lane from the Indian Ocean to South East Asia.

Fourth, ease of travel to and between the islands is key. Without rapid movement of people and goods, the pace of development will remain slow. Improved transportation will help to create and sustain the tourism potential of the islands.

Fifth, the islands’ dependence on mainland support, whether in respect of foodstuffs or relevant local industries that support maintenance, repair, and other services, must be

reduced to the extent possible.

And what kind of infrastructure should be prioritised on the islands?

■ The islands stretch 420 nautical miles (777 km) from north to south. This sea area needs to be monitored and patrolled by aircraft and surface platforms. Separate airfields with long runways that can operate Boeing 737-sized aircraft are essential.

■ Ports and fuel storages must be built in both the northern and southern groups of the islands for ships’ operational turnaround without the need to return to Port Blair.

■ The Army, Navy, and Air Force must not only commit more forces, but station the right mix of assets at the ANC. The presence of troops must match the requirement to keep the islands sanitised at all times. There is a need to ultimately base surveillance and fighter aircraft there, and frequent detachments must operate in the interim.

■ Work on the Galathea Bay (Great Nicobar Island) transhipment port must be expedited. Maritime services such as repair and logistics must be developed for international and Indian shipping.

■ Road networks, high-speed inter-island ferry services, and a seaplane terminal must be developed.

■ The pace of development must be enhanced by sourcing suitable material from abroad, utilising international expertise on creating marine infrastructure, and using components that can withstand the weather and possible seismic shocks.

■ Forest and environmental clearances must be accorded with minimum red tape. The concessions for defence infrastructure allowed along India’s northern borders must be extended to the A&N Islands.

■ Planned habitation of uninhabited islands should be considered by providing incentives such as free or subsidised land, where eco-friendly entrepreneurial efforts could be encouraged.

■ India could also explore the possibility of leveraging international arrangements in the Indo-Pacific such as the Quad and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) to catalyse development efforts on the islands.

Vice Admiral Biswajit Dasgupta (Retd) is a former Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Naval Command

How 2,000 senior women from Switzerland won a landmark climate case

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, APRIL 15

THREE DAYS after a three-judge Bench led by Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud said people have a “right to be free from the adverse effects of climate change”, Europe’s highest human rights court on April 9 sided with a group of 2,000 senior Swiss women who had sued their government for violating their human rights by failing to do enough to combat the adverse effects of climate change.

The landmark ruling, which is the first of its kind, by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has paved the way for future plaintiffs to sue their governments for better climate protections.

What was the case in Europe?

The case was brought against Switzerland by *KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz* (Association of Senior Women for Climate Protection Switzerland), a group of women climate activists all above the age of 64, in November 2016. The women claimed that the Swiss government’s inadequate climate policies violated their right to life and other guarantees under the European Convention on Human Rights. The convention is an international agreement to protect human rights and political freedoms in Europe.

The petitioners built their case by partly relying on their medical vulnerability as senior citizens to extreme heat caused by climate change. They cited the reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

Staying the course

BJP manifesto retains development-welfare policy mix

The BJP manifesto, bearing the unmistakable imprimatur of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has an undertone of quiet confidence running through it. It focuses more on economy and governance issues than ideologically contentious ones, which is very welcome. The assurance is of ‘hitting the road up and running’ on winning a third term. The manifesto does not unveil extravagant plans that could compromise the fisc, perhaps because it feels they are not electorally necessary.

The party seems to be sure that the existing schemes with respect to infrastructure and welfare are working well, and that there is no need to tamper with them. There is no hint of a new package. The development formula of big ticket physical infrastructure, creation of entrepreneurs over job seekers, and efficient delivery of welfare and credit to weaker sections through digital infrastructure is here to stay. On physical and digital infrastructure, the decadal claims of the manifesto are not out of place. There has been a major improvement in road and rail networks, with 28 km of national highways and 14.5 km of rail networks being constructed every day. The growth of solar power, as well as improvement in last mile electricity reach are undisputed achievements. The creation of 50 crore Jan Dhan accounts to which ₹34-lakh crore have been transferred marks a huge shift in income transfers to the poor. Digital technology plays a role in improving market outreach of rural businesses and the urban self-employed. The government has reaped electoral dividends from efficient delivery of foodgrains and cash to the poor.

But in the party’s outreach to the youth and the middle classes, the manifesto is less eloquent. The policies for skilling and self-employment seem geared more to serve the needs of the rural and urban poor, while the traditional job seekers in the middle class have not been promised any new deal, save comfortable train and road travel, even as they suffer rising costs of goods and services. It is notable that the BJP manifesto — indeed as that of the Congress — does not have much to say on basic health and education. The BJP manifesto highlights its achievements in Ayushman Bharat insurance coverage besides having created IITs and medical colleges, but there is no perspective on offer. It is disappointing that major political parties have failed to reassess issues of access and quality in health and education, despite upheavals such as Covid that derailed these sectors.

As for surprises, ‘uniform civil code’ and ‘one nation one election’ have virtually been mentioned as agenda items, with none of the argumentation that one might have expected. If the manifesto has stuck to the straight and narrow, it is because the government has already rolled out its elaborate sector plans and its vision for 2047. The Prime Minister’s ‘guarantee’ to actualise this vision was all that was left to be said.

FROM THE VIEWSROOM.

Speak the voters’ language

Parvathi Benu

In India, a registered voter in any constituency, above 25 can contest the Lok Sabha election, usually held every five years. One can contest the election from any constituency in the country, except the autonomous districts of Assam, Lakshadweep and Sikkim.

Once elected, the Member of Parliament is expected to represent the views and aspirations of the people of their constituency in Parliament, apart from performing their other duties.

The question arises: is it fair for a candidate to run for election in a constituency with which he or she has little connection? Many candidates may find it easy to win with strong party support, but this can lead to a disconnect between the leader and the constituency. This issue is compounded when the elected representative doesn’t speak the local language, hindering

regular interaction with constituents. In rural areas, MPs and MLAs are often seen as royalty, and some politicians exploit this perception. But that shouldn’t be the case. MPs and MLAs must be accessible for people to let them know their grievances. Language plays an important role here, as communication via translation often confuses and can even lead to misunderstandings.

While it’s unreasonable to restrict candidates based on their residency in a constituency, there’s a pressing need for MPs who speak the language of their constituents and understand their challenges.

Old habits die hard for certain voters. They vote for political parties no matter who the candidate is. In many cases, this is borne out of the voters’ trust in the party. In those situations, the onus is on political parties too, to choose a candidate who understands their people and can successfully represent their needs in Parliament.

Is that too much to ask?



ARAVIND MELLIGERI

India needs a comprehensive National Aerospace Policy to make a ‘Made in India’ passenger aircraft a reality and propel the local aerospace ecosystem to maturity. A year ago, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while inaugurating the Shivamogga airport in Karnataka, said the day is not far when Indians will travel in Made in India planes. Several senior ministers and government functionaries stress it will not be long before Airbus and Boeing set up final aircraft assembly lines (FALs), in India.

The need for a domestic commercial aircraft programme is undisputed. India is the fastest growing aviation market in the world with the largest order-book for new aircraft, at a whopping \$70 billion over the next decade. Its existing airports are buzzing with travellers even as new ones are being built or are on the planning board.

But how soon India will be able to achieve the Prime Minister’s proclamation of a Made in India commercial aircraft is linked to a host of factors.

Europe and the US lead in commercial aerospace manufacturing, while China has emerged a new challenger. China’s journey began in 2002 with the ARJ21, a regional jet, followed by the C919, a larger narrow-body aircraft. Although the ARJ21 faced delays and is considered a partial achievement at best, the C919, with over one thousand orders, stands as a notable success. Both programmes heavily rely on foreign technologies from global original equipment manufacturers (OEMs), emphasising the importance of collaborations and making it attractive for foreign companies to operate domestically.

INDIAN REALITY

Few realise that India’s own aerospace endeavour predates China’s by more than 60 years. Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL), started off in 1940 as the privately promoted Hindustan Aircraft Ltd. Given this early start, one would have expected India to be a major force in aerospace manufacturing. However, Indian companies currently account for just over 1 per cent of the global aerospace design and manufacturing market. With their roots in IT services, some companies have moved up the value chain to render engineering design services. Then there are those who have made a mark in manufacturing and are a part of the global aerospace supply chain and deliver build-to-print detail parts, sub-assemblies and smaller assemblies to global OEMs. Every OEM operates its own captive engineering/design arm in India. Therefore, aerospace engineering capabilities, across the value chain, exist in India albeit in silos.

There are very few Indian companies

The path to a ‘Made in India’ passenger aircraft



CHALLENGING. An ecosystem of design expertise, manufacturing acumen, component supply base and regulatory system must be in place. For this, govt support is vital

VELANKANNI RAJ B

that operate in both design and manufacturing. There are still fewer who can boast of any worthwhile aerospace IP. To be able to conceive and execute an independent commercial aircraft programme is a stupendous task given the complexities in making an air-plane. Sample this: an average commercial aircraft (Airbus 320) consists of upwards of 340,000 parts, while the Boeing 737 MAX is said to have 500,000 parts. Each is a complex machine that needs to work in perfect harmony with everything else onboard for at least 20 years under demanding conditions’. To build an aircraft an entire ecosystem of design expertise, raw materials supply base, component suppliers, and end-to-end manufacturing acumen apart from a regulatory system for certifications (life-cycle programme management expertise of design to retire) is needed.

UNIQUE NEEDS

And then India is a unique market that needs a unique aircraft programme. India has a high density of flyers who typically want to travel over short distances — from the hinterland to the metros. The number of operational airports is projected to grow to 230-240 from the current 140 as air travel expands to Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities. So, a commuter aircraft that caters to the Udaan segment (high

Sustaining a full-fledged aircraft programme is a long haul and needs long-term risk capital with ample support from the government.

volume/high frequency connectivity between 500+ district HQs to State capitals/metros) is a crying need.

The government’s focus on developing a regional transport aircraft (RTA), designed by the National Aerospace Lab (NAL), and manufactured by HAL, which has been on the anvil for some time now, is thus in the right direction. However, while the government’s nudge to Airbus and Boeing to set up FALs may raise doubts on the future of the RTA, there is space for all. One needs to consider the market segmentation and distinguish between Make in India for India and Make in India for the world. More importantly, developing an aircraft design from scratch is a long and expensive affair. It calls for a collaborative approach both in the interests of cost and time to take-off. Either way, both the NAL-HAL combine for the RTA, and the global OEMs for their own platforms, will have to leverage the local supply chain for their respective endeavours and ride on the domestic capacity and capabilities for profitability.

But graduating to ‘design and build’ is a lengthy process fraught with risks. Indian aerospace supply chain companies tend to invest capital for the short-term, minimal risk opportunities. Sustaining a full-fledged aircraft programme is a long haul and needs long-term risk capital with ample support from the government as has been the case in most developed markets. According to one estimate, COMAC received \$49-72 billion in state-related support over its lifetime. Airbus in contrast received \$22 billion over many years from the EU, according to a WTO estimate.

Likewise, the government of India will

have to go the extra mile to make a National Passenger Aircraft Programme a reality by taking several measures. Among these, the following will be critical:

A comprehensive National Aerospace Policy integrating elements from various other policy approaches like the National Aviation Policy, the MRO Policy, etc.

A National Aircraft Programme that is well funded through innovative mechanisms including grants, subsidies, and preferential buying arrangements with airlines.

A dedicated fund to promote investments in aerospace and defence projects with a particular emphasis on R&D and IP generation.

Extending PLI for aerospace manufacturing with substantial allocations.

This apart, the programme needs to be in PPP mode with involvement of all ecosystem elements.

Emphasis on at least 75 per cent in-country value addition is essential to grow the ecosystem.

There is also a case for classifying both commercial and defence aerospace as infrastructure to enable companies access long term funding of over 20+ years at attractive interest rates.

The government will have to pave the runway for the supply chain to take risks and partner a domestic commercial aircraft programme on priority, while it also ‘designs and builds’ for the world.

The writer is Chairman and CEO, Aequus Pvt. Ltd, and operates the Belagavi Aerospace Cluster (BAC), India’s first notified precision engineering SEZ for Aerospace components

Resurrecting the dead, digitally

AI is doing so by using old voice recordings, images or video. But it throws up moral, humanitarian issues

Atanu Biswas

A new method of remembering and reviving their cherished relatives is emerging as millions of people throughout China flocked to their ancestors’ graves to pay their respects for the annual tomb-sweeping festival this April, a customary day to revere and upkeep the graves of the dead. Some businesses promoted online, however, allow Chinese netizens to construct a moving digital avatar of a deceased loved one for as little as 20 yuan (about \$2.75). The market for “digital humans” was estimated to be worth 12 billion yuan in 2022 and is predicted to grow fourfold by 2025.

AI-resurrected avatars may remind us of one of the fabled Deathly Hallows from *Harry Potter* and *the Deathly Hallows*, the “Resurrection Stone.” It had the ability to recall loved ones from death.

Well, deepfakes are currently being employed extensively in many spheres of life to bring the dead back to life. These days, AI is far more powerful and can regularly bring the dead back to life by

using their old voice recordings, images, or video. The domain is being expanded to include various aspects of life, such as bringing back loved ones, resurrecting deceased actors for new films (e.g., Peter Cushing, Audrey Hepburn), or even reviving deceased politicians to capitalise on their magic for election campaigning (e.g., J Jayalalitha, M Karunanidhi). The options appear to be endless. What about the moral and humanitarian issues, though?

MENTAL PAIN

Some are even advocating the outlawing of content that uses AI services to “resurrect” the dead if it causes “mental pain” to the departed’s families. What, though, is the true trade-off? Take an appealing example. While he sat at his computer a little over two decades after his father’s death in 1999, American novelist and journalist Michael Grothaus watched a video of his father, who was healthy and sporting a yellow T-shirt, playing with a smartphone that had been invented many years after his death. He was having fun and taking pictures of the park, which was dappled with sunlight.



AI AVATARS. Rising in the real world

Then he turned to face the TV and, with his trademark bushy eyebrows raised, gave his son a benign smile.

Grothaus had brought his father back to life through a “deepfake.” It just comes with about a \$200 price tag. Grothaus supplied more than 60 seconds of mid-1990s VHS footage for the video. For Grothaus, his father’s digital resurrection created conflicting emotions. He enjoyed the reconnection as he viewed the video over and over. Then he deleted it, appalled at the rift it had created in reality and the implications it held for our perception of

truth and trust. In this connection, in his review of Grothaus’ book, in a December 2021 piece published in *The Guardian*, documentary filmmaker Peter Pomerantsev questioned why people consented to participate in his documentaries. “Our relationship with visual representations of ourselves always runs along this axis of narcissism and dread: at once promising a defeat of death, but by arousing that desire only to disappoint it, crushingly reinforcing its inevitability,” stated Pomerantsev.

Maybe so. But in ‘The End of Life’, the last chapter of his 2021 book *Trust No One: Inside the World of Deepfakes*, Grothaus stated that “everything about deepfakes is complex — except for the expertise needed to create them.” Indeed, nothing is more intricate than how they affect our perception of truth and trust. AI avatars are starting to appear in an increasing number of human endeavours, and civilisations will have a difficult time handling these complex scenarios.

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✉ **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.

Economic headwinds

This refers to the editorial ‘Storm warning’ (April 15). The geopolitical landscape presents a complex challenge for central banks worldwide. The conflict between Iran and Israel has escalated tensions, potentially leading to higher crude oil prices. This situation could disrupt the global commodities supply chain and contribute to inflationary pressures. Central banks may need to reconsider their monetary policy strategies, particularly regarding interest rate cuts. The rise in gold prices has prompted central banks to increase their gold reserves, which is a traditional move during times of economic uncertainty. For India, the current geopolitical events could impact forex inflows,

potentially leading to a depreciation of the rupee. However, India’s robust domestic investor base has been a source of resilience for its stock market. Leveraging this domestic strength could help maintain market vibrancy despite external pressures.

Srinivasan Velamur

Chennai

PoS players

Apropos ‘RBI likely to bring point-of-sale players under licence regime’ (April 15), the regulatory action has not come a day soon as the issue has been under discussion for long and even doubts have been expressed regarding the eligibility of some of the PoS players like Bharat Pe and Paytm to continue in offline PoS business. It is common

knowledge that the merchants have been using these PoS machines to swipe cards and pay cash to customers for a commission, which is not only illegal, but also considered usurious. There is need to put in place regulations that would stop unauthorised cash transactions and ensure secured access to PoS systems with measures such as multi-factor authentication and prevent unauthorised access to the machines.

Kosaraju Chandramouli

Hyderabad

Fans go overboard

This refers to ‘When fans behave unsportingly’ (April 16). When fans literally treat cricketers as demigods, they have the right to criticise them

too. But in the case of Hardik Pandya, it has gone a bit too far, from the time he took the field in the very first match of the ongoing IPL. It was Mumbai Indians’ decision to appoint Pandya captain in place of Rohit Sharma, and players moving from one franchise to another is a common phenomena. Fans should have shown more restraint in their over-the-top behaviour. Thanks to former Indian captain Virat Kohli for urging the fans not to unnecessarily boo Pandya..

Bal Govind

Noida

Factors of production

The article ‘The poverty of Indian economic discourse’ (April 15) did not mince words on the imperative

need to encourage capital-intensive industries in India to optimise economic growth. It must be remembered that capital doesn’t displace labour. As a matter of fact, to produce physical capital (for instance, machinery) and also to operate it, labour is needed. A judicious mix of these two factors of production — labour and capital — can enhance the production of goods and services or real income, which is the best indicator of growth. India can take a cue from the Asian Tigers — Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea — which maximised economic growth by rapid industrialisation.

S Ramakrishnasayee

Chennai

Thermal comfort norms

Affordable housing schemes must integrate them

Dhaval Monani
Nikhilesh Sinha
Sharadbala Joshi

As we get to the hottest months of the year, millions of households are running their ACs 24 hours a day. Between 8-10 per cent of India’s 300 million households have an air conditioner, but what about the other 90 per cent?

Low-income families struggle with rising temperatures, unable to afford ACs and are most vulnerable to the effects of extreme heat. Yet surprisingly there are no special guidelines to ensure thermal comfort in the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY).

Under PMAY-U, States and cities offer increased floor space index (FSI), or transferable development rights (TDR) for slum redevelopment and low-cost housing. This promotes dense high-rise developments that improve land use efficiency and also increases emissions per unit area. In addition, while the increase in building heights, non-reflective roofs, higher reflectivity of roads and poorly vegetated parking areas create hot air pockets around buildings, the extensive use of cement and steel without proper insulation in the buildings cause higher indoor temperatures and thermal discomfort.

Thermal comfort is a subjective measure of an individual’s satisfaction with the thermal environment, including air temperature, mean radiant temperature, air speed and relative humidity. This has not been given much importance except for token consideration by providing windows for cross ventilation. Even this has become largely irrelevant due to planning that has disrupted wind paths, paved up percolation zones and reduced green cover in cities.

ACS’ ECO IMPACT

While the use of air conditioners achieves thermal comfort they emit fluorocarbons and account for nearly 20 per cent of electricity used in buildings.

Additionally, continuous exposure to an air conditioned environment has been associated with respiratory and skin ailments. Recent observations reveal that the use of air-conditioners has increased even in the smallest affordable government housing, where the walls contribute substantially to heat gain.

Indian building guidelines



GREEN IMPACT. ACs emit and consume lot of power PERIASAMY M

focus primarily on space utilisation. There are some parts relating to openings/fenestrations that can be inferred to utilisation of natural light. But there are no other guidelines that directly address thermal comfort — on the contrary many guidelines seem to penalise good thermal practices.

Wall thicknesses are considered within FSI calculations — thicker or cavity walls that would help reduce heat transmission restrict the amount of usable space. The rules for concrete walls, which transfer very high amounts of heat, stipulated a wall thickness of 100mm that was subsequently increased to 150mm. No guidelines take into account sun paths, wind direction or on-site conditions which at times lead to facades that face the direct afternoon sun.

The Centre in its ‘Housing for All’ mission can implement best practices for thermal comfort in buildings. Retrofitting and mitigation by occupants will always be sub optimal, expensive and lead to unforeseen consequences. Simple measures like orientation, alignment of openings to wind paths, use of reflective paint and green roofs can create great impact.

What is needed though is a greater attention to design, new materials and better guidelines. For instance, building codes could mandate adoption of passive design to promote thermal comfort.

In addition, initiatives like the Eco Niwas Samhita co-developed by the Bureau of Energy Efficiency could be adopted to ensure building envelopes and shaded areas were designed to minimise heat gain.

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thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

April 15, 2004

HLL goes for business rejig, installs new management team

FMCG leader, Hindustan Lever Ltd (HLL), today announced major changes in the management and organisational structure in a bid to provide sharper focus on key brands and ensure better deployment of resources. Mr M.S. Banga, Chairman, HLL, has been appointed as the Business Group President of Unilever’s \$6-billion home and personal care (HPC) business in Asia.

IMD predicts 100% normal monsoon

The country is set to have a ‘100 per cent’ normal southwest monsoon this year, with the India Meteorological Department (IMD) today releasing a long range forecast that is even more bullish than the one it made for 2003. According to the IMD Director-General, Dr S.K. Srivastav, total rainfall for the country as a whole during the coming monsoon season (June-September) will be 100 per cent of the long period average (LPA).

Hyundai bullish on sales, launches Elantra

Hyundai Motor India expects its unit sales to jump 37 per cent this fiscal on the back of surging domestic and export demand. Its sales rose 25 per cent in the last fiscal. Its latest launch is Elantra family sedan.

The true face of ‘philanthropic aid’

A recent spike in aid has been spurred by Western assistance to Ukraine, serving the interests of West’s arms manufacturers

MACROSCAN.



The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), predominantly a club of rich market economy countries, has just released preliminary estimates of the flow of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) or “aid” from 31 members of its Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to developing country recipients.

The figures seem to suggest that nothing really changes in that domain. The promise held out in a UN General Assembly resolution of 1970 that “Each economically advanced country will progressively increase its official development assistance [...] and will exert its best efforts to reach a minimum net amount of 0.7% of its gross national product [...] by the middle of the Decade” still remains unrealised.

As Chart 1 shows, there are only five countries that have realised or exceeded that target. The average for all DAC members is just above half of that modest target. And the figure for the US, the world’s largest economy, is a pathetic 0.24 per cent.

The contribution of the countries that realised the target fades in importance once we realise that they together accounted for just \$51.5 billion of the total flow of ODA from DAC countries of \$223.7 billion in current prices in 2023.

That was less than flows of \$66 billion from the US, which contributes close to 30 per cent of the total. In the flows from the five countries that met the ODA target, Germany, with \$36.7 billion, accounted for \$51.5 billion or more than 70 per cent.

More recently, however, the DAC ‘donors’, including laggard US, seem to be getting their act together. There has been a noticeable rise in the volume of ODA flows from the DAC during the three years ending 2023. ODA measured by the OECD in grant equivalents at constant 2022 prices rose from \$166.5 billion in 2020 to \$180.3 billion in 2021, \$210.7 billion in 2022 and \$214.1 billion in 2023 (Chart 2).

Flows from the US too rose from \$39.8 billion in 2020, to \$51.2 billion in 2021, \$60.5 billion in 2022, and \$63.6 billion in 2023.

However, a more disaggregated look at the destination of these flows suggests that there is little reason to applaud this improvement. As Chart 3 shows, the two years 2022 and 2023 were marked by a steep rise in ODA flows from the DAC members to Ukraine, from \$1.1 billion in 2021 to \$17.8 billion in 2022 and \$19.4 billion in 2023.

Moreover, besides bilateral flows from member governments, flows of “development assistance” from EU institutions (not governments) also rose from \$1.1 billion in 2021 to \$10.6 billion in 2022 and \$18.7 billion in 2023. Among member governments, the US was the dominant contributor, accounting for close to 60 per cent of the flows of ODA from the DAC members to Ukraine (Chart 4).

UKRAINE FACTOR

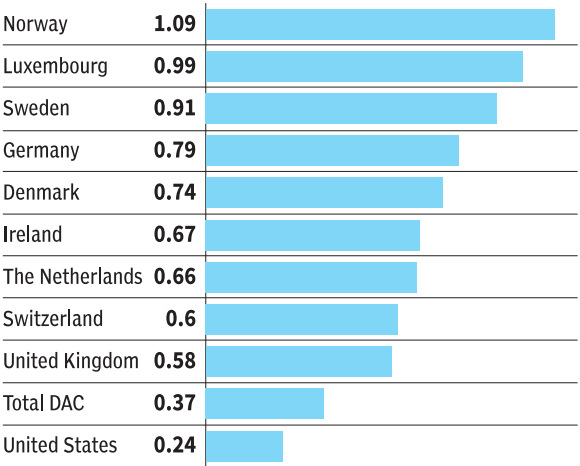
The sharp and sudden spike in flows to Ukraine in 2022 and 2023 is not difficult to explain. To recall, it was on February 24, 2022 that Russia chose to invade Ukraine, leading to a war in which Ukraine’s response was completely dependent on military aid from the US and Europe.

Having been partly responsible for the failure of efforts to arrive at a mediated settlement of the conflict triggered by official Russian perceptions of threats to the country’s integrity, the West has backed Ukraine in a war that has not ended as soon as expected.

Thus, the increase in ODA from the DAC countries is not “development aid”,

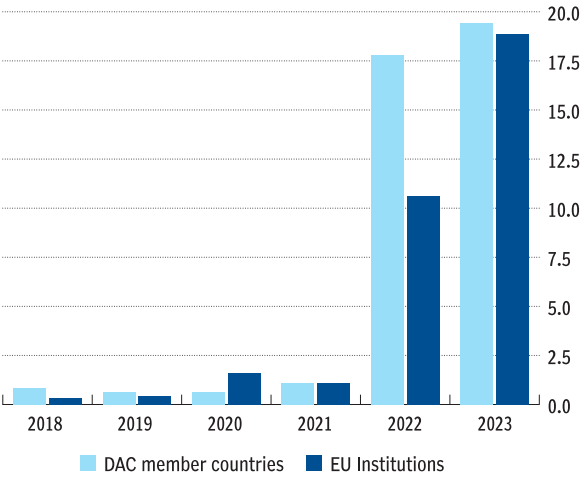
The break-up

ODA in 2023 (as % of GNI)



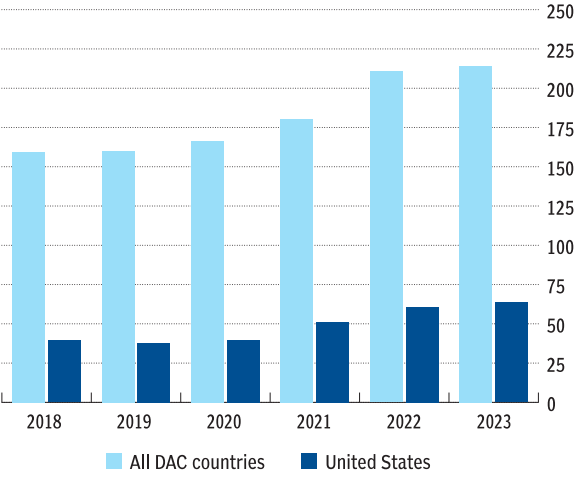
Ukraine surge

ODA to Ukraine (\$ billion, constant 2022)



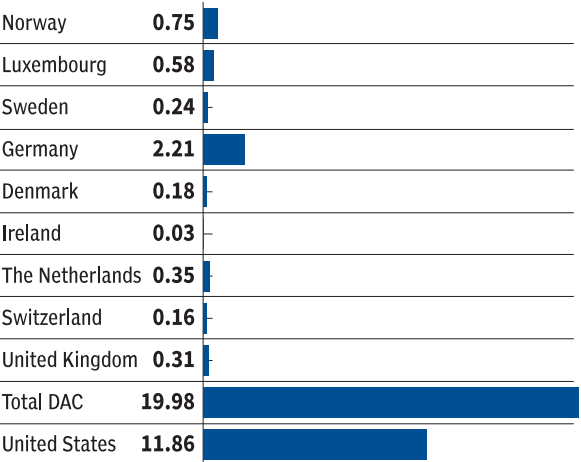
US vs The rest

ODA measured by OECD in grant equivalents (\$ billion, constant 2022)



Military aid

Net bilateral ODA in Ukraine 2023 (\$ billion)



SECURITY PUSH. Post Russian invasion, Ukraine is now a major arms importer REUTERS

but the cost of expansionism by proxy of the US and its European allies.

Paradoxically, with the US and EU allied in an effort to win a war against Russia fought by proxy Ukraine, there has been much hand wringing about the inadequacy of support from them for Ukraine’s war effort. Especially since that country appears to be failing in its effort to push back against Russia.

The recent aid flows from the West seem to serve its “strategic” objectives more than any real development goals as traditionally defined

Domestic politics, the genocidal Israeli attack on Gaza, and the widening of the conflict in West Asia, have resulted in the waning of US support for the Ukrainians.

A \$60 billion package of US military support has not progressed through the House of Representatives. What is more, Donald Trump has made it clear that he sees the conflict in Ukraine as Europe’s problem, which the European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) must pay for.

European countries have been promising to step up their contribution, but differences on the size and form of that support persist. In January, the EU agreed on a package of support totalling around \$55 billion, but delivery has been slow. A call from Estonia that NATO

countries must commit to provide support to Ukraine amounting to 0.25 per cent of their GDP has few takers.

But the call makes the priorities clear. If aid is to increase, it will only be for strategic purposes that would not meet the requirements of “development aid” as properly defined. The recent increases in flows included in the DAC aid figures only confirm that perception. But even that spurious inclusion does not help take average aid levels anywhere close to the promise made in 1970.

ARMS TRADE

Even the observed increase in support to Ukraine is not driven by purely geopolitical considerations geared to containing Russia. Rather it is partly influenced by pressures from the US military-industrial complex and arms producers in the OECD countries.

Military “aid” for Ukraine, which involves no non-Ukrainian “boots on the ground” but only supply of military equipment and ammunition, generates substantial demand for this military-industrial complex that produces those weapons and the needed ammunition.

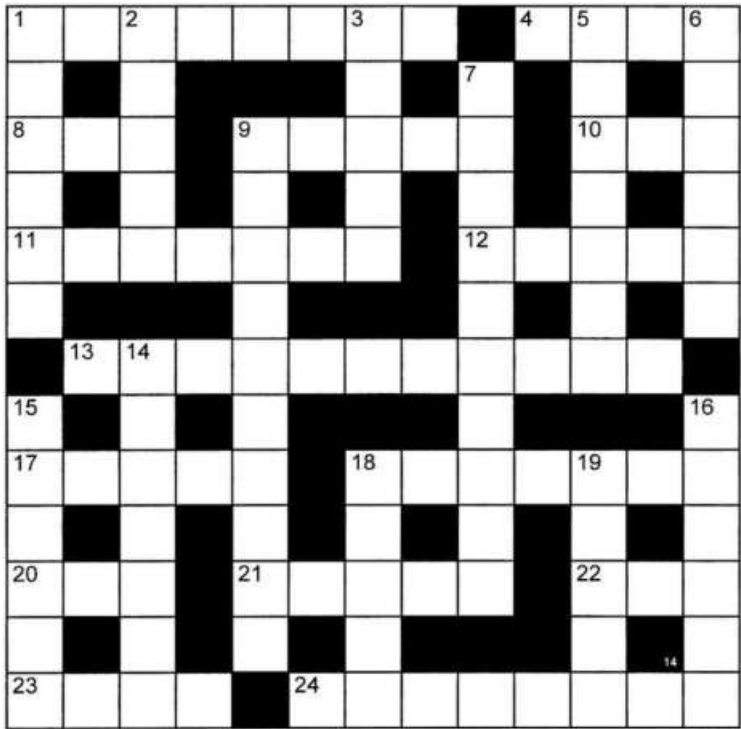
According to one estimate, Ukraine became the world’s third biggest arms importer in 2022 and was ranked fifth among the arms export destinations of the US.

The US was the major supplier of arms to Ukraine in 2022, and as per the trade-indicator values (TIV), based on known unit production costs of different kinds of equipment collated by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Ukrainian arms imports from that country amounted to 917 million TIV in that year.

The corresponding figures were 297 for Germany and 276 for the UK. They were the leading sources of imports, other than Poland with 466 TIV. A lot of “aid” was circling back to boost profits of the military-industrial complex.

That is a stark and telling revelation of the real purpose of what is euphemistically identified as ‘philanthropic’ aid.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2418



EASY

ACROSS

1. Reduce very heavily (8)
4. Assuage (4)
8. Pinch (3)
9. Fat (5)
10. Sailor (3)
11. Dealt with (7)
12. Have actual being (5)
13. One constantly puffing (5-6)
17. Punctuation mark (5)
18. Missed footing (7)
20. Regret (3)
21. Untruthful (5)
22. Fruit seed (3)
23. Hyphen (4)
24. Snakes, etc (8)

DOWN

1. Signify (6)
2. Wire (5)
3. Material (5)
5. A foot either side (7)
6. Deserves (6)
7. Growing (10)
9. Can be got (10)
14. Stops broker dealing (7)
15. Marked with incised lines (6)
16. Skilled people (6)
18. Rubbish (5)
19. The Pope’s (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. It will take one in ten to marry after December 1st (8)
4. It is unruffled and appears in a vertical manner (4)
8. Stop and hold, the stoppage having been brought back (3)
9. Too big an order to see the end off (5)
10. No end of sour, black stuff (3)
11. Paid for another to be dealt with by doctor (7)
12. To be is, in extent, ten fewer (5)
13. One linking himself with respiratory trouble? (5-6)
17. A pause that gets inverted before quotation (5)
18. Troop-leader tore off – and fell, perhaps (7)
20. Be sorry for a plant that smells strongly (3)
21. Is not up to being untruthful (5)
22. Sanctimonious end of worship is something seedy (3)
23. A line in print made in a hurry? (4)
24. They creep East and South with triple-adjustment (8)

DOWN

1. Signify a half-manufactured informal letter (6)
2. Wire for taxi, the French conclusion (5)
3. You and I, taken in by Edward, are material (5)
5. People must be feet apart to be so (7)
6. Deserves to stir half of them up (6)
7. Unrolling, is making the image visible (10)
9. A bible? Not a change that may be got! (10)
14. Trounces the nail-knockers (7)
15. Cut lines and got a goal (6)
16. They are skilled, being pasted by mistake (6)
18. Honeycomb, perhaps, is rubbish (5)
19. Daddy, at fifty, is connected with the Vatican (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2417

ACROSS 1. Bungalows 5. Ewe 7. Rats 8. Snapping 10. Innocent 11. Wend 13. Hungry 15. Critic 18. Fire 19. Champion 22. Neutrals 23. Base 24. Dye 25. Greenness

DOWN 1. Burnish 2. Not on 3. Owning 4. Saps 5. Eminent 6. Egged 9. Scare 12. Frump 14. Nurture 16. Confess 17. Shelfe 18. Fined 20. Image 21. Brag

Signalling continuity

BJP to build on its govt's work over the last decade

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Sunday released its manifesto, or Sankalp Patra, for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, highlighting what its government has achieved over the past 10 years and how it intends to take the country forward if voted back to power for the third consecutive term. From the economic standpoint, the manifesto signals continuity, or building on the achievements, with some significant reforms. One of the noticeable achievements of the Narendra Modi government over the past 10 years — one that is perhaps not adequately appreciated — is bolstering macroeconomic stability. The macroeconomic outlook in 2014 — with a near-currency crisis in 2013 — was very different from today. India now has large foreign exchange reserves and the banking system is in its best position over the past decade. India's restrained fiscal-policy response to the pandemic and the central bank's commitment to a legally mandated inflation target have helped boost investor confidence. Thus, the BJP has done well to reiterate its commitment to sustaining macro-financial stability, which is necessary for growth and development.

The two other important promises that stand out are strengthening statistical institutions and facilitating fiscal autonomy for panchayati raj institutions. Both these commitments should help improve governance. Making policy decisions in a rapidly developing country like India requires timely availability of data. Although India has a robust statistical system, it requires an overhaul to align with the evolving nature of the economy's demands. The national accounts data, for instance, comes with a significant lag and is subject to multiple large revisions, affecting policymaking and making decision-making for business more difficult. One important aspect of reforming the statistical system will be to ensure that institutions engaged in this area are made independent and credible. Timely availability of data will improve decision-making and help boost investor confidence.

Further, one of the valid criticisms of the Indian governance structure is that power is not adequately decentralised. As a result, the third tier of the government, or local bodies, which are best-placed to deliver a variety of services to citizens, are not adequately empowered. In this regard, the BJP's promise to facilitate fiscal autonomy for panchayati raj institutions must be welcomed, though how it will be done remains critical. Despite enabling constitutional provisions, not much has happened over the years. As highlighted in this space earlier, the average revenue per panchayat, including grants, was only ₹21.23 lakh in 2022-23. The fiscal autonomy of local bodies can be improved by both empowering them to raise resources and through a predictable devolution of funds. One of the possible ways out, subject to legal changes, could be to allocate resources directly through the Finance Commission. Granting a share in revenue from goods and services tax collection could also be an option.

Among other commitments, if voted back to power, the BJP will continue to focus on investment and building infrastructure, which should help boost economic activities and create employment. It also intends to build on initiatives in the manufacturing sector to enable job creation. In this context, it would be useful to review the trade policy. A sustained increase in exports can be a big driver of both economic growth and job creation. One big political promise with economic reasoning is "One Nation One Election". While the idea promises to reduce policy uncertainty, the way forward suggested by the high-powered committee must be extensively debated.

Reckoning in West Asia

Too soon to assume that the Israel-Iran crisis is over

Iran's widely anticipated response over the weekend to Israel's attack on the Iranian embassy in Damascus on April 1, killing an Iranian general and six officers, appears to have caused a rethink among Tel Aviv's key allies. Instead of pushing for escalation, the US has ruled out joining any Israeli counter-attack, and French and UK leaders have called on Israel not to respond to Iran's attack. This was also the message emanating from an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council meeting, at which Secretary General Antonio Guterres rightly pointed out that the world could not afford another war in West Asia. Taken together with India's statement expressing "serious concern" at the escalation of hostilities, the concerted de-escalatory pressures on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may weaken his hopes of widening the war against Hamas, which is supported by Iran, to retain his precarious hold on power. Thus, oil prices and financial markets saw muted responses to Iran's aggression; some analysts suggest the events were already priced in. The fact that the widely anticipated attacks by 360 missiles and drones by Tehran, said to be on a far vaster scale than similar attacks by Russia on Ukraine, were defeated in a coordinated operation by the US, the UK and Jordan may have also helped contain the response of Israel's allies.

The urgent next step for the international community is to prevent an escalation of the attacks on Gaza in which Palestinian civilian casualties have mounted. Doing so demands a scaling back of arms supplies to Israel by key allies, especially the US, which accounts for almost 66 per cent of major arms supplies to Israel, and they have been deployed for what is being increasingly described as genocide acts. Israel bombed a refugee camp in central Gaza on Monday, killing five and wounding many more even as the UN Security Council met. Mr Netanyahu has stated his government would not be distracted from the war on Gaza after Iran's unprecedented strikes on Israeli territory. He intends to go ahead with plans to attack Rafah in southern Gaza. An Israeli War Cabinet meeting on Sunday concluded without a decision on how to respond to Iran's attacks. Iran is already defiantly suggesting that the West should appreciate Iran's "restraint". All this suggests that it is too soon to assume that the Israel-Iran crisis is over.

A barrage of retaliatory responses between Israel and Iran could spell bad news for India. Though international sanctions have ruled out oil purchases from Iran, the country imports 88 per cent of its oil requirements and 45 per cent of gas. The bulk of this is imported via the Red Sea, the principal route of Russian oil to India, and the Strait of Hormuz, dominated at its northern shore. Any escalatory violence in the region can destabilise global supplies and push up prices. Some analysts suggest oil prices might rise past \$100 a barrel in the immediate aftermath of an escalation. The "return to the path of diplomacy" as South Block counselled on Sunday has never been more crucial.

Priority for human development

The Union government should allow federalism to function more effectively if it wishes to push human development

There is much discussion now about India becoming a developed country by 2047 or before. For this to happen, we will need changes in several areas of development policy. The top two areas of policy where substantial change was required would be human development, particularly education and health, and technology innovation. In some ways the second depends to a significant extent on the first and hence my focus on priority for human development. The national accounts data shows that in 2021-22 education and health had a modest size in our economy, accounting for 4 per cent and 1.6 per cent, respectively, of the gross value added. This will have to change if we aim to become a developed country. Education and health matter not just for growth but are also an essential part of the goals of development, which should include the quality of life of individuals.

A correlation between the rate of economic growth and some measure of human development does not tell us whether high economic growth leads to better human development or whether better human development leads to high economic growth. A better understanding requires a more careful statistical analysis.

A recent article by Janak Raj, Vrinda Gupta, and Akanksha Shrivastava does this for the link between the human development index (HDI) as measured by the United Nations Development Programme and economic growth at the state level for 1990-2019.^[1] Their analysis shows a long-run relationship between the HDI and economic growth in India. But the relationship in terms of causality is bidirectional, which means that accelerated growth requires higher human development and improvement in human development requires growth. They could not find a clear impact of public spending on education and health on the HDI. An analysis of the impact of education shows improvements in primary education have no discernible impact on inter-state growth variations but that improved secondary education has a significant impact on growth in agriculture and manufacturing and improved higher education on services.

Could the lack of impact of public spending be a result of an inadequate level of funding? According to the World Bank's Development Indicators, in India government spending on education as a percentage of government expenditure was about 14.7 per cent in 2021 —

broadly comparable with the data for lower middle-income countries. However, government spending on health, which was 3.5 per cent of government expenditure in 2018, was significantly below the 5.1 per cent in lower middle-income countries.

How dependent are education and health on spending by the Union and state governments? The two account for about 80 per cent of the national accounts sector labelled "Other Services". The public sector accounted for 17 per cent of gross fixed capital formation (GFCF) in "Other Services" and 83 per cent came from the private sector and households. The relative neglect by the governments is reflected in the fact that the share of "Other Services" in public-sector GFCF was just 5.9 per cent in 2021-22.

The outcomes in education and health have been disappointing. The recent report of Pratham titled "Annual State of Education", which focuses on students in the 14-18 age group, states that 25 per cent in this category cannot read a standard II level text fluently in their regional language and more than half struggle with division (three-digit by one-digit) problems. The quality problem among younger students is worse.

As for health outcomes, there are positive developments, for instance in the reduction in infant mortality. But the persistence of under-nutrition in children and the continuing prevalence of communicable diseases are two aspects of underperformance. The crucial defect is the inadequacy of public provision for poor people. The out-of-pocket expenditure of households accounted for 52 per cent of current health expenditure, according to the health ministry data and a significant part of this is because of the inadequate provision of free medicines even in public health facilities. A recent study using data from Consumer Expenditure Surveys estimated in 2011-12 around 46 million people faced catastrophic health expenditure, amounting to 10 per cent or more of their total expenditure, usually for extreme illnesses. In such situations they are forced to sell productive assets, borrow money, and sometimes even reduce expenditure on education by moving children to inexpensive schools and many move into the poverty category.

Substantial improvement in human development will depend both on higher and better-organised public spending and on promotion and policy regulation of



NITIN DESAI

Managing competition in a digital world

Addressing competition in the digital domain presents a formidable challenge for governments and regulators. Unlike the physical realm, where network effects are limited, digital products and services often exhibit robust network effects. Put simply, network effects occur when every new user enhances the value of the offering for all others. The telephone is a classical example. Networks defy the traditional economics of competition and efficiency. Instead, they can lead to winner-takes-all scenarios, creating monopolies or oligopolies. Recognising this characteristic of the network industry, AT&T, a hundred years back, described telephony as a natural monopoly. Google Search, Microsoft Office, Android OS, Google and Apple play stores, WhatsApp, and Facebook are examples of a multitude of network-economy products that have become near monopolies.

Conventional economic theories propound that competition drives down prices and improves quality and efficiency, and is therefore best for consumer welfare. In a network economy as networks amass vast user-bases, they enhance the value provided to each user and collectively increase society welfare. However, the concentration of power in a few profit-maximising entities poses risks, including the potential to destabilise the political and social structures.

Historically, network effects were recognised in technologies like telephony, telegraph, railways and postal services but they comprised a small portion of the economy. Digitisation has increased the network economy's share in gross domestic product to substantial levels. Moreover, this trend is only going to grow. As networks expand and acquire large user-bases, their offers resemble public goods, though privately controlled, leading to significant policy implications. Consequently, addressing the economic reality of network effects has become imperative.

Both the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance and the Committee on Digital Competition Law set up by the Ministry of Corporate Affairs have recommended a law with *ex ante* control to deal with the emerging challenge of anti-competitive practices among major digital enterprises like bundling or tying products to existing networks, self-preferencing, preventing third-party products, monopolistic use of data, deep e-commerce discount, exclusive tie-ups, search and ranking preferences, restricting third-party apps, and anti-competitive advertising policies. They rightly pointed out

that such practices reinforce the dominance of leading players, risking irreversible polarisation in favour of the incumbent. Given the fast-paced nature of the digital domain, they felt the *ex post* approach was inadequate and recommended an *ex ante* approach especially for those enterprises that had "a significant presence and as such, the ability to influence the Indian digital market".

A draft Bill has been put out for comment. The Bill has some similarities with the European Union's (EU's) Digital Markets Act, 2022. The EU had designated major online platforms as gatekeepers and proposed regulations to prevent practices like self-preferencing, leveraging market power in adjacent markets, hindering third-party access, and ensuring platform interoperability. The proposal for *ex ante* regulation sparks concerns that the regulatory environment may resemble the restrictive licence raj and inspector raj, potentially limiting the freedom that has characterised this sector thus far.

In the early 20th century, governments recognised the network effects in the telephone industry and took the lead in regulating the sector to prevent private monopolies and have multiple players. Measures included licensing, sub-dividing territories, and price regulation. The International Telecommunication Union, the regulatory framework at global level, was also government-led. While some measures like interoperability and

common standards were beneficial, others failed to prevent the emergence of monopolies/oligopolies in the sector. India's experience serves as an illustration. India initially had a public-sector monopoly in telephony. It opened up the sector in 1994 but despite *ex ante* regulation, a two-player oligopoly has emerged. Similar monopolies/oligopolies exist in countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, France, the United Arab Emirates, and Singapore. Regulation slowed down innovation in the sector and even after 100 years of existence, telephone calls were exorbitantly high and accessibility relatively low. Regulated prices provided assured and growing returns for incumbents, who, instead of prioritising innovation, prioritised turf protection and erecting entry barriers, masking these actions as regulatory compliances.

A stark contrast to telephone networks is the case of the internet, which is humanity's largest network with strong network effects. Developed as a non-profit private enterprise, it prioritised open networks with minimal government interference. Embracing open standards



OFF THE GRID

AJAY KUMAR

private activities in education and health development.

The primary focus of public policies and spending on health care has to focus on its impact on people's lives rather than on an economic impact. The primary focus had to be on reducing the substantial out-of-pocket expenditure incurred by poor households. In fact, the impact on poverty looks even worse when one takes into account the costs incurred on travelling out of a village or small town for treatment.

A broader approach to health care that also seeks to improve the environment will have an economic impact. I remember a nutrition specialist who advised the Planning Commission that safe water supply was a more reliable way of improving nutrition than supplementary food supply. One must also recognise that better health will have an economic impact. I remember a vigorous argument by an eminent economist from Punjab that malaria eradication was a contributory factor in the advancement of agriculture in the state.

The spread of schools and colleges is now widespread. One exception is the need for a better spread of higher education for engineering. The challenge is improvement in the quality of education not by rewriting textbooks for political reasons but better teaching — from primary schools to higher institutes. This requires a rigorous performance assessment system for public and private educational institutions. If Pratham, a non-government organisation, can undertake plausible performance assessments, why can the states not set up a more comprehensive system for this purpose? A more radical approach to promote better performance in higher education would be to shift public funding from grants to institutions (and abolishing the excessively dominant University Grants Commission) to grants or loans to students and rely on them to choose institutions on the basis of established teaching quality.

A substantial emphasis on health and education advancement will require substantial and variable innovative actions by state governments as the underlying reasons for underperformance vary. In any case the Union government's spending on health and education is significantly smaller than that of states, particularly if one deducts spending for working and retired employees. Hence the Union government should allow federalism to function more effectively if it wishes to push human development at a pace that is required for attaining the long-term objective that it wishes to promote.

[1] Janak Raj et al, Internal linkages between economic growth and human development in India, Indian Public Policy Review 2024, 5.1:113-155
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like TCP/IP, it established a multi-stakeholder governance framework involving industry, academia, government and civil society. There is no hierarchy among stakeholders and all, including governments, participate on an equal footing. Over its 30-year history, the internet has spurred transformative innovations, driving the digital economy's growth unlike anything before. Despite being a monopoly, the internet has propelled global economic and social progress. When some stakeholders tend to dominate decision-making, the same is tempered due to a multi-stakeholder approach.

The preceding case studies offer valuable insights. First, network effects are inherent and integral to a network economy and rules of classical economics will fail in these contexts. Secondly, public-sector monopolies, particularly in liberal democracies, are not a solution because they lag in innovation and efficient resource utilisation, thereby reducing consumer welfare. Thirdly, government-led regulation fails to prevent the formation of monopolies/oligopolies because incumbents start wielding considerable influence over policies. Fourthly, when governments are in the driver's seat, decision-making tends to be sub-optimal in terms of innovation because they may lack the understanding of unseen opportunities. Fifthly, while regulation is essential to curb the emergence of monopolies, it must ensure both consumer welfare and innovation.

In some ways, the internet is the reason for the explosive growth of the network economy. It is said every problem also contains seeds of its own solution. The internet governance model offers an alternative model to address the challenges posed by a network economy.

Accordingly, governments could consider creating statutory mechanisms for governing network-economy products, in which all stakeholders are on an equal footing. For example, there could be a multi-stakeholder group for app stores, which would include academia, startups and industry, government and civil society, ensuring fair representation and creating checks and balances which would prevent any one entity or group hijacking the governance. While maintaining oversight, governments may refrain from directly prescribing solutions, however retaining overriding powers whenever national security, sovereignty, or substantial public interest is involved. Such an approach would also be consistent with the government's "minimum government maximum governance" thinking, offering a new paradigm for effective governance of the digital network economy.

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Leader as 'friction fixer'



BOOK REVIEW

R GOPALAKRISHNAN

What are the core roles of a leader? Too many are listed and written about. But have you heard of a role as a "friction fixer"?

Leadership is, in some ways, an odd subject when compared to finance or engineering. What you see is not what there is, and what you have been taught is not necessarily what will work. There is a strong tendency to not do what you know needs doing. In this sense, leadership is akin to life itself. Issues unravel, you try to solve them, some actions work, and some do not, so you work at it all over again.

In the book under review, the authors observe that organisations should be filled with people who make the right things easier and the wrong things harder.

Leaders should reduce the "bad" friction in their organisation so that the organisational parts are better lubricated; equally, they introduce "good" friction into joints that should be slowed down.

In making the right things easier, leaders solve operational irritants and niggling problems by "walking around". The book cites how in the Hewlett Packard of the 1970s, Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard would visit employees at their workplace. They would talk about their work challenges — a practice which a former HP senior leader captured in the colourful phrase, "We needed less of MBA and more of MBWA, management by wandering around."

Here is an example from my experience. Former Hindustan Lever Chairman, Ashok Ganguly, recalls a switch in his early career from scientific research to an unfamiliar manufacturing role. "The only way I could learn the details of the new role and be seen to be helping my team was to turn up unannounced during the night shift of the factory, share a chai with some operators and supervisors, and chat

with them about their shop floor work." This, too, is an example of lessening "bad" friction joints.

There can also be value by introducing friction. The book cites the case of chemical manufacturer Rohm and Haas (now part of Dow Chemicals), which taught its leaders that when they face a decision with broad and enduring consequences, they should slow down and abandon the general tendency for speedy action. The company preached the "Five Voices" method to assess the impact on — Customer, Employee, Shareholder, Community and Process.

From my experience at Hindustan Unilever, I recall a deliberately placed friction. During the price control and cost saving pressures of the 1970s and 1980s, the internal procedure to recruit even a junior staffer was so cumbersome that a line manager avoided undertaking the pain of the process.

Since I have been associated with a lubricating oil company for over two decades, I refer to friction-fixing as the "tribology" of management organisations. Now what is that jargon?

Tribology in the language of lube oil companies is the science of understanding friction, lubrication, and wear.

This book is all about improving the tribology of organisations and the role of the leader in that action. Impressive jargon?

Unintelligible jargon is what the book refers to as "Jargon Monoxide." Leaders use seemingly impressive terminology like "let us leverage our core competencies to create synergies that move the needle" or "elucidating the antecedents of upright striding vertical bipedality on horizontal terrestrial substrates by non-human primates" (it means learn how gorillas and monkeys walk on the ground). With the advances in data handling and intelligent technologies, acronyms like LLM, Industry 2.0, GenAI, and AGILE are used quite commonly. These are valuable technologies, but, after a stage, "decision-making and

coordination suffer, giving rise to dysfunctional conflict because people don't quite know what to do, and how to do it," according to the authors.

In 2001, 17 software developers published "The Manifesto for Agile Software," emphasising (i) individuals and interactions over processes and tools (ii) working software over comprehensive documentation (iii) customer collaboration over contract negotiation, and (iv) responding to change over sticking to a plan. Clearly the agile manifesto has played a crucial role for companies like Adobe, Google, and

Salesforce. But a confounding babble has also developed around agile organisations and agile leadership.

The last part of a book is a good place to taste sanity again. *The Friction Project* relies on three principles. First, leaders fervently believe that they are trustees of other people's time; hence, they are constantly at the task of

diminishing obstacles to good work, and placing friction wherever slowing down is a positive. Second, leaders own friction-fixing as a key role and hold themselves accountable for the results. Third, designing and updating organisational structure is a high form of friction-fixing. The authors have been interviewed in the *strategy + business* magazine of April 8, 2024. Expanding on a point they make in the book, they said that leaders tend to "add" processes, things, and controls, but do not adequately consider how to subtract existing processes, things, and controls.

In this regard, leaders are just as we all behave at home: We accumulate new things at a much faster rate than we dispose of things we no longer need. On rare occasions, such as when we are transferred or face retirement, we do a reluctant spring-cleaning; funnily, soon, we find the need to refer to a book or wear a pair of trousers that we had recently junked! Such is the nature of organisations. Successful friction-fixers are assured of a long-lasting functional job that is for sure.

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OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
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{ OUR TAKE }

Speaking politics
through manifesto

The BJP’s *sankalp patra* — Modi ki guarantee — reflects transformation of polity and the party

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s manifesto (*sankalp patra*) for the 2024 general elections reveals a party confident of another term in office and confident that it only needs to promise continuity of its policies to win over voters. On this count, it is more like the last Union budget, where the Centre refused to offer pre-poll sops but stuck to fiscal prudence and policy continuity. A decade in office and the hegemonic position it now enjoys in politics seem to have influenced the BJP to see itself as a party of government and craft a language that suits its new profile in the manifesto. The manifesto is also offered as the guarantee of Narendra Modi — Modi ki guarantee — where the leader is privileged over the party: It reflects unparalleled trust in the leader to deliver electoral goods.

Each of Modi’s guarantees is linked to the grand idea of *Viksit Bharat* (developed India) that the Prime Minister champions in his campaigns. Welfare, employment, education, culture, tourism, national pride, defence and India’s global image have been tied together to envisage a governance model that promises to transform India into a developed economy and a global power by 2047. Even contentious topics such as the Uniform Civil Code, Citizenship Amendment Act, One Nation, One Election, and Common Electoral Roll have been presented as central to the governance promise — not as ideological choices. On politically sensitive topics such as minimum support price in agriculture, the manifesto steers clear of any promise that may entail major fiscal allocations and has refused to promise legal guarantees. In this sense, the manifesto is rooted in a political economy in which the State is only a facilitator, an entity that will build infrastructure, promote private enterprise, and nurture a culture of entrepreneurship to address the crisis in employment rather than spend to provide jobs. There is, of course, the odd “guarantee” that is in perfect sync with the BJP’s commitment to cultural nationalism but could also be interpreted as an outreach to sections so far indifferent to the party — for instance, the promise to build Thiruvalluvar Culture Centres which is an attempt to reach out to Tamilians.

In an election short on emotional pitch, the BJP’s focus on governance is an interesting gambit. The Opposition has a counter-narrative on Modi’s record in office around inflation, and unemployment, of course. In this battle of narratives, manifestos play a crucial role, but elections, of course, are won with hard-nosed politics — smart tactics, organisational muscle, managerial skills, leadership and hunger for office. And there, if 2014 and 2019 are any indication, the BJP does way better.

Apple shows the way for electronics exports

At \$10 billion in FY24, exports of India-assembled iPhones have doubled from the previous fiscal. What makes the showing even more impressive is that Apple had estimated meeting this target under the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme only by FY25. Apart from the export boost, there have been significant employment gains; Apple is projected to have created 450,000 direct and indirect jobs in the country. While India-made iPhones are still a small fraction compared to China-made ones, the gathering pace of production in India is encouraging.

Now, Apple’s success needs to be replicated for other consumer electronic goods. While the iPhone instance is evidence of policies such as the PLI for smartphones working, India must do more to convince the world that it has the makings of a preferred China+1 destination for electronics exports. It has lagged in taking advantage of the de-risking of global value chains away from almost exclusive reliance on China.

At present, the world may seem more inclined towards Vietnam or Malaysia, which offer stable, low-tariff regimes; this allows marquee manufacturers to import components and assemble them for export. India, of course, aims to have more local production, and therefore, has maintained a tighter tariff regime. But New Delhi’s January decision to lower tariffs for high-end smartphone parts and the new electric vehicle policy that allows for tariff reduction for specific imports in exchange for local production above a certain investment floor show that policymakers are not averse to providing such impetus. A balanced approach towards tariffs may well allow India to become an electronics export powerhouse without having to sacrifice its local manufacturing ambitions.

Apex court muzzles a
media silencing tool

In its ruling against interim injunctions in defamation, the Supreme Court has restated basic principles with respect to the freedom of speech and expression

On March 22, 2024, the Supreme Court (SC) handed down a brief — but important — judgment, restating some basic principles with respect to the right to freedom of speech and expression. The context was a defamation case against Bloomberg TV, its editor and certain journalists. Defamation cases against the media are, of course, common in India. Such cases, however — as with all civil cases — take a very long time to be decided. For this reason, much turns upon whether plaintiffs in defamation cases can persuade the court to grant an interim injunction, requiring that the allegedly defamatory material be taken down (in the case of online content) or expunged or not released (if it is physical content), pending the final determination of the suit. As the suit itself will not be determined for many years, this has the effect of killing the inconvenient piece or story.

It is a matter of some regret that, despite certain honourable exceptions, the courts have been far too

quick to grant injunctions. This has especially been the case when proceedings have been brought by powerful and influential individuals, who can engage the best and highest-paid lawyers (a famous recent example was a biography of Baba Ramdev). This, indeed, was precisely what happened in the present case, where an *ex-parte ad interim* order (that is, an interim order passed without hearing the other party) was passed by a Delhi additional district judge, directing Bloomberg TV to take down a February 21 article published on its website, within a week. This order was subsequently upheld by the high court (HC) as well.

The SC set aside the orders of the district court and the HC and vacated the injunction. In doing so, the Court also — importantly — restated the core principles around judicial injunctions in the context of freedom of speech. While these principles are a part of settled law, the restatement is important, as far too often, they are honoured more in the breach.

The main principle is known as “the rule in *Bonnard vs Perryman*”, after the English case in which it first evolved. The logic of the *Bonnard vs Perryman* rule is that the appropriate remedy in case of a civil defamation claim is that of compensation, or damages (should the plaintiff succeed). In a defamation

claim, therefore, an injunction — which would have the effect of taking the allegedly defamatory speech entirely outside the marketplace of ideas — is a disproportionate interim remedy, given that even if the plaintiff were to finally win, they would only be awarded financial compensation. For this reason, the rule in *Bonnard vs Perryman* states that ordinarily, in cases involving defamation and free speech, injunctions should not be granted. The only exception to this is when the defendant cannot muster up even a plausible case during the injunction hearing. If the defendant, however, is able to put forward a plausible defence, then the court will stay its hands, and let the defence be tested during the course of a full trial.

More than a decade ago, in a case involving litigation between Tata Sons and Greenpeace, the Delhi HC famously held that the rule in *Bonnard vs Perryman* ought to apply with even greater force in the context of a Constitution that explicitly protects the right to free speech. However, as we have noted, when it came to the daily practice of injunctions, this rule was not being followed. The SC’s clear restatement of the rule, therefore, is welcome. In the words of Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud, “Courts should not grant *ex-parte* injunctions except in exceptional cases where the defence advanced by the



Gautam Bhatia



Far too often, even despite the SC laying down legal and constitutional doctrine, not much changes at the level of grassroots practice SANCHIT KHANNA/HT

respondent would undoubtedly fail at trial.” This will, it is to be hoped, be of use to journalists and writers, going forward.

In addition, in the Court’s order, Chief Justice Chandrachud also noted the increasing trend of SLAPP suits — that is, Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation — being deployed to silence dissenting or critical voices. Defamation suits — with their attendant claims for injunctions — are the primary examples of SLAPP litigation. As the Court, therefore, correctly noted, in such SLAPP suits, “the grant of an interim injunction, before the trial commences, often acts as a ‘death sentence’ to the material sought to be published, well before the allegations have been proven”. The Court

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Kerala Muslim politics
is rooted in pragmatism

The electoral politics of Muslims in Kerala, who constitute about 28% of the population, has followed a distinct trajectory in the past three decades. What makes it interesting is the presence of a pan-Indian line of thinking that identifies certain seminal national issues and sets them as political equalisers fitting into every context cutting across regional lines. These political equalisers aid in shaping Muslim politics in the state, but the circulation of each of these national — and international — issues produces different meanings, motivations and aspirations in the local context.

The rise of Hindu nationalism and the resultant insecurity and humiliation that the community feels at the national level have been perennial sources of mobilisation in Parliament elections, especially since the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. Internationally, acts of Islamophobia, instances of attack on the Muslim States of West Asia by western powers, the question of Palestine and issues of Malayali Muslim migrants in Gulf countries also influence Muslim choices in politics.

Locally, issues like the under-representation of Muslims in governance, stereotyping of their images in the media, and violation of minorities’ rights serve as the *raison d’être* for Muslim organisations to mobilise people politically. There are also occasions when the response of political parties to these issues matters more than the actual impact of these issues for Kerala Muslims.

Let me give two examples to highlight the exceptional nature of the political response of Kerala Muslims. In 1991, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) won a landslide victory in the district council elections thanks mainly to its symbolic ideological support to Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War I.

More recently, in local body polls, the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML)’s position favouring the conversion of the sixteenth-century church in Istanbul, Hagia Sophia, into a mosque by the Erdogan administration in Turkey upset many Christian groups, which, in turn, affected the poll prospects of the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF)’s chances. The IUML is the second largest party in the UDF after the Congress, and the Christian groups predominantly back the UDF.

The political tactics of Kerala Muslims have now become pragmatic as they switch support between the LDF and the UDF. The one notable trend visible in the political opinion of the Muslim voters in the 2021 assembly elections was a trust deficit in the Congress, which many among them increasingly believe can’t tackle minority issues effectively. Interestingly, there was a major tilt towards the Congress two years earlier in the 2019 general elections out of hope that the party would regain office at the Centre.

The anguish and anger felt by Muslims over the tactical silence of the Congress on many important issues such as the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), temple consecration at Ayodhya, and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) could spell trouble for the party in the state. Unlike the 2019 general elections, only the Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI), among various Muslim organisa-

tions, has announced support for the UDF this time. On the other hand, the stance of the Left Front on issues such as reservations for forward communities in higher studies and employment and the state police’s conduct of cases involving Muslims have invited the displeasure of the community.

The pragmatism of Kerala Muslims is in large measure a result of the confidence and the power of bargaining that the community has gained in state politics owing to their deep involvement in governance, chiefly through the IUML. The IUML, or League, holds 15 seats in the state assembly and is represented well in local self-governments and cooperative societies. The party enjoys a “sought after” status among both the UDF and LDF, in sharp contrast to the sense of alienation Muslim political parties generally feel in the rest of India.

The Muslim migrants to the Gulf are the other force that contributes to the influence of the community in Kerala politics. At times of need, state units of major political parties, including the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), turn to them for support, including funds.

The Muslim migrants play a key mediatory role in Kerala politics and their voices are now increasingly heard in the public discourse. Engrossed in global politics, the issues pertaining to the politics of West Asia create substantial reverberation in the migrant circles including their families in Kerala. The CPI (M), which employs the rhetoric of anti-imperialism (read anti-United States) for political mobilisation, has a distinct edge over others among the Gulf migrants.

The subtle entry of the Samastha Kerala Jem-iyathul Ulama (known popularly as Samastha E K faction), an outfit of tradition-oriented Sunni Muslims who make up around 60% of the Muslim population in Kerala into mainstream politics is another major development. Traditionally backers of the League, the present move from Samastha points to disillusionment with that party for what it perceives as indifference towards the majority Sunnis and the newfound enchantment with Salafi ideology among its leaders.

Meanwhile, the rising polarisation makes it tough for both the Left Front and the UDF to capitalise on each other’s frailty vis-à-vis Muslim issues. The latest contentious issue has been a row over the screening of the Hindutva propaganda flick, *The Kerala Story*, by a section of the Catholic clergy. The screening was justified as being aimed at educating women in the community about alleged “love jihad”. Though the Congress and CPI (M) agree on the movie’s potential to polarise, both parties engage in delicate balancing by presenting it as an attack on Kerala’s secular identity.

Meanwhile, another set of priests from the Catholic community have started screening documentaries on the Manipur violence against the Kuki Christians in their parishes as a political counter. Clearly, the politics of minorities in Kerala is constantly evolving, with multiple issues forcing a reset at unexpected moments, and because of unexpected reasons.



MH Ilias

West Asia create substantial reverberation in the migrant circles including their families in Kerala. The CPI (M), which employs the rhetoric of anti-imperialism (read anti-United States) for political mobilisation, has a distinct edge over others among the Gulf migrants.

The subtle entry of the Samastha Kerala Jem-iyathul Ulama (known popularly as Samastha E K faction), an outfit of tradition-oriented Sunni Muslims who make up around 60% of the Muslim population in Kerala into mainstream politics is another major development. Traditionally backers of the League, the present move from Samastha points to disillusionment with that party for what it perceives as indifference towards the majority Sunnis and the newfound enchantment with Salafi ideology among its leaders.

Meanwhile, the rising polarisation makes it tough for both the Left Front and the UDF to capitalise on each other’s frailty vis-à-vis Muslim issues. The latest contentious issue has been a row over the screening of the Hindutva propaganda flick, *The Kerala Story*, by a section of the Catholic clergy. The screening was justified as being aimed at educating women in the community about alleged “love jihad”. Though the Congress and CPI (M) agree on the movie’s potential to polarise, both parties engage in delicate balancing by presenting it as an attack on Kerala’s secular identity.

Meanwhile, another set of priests from the Catholic community have started screening documentaries on the Manipur violence against the Kuki Christians in their parishes as a political counter. Clearly, the politics of minorities in Kerala is constantly evolving, with multiple issues forcing a reset at unexpected moments, and because of unexpected reasons.

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{ OLAF SCHOLZ } GERMAN CHANCELLOR

Everyone agrees that the way in which Israel managed to successfully repel this attack is really impressive. That is a success that should not be given away and our advice is to contribute to de-escalation

HT

After Iran fired over 300 missiles at Israel on Sunday

War avoidance the only
path for Iran and Israel

Though it is too early to predict the trajectory of escalation in the Iran-Israel crisis, it is important to assess the events as they occurred and benchmark them against three strategic aspects of intent, credibility and the willingness to go to war in respect of both the belligerents.

Both Iran and Israel consider the other an existential threat and have evolved distinctly different strategies to keep the other at bay. For Israel, coercive credibility vis-à-vis Iran has been repetitively on show. The collaborative Stuxnet virus attack on Iran’s nuclear reactors in 2010, the erosion of its nuclear manpower through covert means, and the direct attacks on its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) leadership outside Iranian borders are all examples of the Israeli philosophy of “it ain’t credible if it is not pre-emptive, preventive and repetitive”.

Israel, under Benjamin Netanyahu, has been seriously tested and at times frustrated by Iran’s perfection of “proxy and hybrid war strategies”. However, Iran’s strategy of using Hezbollah and Hamas to undermine Israel’s security from multiple directions under a blanket of deniability has met with mixed success. On the one hand, the strategy has kept Israel on tenterhooks and forced it to launch direct kinetic attacks on the IRGC whenever the opportunity presented itself. On the other hand, Iran finds itself increasingly isolated in the Gulf and West Asia, which has been collectively trying to usher in some modicum of peace and prosperity amidst the ruins of Iraq, Syria and Gaza.

Iran’s strikes on Israel early Sunday can logically be classified as retaliatory after Israel bombed the Iranian embassy in Damascus two weeks ago, killing IRGC commanders who allegedly had gathered to plan a strike on Israel. The plot takes a strange twist here. Taking advantage of Israel being preoccupied with Gaza, it appears that hawks in Iran felt that an immediate retaliatory strike was important to save face. Sane voices within Iran’s strategic establishment may have concurred with the need to retaliate, but asked for time to look for an exit window that would combine rhetoric, action and the avoidance of war.

The fact that Iran kept threatening Israel with attacks forced the latter to bring its air defences and anti-ballistic missile defences to high alert. Informing the United States (US) of imminent attacks on Israel would have alerted similar US defences in the entire region. Consequently, when Iran launched its barrage of not-

so-sophisticated missiles and drones, all barring a few were claimed to have been shot down before they could cause any damage. Barring some damage to a military installation on its borders, there was no loss of life reported in Israel even as crowds in Tehran rejoiced at Iran finally hitting back at its “mortal enemy”.

Considering past trends, Israel could now target Iranian assets and IRGC leaders outside Iran or launch its own version of a few retaliatory precision strikes on secluded military targets inside Iran. Beyond a “no response” policy, this would be the closest to a careful calibration of escalation under the watchful eye of Uncle Sam. Neither Iran nor Israel have the intent or the wherewithal to go to war. Although resilient and defiant, the Iranian economy and its society are extremely fragile, recovering from the triple whammy of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the crippling Iran-Iraq war, and decades of sanctions. Israel is no better off, following its miscalculated assault on Gaza, internal criticism over the hostage crisis, political instability at home, and growing international pressure to find a resolution to the Palestinian problem. In such an environment, war avoidance seems to be the only way forward unless one of the belligerents feels ordained to commit *harakiri* and plunge the region into war.

At the operational level, there are some questions for both the Indian Air Force and the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) to ponder over when it comes to dealing with such a large barrage of missiles and drones that could come across India’s northern borders without much warning. Do we have the warning systems and the air defence and anti-ballistic missile systems to cope on our own, or do we embrace a collaborative mechanism till we can go it alone? How come this barrage was ineffective in comparison to less intense attacks in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and does this add fuel to the debate on the effectiveness of precision strikes using fixed-wing aircraft versus the more cost-effective option of drones and missiles?

The stakes are high for India to do what it can to defuse tension in West Asia. The last thing it wants is a Black Swan event that slows down development and derails economic progress.



Arjun Subramaniam

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OUR VIEW



Cold War II in West Asia: Minimize hot eruptions

Oil prices softened a bit after Iran’s attack on Israel, but to cap the risk of a regional flare-up that would disrupt the global economy, the US must mount a credible push for lasting peace

Investors are well aware that every war heightens uncertainty. It entails risks that are hard to price, as they defy probability estimates. A recency bias, however, must not get the better of us on the disruptive potential of hostilities in West Asia, where Israel’s night-sky was lit up on 13 April by the flares of aerial strikes by Iran in retaliation to an attack on its consulate in Syria. With the Gaza War proving hard to abate, it was something of a relief that Tehran’s spectacle of drone-and-missile attacks was ably fended off by an Israeli air-shield operating in alliance with the US and others. At the United Nations (UN), Tel Aviv was offered a chance by Tehran to call the score level and end the slugfest, and since Israel took only a minor blow in this mutual exchange of fire-power, it can claim an upper-hand and take that olive branch. In fact, this is what the US, in its effort to forestall an escalation, is reported to have advised Tel Aviv. Although Israeli hints of hitting back—to stiffen its deterrence, perhaps—have not sent oil prices flaring and inflation forecasts have held firm, so far, we must not under-estimate the likelihood of today’s Cold War II turning too hot to handle. The world economy may yet turn out to be less war-proof than assumed.

Oil stability tempts the view that shale-oil rigs in the US and a progressive squeeze on fossil fuels for climate action are reducing the relevance of West Asian wars. True, the US matches Saudi Arabia as an oil supplier today, and last year’s eruption of the Israel-Palestine dispute was only a faint echo of the oil shock half a century earlier. Still, energy forecasts suggest that carbon pricing will give cheaply extracted West Asian oil a cost advantage and so every path towards a phase-out would raise

its relative value till the time it’s finally choked off. In other words, we cannot count on a fade-away. On the contrary, what’s evident are the rising stakes of geopolitics in this region amid a new Cold War, with Tehran and its proxy militia in cahoots with Beijing and Moscow ranged against Washington and its allies. While Hamas’s terror outrage of 7 October 2023 may have been timed to mark 50 years of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, it also came soon after a project was declared for a new trade route from India to Western markets via the Arabian peninsula and an Israeli port, Haifa. Whether another ‘great game’ is afoot is open to speculation, but the possibility of a big challenge to US authority means we can’t overlook other scenarios: of rebellions being stirred up against US-allied governments in the region, for example. In 2001, taut nerves over Israel’s treatment of Palestinians, raked up even at the UN summit on racism in South Africa, had preceded the 9/11 terror attacks in America that provoked the Iraq War. The legacy of US hard-power actions adds to the region’s volatility.

In the latest episode, oil markets had priced in worse, which explains why prices softened a bit in the wake of Iran’s barrage against Israel. Yet, the ideal way to de-risk the region durably would be for the US to display even-handedness in a conflict going back to 1948 by helping alleviate the plight of Palestinians. This would make it harder for America’s adversaries to mobilize forces against its interests (and world order). For its pitch of ‘Pax Americana’ not to ring hollow in West Asia, US President Joe Biden should show statesmanship. Calm oil prices don’t relieve the US of its need to make a credible push for permanent peace. Helping end the Gaza War would be a good start.

MY VIEW | TIGHTROPE WALK

The innovation trap: There is a way for organizations to avert it

They should foster alternate thinking as a strategic aim and that means resisting mental short cuts



RAGHU RAMAN
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The ancient art of magic might seem a strange way to understand human behaviour, but two neuro-scientists Stephen Macknik and Susana Martinez discerned that master magicians had discovered the secrets of neuroscience and human behaviour much like master painters had developed techniques to get a three-dimensional effect while painting on two-dimensional surfaces centuries before modern technology. Here is a quick example to show how neural pathways can be hijacked to influence behaviour.

Think of any number from 2-10 and multiply it by 9. Now add the two digits and subtract 5. You should be left with a completely random single digit number. Next find the corresponding letter of the alphabet for that number—if the number is 1, then the letter is A; if it’s 2, the letter is B; if it is 3, then C; and so on. Now think of a country that starts with your letter. Next, think of an animal whose name starts with the second letter of the country’s name and picture its colour. This is much more fun when I do it in a large group, where almost everyone would end up with a grey elephant in Denmark. (For those who can’t read further until you know how this works: Any number from 2 to 10 multiplied by 9 will result in two digits that add up to 9. Subtracting 5 leaves 4, which lands most of us in Denmark).

This trick, popularly called ‘Ele-

phants in Denmark,’ demonstrates how an entire group of diverse people can follow herd behaviour while believing that they have made unique and independent decisions. Ironically, this is also the behaviour of many organizations where status quists follow herd mentality but are convinced that their decisions or behaviour is distinctive.

There will always be a few who deviate from the herd, perhaps going wrong in their calculations or choosing an eagle or eel instead of an elephant and getting a different result. These are deliberate or accidental iconoclasts who by virtue of their previous experiences (or lack of it), or by deviating from the norm, discover approaches that are different from the herd’s. These are the genuine pathfinders who question organizational assumptions. But such outliers are usually bludgeoned into submission under the euphemism of organizational ‘alignment’. That’s why entrepreneurs feel stifled and depart with their valuable ideas and passion, or worse, stay back in a disengaged state while the organization languishes in dull conformity. How then can leaders create an environment where alternative thinking is encouraged?

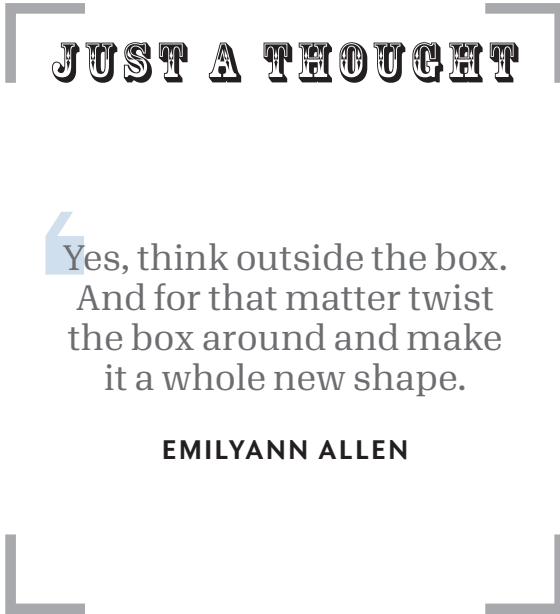
As George Bernard Shaw observed, “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable man persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.” The key job of strategic leaders is to find such ‘unreasonable’ persons who are simply not satisfied with the *status quo*, empower their audacity and support them, especially when they face push-back, which they most certainly will if their ideas are truly futuristic.

Some of our larger companies try to do this with frameworks like incubators and idea generation campaigns, but while their intent may be noble, the implementation is usually suboptimal. Results are often measured in terms of businesses incubated or number of ideas generated. That misses the whole

point. If the measurement is focused on success, then by definition outliers will be ousted because all radical ideas will fail a few times before succeeding. Even highly admired companies such as Apple, Google, etc, have had a string of high-profile failures like Lisa, Newton, Pippin and Apple Maps in the case of the former and Google Glass, Wave, Buzz, Google Plus, etc, in the latter’s. However, the key differentiator of these world-leading conglomerates is that they genuinely encourage alternative thinking using three strategies.

The first is establishing a structured outlier recognition programme that seeks to identify, empower and reward such individuals and create the initial set of change agents. Next is to create a culture of experimentation where success is measured by what was learnt, rather than whether the experiment was successful. This requires creating frameworks like hackathons, innovation labs and brainstorming off-sites, and investing in people, ideas and projects that are different from the norm. The third step is to make the rubber meet the road by implementing an outcome-oriented mindset. This involves transitioning from measuring outputs to evaluating outcomes in assessing the success of outlier-driven initiatives. This shift entails looking at the big picture aligned to the organization’s future objectives and emphasizing the impact of outlier ideas on those ambitions. Metrics like ‘speed of trust,’ business velocity and strategic capacity building are benchmarks to gauge the effectiveness of such projects. Furthermore, teams are constantly encouraged to set audacious goals and given a free hand to deliver on them.

In a world that glorifies well-aligned, consensus-driven conformists, the use of alternative thinking doesn’t just offer a competitive advantage, it is an existential need. Unless organizations realize this, they will keep placing grey elephants in Denmark while believing they are unique in their thinking.



MY VIEW | TRUTH, LIES AND STATISTICS

Tracking poverty mustn’t become a casualty of politics

PRAMIT BHATTACHARYA



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lections in India seem to be incomplete these days without the background noise of a statistical controversy. Ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the suppression of an unflattering employment report had ignited a controversy. At that time, two members of the National Statistical Commission (NSC), India’s apex statistical regulator, had resigned in protest. They were vindicated when the ministry of statistics and programme implementation (Mospi) released the report just after that year’s elections were concluded.

This time, the partial release of a rather flattering consumption expenditure survey has stirred a controversy. Niti Aayog’s chief executive was quick to claim that the survey shows an unprecedented decline in poverty over the past decade. Some economists lent support to the establishment view. Others have challenged such claims, since the new consumption survey of 2022-23 has been conducted using a different method, which makes its results incomparable with the past.

To make sense of the latest controversy, it is useful to understand the backstory first. The idea of a poverty line is as old as economics itself. Classical economists (such as David Ricardo and Thomas Malthus) held that workers were paid “subsistence wages”—just enough to buy the minimum quantity of food and clothing needed to survive. The first poverty line for British India, developed by nationalist thinker Dadabhai Naoroji, was also based on a similar idea.

Across ages and continents, most economists have held that a person must count as poor if she doesn’t have enough to eat. Most modern economists also agree that it is not enough just to eat adequate food; people also need access to basic services (education, health, shelter, etc). As long as there’s consensus on the minimum income (or expenditure) needed to maintain a life of dignity, and a reliable database of household income (or expenditure), estimating the number of poor households (those unable to afford a life of minimum dignity) is just a matter of simple arithmetic.

Unfortunately, there’s no consensus in India or globally on the basket of goods and services needed to maintain a life of dignity. The World Bank’s \$1 a day or \$2 a day poverty lines have been as contentious as the

official poverty lines announced by India’s erstwhile Planning Commission. Recent changes in how India’s official consumption expenditure survey is conducted have polarized this debate further.

Over the past few decades, India’s consumption expenditure survey has faced criticism from economists for underestimating consumption expenditure. Mospi has tried to address those criticisms by tweaking the questionnaire to elicit better responses. Each time it has done so, it has ensured that a representative sub-sample is canvassed using the older questionnaire, so that it is possible to link back the new data with the older consumption database (based on a different pattern of questions).

In the 2022-23 survey, Mospi chose not to have a sub-sample based on the old pattern of questions. This means there is no direct way of comparing the 2022-23 figures with earlier rounds. Economists who pay attention to detail haven’t missed the fact that

several big changes were introduced in the new survey without leaving any scope for precise comparisons with the past data. They are now crying foul.

This controversy was entirely preventable. When the survey was being rolled out, the then NSC team led by Bimal Roy had asked for a comparable sub-sample. However, the NSC went back on its decision since Mospi’s mandarins were not keen on canvassing a comparable sub-sample this time, according to a person with direct knowledge of the matter. The NSC chief, whose term was about to end, went along with Mospi’s view. The next NSC chief, Rajeeva Karandikar, has been at loggerheads with Mospi’s top bosses, according to the above-mentioned source, and has not approved any survey-related decisions so far. This may have given Mospi officials a pretext to release the latest consumption survey fact-sheet without consulting the NSC.

Some economists have suggested that a comparable sub-sample should be can-

vassed in the next consumption survey, so that the new database can be linked with the old consumer expenditure data. That would be the first step in resolving this controversy.

Going ahead, we need to rethink how we define poverty in the country. All official poverty lines in India have been pegged to a definition of poverty formulated by a Planning Commission task-force in 1979. That definition was based on the average calorie requirements in rural and urban India at that point of time. A lot has changed since then, such as social norms of what constitutes a life of dignity; also, consumption patterns. The average Indian has a less active life, meaning that calorie requirements have also changed considerably. The 1979 definition worked for a while in estimating extreme poverty. But it needs to be revisited.

We also need a new definition of not-so-extreme poverty that goes beyond food and nutrition. To arrive at this definition, we will need to forge a national consensus on what it means to live a life of dignity, and the kind of income (or expenditure basket) needed to sustain such a life. More maturity from our politicians and technocrats could help bring about such a consensus. Till then, any definition of poverty in India will remain deeply contentious.

A consensus on what it takes to live a life of dignity would help resolve our controversy over poverty

THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Scaring people over the climate will yield scars but not solutions

The onus is on other geographies, in line with the Paris principle, and trade-offs mean an absolutist path would be harmful



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Last week, the economics division at the ministry of finance in India invited Professor Mike Hulme at the University of Cambridge to share his views on climate change. In 2007, he received a personalized certificate from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), recognising his contribution to the (joint) award of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize to the IPCC. His recent work, *Climate Change Isn't Everything* piqued my interest, and I read it. In the book, he decries “climatism,” which he defines as an ideology that “naturalises” all the problems of the world in that they are all attributed to climate change. The dominant explanation for all social, political and ecological phenomena is a “change in the climate.” Social, economic and cultural factors, policies and paths do not matter.

The world is strewn these days with such an absolutist and exclusivist approach in many areas, of which climate change is the most prominent example. Mechanisms such as doomsday clocks, climate-change cliffs and apocalyptic predictions of the end of the world have become so common that they have lost their power to demand our attention, let alone action. If alarmists were right, the world would have become extinct several times in the last decade or two. Such alarmism, far from motivating action to mitigate the effects of climate change and combat it, spreads panic and foments ‘climatism.’ On this, we have not learnt much, if anything, from our recent failures in dealing with the pandemic.

The costs of a total-lockdown approach to the pandemic are now being tallied. We are not done with it yet. The most striking outcome was the lost years of learning for children. We are at it again. A scare-mongering approach polarizes people and deters cooperation. It alienates and discourages ownership of the problem that must be solved. In a recent report (alturl.com/woxf9), the *Financial Times* clubs India along with the US and EU in an astonishing display of ignorance of the historical responsibility for emissions over two centuries that are stalking us and of current per capita emissions of the three regions.

If we pick up a copy of *The Economics of Climate Change* by Richard Tol, it is clear that average global temperatures have shifted higher since the 1970s. Pursuing growth at all cost through the neo-liberal agenda of financialization (debt accumulation) and globalization bears a large share of the shame and blame. His book features a chart that converges with another one carried by *The Economist* 13 years ago on how much economic growth happened in the second half of the 20th century and first decade of the next, eclipsing the growth of the previous 19 centuries (alturl.com/syodp). The simple point is that much of the acceleration in the



atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases was due to the pursuit of growth through globalization and leverage, unmindful of trade-offs. So, the West is trying to compensate for it through another approach that places emission mitigation above all else—again, unmindful of trade-offs. Two wrongs, however, do not make a right.

In 1992, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change rightly placed climate change in the context of other goals such as poverty elimination, economic development and reduction of inequality. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of September 2015 followed that template. Three months later came the Paris Agreement. Given the varied historical contributions to greenhouse gas emissions, the Paris pact accepted common-but-differentiated responsibilities in accordance with national capabilities. But, over time, this principle is being shoved aside amid rising insistence in the West that developing nations prioritize emission reduction equivalently.

A standard argument many deploy is that no economic development is possible without tackling climate change. It is a seductive but vacuous argument. Resources are finite, and there are trade-offs. Climate change will have negative consequences, but whether experts believe it or not, humans adapt. Further, combating climate change, whose severest consequences will be towards the end of the 21st century, while letting people suffer in poverty in the next few decades serves no purpose. Climate change will have adverse impacts and we must acknowledge them, but elevating it to the near-total exclusion of equally pressing humanitarian problems is to trivialize the existential concerns of millions of people in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The SDGs include climate and environmental aims and the world gave itself a more exacting timeline for achieving SDGs by 2030 than for ‘net zero.’ Taking those goals and the timeline seriously will give the world’s people hope and the resources to tackle climate change.

In 2022, India updated its Nationally Determined Contributions, first enunciated in 2015, and

upped its targets of reducing the energy intensity of growth and share of installed capacity of non-fossil-fuel power by 2030. The country is well on track to meet those goals. India is investing in public transportation in major cities. Indians, with their lifestyles (alturl.com/2g8n7), including eating habits, are already making a contribution to lower greenhouse gas emissions. The economic and social costs of asking them and the people of other developing economies to shoulder the burden of keeping greenhouse gas emissions in check will far outweigh the benefits, if any. The onus of action rests on advanced geographies.

Daniel Yergin of S&P Global wrote eloquently in a recent research note (alturl.com/3su55) that an energy transition could progress only if energy security were assured. Otherwise, a backlash against climate policies would follow, as is already happening in Europe today, he said. Similarly, he noted that energy transitions have historically taken a century to achieve (alturl.com/srtrp). To try and compress the time-frame to one-fourth of it is to risk social upheavals and conflicts.

Towards the end of his book, Hulme wrote, “Climate change isn’t everything. It is quite easy to imagine future worlds in which global temperature exceeds 2° C warming, which is ‘better’ for human well-being, political stability and ecological integrity, for example, than other worlds in which—by all means and at all costs—the global temperature was stabilised at 1.5° C.” That is precisely the trade-off that should be debated, along with all the costs and benefits of either approach on the table.

Four attitudes are critical if policymakers and experts are to help billions of poor people realize their aspirations and keep the world safer from climate change. One is humility. The second is to resist the temptation of hectoring nations into submission. The third is to minimize certitudes in an area where science acknowledges uncertainties. The fourth is to trust people and grant them the agency to adapt and do the right thing for themselves.

These are the author's personal views

Beyoncé’s cowboy call-out for Levi’s can help reposition both

Two big American icons are trying to rework their brand profiles



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Beyoncé’s new album has a song dedicated to Levi’s jeans
REUTERS

Levi Strauss & Co’s jeans got a hat tip with the recent release of Beyoncé’s album, *Cowboy Carter*, which draws on country and folk music across cultures and eras. It includes a sensual song called *Levi’s Jeans*. As fans speculate, the double ‘i’ plays off the fact that the album is ‘Act II’ of a planned trilogy. The company nodded by changing its Instagram name to ‘Levi’s’ and posting a carousel of photos with the subtitle, “Oh to be Levi’s jeans right now.” There is speculation that a Cowboy Carter tour could be the type of windfall for the jeans maker that Beyoncé’s Renaissance tour was for glitzy Etsy businesses. It’s like a glittering ad campaign served on a silver platter for Levi. But it’s the brand’s cost-cutting and growth plan that will keep it headed well, not the Beyhive alone.

Of course, being on the radar of one of the biggest fandoms in the world has its perks. It could help Levi thrive during this stretch of slowing US consumer demand for goods and kick off its campaign to become a more sought-after brand. Yet, on its last earnings call, the company indicated that it’s not getting too caught up in the Queen Bey hype. That’s wise. In the long run, it’ll take more than Beyoncé to get choosy shoppers to spend on jeans.

Although Levi’s new CEO Michelle Gass said the company was “very honoured” by the shoutout, she stopped short of saying the song impacted sales so far. “Denim is having a moment, and the Levi’s brand is having a powerful moment around the world,” she added. This comes months after the company began slashing costs. In January, it announced that it would trim about 12% of its global workforce, discontinue its lower-margin Denizen business and reduce discounts. Levi is also doubling down on getting shoppers to buy directly from it instead of department stores, and it is expanding its merchandise in an effort to become more of a denim lifestyle brand than just a jeans maker.

Achieving that particular aspiration will require more than cutting costs. While an iconic denim wear brand, Levi still faces all the same challenges dogging the rest of the retail sector. Executives from Etsy to Ulta Beauty have warned investors about a continued slowdown in consumer spending due to increased prices. Denim sales, more specifically, have been volatile over the last few years as shoppers switched out their skinny-leg jeans for wide legs. After that stretch of growth, denim sales fell by an overall 6% last year, according to Circana.

Levi is also taking a risky move by betting on its brand name to get people to

shop directly at full price rather than on sale at Macy’s, for instance. While it sounds simple, that same strategy has marred even bigger names such as Nike. In the sneaker maker’s case, leaving department stores and third-party retailers pushed some shoppers to choose a similar sneaker at a cheaper price than seek out the Nike brand in its own stores or online.

For Levi to avoid that fate, consumer perceptions about denim have to shift. This is where Beyoncé may be helpful. The *Levi’s Jeans* lyrics help serve as fashion pointers for listeners: “*Denim on denim on denim on denim, Give you high fashion in a simple white tee.*” This all plays well into Levi’s vision for its future as a premium brand. But it could lose market share if it doesn’t find the right direct and wholesale balance. Rivalry in denim-wear is fierce.

While Levi’s still leads in the American denim department, Shein Group is making inroads. Last week, the Singapore-based company announced it would be a fashion sponsor at Stagecoach: California’s Country Music Festival for a third year. It released a partner collection of western-inspired music festival apparel, including fringe tops, bedazzled denim and metallic boots. A pair of \$21 high waist fringed jeans seems like a better deal for a Cowboy Carter concert than a pair of Levi’s \$98 501 jeans (the brand’s best-known pair). History has also shown that Shein’s market operations move as fast as the swipe of a finger while browsing TikTok. Shein may be more prepared for Cowboy Carter than Levi is so far.

Perhaps sensing competition, Levi relies on fabric innovation and stays ahead of trends. For example, it recently released 511 Slim Tech Men’s Pants that are moisture-wicking and cooling and plans to launch new denim fabrics for warmer weather. And it’s investing more in baggier and looser silhouettes that are driving fashion trends and sales rather than skinny styles, says Kristen Classi-Zummo, an apparel industry analyst with Circana. As Cowboy Carter challenges the limits of country music as a genre and the meaning of Americana, Levi is rethinking how denim fits into wardrobes. Two US icons are leaning into the kind of American innovation that will keep their names on our lips years after this latest buzz. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | IT MATTERS

Masterpiece recovery: Ramcharitmanas in new light

SIDDHARTH PAI



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I have written in this space before about how technology artefacts can be used as instruments of power. Privacy is dead, and people the world over have become pawns in Big Tech’s relentless move to commoditize and sell human beings and their data. At the same time, image recognition algorithms baked into artificial intelligence (AI) systems have proven problematic. They harbour the biases of their programmers. This is not new; even the construction of US road bridges in New York state has been shown to have racist or discriminatory undertones in their design. This time, I want to focus on how technology artefacts can be used well in an unusual context.

I recently visited the breathtaking reconstruction of the Ramcharitmanas of Varanasi at the Museum of Art & Photography (MAP) in Bengaluru. MAP is the brainchild of Abhishek Poddar, an old friend who donated all his art and built this museum in a labour of love. I was so taken with the work that I asked Poddar if I could see MAP’s chief tech-

nology officer (CTO), who technologically curated the reconstruction. Mayank Manish, founder of Opezee, volunteers his time as MAP’s CTO. He and his teammate Raghava Kumar walked me through what the team had done.

The Ramcharitmanas of Varanasi originated in that culturally rich city and is also known as the ‘illustrated’ Ramcharitmanas. Like Kamban’s re-creation in Tamil of the original Sanskrit epic by Valmiki, the Ramcharitmanas was written by the saint poet Goswami Tulsidas in a local language for a broader audience. His version is a 16th-century epic. Like Valmiki’s and Kamban’s epics, it narrates the story of Lord Rama, focusing on his trials, triumphs and moral teachings. The Varanasi version was an embellishment of Tulsidas’s original work, with intricate illustrations to go with almost 1,000 pages of its timeless verses. I married the literary richness of the text with the visual allure of artistic expression, using scenes from Varanasi as a basis for illustration. Each visual was a masterpiece in its own right, depicting a key moment from the narrative with exquisite craftsmanship.

However, despite its significance, the fate of many pages from the original illustrated edition remains mysterious. As with many

historical artefacts, its pages were vulnerable to neglect, decay and damage. Unsurprisingly, they were also dispersed through the looting and selling of individual pages to collectors. MAP began with access to only 70 or 80 pages of the initial anthology. This loss is particularly poignant in the context of art exhibitions, where curated collections tell stories, evoke emotions and inspire dialogue.

However, technological advancements in digitization, virtual reality (VR), and AI have revolutionized how we interact with art and cultural artefacts. Digital tools let us preserve and reconstruct lost art in unimaginable ways. The technology team at MAP was lucky in that a complete photographic record (in black-and-white) of the pages of the Varanasi Ramcharitmanas had been made by an American team in the early 20th century; this record was made available to MAP. Collectors also came forward by donating some lost pages to the exhibition or making them available for digitization.

This allowed for creating high-resolution scans and photographs of the pages, preserving them in a digital format that can be easily accessed and shared. The MAP team’s VR efforts took this a step further, offering immersive experiences at MAP that allow viewers to enter a virtual gallery and explore the artworks as if they were physically present within the painting. VR reconstructions offer an opportunity to experience and appreciate art that may no longer exist in the physical world. These VR reconstructions offer a glimpse of the opulent world of old Varanasi and bring to life the exquisite illustrations that once adorned its pages.

AI also played a role in the reconstruction process, with algorithms capable of analysing visual artefacts and generating plausible reconstructions of lost pieces. While AI-driven reconstructions may not be perfect replicas, they offer valuable insights into the appearance and context of the original artworks. In MAP’s case, they could colourize the mono-

chromatic American photographs to replicate the original.

MAP occupies a small space in Bengaluru, and space is always a constraint for large exhibitions. Even if the entire manuscript had been available, MAP would not have had the space to exhibit it, but the digitization of the masterpiece allowed for a physical-cum-virtual exhibition. MAP is now at the point where the entire reconstructed exhibition can be held simultaneously at several centres worldwide. Museums worldwide have approached MAP to conduct this virtual exhibition in their locales.

The reconstruction of lost art exhibitions represents a vital endeavour in preserving cultural heritage. By harnessing the power of technology and leveraging visual artefacts such as photographs, we can breathe new life into lost masterpieces and ensure that they continue to inspire and captivate audiences for generations to come.

The illustrated Ramcharitmanas from Varanasi is a compelling example of the potential of technology and visual artefacts to reconstruct lost art. Through collaboration, innovation and a deep appreciation of the past, we can honour the legacy of our artistic heritage and keep alive the stories and traditions they embody.

The illustrated version of Tulsidas's epic from Varanasi shows what tech can do for our art and heritage

Glad tidings on rains

The policy imperative must be to ensure that farmers don't remain hostage to the vagaries of the southwest monsoon

FAVOURABLE AUGURY for India's agricultural sector is the India Meteorological Department (IMD) and Skymet's forecasts of normal and above normal rains respectively this year. Normal means that rainfall over the southwest monsoon season from June to September is between 96 and 104% of the long period average (LPA) of 868.6 mm. The IMD states that it would be 106%. Agriculture's nominal share in the nation's gross value added may have declined to 17.6% but 55 to 60% of its contribution to the economy emanates from rain-fed crop lands. More than a half of the country's net cultivable area of 141.4 million hectares is un-irrigated and rain-dependent. More than three-fifths of India's farmers cultivate crops without irrigation. While the prospect of copious rainfall is good news, these forecasts are not always accurate. Last year, the IMD predicted normal rainfall but it turned out to be below normal at 94% of the LPA. Normal or above normal rainfall refers to only the overall precipitation during the season and doesn't indicate its spatial and temporal distribution which can be highly uneven.

The differences between Skymet and the IMD depend on the weightage they place on important variables that influence the monsoon like the El Niño factor — associated with the warming of sea surface waters in the central and eastern tropical Pacific Ocean — which tends to weaken the southwest monsoon as it did last year. Due to the lingering "remnant impacts of the El Niño phenomenon", the season may start with risk of impairment according to Skymet. The IMD, for its part, expects El Niño to further weaken during the early part of the season. Both are in agreement regarding the probability of La Niña conditions — associated with the cooling of sea surface waters in the Pacific Ocean — developing in August and strengthening the southwest monsoon. The IMD also factors in positive Indian Ocean Dipole conditions which are good for rainfall — warmer sea surface temperatures in the western Indian Ocean and cooler sea surface temperatures in the eastern Indian Ocean — developing during the second half of the season and Eurasian snow cover which has an inverse relation with the monsoon. For such reasons, the second half of the season is expected to be much better than the first.

However, the likelihood of impairment should warrant concern as it has a crucial bearing on crop output during the kharif or summer season as June and July are crucial months for sowing operations for crops like paddy, coarse cereals, pulses, and soya bean. That said, normal or above normal rainfall with a better spatial and temporal spread should translate into higher grains production. But if the rain gods are parsimonious, the spectre of drought and distress will haunt the countryside. The policy imperative must be to ensure that agriculture does not remain hostage to the vagaries of the southwest monsoon.

The need is to build more irrigation facilities to reduce monsoon-dependence, especially for small and marginal farmers in peninsular India. This is perhaps less of a concern in Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh which have access to canal irrigation. In fact, the share of irrigation in paddy-growing states like Punjab is as high as 99.7% but as low as 31.5% in Odisha. Above all, contingency plans must be in place if drought conditions occur in order to minimise distress among small and marginal farmers.

Women entrepreneurs can make the world \$6 trillion

EVERY SMALL BUSINESS owner knows how difficult it can be to get access to affordable capital. But for many women in the Global South, it's not just difficult — it's often impossible.

A few years ago in Senegal, I met a woman who decided to do something about that problem. In 2017, Thiaba Camara Sy left her job as the head of a consulting firm and co-founded WIC Capital, an investment fund for women entrepreneurs in West Africa. Since then, WIC Capital has raised more than \$5 million and invested in eight businesses run by women who knocked on far too many closed doors before WIC saw their potential.

One of those women, Souadou Fall, co-founded a company that turns abandoned tires into fuel for factories. Fashion designer Safiétou Seck, who'd struggled to find funding despite an MBA and years of experience, was able to grow her company and now sells her designs to customers around the world. And Isseu Diop Sakho expanded a business that bakes French pastries from native grains, supporting 20 local suppliers and 75 employees.

As inspiring as these stories are, they underscore a grave problem: When women entrepreneurs succeed, it's in spite of the system, not because of it. Worldwide, there's a \$1.7-trillion gap between the credit women need and what they're able to get. Estimates suggest that by closing that gap, as much as \$6 trillion in global GDP can be unlocked.

No country can grow healthier and more prosperous while leaving behind half its population. So as leaders gather at the World Bank and International Monetary Fund meetings this week to find ways to accelerate economic growth, they must also seek ways to unlock women's economic power — starting with access to capital.

After all, while investment funds like WIC Capital can make a huge difference for a handful of entrepreneurs, they can't come close to making up the huge financing shortfall. For that, there needs to be systemic change. Many financial systems simply weren't built with small borrowers — and particularly women — in mind.

Fortunately, there are a number of reforms leaders can pursue that would address the financing gap.

First, governments should remove the barriers facing responsible lenders trying to serve low-income customers while still protecting people from predatory lenders. That means creating systems in which minimum capital requirements and compliance expectations increase along with the size and complexity of the lender in question.

Second, the development community should make funds from donor countries available to lenders to help manage their perception of risk. If lenders know they're partially covered in case of default, they're more likely to invest in a more diverse range of entrepreneurs. By providing those guarantees, donors can also incentivise larger financial institutions to loan to smaller, more nimble ones in their own countries.

Third, governments should invest in digital infrastructure so that lenders can add customers more cheaply and assess creditworthiness in new ways. Women are less likely than men to have formal credit histories — but they may have informal ones, built by paying bills on time and saving and pooling money in community groups. With digital tools, lenders can evaluate customers based on less traditional data and share that information securely with other lenders.

Finally, donor countries must fully fund the World Bank's International Development Association (IDA), which in turn must prioritise the lowest-income countries in its efforts to reduce poverty and spur economic growth. By offering loans on better terms than the broader market, the IDA helps lay the foundation for those countries to build stronger financial systems.

Getting capital to women is not just the right thing to do. It's the smart thing to do. A full quarter of all African women are entrepreneurs. Imagine the progress that would be possible — for their families, communities, and countries — if those who hold the keys to capital opened the doors to all.

● MUZZLING THE TRUTH?

WHILE SINOPHOBIA IS NOT TO BE CONDONED, CHINA DOES FACE SERIOUS GROWTH CHALLENGES

China stifles its own debate

AFTER MY RECENT trip to Beijing to attend the 25th annual China Development Forum (CDF), the country's most important public conference, one question keeps turning over in my head: What's the point?

I raise this question as a CDF insider — as the longest-attending foreign delegate, having participated in all but the first CDF in 2000. I have witnessed this event at its best and its worst. I can say with certainty that this year's gathering marked a new low — hence my question.

Former Premier Zhu Rongji conceived of the CDF as a forum for debate and exchange between senior Chinese leaders and foreign academics, think-tank experts, and business leaders. The timing of the conference — immediately following the National People's Congress (NPC) — was deliberate: Zhu held the provocative view that the ministers of the State Council should engage with outside experts immediately after their internal deliberations at the NPC. It was, in effect, a stress test for senior Chinese officials.

Zhu practised what he preached. At my first CDF in 2001 — a much smaller and more intimate gathering — I delivered a keynote luncheon address on the state of the global economy, arguing that a post-dot-com slowdown was at hand. Fred Bergsten, the founding director of the Petersen Institute for International Economics, challenged me in the discussion that followed. At the concluding session of CDF 2001, Zhu interrupted John Bond, then chairman of HSBC, during his summary of the three-day gathering, and instead called on me and Bergsten to recap our views. Zhu was more interested in the debate than in Bond's commentary.

After the meeting, Zhu pulled me

STEPHEN S ROACH

Faculty member, Yale University and former chairman, Morgan Stanley Asia



aside and said, in perfect English, "Roach, I hope you are wrong, but we will plan as if you are right." At the following year's CDF, he warmly greeted me with a simple, "Thank you."

It is in that spirit and in the spirit of many subsequent years of active participation in CDF sessions that I bemoan the loss of what had been a vigorous culture of debate in China. The CDF has effectively been neutered as an open and honest platform of engagement. Word has been sent down from on high that there is room for only "good stories of China". Anyone who raises questions about problems, or even challenges, faces exclusion from the public sessions.

That was certainly true for me. On the eve of this year's CDF, the powers that be informed me that my recent comments on the Chinese economy "have generated intense scrutiny and even controversy" among the Chinese and international press, which suggested to them that anything I say publicly at the conference "will be misinterpreted and even sensationalised" by the media. I was told in no uncertain terms that this would not be in my — or China's — best interest.

No surprise, then, that I was not given a speaking role for the first time

in 24 years. Moreover, my background paper on Chinese rebalancing, which I had been invited to prepare as part of the CDF Engagement Initiative, was neither published nor distributed, as has always been the case for invited submissions in the past.

Nor was I the only one singled out: an economist friend whom I have known and respected for years was instructed before going on stage not to say anything negative about the economic outlook.

Political correctness can be bad enough. But censorship and attempted thought control, with the aim of stifling debate, are something else entirely. That led me to the seemingly pointless feeling of resignation. Why even bother?

My answer is both idealistic and admittedly naive. I went to Beijing in late March with the hope that the CDF would retain a sliver of its original spirit. As I wrote in my book *Accidental Conflict*, I am fully aware of the changes in Chinese discourse in recent years. Even taking into account recent efforts by Chinese authorities to tighten their control of the narrative, I clung to the hope that there may still be room for empirical research and analysis. After all, I was

China's "good friend". My error was to presume that this seemingly special status allowed me to raise tough questions about China's medium- to longer-term growth outlook.

CDF 2024 closed the door on that possibility. This year's event was tightly scripted, with no debate, no meaningful exchange of views — not even at the smaller roundtables, which are designed for engagement. Yes, plenty of Western business leaders were in attendance, but mainly for shameless commercialised pitches of their commitment to China. Moreover, the truncated conference had a streamlined agenda. The normally high-profile Monday lunch slot was left empty, while the premier's closing session was replaced by an opening speech that regurgitated the work report he delivered to the NPC on March 5.

It saddens me to watch the CDF become a remnant of its former self. But my admiration for the Chinese people and the extraordinary transformation of China's economy over the past 45 years persists. I still disagree with the consensus view in the West that the Chinese miracle was always doomed to fail. Moreover, I remain highly critical of the US' virulent Sinophobia, while maintaining the view that China faces serious structural growth challenges. And I continue to believe that US-China codependency offers a recipe for mutually beneficial conflict resolution. My agenda remains analytically driven, not politically motivated.

In the end, I intend to keep showing up. In the spirit of Deng Xiaoping's credo, "seeking truth from facts", I will keep pushing for free and open debate in China. I am not giving up. Ultimately, that is the point of it all.

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Apple security alert: Mind your language



RISHI RAJ

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While sending out spyware threat notices, big tech firms should avoid using terms like "state-sponsored" or "nation-state" unless they can back the same with evidence

APPLE WAS IN the news last week for two consecutive days. On April 10, it was reported that the company has achieved a major feat in India in FY24 by producing smartphones worth \$14 billion, which was double of what it manufactured in the previous fiscal. The achievement is by no means small, since the India production story started only some three years back and today, one in seven iPhones in the world are being assembled in the country.

The very next day — on April 11 — came the news that the company has warned its users in over 100 countries including India against mercenary spyware attacks such as Pegasus in their devices. A similar alert was received by users on October 30, 2023. While all hell had broken loose in October, this time no such thing happened, though the country is in the midst of a sharp and polarised election.

What changed between October and April? Trivial as it may sound, the answer is the language or, to be more precise, the wording.

Sample this: "Apple believes you are being targeted by state-sponsored attackers who are trying to remotely compromise the iPhone associated with your Apple ID."

And this: "Apple detected that you are being targeted by a mercenary spyware attack that is trying to remotely compromise the iPhone associated with your Apple ID."

The first one is the October 2023 alert and the second one came on April 11. Both are the same, barring that in the

former, the supposed attackers have been named as "state-sponsored" and in the latter, "mercenary spyware", and therein lies a tale and a lesson.

The usage of the term "state-sponsored", followed by Opposition leaders, activists, and journalists flashing screenshots of their iPhones, indicated that the government was behind the move. Put simply, the phones of the Opposition leaders were under surveillance.

Free press, a fearless Opposition, and an independent judiciary need to be protected at all times. So, any attack on their freedom, especially through "sophisticated" spyware, is not something to be taken lightly. It needs serious examination and investigation since stakeholders' privacy and security — sometimes their lives — can be at threat.

Since there is no brouhaha this time, one can safely come to a set of conclusions. First, it seems that there was no surveillance by the government. Had that been the case, questions should have been raised this time too, as Opposition leaders and activists are not likely to be convinced by a mere change in the wording of the security alert.

Second, Apple, the maker of iconic brands, should have known all along that "mercenary spyware" is the right terminology rather than "state-sponsored" — the former encompasses gov-

ernments, non-state actors, and even private companies.

Third, the ruling party, which ordered an investigation in the matter, in which Apple was asked to cooperate and explain the vulnerabilities in its security system, should also have known better. It never clarified whether any of its members possessing iPhones received such alerts. If they had shown the screenshots of their phones, the matter would not have become politically acrimonious.

Fourth, while Apple could obviously have done better by using more accurate and transparent language in the notifications, it's hilarious that the company was under attack. This is because the fact is that 94% of India's smartphone users are on non-Apple devices.

Did anybody, at any stage, bother to ask why we are not seeking an explanation from Xiaomi, Oppo, and Vivo, the three Chinese companies that occupy 80% of India's mobile phone market, and Samsung, which occupies approximately 12%, for not alerting their customers of any such spyware attacks?

Apple's reputation for privacy and security is legendary, so it's understandable that expectations from it would also be higher. But to attack it for providing security alerts, which is the right thing to do, and giving every other company — especially the Chinese firms operating in the country — a pass seems strange.

It's also known that other big tech firms use similar language while issuing threat notifications. Meta, for instance, uses "state-sponsored actors" to describe the attacks, Google uses "government-backed attackers", and Microsoft uses "nation-state attacks" to describe cyberattacks.

While Apple course-corrected, it's time to point out to other big tech firms that they either provide hard evidence of state involvement if their security alerts say so, or taper their language to ensure that the victims are informed. Then, such alerts would not create any chaos and increase the rift between civil society, journalists, and governments.

Lastly, there's another corrective action undertaken by Apple this time. The April notification has three additions that are critical for the victims and the governments. It discloses that the current batch of threat notifications has been sent to targeted users in 92 countries — which is practically half the world. Further, Apple has, this time, made a clear disclosure that it does not attribute the attacks or the notice to any specific attackers or geographical regions.

The new wordage, therefore, ensures that while the consumers are alerted — and even alarmed — they act to protect themselves rather than make harmful allegations.

The lesson is clear: whether it's Apple or any other big tech firms, sophisticated technology, branding, or quality of services, everything fails if the language used to communicate is not accurate.

involvement against Iran is a signal to contain the hostilities and a move to force Israel and Palestine to effect a ceasefire and negotiations. This helps Joe Biden in his bid to retain the Oval office and a offer a sigh of relief for western nations. Besides, Israel which is facing heavy flak over its virtual genocide in Gaza will be happy to use this diversion as a face saver.

—R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BJP's Sankalp Patra

The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) election manifesto shows the vision of the party for Viksit Bharat with long-term perspectives after considering 15 lakh suggestions from the public. It is an aspirational document to guide the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance in its probable next tenure, as the opposition alliance does not appear to contest Lok Sabha elections unitedly. Prime Minister Narendra

Modi's guarantees for development, infrastructure, welfare schemes, education, industry, start-up ecosystem, manufacturing, railways and aviation, agriculture, etc. are all incorporated in the manifesto on expected lines. The last chapter on environmental issues deserves appreciation and welcome. Political parties will contest the next Lok Sabha elections with 33% reservation for women under the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, so they should have

prepared themselves in this election itself to avoid a vacuum in the future.

—Vinod Johri, Delhi

Iran-Israel face-off

The Iran drone strikes into Israel does create concerns over a widening conflict in the region that is already a hotbed of many vintage militant outfits. But it could compel Israel to tone down its belligerence in Gaza and threats over Rafah. The very fact that the US has ruled out its direct

NEXT GOVT WILL NEED A RETHINK ON JOB CREATION

DESPITE the BJP's confidence in coming back to power with an even bigger mandate, the INDIA bloc is not letting the ruling coalition have a stroll to that goal. The opposition parties have made joblessness a big electoral issue, which the ruling party is not able to easily ward off. The Congress manifesto offered a detailed plan to improve the employment situation in the country. In comparison, the BJP, which released its manifesto this Sunday, has put out fewer specifics on job creation. While the Congress's focus is on filling 30 lakh government vacancies, the BJP has shied away from making any such announcement. The Congress has talked about jobs through small and medium enterprises, employment-linked incentives, and the launch of mining schemes with projected new jobs for 1.5 crore people. The BJP, on the other hand, has mostly promised creating a better environment for entrepreneurs and start-ups, who in turn would provide jobs; it has also talked about skilling the young to make them job-ready, but not much about where the jobs would come from.

Employment is an enormous challenge for a country where millions of young people enter the job market every year. Unemployment or underemployment is becoming both a political as well as a social problem in the country. An increasing number of experts are now convinced that overall growth alone would not create enough jobs in the economy. Growth is happening in the organised sector, not in the unorganised sector that employs 94 percent of Indians counted in the labour force. The unorganised sector has faced several severe shocks since 2016—demonetisation, adjusting to the goods and services tax, the non-banking financial crisis and pandemic lockdowns. The country faces a challenge particularly in creating low-skilled jobs, which are mostly provided by labour-intensive sectors. However, with automation and mechanisation increasing at a fast pace, even those sectors that were considered labour-intensive are no longer generating enough jobs.

So policy makers and party think tanks need a rethink on jobs. Apart from the usual steps like creating a conducive environment for smaller players to do business and labour-intensive sectors to grow, the next government would do well to fill a large number of government vacancies. The government should support public education and health, which in turn can generate a large number of jobs. The services sector should also be seen as a generator of low-skilled jobs.

ROHIT'S RED-HOT FORM AUGURS WELL FOR INDIA

SOMETIMES, small gestures can reflect a man's personality. On Sunday, when the Mumbai Indians looked vanquished, one person stood unperturbed and tall in the middle—Rohit Sharma. He had just completed a century, but looked dejected—his team still needed 29 runs off three balls against an accurate and wily Chennai Super Kings attack. When the match was over, Rohit did not celebrate his 105 off 63 balls. He walked alone past the customary handshakes to the dressing room. For him, as for many other players, a team win is more important than individual milestones.

However, it's not just about not celebrating. The way things unfolded days before this Indian Premier League season started, Rohit could have been distraught. Even as he continued to be the India captain in the shortest format, he was replaced by Hardik Pandya as the MI skipper, something that did not go down well with the fans. Hardik has been booed every time he has walked in. He has looked unsure, like in the last over on Sunday when he bowled to M S Dhoni; he gave away 26 runs, 20 of them in four balls to Dhoni. Hardik has been under pressure right from the first match of the season and it has been telling on his form.

On the contrary, Rohit has been a rock for the beleaguered franchise that is walking a tightrope this year. The season has, in fact, been a revelation for the 36-year-old India opener. Like all great players, he is pushing his way back from adversities. His form has not been at its greatest over the last several years. His last IPL century came 12 years ago. Last year, he scored 332 in 16 matches at an average of 20.75 and a strike rate of 132.8. Compare this to 2024: in six matches, he has already scored 261 at 52.2 while striking at 167.3. This augurs well for India at the next T20 World Cup in June, where he would be the captain. Rohit did not play the shortest format for India from November 2022 until early this year. Though the IPL is a long way from being over, he needed these runs. And for MI, his role in reversing the team's fortunes would be crucial. Hardik may be under pressure, but he must labour on too.

QUICK TAKE

SYMBOLIC POLL-TIME SALES

THE last Brazilian presidential election saw the advent of Data Toalha, an informal index of public sentiment divined from the sales of towels printed with the candidates' faces. In India, we can look at the sales trajectories of some of the objects assigned as party symbols. We are witnessing O Pan-neerselvam's jackfruit selling out in Ramanathapuram, Dhoolpet kite makers finding it hard to keep up with orders for AIMIM's kite, and Aurangabad's craftsmen amid a quinquennial spike in demand for RJD's hurricane lamp. Do they really stand for voter sentiment? Perhaps not in our pluralistic polity, but it's surely a swell time for the makers of these objects.

AS soon as Hamas executed its attack last October 7, it was inevitable that Israel would strike back in strength without any remorse. It was equally evident that the action by Hamas, acting as a proxy of Iran, would at some stage lead to another round of possible hostilities between Iran and Israel.

Alongside the war in Gaza, Iran activated Israel's northern borders by employing its assets through proxies in Syria and Lebanon. A series of airstrikes in retaliation were conducted by Israel against various Iranian assets, culminating in the April 1 strike that flattened an Iranian consulate in Damascus. Of the twelve people killed were seven personnel of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC); among them were at least two senior IRGC commanders. Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei promised retribution, which apparently is in progress against Israel but has met with questionable success.

Before assessing what this latest round of hostilities really means in terms of potential escalation beyond the already on-fire Middle East, it's good to make a brief recall. Israel and Iran enjoyed the best of relations before 1979, when the Iranian Revolution took place—considered one of the earth-shaking geopolitical events of the second half of the 20th century. Iran, as the centre of Islam's Shia ideology, entered into confrontation with Saudi Arabia, the core of Sunni ideology. The Saudis were close to Iran's new nemesis, the US, for a variety of reasons. Hence, despite the purported leadership of the Islamic world that Saudi Arabia aspired to, it could never get itself to fully oppose the closest US ally, Israel. A tacit live and let live attitude prevailed.

Iran, itself a flag bearer of the Islamic world, found its lot was enhanced by strongly supporting the Palestinian cause and projecting itself as a strong adversary of Israel. It has never dithered from this policy over the last 45 years.

Besides ideological differences with much of the Sunni Arab world, Iran has trudged a lonely path of opposition to Israel—an opposition that is vehement in many ways. One of the ways Iran chose to play its strategic course for domination of the Islamic world was by remaining a strong player in militarily opposing Israel, something that the combined strength of the Arabs had not succeeded in ever achieving.

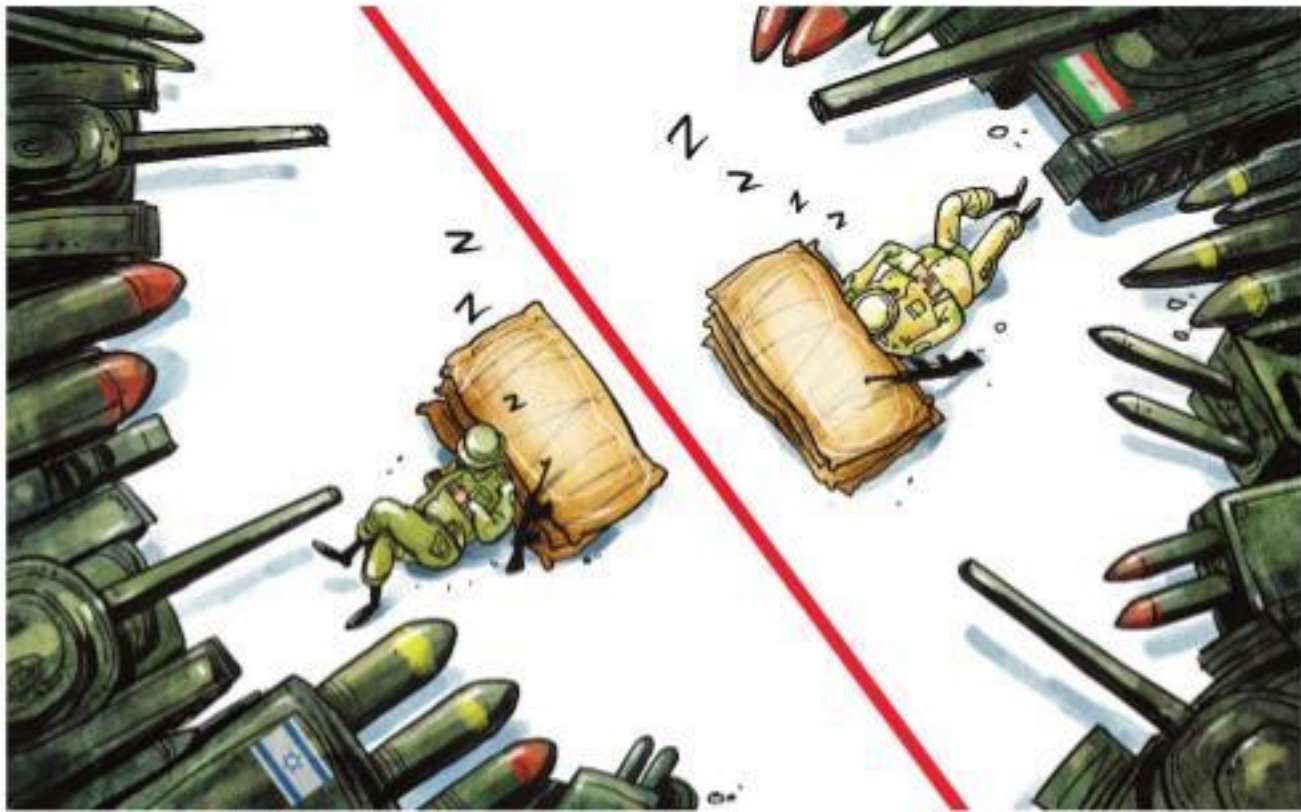
Not enjoying a common land border with Israel, Iran adopted two approaches

Iran and Israel keep crossing regional lines to target each other. The latest escalation is another dangerous episode in a continuum stretching almost half a century

THE SHIFTING RED LINES IN WEST ASIA

LT GEN SYED ATA HASNAIN (RETD)

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



SOURAV ROY

to remain a potent threat to the Israeli military's potential and perceived domination. The first was the employment of surrogate forces, often referred to as proxies, in the Levant. This essentially meant that Lebanon and Syria were to be fully pliant in providing space for deployment of forces, assets and positions.

Attacks by proxy forces on Israel's northern border have been a longstanding phenomenon. In 2006, a full conventional war was fought to a stalemate by Hezbollah, the Shia surrogate in Lebanon and Syria. Hamas played the same role in Gaza. Further, the Houthi rebels, who have fought against an Arab military alliance, were supported by Iran to extend the proxy reach far south. In the current situation in 2024,

the Houthis have virtually prevented the movement of oil tankers to Israel and other places through the Red Sea.

The second and far more deadly part of the Iranian strategy goes back to the early 1990s, when it decided to acquire missile technology from Russia, North Korea and China. Over time, it developed a dangerous arsenal of missiles to include the Kheibar, with a range of 2,000 km, and the Haj Qasem, which has a range of 1,400 km. It has also achieved hypersonic capability and its armed drones have been extensively employed in Ukraine. Missiles and now armed drones have become the cutting edge of Iranian deterrence. This, combined with the proxy forces, IRGC presence and the constant supply of missiles

A LESSON FROM DANTE IN SEASON OF GUARANTEES

I have been carrying Dante's *Inferno* (Robert Pinsky version) on my back like a cross for some time now. On Friday, it got rid of me at Bhubaneswar airport. The parting was subconscious—and perhaps designed. The air hostess might have had something to do with it though. I was a lone passenger on the emergency row. Before the plane took off, the hostess came up and said not to open the heavy-looking but invitational door unless she or the captain said, "Evacuate! Evacuate! Evacuate!" I had been eyeing the door.

In my younger days, I might have telepathically persuaded her to utter the word thrice right away and proceeded at least in my mind to open the door. Aren't we in all some kind of emergency at all times and looking for an exit? But these are days one could get into trouble for lesser thought crimes, and I refrained.

A couple of hours later, I went past the TV showing Gaza news on my way to the airport lounge. Transaction over, I made my way out. There was a little confusion as the driver who had come to pick me up thought I was Ms Pinky Mishra, and I had to make a couple of calls to prove to him this was not the case.

It was only later in the car that I realised that Dante and I had parted company. And, later still, it struck me that the cautionary words uttered by the air hostess in her sing-song voice held a kind of relevance to Indian politics.

On Saturday, a liberal media house released a pre-poll survey that said the Narendra Modi-led NDA front had a 'comfortable 12 percentage lead over the rival alliance, INDIA'. One of the conclusions said the Modi loyalists 'swore by the welfare schemes undertaken by the government'. The newspaper sounded disappointed.

It is not as if the opposition leader Rahul Gandhi has been less generous than the PM in his promises to the public. For example, in Dhule in Maharashtra he recently promised to deliver ₹100,000 every year to every woman in need. This is in addition to many other welfare schemes and 'guarantees' that the opposition and the government have been promising, though admittedly the BJP manifesto released on Monday shifts the emphasis to development. But, in his campaign speeches, Modi has been large-handed. His direct cash

promises and welfare schemes together constitute a new politics of guarantee. Indeed, the prime minister has been a real innovator in this sense. No speech of his complete without a mention of the inspirational 'Modi Ki guarantee'.

On both sides, the guarantee politics is little more than baiting the poor with candies. The material nature of



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In Dante's *Inferno*, the lately pious Emperor Constantine donates vast sums to the pope for a guaranteed seat in heaven. A similar Faustian bargain is at work to get our vote with the promise of guarantees from all sides

the transaction is quite similar to the electoral bond scheme, which the opposition is critical of. It is essentially a *quid pro quo*. Only, we cannot tell for sure. In our world, more than ever, the good and the bad are inextricably mixed. Reality is a ghost haunting our consciousness. I think it was the French historian Jules Michelet who said that humans have invented a language in which truth can never be fully articulated.

The BJP talks of development. Which, of course, India could do with. In the heart of our hearts, who doesn't want an India that looks a bit like the gleaming Nordic Europe, no matter that the Indian genius for dirt and chaos militates against that orderly and snow-custed dream?

In addition to the guarantees, the

C P SURENDRAN

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

MAIL BAG

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Dictatorial record

Ref: *The troubled past between Congress and the judiciary* (Apr 15). Despite its dictatorial record, the Congress has the audacity to call PM Narendra Modi a dictator. The Congress did not lift the Emergency even when the Lok Sabha elections were announced. It was the Janata Party government that humbled the Congress government in the election.

Shreeram Paranjape, Bengaluru

Sapling solution

Ref: *Govt must protect animals from drought* (Apr 15). School students are aware of various issues these days. If they are asked to plant a minimum of two saplings for marks, they'll create a huge impact before the next academic year. Making afforestation a topic in essays alone may not bring it into practice.

R Prabha, Tiruvapur

Informed decisions

Ref: *Why financial literacy is falling short* (Apr 15). Financial literacy will be an irreplaceable asset, especially for the nation's youngsters. We execute financial decisions daily, but are we informed enough to introspect the benefits of the proposed interests?

Nithish G S, Tirupati

Explosive match

Ref: *Rohit's ton in vain for MI as MS blitz powers Kings* (Apr 15). A scintillating century by Rohit Sharma of Mumbai Indians went in vain, but a glittering 20 runs in four balls by M S Dhoni brought the win to CSK. The match between the two star-studded teams was absorbing. Both teams played with full gusto to win the match. It was a treat to watch.

K S Aswathanarayana, email

Extending tenure

Giving extension to senior officials on their retirement can be justified under special circumstances, though it would be an injustice to the next in line legitimately aspiring for the position. If this provision is used indiscriminately at the whims and fancies of the authorities in exchange for favours, it is an unhealthy practice that cannot be justified. A case in point is the extension of service given to the SBI chairman.

Raju Mathai, Kochi

Sustainable democracy

If democracy is to be sustainable, we should have a rule that no party can be in power for more than one term in one go. In the current system, the incumbent party in power, with the sense of indispensability, continues with governance as per its own whims and fancies. This gradually erodes democracy and establishes autocracy.

BS Badarinarayana, email

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

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Gesundheit, Even as West Asia Sneezes

Disruption of merchandise trade should be limited

The effect of Iran's strike against Israel over the weekend, in retaliation with the suspected Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on April 1, has been muted in the energy market. This would suggest the market expects a de-escalation of hostilities. Fundamentally, energy demand is weak on account of Western economies and Opec+, which includes Russia, having to go in for deeper production cuts to establish an \$80-a-barrel floor for crude oil prices. The US has a lower tolerance for high fuel prices in an election year and would not like to see Russia benefit from a surge. Oil-producing nations in the Gulf, including Iran, are wary of a ramp-up in US production if the conflict were to push crude oil towards \$100 a barrel. Besides, energy price volatility would force central banks to keep interest rates higher for longer, with second-order effects on demand.



Disruption of merchandise trade should, in line with energy supply, be of a limited order. Asia's maritime trade with Europe through the Persian Gulf has already seen some dislocation since Israel's strikes on Gaza. Alternate sea routes and air freight are already in operation. Supply chains in Asia, by and large, appear cushioned from energy and trade dislocation. A weak Chinese economic recovery lends additional stability against possibly deeper trade disruption in West Asia.

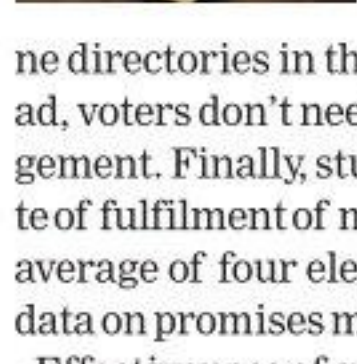
Apart from a flare-up in crude oil prices, India faces turbulence in capital flows on account of higher interest rates and flight to safety in the event of an escalation. Its merchandise trade also has an over-dependence on the Persian Gulf sea route. It would have to lend its voice to global efforts at conflict mitigation to protect its growth momentum and inflation control. The downside risk to inflation is greater than to growth. Core inflation is now well within the tolerance zone. But higher energy prices, if sustained, could work their way in. Meeting medium-term fiscal goals might become more difficult if GoI has to absorb yet another fertiliser price shock.

Let's Make Elections Manifesto-Mukt

In the run-up to Lok Sabha elections, political parties have been releasing their manifestoes. In these times of 24x7 communication, such 'letters of intent' and 'MoUs' are, at best, twee and redundant, at worst, distractions and obfuscations. They serve little in influencing public opinion and voter response. So, parties, why don't you just do away with them?

Decision to support a party or politician is multipronged, often influenced by factors such as performance of incumbents, local issues and collective interests of communities. Manifestoes hardly get into such granular practicalities. Two, manifestoes reflect intentions, which is different from concrete policymaking. This disjunction undermines the credibility of manifestoes as reliable indicators of future governance providing a false correlation. In any case, political parties in India are not legally committed to fulfil their manifesto promises. Three, parties utilise media — social and otherwise — through the year to engage with supporters. So, manifestoes are really akin to telephone directories in the mobile age. Four, in an age of info overload, voters don't need an anachronistic source of further engagement. Finally, studies show that in advanced economies, rate of fulfilment of manifesto promises is as high as 82% over an average of four elections. In India, such slicing and dicing of data on promises made and promises delivered is hardly done.

Effectiveness of manifestoes in influencing voter behaviour and shaping governance — always in doubt anyway — has dwindled to the point of redundancy. It's time to stick to more immediate forms of engagement that have more bearing on voters' wish lists and the electoral contest at hand. So, why go through the manifesto motions?



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JUST IN JEST
Trying to be cool is super uncool even by prime ministerial standards

'Adidad' Joke's On You, Try-Too-Hard Rishi

There's nothing as uncool as trying hard to be cool. And if you're considered uncool to start with, the uncool quotient just spreads like the utter silence that follows a boomer comment on a Sephora kids' site. Politicians fit the bill of people whose job is to, well, fit the bill. Rishi Sunak reeks of not fitting — not just the bill but also the pair of Adidas Sambas he was caught wearing in an interview. In what has overwhelmingly been seen as the PM trying to be 'with it, innit?' the shoe is on the other foot now, with the fashionable trainers now laced with Sunakness. Such is the effect of Brand Rishi, the walking-talking example in Britain of a dad joke, on Brand Adidas, that the Sambas are now being shorn off trendy Brit feet faster than you can say 'Allo, Vindaloo'.

In his subsequent 'apology' — that added another dollop of doddiness to his already impressive reservoir of conservatively laboured chicness — Sunak insisted that he had been Adidas-ing 'for many, many years'. Caught in this toe jam, the footwear brand now finds the till-now trendy Sambas receiving the kick of death from 10 Dowdy Street. So, what next from the Tory Sneaker? Sampling fish 'n' chips from the local chippy? Blasting DJ Cloonee's 'Sippin' Yak' from his man cave? Release 'candid' photos of himself taking out the garbage in Carhartt WIP Dungarees?

Inequality shouldn't be a concern if it coincides with improvement in lives and livelihoods

LET'S NOT MIND THE GAP



Bibek Debroy & Aditya Sinha

On April 9, Sensex breached the 75,000 mark for the first time, thanks to resilient economy, reforms, policy certainty and improved ease of doing business. On the back of this stock market surge, many have suggested that India must have a wealth redistribution plan. Such ideas, while populist, harm social welfare.

Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek argued that redistributive policies can stifle innovation and productivity. If individuals feel their efforts will be heavily taxed or redistributed, they may not be motivated enough to invest in new ventures or improve productivity, leading to an economic slowdown. Moreover, administrative costs, as highlighted by Greg Leiserson, Will McGrew and Raksha Koppam in their 2019 paper, 'Net Worth Taxes: What They Are and How They Work', and complexities of implementing redistribution schemes can create inefficiencies in resource allocation.

Data from France indicates that the 1988 solidarity tax on wealth (ISF) has resulted in:

- €200 bn in capital flight.
- Yearly fiscal deficit of around €7 bn, double its revenue.

- Estimated decrease in GDP growth by 0.2% each year, amounting to a loss of about €3.5 bn.

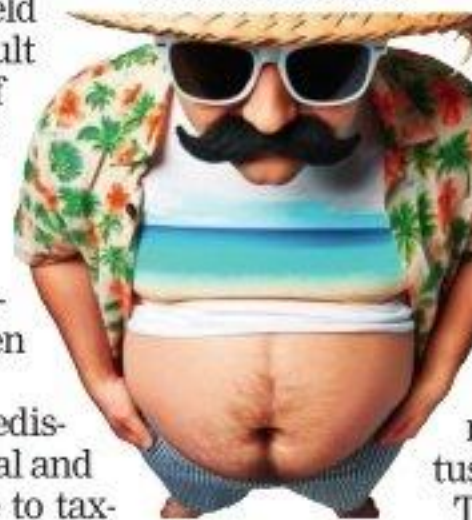
Assessing wealth in India for redistribution is fraught with challenges because:

- Many assets can be undervalued, hidden or held in forms that are difficult to assess due to a lack of formal documentation or reporting.

- Fluctuating nature of values of assets makes capturing the accurate scale of wealth even harder.

- Taxing wealth and redistribution pose technical and policy challenges, due to tax-

Econ 101 teaches us that as an economy grows, so does inequality, a concept illustrated by the Kuznets curve



At the core of this debate is a philosophical stance that champions the principle that personal endeavour should dictate one's earnings, and individuals are entitled to the rewards of their labour.

This perspective challenges the narrative that the rich are yet to earn their status independently.

The underlying intent is vilification of those who generate wealth, casting them as adversaries rather than contributors to economic prosperity.

The state is bound to address issues of equity. But this doesn't mean that the right to private property is challenged in the state's attempt to address the problem of inequality.

Supporters of wealth redistribution often refer to Article 39(b) and 39(c) of the Constitution, which emphasise the state's role in ensuring the fair distribution of resources for the common good and preventing wealth concentration.

However, interpretation of Article 39(b) has sparked legal debates, particularly regarding the redistribution of private property.

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payors' behavioural responses, such as altered wealth accumulation, financial decision-making shifts and evasion tactics.

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Interpretation of Article 39(b) was expanded in Sanjeev Coke Manufacturing Co v. Bharat Coking Coal Ltd (1983), where the court interpreted the article as encompassing the state's power to redistribute private property. However,

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► Property Owners' Association v. State of Maharashtra (2001) brought these concerns to the forefront, signalling a judicial re-evaluation of the scope of Article 39(b) in relation to private property. Supreme Court hinted at the necessity to reconsider the expansive interpretation adopted in Sanjeev Coke, suggesting a need to align the article's application more closely with the constitutional protections afforded to property rights.

Constituent Assembly debates also shed light on the original intent behind Article 39(b). Figures like B R Ambedkar emphasised the balance between state-directed resource distribution and safeguarding individual property rights.

More recently, discussion on wealth redistribution was ignited by a March 2024 paper by Nitin Kumar Bharti, Lucas Ch



A thought for today
*Success usually comes to those
who are too busy to be looking for it*

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Cash Trumps Culture

*Small states are relatively out of fashion these days
because politicians now understand economic realities*

Campaigning in western UP, BSP chief Mayawati said her party will take concrete steps to spin-off the region into a separate state. She held similar views when she was CM of UP. There may be some political support for the move, with administrative efficacy being a frequently cited reason.

How and why of states | Culture has been the primary approach to demarcating states. Language is the most practical way to identify culturally coherent regions. Andhra Pradesh was carved out in Oct 1953 as the first linguistic state but the matter didn't end there.

Does size matter? | A States Reorganisation Commission studied the issue and in 1955 concluded there's a strong basis for linguistic units. It felt a state is not just an administrative unit, but one where the working of democratic institutions required an emotional response. The answer was language. But there was another issue. The question of an appropriate size for administrative efficacy did come up. The Commission said "efficiency of administration is seldom determined by the size of the unit."

When matters | Demands to revisit borders never seem to fade as grievances, real or imagined, are a recurring source of social and political mobilisation. A call to spin-off western UP as Harit Pradesh has surfaced often. About 24 years ago, it was an important plank of RLD. This coincided with new sub-divisions within relatively coherent linguistic regions that

led to formation of Jharkhand, Uttarakhand and Chhattisgarh. Later, when AP was bifurcated, a new economic factor came into play.

Urban dynamics | A parliamentary committee report on housing and urban affairs estimated that urban India now contributes 65% of the national GDP. Therefore, the presence of an urban dynamo in a state can change its political dynamics because it determines the extent of autonomous control over own tax resources (OTR) a govt will have.

Telangana movement was based partly on economic grievances of a relatively poorer agrarian sub-region. But Telangana's control over Hyderabad put it in charge of what really mattered. In 2021-22, Telangana generated about 79% of its revenue through its OTR, while AP could manage just 50%. Consequently, a govt in Telangana will have far more fiscal space to fulfil the needs of the people. Economic reality can no longer be ignored when talking about state formation. Social grievances and cultural factors do drive mobilisation but India's changing economic structure will temper demands.

Iran: A Tragedy

*It could have been a modern West Asian power.
But foreign interference & ayatollahs ruined it*

Iran's barrage of drones and missiles aimed at Israel again cast Tehran as a major security problem in West Asia. As a disruptor, it has cultivated a host of regional militias – from Hezbollah to Houthis – to carry out its strategic goals. Internally, ayatollahs rule with an iron grip, impose an ultra-conservative form of Islam, and deny Iranian women freedoms. But it wasn't always like this. Iran could have been a great modern power.

Inflection point | A major turning point for Iran came in 1953 with the coup against then democratically-elected Iranian PM Mohammad Mosaddegh. The coup, backed by CIA, was a huge blow to Iran's democratic aspirations – Mosaddegh had undertaken a slew of reforms with the aim of turning Iran into a genuine rights-based democracy. It also concentrated power in Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, creating a brutal regime and paving the way for the ayatollahs' 1979 Islamic revolution.

Surviving sanctions | Iran has been under Western sanctions for 40 years. While this seriously curtailed Iran's economic development, it did not lead to collapse. Iran's military prowess – domestic production of drones and missiles, a covert nuclear programme – and continued export of oil, highlight the country's inherent resilience.

Human resource | With a population of close to 90 million, and with some of the highest levels of education in West Asia, Iran has no dearth of human resource. In fact, 70% of its STEM graduates are women. Imagine the impact of this resource, properly deployed, in an Iran that's free.

Nuclear deal | The deal created much hope of giving Iran a chance at becoming a normal country. Trump torpedoed it and Biden didn't pick up the ball. Anti-US ayatollahs were happy. Israelis and Saudis rejoiced. But for ordinary Iranians, who feel trapped in the Islamic Republic, the door slammed shut again on a better life – continuing Iran's disruptor/pariah status.

Mrs P's pulao

A lifelong lesson from a home science teacher

Chitra Phadnis



Last week, I made pulao – not just any old pulao, but Mrs Punhani's pulao. Because, like every girl who went to school with me will swear, that is the only way to make it.

Back in the dark ages when girls learnt to cook and boys threw bricks around as part of "Socially Useful Productive Work", Mrs Punhani was our home science teacher. Her classes opened up an entirely new world for us. We actually had a useful skill, armed with which we could challenge our respective mothers. We also found to our horror that our mothers had the recipe all wrong – wrong quantities, wrong spices and wrong order of putting them in.

Thankfully, most mothers were also open to changing their bad ways. Unlike fathers.

Fathers, of course, refused to listen to reason. Mine once left me with a leave letter that violated every rule of the ICSE-approved format for formal letters. How on earth was I supposed to show it to my class teacher who was also my English teacher? Far better to attend school every single day, I decided resignedly.

But life always has its way of getting back. Years later, I found myself at the other end of this staunch faith in the education system. My daughter was struggling with her homework, writing a news report. My mild offer of help was rejected at once. "This is 8th grade syllabus. You wouldn't know it," she scoffed, dismissing my career both as a journalist and a 7th grade English teacher.

I wasn't really offended. Maybe Mrs P's P was at the back of my mind. I knew that somewhere in a child's life, the adult is always up on a pedestal, for much longer than we imagine.

Just eavesdrop into conversations at school reunions – and you'll hear white haired grandmothers and fathers swap stories of how half a century ago, a teacher treated them either unfairly or exceptionally well. We never really forget.

Then there are days when your entire life is suddenly validated, when your daughter comes and asks you to teach her to make pulao. "Not any old pulao," she says, "but Mrs P's pulao." Is there any other way, really?

Noora Kushti, West Asian Style

*Oil prices fell after Iran's attack. That suggests Iranians were perhaps coordinating
with US & Israel. So, a global economic headache is unlikely*

Somnath Mukherjee



Noora Kushti, a term widely used in the Gangetic plains of India, has Persian (modern-day Iran) origins. Broadly, it means a fixed fight, or pretending to fight (while fooling a target audience). The world in general, and financial markets as a subset, pray that the latest escalation in the conflict in West Asia, in a darkly Freudian twist via Iranian drone-missile attack on Israel, is a Noora Kushti.

There are at least some indications that it might indeed be so. These might also explain why, after Iran's attack on Israel over the weekend, oil prices actually fell on Monday.

For starters, Iran's own words and actions point towards a Noora Kushti.

- This attack, in retaliation for an alleged Israeli air attack on an Iranian embassy complex in Syria (which killed several Iranian military officials), was announced days in advance.

- Information about the timing of the attacks seemed well socialised with major world capitals – enabling advisories from a range of countries, including India, on travel.

- The information was precise enough to also enable Israel to activate a general lockdown of key services (like schools).

- When the attacks came, on Saturday night, not only were Israeli air defences prepared, they were also coordinated with US, British and French forces in the region, besides seemingly Saudi and Jordanian air defences too.

- As a result, nearly all missiles and drones were intercepted and very little damage to life and property was reported.

- Iran's permanent mission to UN put out a message saying, "The matter can be deemed to be concluded," a firm indication of an off-ramp for all parties.

The model isn't new. Earlier this year, a similar face-off took place between Iran and Pakistan. In response to Iranian missile strikes on alleged terror camps in Balochistan, Pakistan bombed targets in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan region. Both sides quickly put the tit-for-tat strikes behind and engaged in diplomatic parleys to de-escalate.

For a world that was just about getting used to and working around two hotspots – in Ukraine and in Gaza – a fresh escalation is certainly a matter of worry. Financial markets reflected the worry. On Friday, in

anticipation of the Iranian strikes, risk assets – stocks and cryptos – declined, while flight-to-safety assets – gold and US dollar – advanced.

Financial market impact of a wider conflict could of course be extensive, with oil prices being the single-biggest adverse variable in play. West Asia accounts for



Image is for representational purposes

nearly a third of global oil supply. Add to it another 15-20% of supplies, from Russia, already under a tricky sanctions regime. No wonder, oil prices have been on a boil for the last couple of weeks, topping \$90.

Globally, inflation seems to have been brought under control, even if slower than what central banks

would have hoped for. Higher oil prices can slow the trend even more, if not reverse it. And that really queers the pitch on the related variable, global interest rates.

Risk assets, especially equities, are in the middle of a year-long rally, at least partially predicated on expectations of policy rate cuts, especially by the US Fed. Deferral of these expected rate cuts will bring into question current valuation levels of risk assets, especially equities.

A second adverse variable is the impact on global supply chains. It's one thing to negotiate Houthi pirates through the Gulf of Aden/Red Sea/Arabian Sea route. That itself has stretched collective naval resources of the world – Indian navy alone has deployed a dozen ships to the effort.

Negotiating a full-scale war between two large countries in the region will severely disrupt supply chains, push up costs and, invariably, feed into global inflation. At an extreme level, any Iranian actions to shut down Strait of Hormuz will be catastrophic.

For India, rise in oil prices could disrupt the current virtuous cycle in the economy. Higher oil prices lead to higher trade deficit, higher inflation, increasing pressure on rupee, reducing foreign investment flows and putting pressure on the fisc. Every \$10 increase in oil prices leads to a rough 0.5% addition to India's current account deficit. With consumption already weak, it could result in a significant negative impact on the biggest cylinder firing the economy today – investments, especially public investments.

The good news is that in the past, India's capital markets have demonstrated significant resilience to oil price shocks. From Lebanon War in 2006 (between Israel and Hezbollah) to Israel's Operation Pillar of Defence in 2012 (in Gaza) and another operation in 2014 in the same theatre, as oil prices predictably went on some boil, Indian markets by and large shrugged off the impact.

Today, while oil prices remain salient, India's mitigating options have also multiplied – burgeoning services trade surpluses and flows arising out of bond index inclusion provide a level of cushion that wasn't available in the years gone by.

Noora Kushti is the best-case scenario. Given the stakes, hopefully that is the scenario that plays out. In the meanwhile, hoping and praying are not great strategies – investors would do well to diversify their investments and keep discipline if the worse cases play out.

The writer is CIO of an asset and wealth management firm

Here's A Hot Button Election Issue

Will soaring temperatures keep people from voting? 2019 data offers some clues

Nandita.Sengupta@timesgroup.com



The joke goes that Sheohar in Bihar logged 45 – for both temperature (°C) on polling day and turnout (%). It may soon not be a joke, given the number of constituencies where turnout and temperature are increasingly proximate. Phulpur voted on May 12, 2019, for instance, in 41°C – a mere 48.7% turned up to vote, UP's lowest.

In LS elections 2009, 13 of Maharashtra's 48 LS seats voted in temperatures of 44°C – 10 constituencies in Vidarbha, 3 in Marathwada – voter turnout averaged 54%. Summer heat has turned increasingly more intense in scale and scope, scorching large swathes of the country for longer periods. No surprises if it makes the electorate cold to the idea of voting.

This year, frequent and longer heatwaves, predicted April through June, will rage through the 44-day LS poll schedule, the longest general election stretch after 1951-52. A heatwave is temperature above 40°C in the plains, above 37°C along the coast, and 30°C in the hills, with a minimum 4.5°C deviation from normal temperature for two days.

For candidates, party workers, election officials, the schedule is punishing. Rayalseema's already touched a max of 43°C end March-early April.

Weather matters | By mid-June 2019, 32 days had been classed as heatwave days – the second longest on record. Lucknow voted May 6 in 43°C, turnout 55%. Patna Sahib voted May 19, temperature 42°C, turnout 46%.

J&K aside, 50 seats in 2019 with lowest turnout (44-55%) were in states that sweltered – UP, Bihar, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, MP, Telangana. City clusters congeal into heat islands more than any rural area, surely contributing to 'urban apathy'.

This time, EC directed that booths must have coolers, drinking water facilities, ORS for workers etc – essentially LS elections will need the cover of heatwave action plans. The challenge for EC is that the primary

heatwave action rule – stay indoors – can also apply in election season. In 2019, turnout was 67%, ie 29.7cr eligible voters didn't vote.

Weather is never the only reason people stay indoors. Nor is urban apathy. The turnout challenge is multidimensional – past turnout matters, as does political inducements of various kinds. Last year EC focused on 266 LS constituencies where turnout was less than the 2019 national average of 67% – the aim being to boost turnouts. But it is a tough challenge.

Can't head home | Of 50 seats with the lowest 2019 turnout, 22 are in UP, 13 in Bihar – both high out-migration states. Why migrants, especially circular migrants, don't vote is long established – they can afford neither the time nor the money to return to vote from faraway Kerala, Karnataka, TN, Maharashtra, Gujarat. If they do head back in droves, it's on EC to figure out if the journey was facilitated by any political party – which is (a) not allowed, and (b) near-impossible to track.

Remote voting is a long bumpy road, in terms of trust in tech and process, for both voters and political parties. Migrants are being wooed greatly in destination states to head home to vote in UP and Bihar – at 59% and 57% respectively, the two states had the lowest turnouts in 2019.

Not here, not there | Turnout was 83% in Manipur in 2019. It will vote in two phases for its two seats, Inner Manipur and Outer Manipur. In a rare case – evidence of the state's vulnerability – Outer Manipur will vote in both phases,

on April 19 (15 assembly segments) and April 26 (13).

Internally displaced Manipuris will vote in 94 special booths (Inner 29, Outer 65). But hill residents forced to flee to neighbouring states, may have to abandon their vote. Around 9,000 Manipuris are in Mizoram, about 2,000 in its refugee camps. They have no option to vote, except to return home, still a feared prospect. They point out that till 2019, Bru refugees in Tripura could vote in Mizoram's elections.

People displaced because of infra projects often end up not voting during long-drawn resettlement periods.

Why turnouts matter | An increased turnout means increased representation, seen as desirable as it reduces biases of choice that may exist between core/habitual voters and the occasional voter. Some non-India studies show higher turnout increases smaller party's vote share, thus higher turnout is associated

with lower vote share for the incumbent party. But research so far also shows no causal effect of turnout on poll outcomes, except that in increased turnouts, vote shares are less predictable.

Turnouts exert influence on seats where contests are close. Non-India studies have also shown that mobilisation influences turnout but doesn't impact direction of the vote. There's little research in India on turnout or what drives it. For instance, if we know intimidation is in play to suppress votes, how do we measure it? As EC studies those 266 constituencies whose turnout was below 67% the last time, one can expect rich data in public once the election heat is over.

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacred space



If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Matthew 5:23-24

Human Voice Is A Unique Gift, Use It Well

Homayun Taba

Each of us has a unique voice that is our oral signature. The voice is the instrument through which we converse, convey ideas, and express emotions. As an instrument like any other, one can learn to play it well – with focus on tempo, timbre, tone, emphasis, speed and volume.

Two unmistakable voices come to mind: "I have a dream..." and "What a Wonderful World..." one of Martin Luther King Jr, and the other of Louis Armstrong.

It is still amazing how the pumping of air from the lungs to vibrate the vocal cords could create such a range. The quality of a voice depends on the position of the tongue, teeth and variation in pronunciation.

There seem to exist three kinds of 'voices' – one we speak with, one when we think or ruminate, and one when

we write. It is said, metaphorically, finding one's voice is a challenge for any author.

An echo is the return of a voice; silence is its absence, though this can still communicate a lot! A voice can be gentle, stern, melodic, piercing, lilting. It can convey the sugary-ness of flattery, intensity of passion, tenderness of seduction, coldness of reason, the disheartening tone of fatalism, or a critical voice of judgment.

Voice is power; the marginalised have no voice. Therefore, the voice of justice reaches to help, equally so when people speak in one voice against injustices. Democracy at its core implies diversity of voices.

All spiritual traditions know the significance of the sound of the voice – recitations of sacred texts, the

Gregorian chant, mantra repetitions, and the Azan, call to prayer. Words or mantras become alive when infused with voice.

In order to tune to the inner voice, quiet solitude is required, and the cacophony of the external ones needs to be hushed. One authentic voice that is difficult to ignore is the voice of conscience – that quietly audible one that tells us, 'Don't do it.'

To express and to connect are two main human psychological needs – expressing feelings, needs, ideas, that establish connection. Disconnection often explains why people shout; not because of physical distance but the psychological one.

From a mother's soothing melodious lullaby to the inspiring voice and words of a great speaker, the acoustic

energy of a voice can lift us with warmth of enthusiasm or dampen our spirits. It is an instrument of impact, therefore, a careful choice as to how to deploy it – appealing to unite, helping to guide, asking to be reasonable, or attempting to disunite, creating disharmony. That may be the reason we can still hear the voices of those who have impacted our lives. However, we experience less of it because the epidemic of texting and emojis has left little scope for sensing the tonal quality, mood, nuance, and the warmth of the spoken word. For this reason, I prefer sending voice messages.

The singing of birds at dawn and dusk could be interpreted as the voice of joy. What they convey is that the world is meant to be celebrated. And here once again, Louis Armstrong's voice begins to resonate in our ears.

April 16 is World Voice Day



THE SPEAKING TREE

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

BJP manifesto

Focus on development & welfare, but gaps remain

SANKALP Patra, the BJP's election manifesto that was released by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other senior party leaders on Sunday, is being dissected not just for its inclusions but also the exclusions. According to the PM, the document — also titled *Modi ki Guarantee* — is 'more than just a collection of promises. It outlines the collective aspirations and goals of our nation.' Reiterating its commitment to rolling out 'one nation, one election' and a pan-India Uniform Civil Code — two issues mentioned in its 2019 manifesto as well — the BJP has highlighted development and public welfare as its top priorities.

The manifesto comes days after the Lokniti-CSDS survey's findings red-flagged unemployment and rising prices as primary concerns of the voters surveyed. The recently released India Employment Report also painted a grim picture of the job scenario in the country. Looking to retain its hold on the middle class — its time-tested vote bank — the ruling party has promised 'ample employment opportunities, quality housing and healthcare, and access to quality education' for this section of the population. The pledge to extend the PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, under which free ration is being provided to over 80 crore citizens, for another five years is aimed at mobilising the support of the poor.

Eying a third successive term, the BJP has largely desisted from announcing sops to woo voters. It has also avoided any mention of the National Register of Citizens, a controversial initiative which had been promised in the 2019 manifesto. In the agriculture sector, the party has patted itself on the back for the 'unprecedented' increase in the minimum support price (MSP) for major crops, but has stopped short of addressing the main demand of farm unions — legal guarantee of procurement at the MSP. All in all, the manifesto walks a tightrope while spelling out a roadmap for making India a developed nation by 2047.

No, it's not healthy

Misleading labelling of 'health drinks' corrected

THE recent directive from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry to e-commerce platforms to remove Bournvita and similar beverages from the 'health drink' category is a much-needed step towards ensuring transparency and raising consumer awareness. The move comes after an inquiry by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights revealed that there was no official definition of a 'health drink' under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006. Earlier this month, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India had clarified that dairy-, cereal- or malt-based beverages should not be labelled as 'health' or 'energy' drinks.

Bournvita found itself in the eye of the storm last year when questions were asked about its nutritional claims, particularly regarding its sugar content. The controversy prompted a re-evaluation of how such products are marketed and labelled. While Bournvita did reduce its sugar content following the backlash, the broader issue of misleading labelling persisted across the industry. The term 'energy drink' specifically refers to flavoured water-based drinks, both carbonated and non-carbonated. These beverages are often marketed as 'health drinks', even though their high sugar content poses serious health risks, especially for children. Excessive sugar consumption can lead to a host of health issues, including obesity, diabetes and dental ailments. The absence of clear regulatory guidelines exacerbates the problem, leaving consumers vulnerable to misleading claims.

The latest clarification addresses this ambiguity, besides empowering consumers to make informed choices. Moving forward, the stakeholders must collaboratively establish comprehensive standards for labelling and categorising food products. By holding manufacturers, retailers and e-commerce platforms accountable for labelling, regulators can safeguard public health.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 16, 1924

India in Parliament

THERE is no reason to believe that the debate which is to take place in the House of Commons on the situation in India will have any momentous results. A special cable published by a Calcutta journal the other day stated that the Labour Government was by no means perturbed by the resolution of which Viscount Curzon had given notice. The statement was not without its humour. There was absolutely no question of the Labour Government, which had so far done nothing for India and had held out no hope of doing anything, being perturbed by a resolution of which the clear object was to strengthen and confirm this very attitude on its part. Interest in India, indeed, centres not so much around the resolution as around the amendment of which a section of the government's followers, headed by Mr Mills and Mr Soury, have given notice. This amendment calls for an immediate and drastic revision of the Government of India Act, for full provincial autonomy and substantial autonomy in the Central Government and for the removal on the part of the Secretary of State of control over the Governor-General in Council. Were this amendment, by some chance, carried out, the House of Commons would, in this matter, clearly bring itself more or less into line with moderate opinion in India. Not even a moment's reflection, however, is needed to show that there is just as little chance of a House, constituted as the present House of Commons is, carrying out this amendment as of its passing a vote of want of confidence in the Cabinet over its Indian policy, which is exactly of the kind that most members of the House desire.

OPINION

Shadow-boxing in West Asia

Iran has indicated that it is willing to call it quits, but will respond strongly if Israel retaliates



NAVDEEP SURI
FORMER AMBASSADOR
TO EGYPT AND UAE

ISRAEL's war on Gaza, now in its seventh month, has always carried the risk of spiralling into a wider regional conflagration. After all, the veneer of shadow-boxing between Israel on the one side and Iran and its partners and proxies on the other could only be stretched to a point before it ruptured. That rupture came on the night of April 13 as Iran launched a wave of kamikaze drones and missiles towards Israel. This was the first time after four-and-a-half decades of fiery rhetoric against its 'Zionist enemy' that Iran had actually carried out a strike directed at Israeli territory. An immutable red line had been breached, some analysts felt. The gloves were off and a devastating revenge strike by Israel would inevitably take the region closer to the abyss. But is that really the case, or are we simply witnessing a new act in a long-running shadow-boxing drama?

The fire and brimstone that characterise Iran's declamations in support of the Palestinian cause often conceal an underlying reality that is now quite apparent. The government of the Islamic Republic under its supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is actually a lot more cautious and risk-averse and has shown little appetite for a frontal confrontation. Its preferred approach towards deterrence is to deploy its advanced capabilities in asymmetric warfare through proxies to send warnings to unfriendly states, even as it maintains a plausible deniability of its own actions. The operative principle, as the old song goes, is '*samajhne*



FAUX PUNCH: It appears that the April 13 attack was not a true reflection of Iran's offensive capabilities. REUTERS

waale samajh gaye hain...

An Iranian hand behind the October 7 attack by Hamas was widely presumed, even though there was no smoking gun to link Tehran or its Quds force to the attacks. As Israel started its destructive offensive against Gaza, there was genuine concern that Iran might unleash the battle-hardened cadres of Hezbollah to target Israeli assets from Lebanon, possibly opening a second front to support its Hamas allies in Gaza. However, six months down the road, it is clear that both Iran and Hezbollah have continued to stay within the unwritten red lines that have maintained an uneasy equilibrium on Israel's northern border with Lebanon. Hezbollah's precision munitions have mainly been used against the now depopulated villages and settlements in northern Israel, while military and civilian targets a few miles south have not been touched, even though they are well within the range of Hezbollah missiles. Israel has responded with dire threats against Lebanon if Hezbollah escalates the conflict. It has carried out targeted airstrikes against top Hezbollah personnel and assets in Lebanon and Syria, but has so far refrained from a

The next few days will be crucial as PM Netanyahu weighs US pressure against domestic politics to fashion a response that could have far-reaching consequences.

frontal attack on Hezbollah.

The Houthis in Yemen, another proxy carefully nurtured by Iran over the years, have unleashed their drones and missiles to play havoc with merchant shipping in the maritime lanes of the Red Sea. There is little doubt about the origins of its stockpiles, training and tactics, but Iran has been content to play the ringmaster and quietly assert the influence that it can wield as a disruptor if the West continues with its hostile posture.

That fragile equilibrium, however, was shaken on April 1 when an Israeli airstrike on the consular building of the Iranian embassy in Damascus killed Hassan Mahdavi, head of the Quds Force of the

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Syria and Lebanon. The precision strike also took out six of Mahdavi's compatriots and created a furore in Tehran. Israel had in December 2023 killed Sayyed Razi Mousavi, Iran's seniormost commander in Syria, and there was mounting pressure by hardliners in Tehran that the leadership's frequent threats of severe retribution should now be matched by firm action.

However, the military action that eventually came on April 13 had been telegraphed by Tehran for almost two weeks. There was widespread expectation that it would come soon after the end of the Eid-ul-Fitr festivities, and it did. Iran has also confirmed that it gave a 72-hour notice to countries in the region, giving enough time to India and others to suspend flights and issue warnings to their citizens. Little wonder that '99 per cent' of the drones and missiles were successfully intercepted by Israel's formidable Iron Dome and other air defence systems and by a range of allies, including the US, the UK, France and even Jordan. A statement issued by the US Central Command confirmed that it had destroyed more than 80 drones and six ballistic missiles. The ones that got through caused relatively minor damage at one

Israeli airbase in the Negev desert. For now, it appears that this attack was neither a true reflection of Iran's offensive capabilities nor a real test of Israel's air defences.

For Israel's embattled Prime Minister Netanyahu, the timing couldn't have been better. Until last weekend, allies like the US, the UK and France were becoming increasingly critical of the wanton destruction and humanitarian suffering being caused in Gaza. But within hours of Iran's attack, the US administration reiterated its 'ironclad support' for Israel, while the UK and France deployed their naval assets to interdict the incoming projectiles. The Israel Defence Forces' reputation for invincibility, which had taken a hit on October 7, was again burnished by its success in neutralising the overwhelming majority of the drones and missiles. Gaza is off the front pages for now, and yes, Netanyahu is again at the centre stage as the US, India and other nations predictably counsel restraint and warn against the dangers of escalation.

Iran has indicated that since its shadow-boxers have landed their faux punch, it is willing to call it quits, but will respond strongly if Israel retaliates. Within Israel, the fractious polity is split down the middle. Right-wing leaders want to teach Iran a lesson for crossing the red line, with National Security Minister Ben-Gvir suggesting that Israel should 'go berserk' to establish deterrence, while Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich has called for a response that "echoes throughout the Middle East for generations to come". More moderate figures like Benny Gantz and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant have counselled against a rash reaction and advised Netanyahu to pay heed to Israel's allies and rebuild its strategic alliance against Iran.

The next few days will be crucial as Netanyahu weighs US pressure against domestic politics to fashion a response that could have far-reaching consequences.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

No walls can separate humanitarian or human rights crises in one part of the world from national security crises in another. — Kofi Annan

When a gadget becomes a guru

POONAM KHAIRA SIDHU

EVER thought a gadget strapped to your wrist could give parenting advice? No? Neither did I, until my smartwatch started teaching me more about parenting than any book or seminar ever could. Here's the lowdown on what my tech buddy has been whispering to me between those heart rate updates and notifications.

Let's talk about two clubs: 'Tiger' parents and 'Champion' parents. 'Tiger' parents dish out criticism and challenges faster than you can say 'timeout'. They love a good reward system, but aren't shy about penalties. The 'Champion' parents are your cheerleaders, turning every little win into a ticker-tape parade. For them, failures are simply steps on the learning ladder. Their kids float on a cloud of confidence and high self-esteem, feeling unstoppable.

I have always wondered which parenting style is right. And guess what helped me see the light? The unassuming smartwatch. Picture this: I'm melded with my 'retirement couch', halfway through a TV show, when my watch buzzes. It's like a gentle nudge from a friend, saying: 'Hey, why not take a little stroll?' It's not judgmental; it's encouraging. And when I get moving and target my daily goals, my watch cheers me on.

If this simple device can make one feel good about taking a few extra steps, imagine what consistent, positive encouragement could do for a child. That's the 'Champion' method in a nutshell. It's about setting those goals just right — not too high that they're unattainable, but not so low that they don't inspire growth. It's a delicate balance, but when you nail it, you see magic happen.

My smartwatch doesn't set my goals based on what it thinks I can do; it learns from what I have done and helps me set the next target just a stretch away. And that's a tip we could all take for parenting. Observe, learn and then encourage with goals that are within reach but require that little bit of extra effort. Setting the bar a tad lower initially makes it all the sweeter when your poppet overachieves. You can always notch it up later, building their confidence and skills step by step.

The smartwatch is never harsh. It doesn't scold me for not moving; it just reminds me of how close I am to my goal and encourages me to get there. It's all about the positives. Instead of focusing on what went wrong, it's about celebrating what went right and using any missteps as learning opportunities. So, here's the deal: as parents, maybe we should aim to be a bit more like the smartwatch. Be the 'champion' your kid needs. Applaud their efforts, encourage their progress, and when they stumble, remind them of how close they are to their goals.

In the grand scheme of things, parenting isn't about steering every move your children make. It's about providing a roadmap, supporting them and celebrating their successes, no matter how small. And if they go off course, nudging them back, just like the smartwatch does, with every step you take, every goal you reach, and every little bit of progress you make.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Attack a harbinger of bigger war

Apropos of the editorial 'Iran vs Israel', the retaliatory attack by Iran on Israel is not just a local conflict but a harbinger of a broader regional crisis. With hundreds of drones and missiles launched, innocent lives remain at risk. The escalating tensions threaten to engulf West Asia into a devastating war. The onus is on world leaders to swiftly coordinate a diplomatic response to prevent further escalation. The US' backing for Israel must be balanced with efforts to de-escalate the situation and prevent a wider conflict. It is imperative for the UN Security Council to condemn Tehran's actions and find a path towards peace. The stakes are too high to not act.

GURDEV SINGH, MOHALI

World can't afford a bigger conflict

Refer to the editorial 'Iran vs Israel'; the drone and missile attack by Iran on Israel late on Saturday night has sparked fears of the six-month-old Israel-Hamas war spilling over. The big question now is: How will Israel respond to the attack? Iran has described its move as an act of self-defence and just a response to the attack on its consulate in Damascus. Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, on the other hand, has warned: "Whoever harms us, we will harm them". It is very unlikely that Israel will take the attack lying down. But it would be in the best interest of the world to ensure a de-escalation of the situation. The world has already been reeling from two wars, and it cannot afford a bigger conflict in West Asia.

RK ARORA, MOHALI

Choose diplomacy, not conflict

With reference to 'Iran vs Israel', the Iranian assault on Israel marks a perilous escalation, threatening to engulf the region in a bigger conflict. America's unwavering support for Israel, while commendable, underscores the complexity of international alliances and the delicate balance of power. More needs to be done to address the underlying tensions. The threat of a response from Israel is looming. Iran's declaration of the conclusion of the matter, juxtaposed with its stern warning against further Israeli actions, paints a picture of a conflict paused but not resolved. In this precarious moment, the international community must

prioritise diplomacy over aggression. The alternative — a regional war with untold consequences — cannot be accepted.

SAHIBPREET SINGH, MOHALI

Caution thrown to the wind

Refer to the news report '550 Rewari school buses unfit or sans permit; 345 impounded'; it is astonishing that such a huge number of school buses plying on roads in Rewari district lack permits. It is a matter of shame that it took the loss of six lives for the authorities to wake up from slumber. The school authorities and the district officials are to blame for the Mahendragar mishap. Stringent punishment should be given to them. Further, the government should issue guidelines to all schools to ensure compliance with the safety norms. Besides, other states should also take steps to avoid such tragedies, as the issue is not just limited to Haryana.

RAJ KUMAR KAPOOR, ROPAR

Hope for J&K residents

Apropos of the editorial 'PM's J&K outreach', the restoration of the statehood of J&K and the conduct of Assembly elections in the UT are two significant promises made by the PM that inspire confidence. The political atmosphere in J&K has long been volatile. If the PM keeps the promises, it could help foster development and prosperity in the region. But there is a need to outline a roadmap and set a timeframe for the milestones to be achieved. That is the only way to ensure that the aspirations of the people of the Valley are realised.

DV SHARMA, MUKERIAN

The Kargil lessons

Refer to the article 'A saga of bravery, discipline & sacrifice'; the Army operation was well planned and ably executed, but Kargil was a glaring case of intelligence failure. India needs to improve its intelligence-gathering system. The writer, who was a part of the Kargil operation, has rightly lauded the bravery of the troops and the sacrifice made by them. But let us not forget the role played by the Indian Air Force in the war.

WG CDR CL SEHGAL (RETD), JALANDHAR

The grand myth of absolute happiness



AVIJIT PATHAK
SOCIOLOGIST

EVEN though we live in a terribly violent world characterised by endless war, militarism, new forms of authoritarianism, heightened economic inequality, climate crisis and multiple forms of societal neurosis, there seems to be no end to our quest for happiness. Furthermore, in modern times, as we love the virtue of mathematical precision, even a highly qualitative and subjective experience like happiness is quantified and measured. Every year, the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network ranks and hierarchises different countries on the basis of what it regards as the measurable 'happiness index' — encompassing gross domestic product, life expectancy, state efficiency, freedom, social support, or for that matter, altruistic behaviour. While Finland continues to be the 'happiest country', India ranked 126th out of 143 nations in the World Happiness Report 2024.

Well, I do not altogether deny the merits of a report

of this kind. Of course, a reasonable degree of economic security, social welfare policies by the state, better medical facilities, fulfilment in the sphere of work, the presence of a dialogic civil society and political freedom generate some sort of contentment in everyday life. However, it is equally important to realise that there is no such thing as pure happiness because our finest moments of joy and contentment are always accompanied by some sort of anxiety — say, the fear of losing whatever we have, be it our material wealth, the vitality of the body, or the company of the loved ones. We strive for absolute happiness, yet it deludes us. No wonder there is no dearth of life coaches, motivational speakers and spiritual gurus in our times who repeatedly instruct us to follow a set of 'techniques' — meditative practices, breathing exercises, mindfulness, etc. — in order to be 'happy' and 'successful'.

But then, it has to be realised that happiness is not an instant remedial capsule to be consumed from self-help books, or special retreats in some ashrams and monasteries. In fact, if we really want to move towards a modestly peaceful and contented world, we need to build a bridge between the self and the world, or the political and the spiritual. Think



ILLUSION: There is no such thing as pure happiness because our finest moments of joy and contentment are always accompanied by some sort of anxiety. *ISTOCK*

of, for instance, the absurdity of teaching 'mindfulness' (the ability to live in the present without any obsession with the trauma of the past or the anxiety of the future) to a person tormented by hunger, malnutrition and homelessness. Or, think of the psychic violence you would inflict on an unemployed young man, continually rejected by potential employers, if you ask him to read a self-help bestseller like *I'm OK — You're OK*, and feel good and positive. It is as absurd as teaching the lessons of 'minimalism' to a slum-dweller or a homeless person. We cannot move towards a reasonable

The fundamental needs of food, shelter, education, political freedom and non-alienated work have to be distinguished from the virus of irresistible greed.

degree of contentment without altering the political and economic foundations of a highly asymmetrical, uneven and exploitative world. No, Palestinians cannot be happy amid the normalisation of genocide.

Likewise, if, as the India Employment Report 2024 indicates, 83 per cent of jobless Indians are the youth; or, as a research paper titled 'The Rise of Billionaire Raj' reveals, if the top 1 per cent of the people in India hold 40 per cent of the wealth, it is not difficult to imagine the intensity of pain, agony, fear and stress an average Indian experiences. We might have thou-

sands of *babas*, gurus and self-help tutors constantly offering us diverse brands of salvation capsules, but then, the harsh reality is that ours is an unhappy nation. Possibly, without a political/economic restructuring of our society, we cannot create a social milieu conducive to the growth of a reasonably contented population.

This is not to suggest that I am denying the significance of introspection or the need for inner calmness for a meaningful, sustainable and compassionate living. While a reasonable degree of economic security and political freedom makes our everyday living somewhat comfortable, we cannot move towards a more meaningful and peaceful existence (not necessarily absolutely 'happy' existence) without what I would regard as the religiosity of life. For instance, this religiosity is about the cultivation of the art of non-consumptionist mode of living. The fundamental needs of food, shelter, life-affirming education, political freedom and non-alienated work have to be distinguished from the virus of irresistible greed — the greed that a market-driven society has normalised.

Yes, there is no happiness in a society that sanctifies the principle of mindless consumption, or the greed for the ever-growing new prod-

ucts and styles that the neoliberal market constantly invents. This craving disrupts tranquillity and calmness; instead, it causes envy, restlessness and the chronic fear of lagging behind. Likewise, it is equally important to cultivate the art of developing a relational self — the self that finds immense joy in apparently simple acts — say, meeting a friend without any ulterior motive, or, walking through a mountain terrain and experiencing the glimpses of the infinite. This art of being 'ordinary' — yet filled with creative surplus — helps us to free ourselves from the neurotic restlessness for achieving a mythical 'success', or running after a mirage of a 'perfect and happy living' through which the seductive 'culture industry' continually deludes us.

The religiosity of life requires the courage to accept the inherent melancholy of existence; it is like accepting that not everything is under our control. Everything we try to hold is transitory and impermanent. Inexplicable accidents and tragedies can shatter our existence without any prior notice; and none can escape the reality of death — the ultimate reduction of our inflated egos into nothingness. Possibly, this realisation, far from making us bitter, enables us to pass through this earthly existence with sacred tears.

The winnability factor and the failure of NOTA



RAGHAVENDRA P TIWARI
VICE-CHANCELLOR, CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF PUNJAB

THE most vibrant form of democracy is governance through elected representatives, and elections are the best way to elect such representatives. This year is crucial for democracy as more than 50 countries, covering nearly half of the population of the world, will go to the polls. This is significant for taking new initiatives for strengthening the civilisational discourse and inclusive development narratives in all aspects of human endeavours, be it economic growth, sustainable development, affordable quality education and health, climate change mitigation, emerging technology usage, human rights, territorial integrity, international relations and peace, etc. in a highly volatile world. Poll-bound India, which is considered the mother of democracy, is among the largest democracies.

We should bear two fundamental things in mind at this juncture: firstly, whether electability alone should be the criterion for political parties to select

candidates, and secondly, whether electorates would cast their votes solely for the purpose of electing or rejecting contestants.

The electorates should ponder whether the selection of candidates should entirely be based on the electability factor and whether the casting of votes is solely for the purpose of electing one nominee and rejecting others. Experience in public life, popularity among the masses for good causes, honesty, integrity, transparency, commitment to the public good and nation-building attributes should form the basis for the selection and rejection of candidates as representatives. The elected representatives should be competent enough to set a development agenda and advocate for it. They should be able to articulate the aspirations of the public for inclusive and sustainable development.

Elections are opportunities for an electorate to decide which party can better articulate the aspirations of the public, can take better decisions for public good, enact better laws for good governance, frame and execute better policies and programmes for inclusive and sustainable development. Polls are also an occasion for the public to endorse its historical, cultural, defence and environmental preferences. The best social security model,



FOR GREATER GOOD: Elections are opportunities for the electorate to decide which party can better articulate the aspirations of the public. *AN*

and not the one packed with freebies, should get preference in the selection of representatives.

An unblemished reputation, a zeal to do public good, the ability to govern in the fairest manner and the capability to think and innovate should prominently figure in the thought process of parties and voters while choosing candidates and casting votes.

It appears that the right to abstain — the provision of NOTA (none of the above) — has not served its purpose. NOTA has not forced political parties to evolve better criteria for the selection of candidates, implying that the parties and candidates have not learnt any lesson from this provision. One of the best pieces of voting advice has come from Singaporean doctor Paul Tambyah: "Voting is not a marriage. It is public transport. You are not waiting for

The best social security model, and not the one packed with freebies, should get preference in the selection of representatives.

'the one'... You are getting on the bus. And if there is not one going exactly to your destination, you do not stay home and sulk. You take the one that is going closest to where you want to be." The message is loud and clear: the best option is not to abstain but to elect the candidate with a policy orientation most closely aligned to your own. Earlier, parties selected candidates on the basis of caste, community, language, influence and financial resources — all euphemistically called the 'winnability factor'. However, the selection of candidates and voting patterns based on such considerations is detrimental to democracy, which is all about exercising choices in the most unbiased manner. It would be prudent to provide a common platform for all candidates to share their development agendas with the electorate.

The media plays a crucial role in educating voters. The quality of debates in electronic, print and social media has a huge impact on the psyche of the voters. Therefore, elections are opportunities for the media to refrain from spreading misinformation, disinformation and fake or paid news. The press ought to reflect ground realities on issues confronting the voters and help them select the best candidates. Those in public life seeking renomination must educate the public about the healthy traits of elections and democracy. They should pres-

ent an alternative model of development and governance during the election campaign and offer themselves for performance reviews.

Some voters develop disengagement from the electoral process and refrain from voting, thinking that their ballot does not matter. How can we overcome this defeatist attitude and encourage voters to participate in elections and uphold democratic values? One way would be to consider that voting is not merely a right but also a duty to perform. Inaction on the part of the electorate may lead to severe consequences in terms of the election outcomes and governance, and the blame for electing an unfit government will also have to be equally shared by even those who did not cast their votes. Complacency on the part of the rich, as popular belief goes that the poor vote while the rich do not, is liable to get our democratic system derailed. Scores of our national heroes made sacrifices for making India the mother of democracy. Casting the vote, therefore, is an important way to honour the values and high morals they strived for. Such considerations may eventually lead to an increase in the turnout and, thereby, people's participation in government formation.

This parliamentary election is, thus, a chance for us to set higher ideals of the democratic process for the world to emulate.

QUICK CROSSWORD

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ACROSS

1 Exceeding what is needed (7)

4 Add together (3,2)

7 Elliptical (4)

8 Become established (4,4)

10 Act immediately (4,2,4)

12 Wildly impulsive (6)

13 Large fish-eating bird (6)

15 Capital of Ethiopia (5,5)

18 Adversary (8)

19 Hard work (4)

20 Irritable (5)

21 Loaded (7)

DOWN

1 Area of shallow water (5)

2 Ecstatic utterance (8)

3 Crudely built hut (6)

4 Device to regulate temperature (10)

5 An implement (4)

6 Stupefy with fear (7)

9 Unique (3,3,4)

11 Forcible escape (5-3)

12 Decipher (4,3)

14 A very small fish (6)

16 To calm (5)

17 Musical work (4)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

ACROSS: 1 Chickenfeed, 9 In doubt, 10 Crash, 11 Even, 12 Peculiar, 14 Teeter, 16 Stress, 18 Asuncion, 19 Spar, 22 Trial, 23 Show off, 24 Less and less.

DOWN: 2 Hedge, 3 Coup, 4 Entree, 5 Face up to, 6 Evasive, 7 Dire straits, 8 Short shirt, 13 Hercules, 15 Erudite, 17 Loosen, 20 Pious, 21 Foil.

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MEDIUM

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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CALENDAR

APRIL 16, 2024, TUESDAY

■ Shaka Samvat 1946

■ Chaitra Shaka 27

■ Vaishakh Purnima 4

■ Hijari 1445

■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 8, up to 1.25 pm

■ Dhriti Yoga up to 11.16 pm

■ Pushya Nakshatra up to 5.16 am

■ Moon in Cancer sign

■ Shri Durgashatmi

FORECAST

SUNSET: 18:50 HRS

SUNRISE: 05:53 HRS

TUESDAY

WEDNESDAY

CITY

MAX

MIN

Chandigarh

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New Delhi

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Amritsar

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Bathinda

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Jalandhar

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Ludhiana

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Bhivani

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Hisar

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Sirsa

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Dharamsala

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Manali

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Shimla

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Srinagar

15

08

Jammu

32

18

Kargil

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Leh

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Dehradun

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Mussoorie

22

12

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Damage control

World leaders scramble to soothe tempers after Iran’s retaliatory attack on Israel for Damascus

The fragile peace equilibrium in West Asia has been hit once again, with Iran launching a direct attack on Israel and escalating tensions. Fresh apprehensions reverberated globally, prompting swift diplomatic action from President Joe Biden who, besides conveying to Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that the US will not be part of any retaliatory action, has convened the G7 nations to address the urgent matter. The missiles-and-drones attack, which targeted strategic locations including military installations and civilian areas in Israel, has escalated the situation to a dangerous level. While casualties and damages are still being assessed, the brazenness of this assault has sent shockwaves across the region and beyond. Iran, a key player in the region, has often found itself at odds with Israel, citing ideological differences and regional power struggles. However, the direct military engagement between the countries represents a dangerous escalation that could have far-reaching consequences. Israel, known for its



robust defence capabilities, has vowed to respond to Iran’s aggression, raising concerns of a prolonged and devastating conflict. The events of April 1 in Damascus marked the onset of a fresh chapter in the ongoing regional strife between the countries. That assault, resulting in the loss of several high-ranking Iranian military officials, signified a shift from indirect hostilities to confrontation. Subsequently, Iran initiated its long-anticipated reprisal against Israel, deploying numerous drones and ballistic missiles. Despite indications of this impending attack during discreet negotiations between the US and Iran, most of the strikes were intercepted en route Israel.

Meanwhile, Israeli authorities, particularly Netanyahu, have endeavoured to depict their nation as the target of unwarranted Iranian aggression. President Biden has responded swiftly by convening a meeting of the Group of Seven (G7) nations. The G7, consisting of the world’s leading industrialised democracies, serves as a forum for coordinating responses to global challenges, including security threats. Though the US may have fostered conditions conducive to Netanyahu’s actions, Israel acted independently to trigger the latest escalation. Therefore, to be fair to Iran, its reaction has not been an unprovoked attack. Lately, Netanyahu has been drawing flak for his misadventures at home and abroad, and the US support for his military campaign is also waning. So he played the Iran card to win brownie points and, with Iran being the West’s favourite punching bag, it bolstered Netanyahu’s standing whereas a gullible Iran took the bait and allowed itself to be drawn into a war in which it had no role so far. An individual’s obstinacy has now put the entire region at heightened risk of volatility. As G7 deliberates on the appropriate response, efforts must be focused on de-escalating tensions and facilitating dialogue between the conflicting parties. Diplomatic channels should be utilised to engage Iran and Israel in constructive dialogue to find a peaceful solution to their grievances.



Devotees perform 'Arghya' ritual on the last day of 'Chaiti Chhath' festival, in Patna

PTI

Screenwriters as architects of emotion

They are the true magicians. Their contributions extend far beyond the screen, touching hearts and shaping societal narratives

The magic of cinema is not just seen; it's heard in the echo of words that linger long after the screen goes dark. Screenwriters, the unsung architects of these moments, weave dialogues and scenes that shape our emotional landscapes, often becoming a part of our very identity. Take the classic scene from 'Deewar', where Amitabh Bachchan, embodying the success and arrogance of his character, delivers the powerful lines, "Aaj mere paas gaadi hai, bungla hai, paisa hai... tumhare paas kya hai?" To this, Shashi Kapoor responds with the iconic, "Mere paas, maa hai." This exchange transcends its cinematic origin, showcasing the screenwriter's ability to capture the essence of human values and emotions in a few, yet profound, words. This is the essence of screenwriting—not just creating dialogues but sculpting moments that become landmarks in cinematic history. It's about crafting narratives that engage, entertain and evoke a spectrum



of emotions, from the laughter that bubbles up during the light-hearted moments in '3 Idiots' to the tears that unknowingly fall for the poignant scenes in 'Taare Zameen Par'. Screenwriters delve into the depths of the human experience, drawing upon themes of love, loss, victory and defeat to create stories that resonate across cultures and generations.

Through their words, characters come to life, embarking on journeys filled with challenges, joys, sorrows and ultimately, growth. Movies and shows like 'Mohabbatein' and 'Maharani' which challenge the values of "Parampara, Pratishta, Anushasan," not only entertain but also inspire reflections and conversations among audiences. In the realm of cin-

ema, screenwriters are the true magicians, crafting the spells of dialogue and narrative that enchant us, make us reflect and sometimes even change our perspectives. Their contributions go beyond the screen, touching hearts and shaping societal narratives. As we recount memorable lines or find solace in the cinematic moments that have moved us, let's remember the architects behind these emotions—the screenwriters. Their mastery over words and their deep understanding of the human condition empower them to create stories that entertain, enlighten and endure. In celebrating their craft, we acknowledge the profound impact of their work, not just on cinema, but on culture and society at large. For in the hands of a skilled screenwriter, words become the bridge between the world of the film and the heart of the viewer, making the cinematic experience truly unforgettable. (The writer is Co-Chair, Media Sub Committee, SWA; views are personal)



PAWAN SONY

Avoiding icebergs in troubled times

Amid escalating unease surrounding the credibility of Government agencies, the path to assuaging these concerns and reinstating trust lies in conducting a transparent inquiry

Clearly, in these dystopian times reality has come to be stranger than fiction and social mores turned on their head. In an earlier time, actions seen as abhorrent or distasteful, when caught, would be immediately disavowed. Today they are brazenly flaunted as a badge of honour and attempted to be normalised. The blatant misuse of our Central Agencies to hound and arm-twist opposition politicians, journalists, businessmen and corporates being one such. What could be more unconscionable than a politician publicly claiming personal credit for an initiative after our Supreme Court has declared it unconstitutional? That too, because it violates the citizens fundamental right to information.

In fact, not only did he attempt to justify his action using that tired old cliché, “it was for our own good”, but also added to good effect that those critical would subsequently regret it. An implied threat perhaps? The reasoning in support was that we would never have come to know the specifics of political donations if not for this initiative, which while accurate, could not be further from the truth. There can be no dispute that was certainly not the intention to begin with, otherwise why the secrecy in the first place? Moreover, it was the Government’s top lawyers who made every effort to convince the court that the ordinary citizen had no right to such information. While it may have just been an attempt to brazen through in view of the elections, one cannot help but feel that the Government believes it has not erred and is thus unrepentant and likely to be pushed through again. The Belgian painter and author, Erik Pevernagie, makes a very pertinent point when he writes “politicians are but tantalising storytellers, as they mix facts with fiction, grab our emotion and tell things, they want us to believe. Their factoids are unremittingly reiterated, take a life on their own and in the end become the very truth... until the bubble bursts.” Unfortunately for this Government it seems that the

bubble has been pricked, if not burst, as the Supreme Court appears to have finally awakened from its deep slumber. Its actions, though still at a very nascent stage, if followed through, may help in ensuring a level playing field during the forthcoming elections and are therefore exceedingly welcome. More importantly, it has put the bosses of our public institutions, be it public sector companies, the central investigative agencies or the Election Commission on notice. Moreover, details of alleged linkages that are emerging from the Electoral Bonds issues suggest humungous malfeasance and sordid corruption at an unimaginable scale indulged in by the richest and most powerful within the country for their own personal gain. All of this has been at the cost of the ordinary tax payer. Moreover, we have yet to learn whether foreign entities have channelled in funds through domestic players, as is a distinct possibility. Such interference, if it has occurred, should be a matter of great concern given the impact it may have on national security. In this context, the functioning of the Prime Minister’s Cares Fund must also be viewed with suspicion,



IN THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, THE ONLY CREDIBLE OPTION REMAINING IS FOR THE SUPREME COURT TO ORDER A JUDICIAL INVESTIGATION UNDER ITS OWN AEGIS, WHICH SHOULD BE BROADCAST LIVE TO ENSURE COMPLETE TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

given its lack of transparency and the various allegations made against it. Both these initiatives were conceived and implemented by the present dispensation in power, which in all probability, will return. It is extremely unlikely therefore, that they will undertake a credible or fair investigation of allegations made. Moreover, our premier investigative agencies also find themselves under a cloud for their acts of omission and commission. For example, the Enforcement Directorate has since 2005 registered approximately 5900 cases. It has completed and filed chargesheets in only 1142 cases and disposed of just twenty-five of these, with twenty-four ending in convictions. What is worse is its biased actions in investigating politicians. As media reports show, since 2014 the Directorate has probed 121 prominent politicians of which 115, or 95 per cent, belong to the opposition. As per these same reports the Central Bureau of Investigation mirrored the pattern followed by the ED. In these circumstances, the only credible option remaining is for the Supreme Court to order a judicial investigation under its own aegis, that

should be broadcast live to ensure complete transparency and accountability. One does not need to be a soothsayer to suggest that if such a strict and non-partisan step is not initiated at the earliest, we will always remain at the mercy of leeches who will suck the life blood out of our democratic norms, right to good governance and the rule of law. Finally, from the proceedings in Supreme Court on the Electoral Bonds case one can infer that the manner in which the Chairman, State Bank of India, used the resources entrusted to him by the depositors to defy and hamper the directions of the Court render him patently unfit to hold that appointment. Just because the party in power appoints him and others to head public institutions and agencies, they cannot see themselves as mere factotums of those who appointed them and do their bidding. One expects far more of them, not least to show integrity of character and follow rules without fear or favour. (The author, a military veteran, is a visiting fellow with the Observer Research Foundation and a senior visiting fellow with The Peninsula Foundation, Chennai, views are personal)



DEEPAK SINHA



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

POLITICAL CHESSBOARD

Madam — Apropos the news article, “Battle lines drawn in western UP”, published on April 13, this is my response. In the heartland of Uttar Pradesh, a political battlefield is shaping up unlike any seen before. With the looming Lok Sabha elections, Western Uttar Pradesh finds itself in the eye of the storm, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s vigorous campaigning seeks to consolidate Hindu votes against a backdrop of shifting alliances and historical legacies. The region’s intricate social fabric, woven by dominant communities like the Jats, Muslims and Dalits, carries the weight of political dynasties and ideological realignments. From the legacy of Charan Singh’s Kisan politics to the emergence of new power centres like the BJP and BSP, each move on this electoral chessboard is strategic, aiming to capture seats and the narrative of Uttar Pradesh’s political future.

As the BJP navigates through the complexities of caste dynamics and minority representation, the challenge lies in maintaining its Hindu vote bank while facing the formidable opposition bloc, now bolstered by the BSP’s calculated manoeuvres. In this high-stakes game, the fate of Uttar Pradesh hangs in the balance, awaiting the verdict of its diverse electorate.

Abhijeet Nand| Bhopal

EXPLORING HUMAN LEARNING

Madam — Apropos the news article, “Education’s cultural impact is profound”, published on April 12, this is my response. The enduring belief that “man is a learning animal” has shaped civilizations, but a deeper examination reveals nuances. While youth and adulthood foster comprehensive learning, its impact wanes with age. The persistence of certain knowledge over time underscores the need for continual renewal and tailored educational approaches. In India, where knowledge, behaviour and spirituality form the essence of personality, there’s a call to integrate these elements into education. To achieve this, the curriculum must evolve to address lifelong learn-



Urban farming

Apropos the news article, “Cultivating sustainability through urban farming”, published on April 11, this is my response. The Pioneer’s succinct write-up of urban farming as a climate change solution is commendable. Climate change’s urgency demands immediate action and urban farming offers a multifaceted response. It not only addresses food security but also mitigates environmental degradation and fosters com-

munity cohesion. The article rightly emphasises the need for supportive policies to scale up urban farming initiatives. Governments must incentivise and facilitate urban agriculture to make it accessible to all communities. Additionally, community engagement plays a pivotal role in its success, fostering social bonds and economic opportunities. Urban farming’s transformative potential lies in its ability to convert urban spaces into sustainable ecosystems. By repurposing vacant lots and rooftops, cities can combat the urban heat island effect and reduce carbon emissions from food transportation. In essence, urban farming represents a promising pathway towards a more resilient and sustainable future. Its integration into policy frameworks and community initiatives is crucial in tackling the imminent challenges of climate change.

Khirabdi Tanya Nayak | Noida

Shihaab Khan | Hyderabad

A CHAMPION OF JUSTICE

Madam — Apropos the news article, “A harbinger of justice and equality”, published on April 13, this is my response. The legacy of Dr BR Ambedkar, a towering figure in India’s history, continues to inspire millions worldwide. His tireless efforts towards social justice, equality and inclusivity have

left an indelible mark on the nation’s conscience. Born into poverty, Dr Ambedkar overcame numerous obstacles to become an intellectual powerhouse and a relentless advocate for the oppressed. His vision of a just society, rooted in education and empowerment, remains as relevant today as ever. Dr Ambedkar’s emphasis on dialogue, non-violence and co-existence underscores the path towards societal harmony. His contributions to India’s legal framework, particularly in labourrights, are foundational to the country’s progress. As we commemorate his birth anniversary, let us not only honour his memory but also recommit ourselves to the ideals he espoused. Let us strive for a nation where every individual, regardless of caste or creed, enjoys equal rights and opportunities. Dr Ambedkar’s teachings resonate as a beacon of hope, guiding us towards a democratic, secular and inclusive future.

Priyanka Sharma | Delhi

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

BALANCING WELLBEING
IN WORK AND LIFE

In the intricate dance of work and life,
boundaries save individual sanctuaries



Boundaries serve as the invisible fences that portrays an individual's personal as well as professional spaces, safeguard the individual wellbeing and preserve harmony in their interactions. Be it in the workplace or in life, setting and maintaining boundaries is paramount for fostering healthy relationships, achieving balance and nurturing self-respect. In today's world, where the pace of life is often hectic and boundaries can easily be overlooked or disregarded, establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries is essential for promoting individual well-being, healthy relationships and a more compassionate and equitable society. Moreover, boundary setting is an indispensable aspect of both the workplace and life at large.

When talked about the workplace, setting boundaries are essential for maintaining professionalism, productivity and helps the employees reduce misunderstandings, conflicts and instead maintain a healthy work-life balance, prevent burnout and improve job satisfaction. It also promotes efficiency, prevents distractions, safeguard individuals from exploitation, harassment and undue stress.



In a competitive and demanding work environment, it becomes crucial to set limits on workload, deadlines and expectations to prevent over-commitment and exhaustion. Numerous studies have also highlighted the importance of setting boundaries to maintain a healthy work-life balance. By defining clear limits on workload, working hours and availability, employees can better manage their work-related stress and maintain a positive attitude towards their jobs. In doing so, they can protect themselves from intrusive inquiries or demands that encroach upon their emotional well-being. Furthermore, boundary setting cultivates respect and professionalism in workplace dynamics and encourages others to treat self with similar respect. By clearly communicating the expectations and limits, the individual establishes a culture of mutual respect and accountability in the workplace. When individuals assert their boundaries assertively yet respectfully, it communicates self-confidence and self-worth, fostering a culture of mutual respect and dignity. Respect for boundaries encourages open communication, empathy and understanding, strengthening interpersonal relationships and teamwork.

Beyond the workplace, boundary setting is equally indispensable in personal relationships and daily life too. In interpersonal relationships, boundaries define acceptable behaviours, emotional intimacy and personal space. Healthy boundaries empower individuals to prioritise their needs, values and aspirations, fostering relationships based on mutual respect and reciprocity. Whether it's setting limits on time spent with certain individuals or communicating preferences regarding personal space, boundaries nurture healthier and more fulfilling connections. Remember, setting boundaries is not about being selfish or uncooperative rather it's about taking care of individual self and ensuring that one can perform their best while maintaining the individual well-being. When done thoughtfully and respectfully, setting boundaries can strengthen the individual's professional relationships and enhance their effectiveness at work.

Remember, boundaries are never about telling other people what they can and cannot do. It is about telling people what they will and will not do. Setting boundaries is an act of self-love and self-respect which is essential for individual wellbeing. Setting boundaries around leisure time, self-care routines and social engagements will allow an individual to recharge, replenish their energy and cultivate resilience in the face of challenges. By honouring their boundaries, individuals assert their agency and reclaim control over their time, energy and emotions.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Challenges galore for NATO@75



The alliance confronts formidable challenges amidst mounting criticism from European nations and the surge of right-wing nationalist movements



One of the biggest challenges being faced by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) on its 75th anniversary pertains to combating and addressing the severe criticism from some European countries and the spread of right-wing nationalist movements. Hence, it needs to adopt a cautious and balanced approach to stay relevant in the 21st century.

Challenges ahead to stay relevant: NATO, with 32 member states and five aligned nations including Japan, New Zealand, Israel, Australia and South Korea, must enhance defence capabilities and security arrangements to ensure mutual trust and better cooperation. NATO also called Washington Treaty, was created on April 4, 1949 to counterweight to Soviet military forces stationed in Central and Eastern Europe after world war 2nd, has traversed a hazardous journey and sustained faith of security and protection from aggressors hinges on its commitment to stay united and germane.

Secondly, NATO's military potential is being perceived as a tool and weapon of the United States to ensure its hegemony over nations that do not pose military threats.

There is a calamitous need to dispel such impressions of supremacy, evident from its 200 military interventions worldwide in 75 years, including 20 major ones like the questionable outcome of combating terrorism in Afghanistan, unlawful interference in Syria, invasion of Iraq, bombing of Yugoslavia, destabilisation of Libya and the creation of ISIS.

Thirdly, as a parting gift, NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg has proposed a \$100 billion package of military aid to Ukraine for five years, aimed at avoiding a potential halt in aid if Trump wins the 2024 American presidential elections.

Former President Trump has made it



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clear to keep his country away from such conflicts and he is seen as pro-Putin, which might upset NATO. Experts feel that NATO members should get this proposal approved at the upcoming meeting in Washington and counter Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

NATO Needs Reforms: Foreign policy experts argue that NATO needs to focus on non-traditional threats such as terror attacks, disinformation campaigns, cyber assaults and risks to disrupt supply chains to preserve its allies. Otherwise, it will lose its credentials and effectiveness.

Secondly, NATO must adopt a comprehensive strategy that will be productive and fruitful only if it integrates itself with international organisations besides strengthening its military capabilities.

Thirdly, it should put in place an effective mechanism to foster a shared sense of purpose and make relentless efforts to ensure cohesiveness and unity among the member states. Consensus-building should be the primary motto of the alliance, guided by essential elements like discussion, dialogue, unified planning and political alignments. Fourthly, transparency is obligatory to create mutual trust and internal synergy, as well as to improve coordination among the five main policy formation committees, including the executive working group, political committee, policy formalisation group, military group and senior resource board. Why did India reject the US offer to be part of NATO? From the Indian perspec-

tive, experts say that India has already rejected the US offer to be part of an alliance to safeguard against Chinese aggression. India is capable of independently countering such threats and, therefore, does not need the assistance of a military grouping like NATO. If India joins NATO, it will pave the way for the US to establish military bases, which is unacceptable to Delhi. US allies like Australia, Israel, Japan and South Korea have permitted military bases, but India cannot allow the infringement of its sovereignty and degradation of its positioning in the world arena. While maintaining strategic autonomy, India will never jeopardise its age-old trustworthy ties with Russia, which is at odds with America and its allies after the Ukraine conflict. A United States Congressional committee had recommended that the US should strengthen NATO Plus to safeguard borders from China and enhance its capabilities to counter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific region hence it warrants India's inclusion in the organisation.

The successes and failures of the organisation go hand in hand, but conflicts' contamination is spreading among major powers and frozen encounters may always heat up in the future, attributed to growing state brittleness and spill-over threats, thereby disturbing the world order.

The recent Global Risk Report has come out with curious findings pertaining to the Global Risks Perception Survey (GRPS) which is the culmination of the analysis of fifteen hundred global experts who have investigated the global

risks through three time frames to support decision-makers responsible for balancing current crises and long-term policies and priorities.

One major failure of NATO relates to the lack of allocation of 2 per cent of funds by defence ministers of state members of their GDP agreed upon in 2006 towards security — related expenditures, especially when the United States accounts for two-thirds of the alliance's spending, which needs to be shared by other nations in the organisation. NATO had focused on restricting communism, discouraging militant nationalism and controlling the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but now the situation has become volatile in post-Cold War era as Russia has indulged in annexing neighbours, posing a threat to other smaller nations as well. Analysts feel that as NATO celebrates its 75th anniversary in 2024, it stands at a vintage point of passing through a litmus test of its core mission of safeguarding the security and freedom of its members, based on a principle-oriented international order and mandate.

Trump's potential return to the White House may jeopardise the existence of NATO as it may encourage aggressors like Putin and give a boost to China's over-ambitious expansion policy to annex Taiwan in the future. Trump may encourage Putin to continue his onslaught on Ukraine, putting Europe's security at risk.

(The writer is a political analyst based in Shimla; views are personal)

A call to vote responsibly beyond party lines

With focus on accountability and progress, it's imperative to scrutinise governmental performance across key sectors

India is undeniably a youthful nation, with a significant portion of our population comprising the younger generation. Every year, countless young individuals come of age, reaching 18 years and gaining eligibility to vote. This message is directed not only to those who have recently attained this milestone but also to those who did so in the past few years. With the power to vote comes a profound responsibility—the responsibility to elect leaders who possess the competence and integrity to effectively govern our nation.

As citizens, it is imperative that we transcend party lines and critically evaluate the progress of our nation. Are we moving in the right direction? Are there tangible improvements



in various sectors? Are we receiving value for the taxes we pay? These are fundamental questions we must ask ourselves as we assess the state of our nation.

While political parties often prioritise winning elections, it is our duty as responsible citizens to vote for candidates who prioritise the welfare of the people and deliver on their promises. Over the past 75 years, India has made remarkable strides, earning recognition as a responsible global player. Whether it's our nuclear capabilities or our humanitarian efforts during crises, we have demonstrated our commitment to progress and compassion.

The electoral process grants us the opportunity, every five years, to hold our leaders



accountable for their actions. We must evaluate their performance across various sectors, including:-

- 1. Infrastructure Development:** Assess the improvement in infrastructure, particularly in terms of connectivity by rail, road and
- 2. Industrial Growth and Policies:** Evaluate the government's plans and policies for industrial growth and decision-making processes, ensur-

ing there is no policy paralysis hindering progress.

- 3. Impact on Poor and Middle Class:** Examine how Government policies impact the poor and middle class, with a focus on initiatives aimed at upliftment and improvement.
- 4. Healthcare Sector Performance:** Evaluate the government's performance in the healthcare sector and assess the affordability and accessibility of healthcare for all citizens.
- 5. Education and Skill Development:** Analyse initiatives in education and skill development, focusing on improving literacy rates, bridging urban-rural gaps and empowering the youth.
- 6. Digital Infrastructure and Connectivity:** Assess improvements in digital infrastructure and connectivity, particularly

in urban-rural sectors and how they benefit citizens.

- 7. Agriculture and Rural Sector:** Review Government initiatives in agriculture and rural development and their impact on rural communities.
- 8. Transparency and Accountability:** Ensure transparency and accountability in public administration, with efforts to curb corruption and promote good governance.
- 9. Foreign Policy and International Relations:** Evaluate the government's performance in foreign policy and international relations, considering India's standing on the global stage.

Remember, our national identity, symbolised by our flag, transcends religious and caste divisions, uniting us as one nation. As we exercise our

right to vote, let us remember the significance of our national flag and the unity it represents. Your vote holds immense power. History has witnessed elections being decided by a single vote. Therefore, before casting your vote, consider crucial factors such as the government's performance and policies, rising above religious and caste affiliations for the greater good of the nation.

While this list is not exhaustive, it underscores the importance of informed decision-making and prioritising the wellbeing of our nation. Let us unite in our commitment to building a stronger, more prosperous India.

(The wrtier is group Pro VC Amity University; views are personal)