



Rain shocks

India's farmers must account for a stronger monsoon while sowing

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has forecast a bountiful monsoon. Rainfall from June-September is expected to be 6% more than the 87 cm, which is considered to be the average rainfall the country receives during these months. This is a fairly bold forecast by the agency that, typically in its April forecast, avoids suggesting either surplus or deficit rain. Given that temperatures in many southern States are soaring and stoking heatwaves, the anticipation of bountiful rainfall might sound like welcome news. There is however a dark cloud to this silver lining. The IMD's climate models suggest a 30% chance of “excess” rains – defined as more than 10% of what is usual. By comparison, its expectation of “above normal” rains is 31%, defined as between 5%-10% of what is normal. The slim difference suggests that excessive rains are as likely as merely ‘above normal’ showers. Most of these rains are expected in the second half of the monsoon, or August and September. The IMD's models forecast for this are premised on the development of a La Niña, or a converse of the El Niño (which more often than not results in a decrease in monsoon rainfall). The La Niña is also expected to be aided by a positive Indian Ocean Dipole, characterised by a cooler than normal Indian Ocean in the east as compared to the west, that helps bring rain to several States in southern India. The IMD is silent on the quantity of rains in June and July but expects “neutral conditions” (neither El Niño, nor La Niña) to be prevalent that time. Two arid monsoon months and torrential rains in the last two may be fine for agriculture but is likely to result in extreme floods and – as has been observed in the past – immense damage to lives, livelihoods and infrastructure.

The 2018 floods in Kerala continue to be a reminder of how vulnerable India is to natural disasters. While an update to the forecast is expected around the end of May, the IMD's current signal must be urgently heeded. States must, at the soonest, draw up emergency plans from their disaster-management modules to bolster infrastructure, prepare evacuation plans, conduct audits of the structural stability of dams and their distress-signalling network and ensure that broader early-warning networks are in place. Also, India's farmers, a majority of whom continue to be dependent on rain-fed agriculture, must also be informed of the possibility of a stronger, second half of the monsoon and incorporate these in their sowing operations.

Missing colleges

Poor doctor-population ratio cannot be set right without better Centre-State ties

Even lofty dreams can be felled by the nitty-gritty of implementation. Nothing exemplifies this as much as the case of the Madurai AIIMS. The idea of starting a number of All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) across the country certainly comes from a clear need – to bridge the gap between demand and supply in India, and set right the grossly inefficient doctor-patient ratio. In 2003, the Centre announced the Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Yojana (PMSSY) with this precise goal. It was in 2006 that the PMSSY got off the ground and a total of six AIIMS-like medical institutions were created in the country. Currently, there are 20 AIIMS institutions with functional medical colleges and three are under development. No doubt, these institutions have created plentiful opportunities for students and advanced the goal of taking affordable health-care education beyond metros. But the intentions are more robust than implementation. At AIIMS Madurai, a project that has caused a further embittering of relations between the central and State governments, there are persistent complaints of inadequate infrastructure, facilities, and manpower constraints. A ‘prestige’ project for the Centre, Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone for construction at Thoppur, Madurai, in January 2019. From 2021, undeterred by the lack of something as basic as a building, the administration invited applications from students. The construction work is still not complete, and not one, but three batches of undergraduate students have been accommodated at the Government Medical College and Hospital, in nearby Ramanathapuram district. Last week, these students went on protest, stating that there was a ravine-like gulf between what was expected of an AIIMS institution and their experience of it in Madurai – in terms of infrastructure, but also exposure to patients.

The extraordinary delay in constructing the AIIMS became a contentious issue during the 2021 Assembly elections in Tamil Nadu, with Udhayanidhi Stalin of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, now a Minister, pointing to a single brick as the sum total of construction activity there. While there are assurances that the project would be completed soon and students shifted to Madurai, it is true that 150 students have already been impacted by this tardy implementation. Meanwhile, the original issue behind starting AIIMS remains unresolved. As per official data, the doctor-population ratio in the country stands at 1:834, worse in rural areas. It is the role of the Centre and the State to work together to ensure that these medical institutions are able to provide high quality education, and that students not made victims at the altar of federal relations.

The Great Indian Bustard and climate action verdict

In a recent judgment, the Supreme Court of India has recognised the existence of a fundamental right to be free from the adverse impacts of climate change (hereinafter ‘the right’). The judgment has garnered significant attention from environmentalists, mostly focusing only on its impacts on the protection of the Great Indian Bustard. Taking a more comprehensive view, this article analyses the judgment from the lens of inclusive climate action. It argues that first, by limiting itself to only recognising the right, the Court has allowed time and space for a productive discourse on the right's content. Accordingly, this could enable a more informed articulation of the right in the future. Second, given the nature of the core issue in this case, using the just transition framework is an excellent approach forward. It can facilitate equitable climate action, including, articulation of a more reflexive and inclusive right.

The Right

The States of Rajasthan and Gujarat are home to the critically endangered Great Indian Bustard. At the same time, both States also hold significant potential for the development of solar and wind power. In 2019, certain public-spirited individuals (petitioners), filed a public interest litigation, seeking conservation of the bustard. In the interim, they sought an order seeking a ban on further construction of solar and wind energy infrastructure, and the laying of overhead power transmission lines linked to these. They argued that these power lines were a hazard, causing the bustards to die due to frequent collisions with the lines. In its decision the Supreme Court imposed a blanket ban on the laying of overhead power lines in an area of 99,000 square kilometres; this included areas identified as priority and potential areas for bustard conservation. The Court also passed an order for undergrounding existing power lines, both high and low voltage.

The government challenged this order citing India's international climate commitments on transitioning to non-fossil fuels and reducing carbon emissions. It argued that the blanket ban was issued for an area much larger than the actual area in which the bustard dwells. This area, it reiterated, held a major proportion of the country's wind and solar energy potential. Further, it argued that undergrounding power lines was practically impossible. Lastly, it attributed the decline in the bustard population to other factors such as poaching, habitat destruction, and predation.

In its decision on March 21, 2024, the Court modified the earlier order, recalling the blanket prohibition on transmission lines. It left the recalibration of the order to scientific experts. To that end, it set up an expert committee to, *inter*



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With the final decision of India's top court still pending, this is an ideal chance for the judiciary to pursue the just transition framework and enable inclusive climate action

alia, assess the feasibility of undergrounding power lines, and identifying measures for bustard conservation. This committee is required to submit its report by July 2024, after which the Court will pronounce its final judgment.

In a first, the Court used this opportunity to recognise the existence of a right against the adverse impacts of climate change. It noted that the right is recognised by the right to equality (Article 14) and the right to life (Article 21) enshrined under the Constitution of India. The Court began by explaining the threat posed by the impacts of climate change to the enjoyment of the right to life. Thereafter, it highlighted that disproportionate vulnerability to these impacts threatens the affected persons' right to equality. Concluding this discussion, the Court found that the source of the right is in a conjunctive reading of judicial jurisprudence on Articles 21 and 14; India's climate change action and international commitments, and, the scientific consensus on the adverse impacts of climate change.

Notably, the Court recognised the existence of the right, but did not articulate it any further. Additionally, it also underlined the need for articulation. However, it steered clear of undertaking that task. Arguably, the conscious choice of not articulating the right and only recognising it departs from the Court's usual practice in environmental cases. Much of Indian environmental law has developed through the Court's judicial decisions in public interest cases. In several cases, it has transplanted, recognised, and articulated environmental rights and legal principles. While appreciated for being proactive, this practice has been critiqued for judicial overreach and the creation of imprecise rights. Contrastingly, in this decision, the Court's approach has been that of restraint. Arguably, this is an optimal approach at this early stage of the recognition of the right – in that, it catalyses the discourse on climate rights, simultaneously providing time and space for articulating a more informed right.

However, it must be noted that the Court's recognition of the right does not appear in the operative part of the judgment. Therefore, it is not binding *per se*. While it will be instrumental in shaping future climate action, the extent to which it can do so remains to be seen.

Just transition framework

The central issue at stake was limiting the adverse impacts of renewable energy projects on the bustard. As rightly noted by conservationist Debadityo Sinha, the judgment approaches the central issue as presenting two competing choices, i.e., either protecting biodiversity or allowing mitigative climate action. In other words, it projects biodiversity protection and climate action as adversarial choices.

Furthermore, the recognition of the right is also contextualised in this approach which juxtaposed biodiversity protection and mitigative climate action. Accordingly, the right so recognised only relates to protecting humans' interests against climate change.

Going forward, adopting an alternative approach could preclude this conundrum. This approach is: utilising the just transition framework. Currently being used in climate cases around the world, it aims to make transitions to a low carbon economy more equitable and inclusive. It particularly serves the interests of those most affected by such transitions. This includes, *inter alia*, workers, vulnerable communities, and small and medium-sized enterprises. Where the core issue is similar to the one in the present case, using the just transitions framework is an excellent approach. In that it allows protecting underrepresented interests (in the instant case, of the bustard) being threatened by slow carbon transition projects (in this case, solar energy).

This approach is advantageous in three ways. First, it will preclude climate action and protection of biodiversity from being pitted as adversarial choices. Instead, it can create a case for inclusive climate action, i.e., climate action alive to varied rights and interests. Second, it can enable the articulation of more reflexive and inclusive climate rights. To that end, utilising it in climate litigation can ensure that articulation and enforcement of climate rights are sensitive to the interests of the non-human nature and furthers ecological justice. Third, if the framework is used in the final decision of the Court, this case will be one of the first just transition litigations to consider a non-human interest. Of the existing just transition litigations globally, only one other case concerns protecting the interests of the non-human environment. Thus, the present case will be a frontrunner in such litigation. Theoretically, it will contribute to expanding the concept of a just transition to considering more than human interests.

A ‘shared burden’

Given that the final decision of the Court is still pending, this is an excellent opportunity for the judiciary to use the just transition framework and facilitate inclusive and equitable climate action. A right against climate change has been recognised and is yet to be articulated. This provides a productive space for initiating a discourse on the content of the right – an opportunity to make it inclusive and effective. However, this burden is a shared one. It falls not only on the state but also on activists, litigants, and academics – who provide content to rights by participating (indirectly or directly) in the process of their recognition, articulation, and enforcement.

The limitations of Ambedkarite Dalit politics today

Organising grand events and celebrations in the month of April to commemorate Babasaheb Ambedkar's birth anniversary has become a national ritual now. These only showcase the presence of a vibrant and robust Dalit mass, engaged to democratise the mainstream public culture. However, such a display of national Dalit unity around B.R. Ambedkar's iconography is unavailable in the political sphere. Instead, there is a growing splintering in Ambedkar's political legacies today, making Dalit political parties a passive and relegated force.

Ambedkar envisaged a robust arrival of subaltern social groups, mainly the Dalit-Bahujan mass, as the prime claimant of state power and visualised that his political party, the Republican Party of India (RPI), would form a greater social alliance with the Adivasis, poor working classes and landless agrarian labourers and strengthen the movement against an exploitative feudal and Brahmanical order. In the post-Ambedkar period, the major task of Dalit politics has been to follow Ambedkar's legacy and establish the Dalit-Bahujan as the key transformative force in democratic institutions. However, even a cursory examination of contemporary Ambedkarite Dalit politics would showcase that it has disintegrated into segments, and lacks a visionary leadership, strong social base and effective political strategies to re-emerge as a crucial player in democratic battles.

Ideological camaraderie

In the post-Independence democratic churning, a powerful arrival of agrarian backward castes in major States as the new ruling elites was witnessed. In the mid-1990s, the nation also experienced a powerful Dalit political leadership, especially the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) under the leadership of Kanshi Ram and Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh.

The BSP emerged as a significant political force and opened the possibility that the politics of social justice would be a game changer in India's democracy. In Maharashtra, during the same



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The absence of a national political agenda, ruptures in ideology and a weak response in taking on the right-wing juggernaut are affecting the revival of Dalit politics

period, a new beginning was witnessed with the arrival of Republican-Bahujan leaders such as Prakash Ambedkar and Ramdas Athawale on the political turf. Similarly, the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) under Thol. Thirumavalvan in Tamil Nadu and the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) led by Ram Vilas Paswan in Bihar provided space for a dignified and robust articulation of the Dalit political cause and re-introduced them as a crucial player in democratic battles. Though there was no alliance between these political outfits, they had an ideological camaraderie around the iconography of Ambedkar, had a committed Dalit social base, and often flagged the slogans of social justice.

Periodically, even on their own political turf, these parties vacillated from core ideological principles. The BSP joined hands with the Bharatiya Janata Party in 1995 to form the first State government headed by Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh. It was followed by Ram Vilas Paswan joining the BJP led-alliance in 1999 and securing an important portfolio in Atal Bihari Vajpayee's cabinet.

In Maharashtra, Ramdas Athawale distanced his political outfit from the radical ideas of the Dalit movement and formed an electoral alliance with the BJP in 2011. Only a few among the Dalit parties, such as the VCK and Prakash Ambedkar's political outfits (recently renamed as Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi- VBA) retain a consistent anti-BJP position and formed only alliances with the secular parties.

The challenge of Hindutva hegemony

The aggressive ascendancy of the BJP as a powerful mobiliser of Dalit-Bahujan groups under the Hindutva umbrella, has been met with little challenge by the Dalit parties. These parties lack strategic interventions, innovative slogans and a capable leadership to motivate socially marginalised communities to stay away from Hindutva's hegemonic cultural paradigm. Further, these parties have been limited to certain geographical boundaries as many States with a significant Dalit population such as Punjab

(32%), Bengal (24%), Himachal Pradesh (26%) and Haryana (21%), and parties such as the RPI or BSP failed to mobilise Dalits. Other marginalised communities such as Adivasis and Muslims also hesitate to vote for Dalit political outfits overwhelmingly as their ideological commitment and capacity to win the electoral battles are often questioned.

In the run-up to the general election 2024, the Dalit parties could have presented a new outlook and innovative political programme to influence Dalit-Bahujan voters. For example, announcing a unified political bloc of Ambedkarite parties, especially of the BSP, VCK and VBA, could have helped set up a national Dalit-Bahujan agenda to challenge the current political establishment. Though other political parties have often joined hands to secure their class and social interests, the Dalit parties have remained attached to regional specificities and lacked the political imagination to revamp social justice politics. Most importantly, in the crucial political battle against the BJP, parties such as the VBA and BSP have decided to go it alone.

The refusal by these parties to form a unified secular front with mainstream Opposition parties may allow them to remain visible in the democratic processes. However, they seem unanswerable to the growing anxieties and troubles that the poor Dalit-Bahujan mass is facing under the Hindutva regime. There is a visible fear that the BJP's return to power for a third term in India would also relegate the prospect of social justice politics and may disturb India's constitutional democracy.

Segmented and powerless, Dalit-Bahujan politics today overtly shows that there are visible deviants into Ambedkar's political legacies. The absence of a national political agenda, ruptures in political ideology and limitations in challenging the right-wing juggernaut have hampered the revival of Dalit politics today. A new generation of Dalit-Bahujan leaders and intellectuals must emerge to cross these obstacles and rediscover a transformative political alternative – one that is truthful to Ambedkar's political principles.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Yoga guru's apology

The Supreme Court of India is justified in giving self-styled yoga guru Baba Ramdev and his associate Acharya Balakrishna an earful for disrespecting its earlier orders regarding the misleading advertisements put out by Patanjali. The yoga guru's apology (Page

1, “Ramdev, associate apologise before SC”, April 17) reminds me of a man who said, “It's easy to give up smoking – I've given it up many times!”
P.G. Menon,
Chennai

While acknowledging and appreciating the fact that

the growing incidence of lifestyle diseases has made interventions that emphasise dietary management, toxin removal, herbal therapies, and yoga more popular, the government cannot be oblivious to the significance of regulatory protocols and evidence-based policy as

quackery and anti-science attitudes are still widely prevalent in the country. Stringent implementation of regulatory protocols and holding people and companies peddling misleading advertisements accountable are a must.
M. Jeyaram,
Sholavandan, Tamil Nadu

Illegal trade practices will only cause damage. Claiming that his medicines are a permanent remedy is akin to antisocial activity.
R. Mahadevan,
Chennai

On the EVM
The common man agrees with the Supreme Court

that “EVMs are accurate unless they are maligned by human bias” (April 17). His only apprehension is that it will be ‘maligned’ by the party at the Centre given its emphatic line: that it would win 400-plus seats in the general election.
A. Jainulabdeen,
Chennai

Hapur verdict, challenging vigilantism

On March 12, 2024, in a first for Uttar Pradesh, a trial court in Hapur awarded life imprisonment in a case of cow protection-related lynching of a Muslim man. Six years earlier, in June 2018, Qasim Qureshi was lynched to death, and Samiuddin was brutally assaulted, by a Hindu group in the Bajhera Khurd village, under the false accusation of cow-slaughter. The additional district and sessions court judge Shweta Dixit sentenced 10 men to life sentences and fined them ₹59,000 each, under charges of murder, attempt to murder, rioting and promoting religious enmity. The conviction in this case is significant because while illegal vigilante crimes are coalitionary projects between state and non-state actors, the price paid is solely by the non-state actors.

The steep rise in cow vigilantism in India has occurred on the back of the state’s interest in the campaign to protect cattle from slaughter. The subsequent violence has blurred the boundaries between vigilantes and the state and has gained legal legitimacy. Governments in Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh have amended their cow slaughter prevention laws and set up special task forces to enforce them. These have allowed cow vigilantes to operate freely, with the state’s sanction and the police’s cognisance. As a result, judicial processes that punish cow protectionists for their anti-Muslim violence have been rare occurrences.

The Uttar Pradesh court’s conviction is just the fifth one in cow protection-related lynchings in India: three others are in Jharkhand and one in Rajasthan. Of these, only the courts in Jharkhand have pronounced maximum life sentences in the 2016 lynching of Mazlum Ansari and Imteyaz Khan and the 2017 lynching of Alimuuddin Ansari.

Despite its rarity, the judgment in the Hapur lynching is significant for three critical reasons.



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First, the conviction of the 10 men, is also a conviction, in principle, that bears down on the actions of the state. The order censures the police for fabricating the First Information Report (FIR). It states that the police created an alternative narrative of Qasim’s death and Samiuddin’s grievous injuries. The police claimed that these were the result of a motorcycle accident, instead of a lynching. It raises questions about police accountability. The Hapur conviction is an acknowledgement that the state was not only a participant but also an enabler.

The judgment also casts aspersions on the police’s intent. The police did not collect the statements of Samiuddin and other eyewitnesses. In an “extremely objectionable” act, the police also damaged the video evidence of the confession of one of the accused. The judgment alleges that the police did not conduct a forensic investigation of a weapon that was recovered from another one of the accused. And finally, it asks the Director General of the Police, Uttar Pradesh, to investigate the collusion of police personnel and investigating officers. In this way, the Hapur court’s conviction lays bare the collaboration of the police in the violence, and in endeavouring to protect the accused.

Second, the police made attempts at misdirecting the investigation initially. Despite Samiuddin approaching officers, the police did not conduct an official identification parade, for Samiuddin to single out the men accused of the crime. This failure helped the accused to secure bail. However, the court’s sentencing to life imprisonment is an indicator that the State cannot ensure the unconditional security of the cow vigilantes. In the alliance between state and non-state actors, the vigilantes will continue to bear higher risk, and pay a higher price. The sentence, thus, demonstrates the fragile nature of this coalition of violence. The partnership is tipped on one side

such that the occasional non-state actor can be disposed of in a rare conviction. The Hapur court’s decision, thus, must serve as a forewarning to any budding cow vigilantes and smaller-time Monu Manesars and Bittu Bajrangis of north India. In the exercise of such violence, the boundaries between state and non-state actors may be blurred. But the power continues to lie with state agents.

And third, the conviction must not be seen as a dent in the state’s sanction of such anti-Muslim violence. Instead, it brings to the fore how the state delegates illegal policing to vigilantes. As seen in several cases of anti-minority violence, while police complicity enables crimes against Muslims, the convictions have no material impact on the state. Thus, the police can be both – deeply entwined in the making of the violence, as well as being comfortably distant from its punitive consequences. The Hapur conviction, thus, will not address, punish, or put an end to the means of violence that are a part of the state.

State-induced lynching

The two systems that sustain every lynching conviction are the state that enabled it and the processes that legitimised it. Despite the life imprisonment, what remains untouched, unpunished, and unchanged, is the state-induced lynching. The close association of the police, in the exercise of such violence has persisted through several such instances. The processes that led to the concoction of the FIR, manipulation of the investigation, the designedly defective evidence collection and handling, and the police harassment, are typical of cases of anti-minority violence.

The Hapur conviction, that imposed the maximum punishment on the culprits, can be a big win for justice. However, it is also a reminder that state crimes continue to be sustained while the non-state actors, or 10 of them, are disposed of.

Sexism on the campaign trail

Leaders in Karnataka are in a dispute over the effect of schemes targeting women

STATE OF PLAY

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Since last weekend, Karnataka has seen arrows flying between the two top political leaders on the question of what the government’s flagship guarantee schemes have meant for women.

It all began with the Janata Dal (Secular) State president and former Chief Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy’s interpretation of how two of the five guarantee schemes targeted at women – free travel in non-luxury government buses and monthly financial support of ₹2,000 for women heads of families – have impacted them. “Today, because the government has announced the five guarantee schemes during the last elections, our mothers in villages have gone astray. They have to think about what happens to their lives. You should think about what happens to your family...” he said.

This drew widespread condemnation from the Congress leaders, with the Deputy Chief Minister and the president of the Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee D.K. Shivakumar leading from the front. Since then, the repartee between them has gone beyond just a debate on the schemes and got enmeshed in their ongoing bitter battle for Vokkaliga (the politically powerful caste to which both belong) leadership, assuming the character of alpha males sparring for territorial control.

Mr. Kumaraswamy’s statement, off the cuff as it may sound on the face of it, actually draws from two notions that have been mainstreamed ever since the women-centric schemes were implemented,

that the money given to women comes from “pickpocketing” men – a reference to money that men might spend on liquor – and that with more mobility and cash in hand, women have “abandoned” their duties, such as cooking and caring for their families. This is among the several narratives built by the Opposition to undermine these schemes, one of the earlier ones being that Chief Minister Siddaramaiah was “dividing families” with these schemes by creating fissures between husband and wife or daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. These notions have been pushed aggressively on social media platforms.

There can be debates on whether the schemes have been implemented well, whether Karnataka’s excise policy is skewed and whether these schemes can serve as tools for women’s empowerment in the long run. But the typically patriarchal and feudal reactions and narratives are in themselves testimony to the fact that the schemes have, in principle, achieved their purpose of giving some sense of autonomy to women.

A reluctant apology

Sensing the widespread condemnation and the potential damage it can cause from women voters, Mr. Kumaraswamy apologised to “mothers and sisters if his statements had hurt them.” However, re-

fusing to let go of the patronising tone, he said that he only meant to warn them about how women’s “innocence was being misused” by the Congress administration in the name of guarantee schemes.

He also pointed out, rightly, that the Congress leaders have not exactly covered themselves in glory when it comes to misogyny. He cited nonagenarian MLA Shamanur Shivashankarappa’s recent remark that the BJP candidate, from Davanagere, Gayathri Siddeshwar was only “fit to cook.” All India Congress Committee (AICC) general secretary Randeep Singh Surjewala’s comment on BJP MP Hema Malini has attracted the wrath of the Election Commission of India, he said. Mr. Shivakumar had himself told an interviewer some months ago that women are *chanchale* (fickle-minded) by nature and need to be watched over.

Outright misogynist remarks are quite the norm in political discourse and tend to come thicker and faster in an election season. This again begs the larger question that has been posed *ad-nauseum*: could such talk have been so normalised if our Assemblies and the Parliament had more women with fair representation to the cross-section of castes and classes?

This time, in Karnataka, eight women are in the fray for the Lok Sabha election from the Congress and the BJP-JD (S). The eight out of 56 fielded by the parties is nowhere near the “ideal” envisaged by the Women’s Reservation Act, 2023. The only solace is that though many of the eight are from politically powerful families, it is a big jump from the 2019 elections that saw the two parties fielding four women.

FROM THE ARCHIVES



FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 18, 1974

U.S. firm-Hind Motors tie up plan opposed

New Delhi, April 17: The proposal of the General Motors of the United States for equity participation in the Hindustan Motors, Calcutta, came under heavy fire in the Lok Sabha today.

Members irrespective of party affiliation spoke strongly against allowing the multi-national company to invest in the Indian company and said this would amount to raking the industrial policy in “reverse gear”. They demanded a discussion in the House on this issue before the government took a decision.

The Heavy Industry Minister, Mr. T.A. Pal assured the House that the matter would be “fully considered” by the government in the national interest before taking a decision. He said the government had only received the proposal which was under consideration. No decision had yet been taken on it.

Giving the details of the proposal, Mr. Pal said that the authorised capital of Hindustan Motors was Rs. 20 crores and the paid up capital was Rs. 13.62 crores of which 31 per cent was held by public financial institutions. The company had a licensed capacity to produce 15,000 trucks a year and much of it remained unutilised. At present the country has to depend on two companies – Telco and Ashok Leyland – to meet the requirements of the public transport system. Besides allowing these two companies to raise their licensed capacity for the production of trucks, the government was also trying to see how the existing capacity was fully utilised.

The present proposal was that General Motors be allowed to invest Rs. 6.33 crores in the shape of machinery to improve the production techniques of trucks. One of the conditions was that components worth Rs. 7 crores would be exported if they were permitted participation for ten years.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 18, 1924

Restaurant car in G. I. P.

Bombay, April 18: As an experiment, the G.I.P. Railway workshops have turned out a restaurant car for the sale of refreshments suitable for Indian passengers for the present. This car will be attached to the Delhi-Bombay Express train and will be accessible to third-class passengers even when the train is in motion.

T.N. among leaders in many socio-economic measures

The State has recorded holistic development with its economic might translating to better educational and health-related outcomes

DATA POINT

Rebecca Rose Varghese
Vignesh Radhakrishnan

An analysis of economic, social and environmental indicators of Tamil Nadu, which is headed to the national polls this Friday, shows that the State has recorded a holistic development across periods. While on the one side, it features among the top major States in various indicators which measure child-health, women empowerment and educational attainment, the State also features among the top major States in economic performance, strongly supported by its manufacturing sector. The State should concentrate on sustainable development as its better economic performance has come at a cost with it lagging in environment-related indicators.

Table 1 lists Tamil Nadu’s rank in social indicators and its score in a parameter in 2005-06, 2015-16, and 2019-21. It also shows the change in the State’s rank in 2019-21, compared to 2015-16. The rankings include smaller States too such as the northeastern States and Goa. So Tamil Nadu’s rankings among major States are depicted separately. For instance, the share of the female population aged six or above, who ever attended school in 2019-21 was 80.4% in the State. While Tamil Nadu was ranked 11 of the 30 States analysed, if only major States were considered, it featured inside the top three (behind Kerala [1] and Himachal [10]). States ranked two to nine were smaller States.

The share of women aged 20-24, who married before turning 18 was 12.8% in 2019-21 (ranked 13 of 30). The share of such women has decreased in Tamil Nadu over the years, however, the State’s relative ranking has increased from 9th in 2005-06 to 13th in 2019-21.

Tamil Nadu featured among the top three major States in both the

Infant mortality rate and the share of stunted children in 2019-21. Its relative ranking in the share of wasted children too has improved from 23rd in 2005-05 to 10th in 2019-21. It is placed much closer to the top three States in the share of underweight children.

In the share of households with any member covered under a health insurance/financing scheme (%), the State is ranked fourth. However, the State has to improve much when it comes to population share that uses an improved sanitation facility.

Tamil Nadu’s ranking in the Human Development Index has improved from 16th in 1990 to 11th in 2021 (**Table 2**). The State’s economic performance has also improved in the last two decades. In 1993-94, it was ranked eighth out of 27 States and in 2021-22 it jumped to the sixth spot overall (third rank among major States) in per capita net state domestic product (current prices) as shown in **Table 3**.

Also, its economic might is majorly supported by the manufacturing sector, which employs 18.7% of the State’s workforce. This is the third-highest share among major States (**Table 4**). Also, in terms of the contribution of manufacturing to the State’s total Gross Value Added, the State is ranked sixth overall and fourth among major States.

Among educational indicators, Tamil Nadu is among the best-performing States (**Table 5**). The State has the highest Gross Enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education, and the third-highest GER in higher secondary schooling, among major States.

However, the State lags in environment-related indicators due to industrial growth (**Table 6**). In terms of hazardous waste generated per capita, the State was ranked 25 out of 28 (three States had lower waste generation). In terms of fossil fuels consumed per capita, Tamil Nadu ranked 22 of 30 (eight States had lower consumption).

Dravidian model - Tamil Nadu report card

The data for the charts were sourced from the National Family Health Surveys, Global Data Lab and NITI Aayog

Table 1	2019-21				2015-16		2005-06	
Indicator	Value	Tamil Nadu's rank	Top major States	Change from 2015-16	Value	Tamil Nadu's rank	Value	Tamil Nadu's rank
Female population aged 6 years and above who ever attended school (%)	80.4	11 of 30	Kerala: 1; Himachal: 10; Tamil Nadu: 11	+1	77.2	12 of 30	69.4	10 of 28
Women aged 20-24 years married before 18 years of age (%)	12.8	13 of 30	Himachal: 2; Kerala: 5; Punjab: 7	-1	16.3	12 of 30	21.5	9 of 28
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	18.6	6 of 30	Kerala: 1; Tamil Nadu: 6; West Bengal: 8	-3	20.2	3 of 30	30	3 of 28
Stunted children (low height-for-age) (%)	25	5 of 30	Kerala: 2; Punjab: 4; Tamil Nadu: 5	+1	27.1	6 of 30	30.9	3 of 28
Wasted children (low weight-for-height) (%)	14.6	10 of 30	Punjab: 3; Haryana: 5; Uttarakhand: 8	+8	19.7	18 of 30	22.2	23 of 28
Underweight children (low weight-for-age) (%)	22	11 of 30	Punjab: 5; Kerala: 6; Uttarakhand: 8	-1	23.8	10 of 30	29.8	10 of 28
Households with any member covered under a health insurance/financing scheme (%)	66.5	4 of 30	Rajasthan: 1; Chhattisgarh: 2; Andhra: 3	0	64.1	4 of 30	4	19 of 28
Population that use an improved sanitation facility (%)	72.6	20 of 30	Kerala: 1; Punjab: 6; Haryana: 7	0	52.5	20 of 30	-	-

Table 2: Human Development Index (HDI)

2021				1990	
Indicator	Value	Tamil Nadu's rank	Top major States	Value	Tamil Nadu's rank
HDI	0.686	11 of 30	Kerala: 1; Himachal: 4; Punjab: 7	0.475	16 of 30

Table 3: Per capita NSDP (in ₹)

2021-22			1993-94	
Value	Tamil Nadu's rank	Top major States	Value	Tamil Nadu's rank
2,42,253	6 of 27	Karnataka: 4; Haryana: 5; Tamil Nadu: 6	8,955	8 of 27

Table 4

Indicator (2018-19)	Value	Tamil Nadu's rank	Top major States
Manufacturing Gross Value Added (GVA) as a % of total	20.58	6 of 30	Uttarakhand: 3; Gujarat: 4; Himachal: 5
Manufacturing employment as a % of total employment	18.74	4 of 30	Gujarat: 2; Punjab: 3; T.N.: 4

Table 6

Indicator	Value	Tamil Nadu's rank
Hazardous waste generated (per 1,000 population in metric tonnes in 2018)	17.26	25 of 28
Plastic waste generated (average plastic generated per 1,000 population in tonnes in 2018-19)	5.32	28 of 30
Per capita fossil fuel consumption (average fossil fuel consumed per capita in 2018-19)	199.9	22 of 30

Table 5

Indicator (2018-19)	Value	Tamil Nadu's rank	Top major States
Adjusted Net Enrolment Ratio (ANER) in elementary education (Class 1-8)	85.49	20 of 30	Karnataka: 5; Himachal: 5; Uttarakhand: 7
Average annual dropout rate at secondary level (Class 9-10)	13.02	9 of 30	Himachal: 1; Kerala: 2; Odisha: 4
Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher secondary (Class 11-12)	72.32	3 of 30	Himachal: 1; Kerala: 2; Tamil Nadu: 3
Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education (18-23 years)	49	2 of 30	Tamil Nadu: 2; Himachal: 4; Uttarakhand: 5

Text & Context

THE HINDU

The number of trains
impacted due to
farmers protest

The magnitude of the earthquake which hit southern Japan

Ford recalls Bronco Sport and Maverick cars

Israeli soldiers wounded in strike from Lebanon

Estimated cost of damage caused by climate change

38 In trillion \$ per year. German government-backed research finds that by 2050, damage to farming, infrastructure, productivity and health from climate change will cost an estimated \$38 trillion per year. REUTERS

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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On India's 'heat action plans'

How does the India Meteorological Department define heatwaves? What do heat action plans recommend? Are special interventions needed for vulnerable communities during a heatwave? What about regional variations and socio-economic differences?

Indu K. Murthy is a principal research scientist heading the Climate, Environment, and Sustainability Sector at the Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy (CSTEP). Sahil Mathew is an analyst in the Climate, Environment and Sustainability Sector at CSTEP.

While HAPs are excellent guidelines that have brought into focus the problem of heatwaves and the need to address them, much work remains to make them practical to the highly variable weather conditions.

CSDS-LOKNITI

Analysing the social media and advertising campaigns of the BJP and the Congress

In the ever-evolving landscape of political campaigning, advertisements and social media campaigns have emerged as the unsung heroes of political strategy. Studies conducted by the CSDS-Lokniti on spokespersons of the BJP and Congress as well as both parties' advertising spending revealed a more co-ordinated election strategy by the BJP

CSDS-Lokniti Team

A study conducted by CSDS-Lokniti monitored the X handles of five spokespersons each from the BJP and the Congress. The study examined 798 tweets till early April. Of these, 378 were attributed to spokespersons of the Congress, while 420 with the BJP.

Local and national issues
53% of the BJP's posts focused on local issues while 48% focused on national issues. It was 14% and 86% respectively for the Congress (Table 1).
For the BJP, among the 53% local issues, the most discussed were local campaigns in panchayats and Assemblies – covering almost 58%. The most discussed national issues were political campaigns but these were mostly short clips of major rallies of Prime Minister Modi, Amit Shah, and J.P. Nadda, covering 24% of all national issues. For the Congress, among its 14% of local issues, the most discussed were Congress party functionaries and local rallies, covering almost 19%. The most discussed national issues were posts covering the Congress manifesto, which covered 19%, and posts critiquing the ruling party, which covered 15% (Table 2).

Jibes and promises
For the BJP, of its 25% negative posts, 45% posts were targeted towards the Opposition, while of its 75% positive posts, 53% were related to posts of local and national political campaigns. For the Congress, of its 75% negative posts, 19% and 15% critiqued the ruling party and the PM respectively while of its 23% positive posts, 46% were on party functionaries, and 44% on its manifesto (Table 3).
The posts made by the BJP appear more coordinated and strategic in comparison to the Congress. This conclusion is drawn based on the use of hashtags. Most BJP posts use the hashtags in two combinations: #BJP4Development, #ModiHaiToMumkinHai together; and #PhirEkBaarModiSaarkar, and #ApkiBaar400Paar #Viksit (localised) together. Congress, on the other hand, uses its respective hashtags sparingly without any discernible combination or pattern. They also lack a localised hashtag like BJP's, appearing less connected.

The BJP has long since established PM Modi as the face of their party and is seemingly continuing the trend this election. At the same time, the Congress too is focused on Mr. Modi. Instead of establishing Rahul Gandhi as a comparable figure to Modi, the Congress is attempting to undermine the validity of PM Modi's candidature by exposing his and the ruling party's inadequacies.

The electoral advertisement blitz
We also monitored 900 advertisements by the BJP and the Congress running on March 18 (irrespective of the date of their origin) across Google platforms, including YouTube (Source: Google Ads Transparency Centre). During this 24-hour period, while the BJP posted 1,111 ads, INC posted 10 ads. BJP broke its record in ad spending, for the last five years, in February 2024, surpassing what it spent since February 2019 (Source:

Electoral branding

The BJP has long since established PM Modi as the face of their party and is seemingly continuing the trend this election. At the same time, the Congress too is focused on Mr. Modi, by attempting to undermine the validity of his candidature by exposing his and the ruling party's inadequacies

SOCIAL MEDIA		
Table 1: % of local, national issues		
	Local issues	National issues
BJP	53%	48%
INC	14%	86%

Table 2: % of top two subjects within local and national issues		
	Local issues	National issues
BJP	■ Campaigns in panchayats,Assemblies (58%)	■ Major campaign clips of Modi etc. (24%)
	■ Posts on BJP functionaries (9%)	■ Discussion on the Opposition leader (20%)
INC	■ Congress party functionaries, local rallies of State (19%)	■ About the Ruling party (15%)
	■ Jabs against the PM (15%)	■ Manifesto of Congress (19%)

Table 3: % of positive, negative posts		
	Positive	Negative
BJP	75%	25%
INC	23%	75%


Table 4: Total share of retweets		
	Retweets	
BJP	41%	
INC	43%	

Table 5: Two major subjects retweeted		
	Subjects retweeted	
BJP	National political campaigns (32%)	
INC	Manifesto (22%)	

Table 6: Use of hashtags		
Hashtags used by Congress	Hashtags used by BJP	
#HaathBadlega-Halaat	#BJP4Development	#ModiHaiToMumkinHai
#CongressNyay-Patra	#PhirEkBaarModiSaarkar	#ApkiBaar400Paar
*#GharGharGuarantee	#Viksit (localised)	-Some localised campaigns
#PaanchNYAYPa-cheesGuarantee"	-Modi ka Prayas, Puri ka	Vikas
		KarnatakaWelcomesAmit-Shah

Google Political Ads CSV file).
While the BJP as well as the INC employed location-based targeting, no gender or age filters were used by either party. The BJP targeted the majority of its ads in Andhra Pradesh (50%) and Odisha (39%). The remaining 11% of the ads were targeted at multiple States, mostly from the Hindi belt (Table 2). The study of such location-specific targeting, along with its correlation with expenditure and theme of ads, has revealed both parties' selective approach to engagement with different parts of India.
In Andhra Pradesh, where a staggering 50% of BJP's ads were targeted, around 53% of them were dedicated to infrastructure development. A similar

ADVERTISEMENTS		
Table 1: Major themes in ads of BJP and Congress (format-wise)		
Party	Format	Major themes
BJP	Image (94%) *	Infrastructure (42%) Mostly welfare schemes (10%)
	Video (6%)*	Infrastructure (47%) Education (12%)
INC**	Video (100%)	Employment (60%) Job security (30%) Addressing paper leaks (10%)

Note: The multiple observations from one ad are coded; but for this analysis only first two observations are analysed. Only the top two themes for the BJP.

*Figures are rounded off but nearly 0.5% of the BJP's ads were either removed or could not be seen. **For Congress only 10 ads were analysed.

Table 2: States and corresponding themes of ads displayed by the BJP and INC		
Party	States	Themes
BJP*	Andhra Pradesh (50% of BJP's Ads)	Infrastructure (53%) Welfare Schemes (19%) Padma Awards to Telugu people (5%) Grants and aid given to State (4%)
	Odisha (39% of BJP's ads)	Infrastructure (39%) Education (16%), Youth (11%) Skill Development (12%)
	Multiple States targeted (11% of BJP's ads)	Donations (50%) Manifesto (13%)
INC**	Multiple States targeted (100%)	Labour & Employment (60%) Youth (30%) Skill Development (10%)

Note: The multiple observations from one ad are coded; but for this analysis only first two observations are analysed. Only top two themes for BJP.

*Figures are rounded off but nearly 0.5% of the BJP's ads were either removed or could not be seen. **For Congress only 10 ads were analysed.

Table 3: States and corresponding amount spent on ads by the BJP AND INC				
Party	States	Upto to ₹ 10k	₹ 10k-50k	More than ₹ 50k
BJP *	Andhra Pradesh	80%	16%	4%
	Odisha	86%	10%	4%
	Multiple States targeted (mostly in the Hindi belt)*	55%	25%	19%
INC**	Multiple States targeted	0%	0%	100%

*Figures are rounded off but nearly 0.5% of the BJP's ads were either removed or could not be seen. **For Congress only 10 ads were analyzed.

trend is observed in Odisha, where majority of the ads were focused on this theme (39%). In Odisha, the BJP's focus seems to be on the youth demographic, with most of the ads highlighting training programs, employment opportunities, and educational institutions (Table 2). These ads proudly announced the establishment of AIIMS, IITs, and IIMs in the State even though there is only one AIIMS in Bhubaneswar, which was established in 2012 before the Modi government rose to power. (In such ads targeted to Odisha, Bhubaneswar has been excluded.) Interestingly, ads appealing for donations in the name of “Viksit Bharat” were displayed in all States and UTs. However, ads soliciting

suggestions for the manifesto specifically excluded South Indian states. The INC ads on ‘PehleNaukriPakki’ and a massive investment project of ₹500 crore for start-ups excluded most north Indian States. However, ads targeting specific locations in major north Indian States focused on loan waivers for farmers and the reduction of GST in the Minimum Support Price. The ads targeted towards the northeastern States focused on employment and job security. Unlike the BJP, no Congress ads asked for donations.
The maximum spending by the BJP was on ads related to its manifesto, donation requests, and infrastructure. While BJP, on average, had spent under ₹10,000 per ad for most of the ads (79.8%), a

disproportionately high amount was spent (₹4,00,000 per ad) for some of the ads focusing on infrastructure and developmental projects. In contrast, Congress's highest spending in this period goes up to ₹3,00,000 per ad on video. While the Congress was not relying much on Google ads, the BJP is spending substantially on digital ads advertising.
Sanjay Kumar, a Professor at CSDS, Aditi Singh, Assistant Professor at O.P. Jindal Global University, Anagha V. Nair, Subhayan Acharya, researchers with CSDS worked on the study on social media. Sanjay Kumar, Aditi Singh, Iyoti Mishra, a Research Associate with CSDS, and Abhishek Sharma, a researcher with CSDS worked on the ads study.

THE DAILY QUIZ

On April 19, the entire State of Tamil Nadu will vote in the 2024 Parliamentary elections. Here’s a quiz on some well known parliamentarians from the State

Srinivasan Ramani

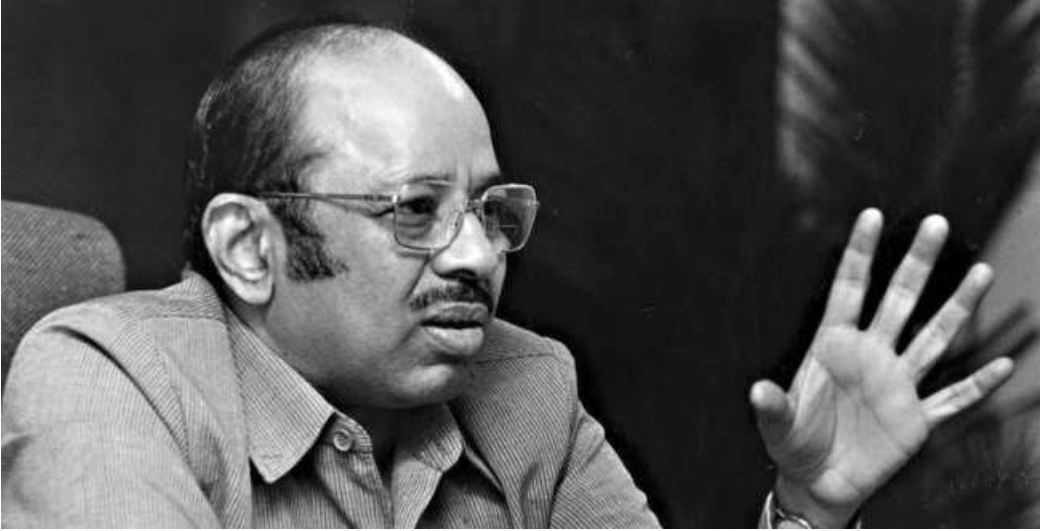
QUESTION 1
A freedom fighter and later a member of the Constituent Assembly, this person was elected to the Lok Sabha in 1962 from Palani, then a parliamentary constituency. He is more famous for his role in ushering the Green Revolution as Union Agriculture Minister. Name him.

QUESTION 2
Another freedom fighter, this well known and still popular leader from Tamil Nadu, first made his entry into Parliament from Srivilliputtur in 1952. Apart from other things, he is well known for his eponymous “Plan” that involved the resignation of senior Congress leaders from Ministerial posts to take up organisational work. Name him.

QUESTION 3
Considered as one of India's most accomplished actors, this thespian was twice elected to the Lok Sabha on the Congress ticket from South Chennai in the 1980s and remains the last representative from the Congress from this seat. Name her.

QUESTION 4
He is the author of the novel *Kavalkottam* that was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for Tamil in 2011. He is also credited with the writings for three films. Name this incumbent Member of Parliament and the party he belongs to.

QUESTION 5
One of the few parliamentarians elected on a Bharatiya Janata Party ticket in Tamil Nadu — from Tiruchirappalli in 1998 and 1999, he also held portfolios as Union Minister in the BJP led governments during that period. Name him.



Visual question:
Identify this five-time member of Parliament and the party he represented. THE HINDU ARCHIVES

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. The book series from which *Game of Thrones* has been adapted from. **Ans: A Song of Ice and Fire by George R. R. Martin**
2. The name of the prequel that premiered in 2022. **Ans: House of the Dragon**
3. The name of the family that has three siblings, two of which are twins, and the other is a dwarf. **Ans: Lannister**
4. This sequence of the show received the 2011 Primetime Emmy Award for Main Title Design. **Ans: A three-dimensional map of the series's fictional world**
5. These two languages spoken in the show are often subtitled in English. **Ans: Dothraki and Valyrian**
Visual: The name of the throne. **Ans: Iron throne**
Early Birds: K. N. Viswanathan| Rajmohan. V| Ashish Dabral| Rajeev Jain| Manasi Roy

Monsoon cheer

Prospects of above-normal monsoon seem bright

The India Meteorological Department’s (IMD’s) forecast of above-normal rainfall in the upcoming South-West monsoon is welcome news for the farm sector and the economy. In its first-stage forecast released on Monday, IMD predicted that the overall quantum of rains for the 2024 season will be at 106 per cent of the long-period average (LPA). Its probability distribution, which is sometimes at variance with its forecast, is in sync this year. It pegs the probability of above-normal or excess rains at 61 per cent and below-normal or deficient rains at 10 per cent.



The second-stage forecast in May is expected to provide granular predictions on region-wise and month-wise distribution of rain. A munificent South-West monsoon is critical for the country. In 2023, a prolonged El Nino contributed to a sub-par monsoon with rainfall at just 94 per cent of the LPA. Patchy spatial and temporal distribution resulted in Eastern and Southern States facing drought. Southern States are grappling with a precarious water situation with average reservoir storage at 20 per cent of capacity. Owing to sub-par rain, the agriculture Gross Value Added (GVA) expanded by just 0.7 per cent in FY24, a year when industry and services were firing on all cylinders. A timely and bountiful monsoon can lift agriculture GVA, boost rural incomes and hopefully quell stubborn food price inflation.

This is, however, subject to IMD’s first-stage forecast coming good. IMD’s April forecasts have been off-target in the past, as they tend to be too early to gauge developing atmospheric conditions and weather anomalies impacting monsoon performance. Last year, for instance, when the IMD forecast a normal monsoon ast 96 per cent of LPA in April, it underestimated the impact of the developing El Nino. In 2022, the actual rainfall at 106 per cent of LPA substantially overshot IMD’s April forecast of 99 per cent. But this year one can attach a greater degree of confidence to IMD’s forecast of above-normal rain due to two factors.

The IMD has historically faltered in predicting monsoon performance mainly in El Nino years. But this time, there are strong indications that global El Nino conditions that have been in place since February 2023 are rapidly receding. Besides, an Australian Bureau of Meteorology update on Wednesday announced the official end of El Nino and said Pacific waters were transitioning to neutral ENSO (El Nino Southern Oscillation) conditions. It also cited global models that predicted the onset of La Nina in the Central Pacific by July. La Nina years have coincided with excess monsoon rain in India. The Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) has historically exercised a greater influence on the Indian monsoon than the ENSO. Global weather trackers have recently noted IOD readings moving into positive territory. Should these readings persist, India could reap twin benefits from an emerging La Nina and a positive IOD in the second half of the monsoon season.

FROM THE VIEWSROOM.

Crisis in Sudan: The forgotten war

Achuth Vinay

It has been a year since Sudan descended into a devastating war, which has left over 15,000 people dead, thousands injured, and driven some 8.5 million people away from their homes. The country now faces one of the worst hunger crises the world has ever witnessed. The UN has warned of a famine. And like in any war, children have been the worst affected. Around 3.8 million children are malnourished and, according to the MSF (an international medical humanitarian organisation), one child dies every two hours in relief camps.

The civil war that broke out between two rival factions of the military government of Sudan — the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) under Hemedti — on April 15, 2023, is still raging with no signs of relenting.

Reports suggest that the UN’s humanitarian campaign “needs \$2.7 billion this year to get food, healthcare and other supplies to

24 million people in Sudan — nearly half its population of 51 million.” Donors pledging more than €2 billion for the war-ravaged nation at a conference in Paris on Monday is a step in the right direction, but more needs to be done on this front.

The glaring aspect is that the world has viewed with indifference this bloody war in one of the world’s poorest nations. While the Russia- Ukraine and Israel- Palestine conflicts, along with the escalating Middle-East situation, have attracted the attention of the global powers, Sudan’s crisis has been largely ignored. That the cataclysmic situation in Africa’s third largest country has not brought about necessary diplomatic interventions from the major powers is a sad reality.

International media coverage too has been found lacking. Perhaps, the extremely hostile conditions that journalists find themselves in while trying to report the incidents unfurling in the country have served as a deterrent to active ground reporting from the north-east African nation.

POINT BLANK.



The recent agreement signed between India and Mauritius to amend the double tax avoidance treaty is important in many ways.

It signals that India is willing to let go of the round-tripping funds that is routed through the verdant island nation and that Mauritius is keen on rebuilding its image as a credible offshore financial centre. But more importantly, the change signals growing intolerance globally towards abuse of loopholes in bilateral tax agreements, which is resulting in a large loss of revenue for governments.

The original intent of the tax treaty with Mauritius, signed in 1982, was to promote investment flows between the two countries and to prevent the gains on investments from being taxed twice. But since the treaty provided for the capital gains to be taxed at the country of origination, and with capital gains tax rate in Mauritius being zero, entities from other jurisdictions began investing into India through Mauritius, to save on tax.

The other, and greater, concern was the Mauritian authorities allowing businesses without significant business presence to be incorporated in the country; called shell companies or brass-plate companies. The island nation had very lax rules, which allowed the ultimate owner of the companies to stay hidden. This allowed Indian entities to set up shell companies in Mauritius to round-trip money, much to the annoyance of the RBI and SEBI.

But winds of change are blowing, not just for Mauritius, but for all tax havens. It began with all the major countries coming together under OECD to sign the BEPS (Base Erosion and Profit Shifting) agreement in 2017. This required countries to close the gaps in bilateral treaties, improve information sharing and tighten domestic rules to check tax evasion. The results are already evident in changing pattern of global investment flows.

GLOBAL ACTION

Global regulators had been confounded by the problem of corporates shifting their base to low tax jurisdictions to avoid tax. The US Congressional Research Service estimates that revenue loss to the country from such base shifting could range between \$50 billion to \$100 billion annually. The other issue was tax evasion and money laundering through gaps in bilateral treaties.

P Saravanan
A Paul Williams

The explosive growth of digital platforms has revolutionised the way we live, work, and interact. While offering undeniable benefits in terms of convenience, choice, and innovation, the dominance of a few tech giants has also raised concerns about unfair market practices, stifling of competition, and potential harm to smaller businesses, especially micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs).

Concerns about dominance by large tech companies have led to the proposal of a new Digital Competition Bill (DCB) aimed at regulating these digital behemoths and fostering a more level playing field. However, recently, India SME Forum (ISF) expressed concerns over the proposed Bill. Let us look at the pros and cons of the Bill with special reference to MSMEs.

The draft Digital Competition Bill, released in March 2024, identifies large digital platforms as ‘Systemically Significant Digital Enterprises’ (SSDEs) based on factors like market share and user base. The Bill proposes to prohibit anti-competitive practices like self-preferencing (promoting the platform’s own products over

competitors) and data discrimination against businesses (those indulging in such discriminatory practices will be outlawed). Further it aims to promote interoperability.

Platforms will need to ensure data portability, allowing users and businesses to move their data seamlessly to other platforms. The Bill mandates greater transparency in how algorithms rank content and how platforms utilise user data. Finally, the Bill further aims to empower the Competition Commission of India (CCI) by granting enhanced powers to investigate and penalise violations. This legislation represents a significant shift from India’s current reactive regulatory system towards an ‘ex-ante’ framework by empowering authorities to intervene before potential anti-competitive behaviours cause harm. Inspired by efforts such as the European Union’s Digital Markets Act, the Bill signifies a crucial step in creating a fair and more competitive landscape within the nation’s digital ecosystem.

IMPACT ON MSMEs
The Bill restricts practices like self-preferencing by large platforms, which could give MSMEs a better chance to compete and showcase their offerings. Curbing anti-competitive practices by Big Tech could significantly improve access to online marketplaces

Are tax havens fading into the sunset?

Global clampdown is reducing investment flows routed through low tax jurisdictions such as Mauritius

In 2016, more than 100 countries agreed to implement changes to tax treaties and update international tax rules to reduce the gaps available for MNCs to avoid paying taxes. The BEPS MLI came into force on July 1, 2018.

The signatories to the agreement include almost all the tax havens such as Mauritius, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Hong Kong. It covers almost 1,900 bilateral tax treaties, making its enforcement quite effective.

TIGHTER TREATY

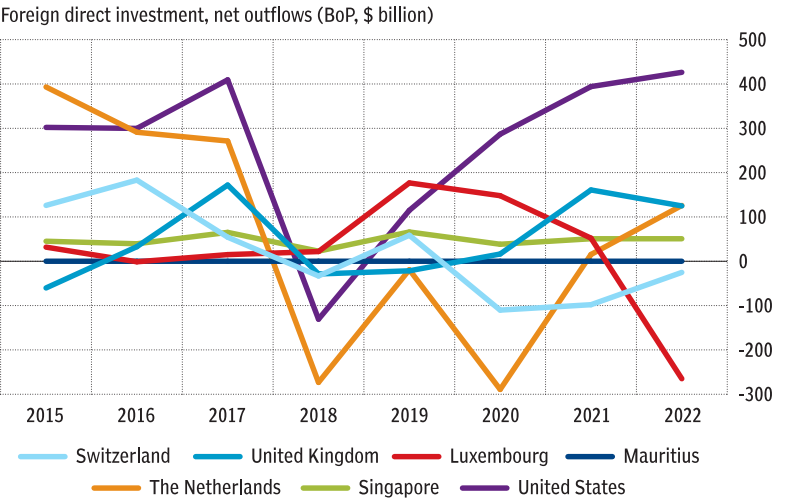
India’s signing of the BEPS MLI in 2016 was followed by a significant amendment of the Indo-Mauritian double tax avoidance treaty that year. The amendment resulted in investments in Indian shares done after April 1, 2017, being liable for taxation in India, thus removing the tax benefit derived by investing in Indian equities from Mauritius. But the amendment left investments in equity made prior to April 1, 2017, out of its ambit. Fixed income and other non-equity investments were also not covered.

Last month, India and Mauritius agreed to amend the treaty further. A Principal Purpose Test will be included in the agreement, under which, the benefit of the treaty can be denied if it is established that the main objective of the arrangement or the transaction is to benefit from the treaty.

This implies that companies can no longer flash tax residency certificates (TRCs) issued by the Mauritian government to claim benefits under the treaty. The use of TRC to establish residency has been a bone of

Global tax havens seem to be at an inflexion point. The tighter laws are likely to reduce the income they derive from offshore services, forcing them to reinvent themselves and find other sources of revenue.

Diminishing flows out of tax havens



Source: World Bank

contention because earlier it could be obtained easily without the entity having a substantial presence in the country.

Through the recent amendments, both the governments seem to be signalling that they will not tolerate tax evasion or round-tripping using the treaty any longer.

DIMINISHING FLOWS

The change in stance of the Indian and Mauritian government is in sync with other jurisdictions. The amendment to various bilateral treaties, along with greater scrutiny since 2017 is resulting in reduced investment flows out of low tax jurisdictions, which were earlier preferred by treaty shoppers.

From the graph of net FDI outflows based on data from World Bank, it can be seen that outflow from Luxembourg, which was one of the preferred tax havens, has declined from \$176 billion in 2019 to \$-265 billion in 2022. Outflows from Mauritius have declined from \$58 million in 2019 to \$19 million in 2022. Similarly, flows out of the Netherlands and Switzerland have also been erratic after 2017.

On the other hand, FDI investments

from the US, the UK are increasing. A large proportion of global funds are based in the US and the UK and these funds appear to be investing directly from their home countries instead of taking a more circuitous route through tax havens. Outflows from more transparent offshore centres such as Singapore have been steady.

This trend is visible in the foreign flows into India as well. Foreign portfolio investors from Mauritius had the largest share of 26 per cent in FPI assets in Indian shares and debt, prior to 2013. But the share has now reduced to 6 per cent and the country relegated to the fourth position. FPIs from the US are now the largest holders of FPI assets with 39 per cent share. Similarly, in FDI inflows, Singapore has displaced Mauritius as the largest source.

Global tax havens seem to be at an inflexion point. The tighter laws are likely to reduce the income they derive from offshore services, forcing them to reinvent themselves and find other sources of revenue. Whether the tax planner fraternity admits defeat or manages to find other loopholes for ‘tax avoidance and management’, remains to be seen.



DIGITAL SKILLS. MSMEs need training

for MSMEs. The Bill encourages fair data access and sharing practices. The data portability can empower MSMEs to leverage their data for better marketing, customer insights, and improved offerings.

Increased transparency in platform algorithms can help MSMEs understand how their products are displayed and ranked. This allows them to optimise their listings and potentially reach a wider audience, and reduce reliance on gatekeepers. A more balanced digital landscape could allow MSMEs to build independent online presences and diversify their customer base.

Challenges and concerns:
Navigating new regulations could be a challenge for smaller businesses with limited resources. The effectiveness of

the Bill in creating a truly balanced market remains to be seen. Stricter regulations might stifle innovation by large platforms, potentially limiting the adoption of new features and functionalities that could benefit MSMEs. Significant changes to dominant platforms could disrupt existing business models and potentially require MSMEs to invest more in adapting their online operations.

THE ROAD AHEAD

The success of the Digital Competition Bill hinges on a nuanced approach. Regulations should target specific anti-competitive behaviours impacting Indian MSMEs, without hindering overall innovation. The Bill needs clear definitions of SSDEs to avoid unintended consequences for smaller digital businesses. A tiered regulatory approach could be implemented, with stricter rules for large platforms and simpler compliance for MSMEs.

Initiatives to equip MSMEs with digital marketing skills and e-commerce knowledge will be crucial to capitalise on the new opportunities. The proposed Bill holds promise for a more equitable digital marketplace.

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Monsoon forecast

With globe climate models indicating a weakening of current El Nino conditions and ‘positive’ Indian Ocean Dipole conditions, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) has forecast an “above normal” South-West monsoon this year. Given the inextricable link between a good monsoon and economic growth, such a forecast does augur well for the country’s economy. Also, a good monsoon could increase reservoir levels and boost hydroelectric power generation, besides ensuring the availability of drinking water. Since the farm sector employs nearly 46 per cent of the country’s workforce, a second consecutive not-so-good monsoon

could wreak havoc on already stressed rural incomes and consumption. If the country has a good monsoon, it will ensure a bumper kharif harvest about six months from now and help the government ward off food inflation to a greater extent.

M Jeyaram
Sholavandan, TN

GST on Malabar parota

The ruling of the Kerala High Court that the popular flat bread (Malabar parota) will attract GST at 5 per cent and not 18 per cent is welcome. From the consumers’ point of view, all goods are final goods. Hence, lessening GST on single use consumer goods will benefit the

people in general and the poor in particular. Malabar parota, for instance, is a popular consumer good, albeit it may require a little more effort for readying it for final consumption. Consumers will be immensely benefited by the verdict as they need not shell out extra GST (an indirect tax) on the commodity. This essentially means that they could save considerable nominal income in the purchase of it.

S Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

Tax treaty

This refers to ‘Capital move’ (April 17). It is indeed a positive development for those aiming to avoid tax. However, there is a need

for clarification regarding the differences between the Principal Purpose Test (PPT) and the proposed article 27B, as the distinction seems subtle. Failure to address this could result in legal disputes, particularly concerning the Vodafone double taxation issue and Mauritius, stemming from the capital gains tax dispute related to Vodafone’s acquisition of Hutchison Essar in India in 2007, which significantly impacted the Indian tax system.

Srinivasan Velamur
Chennai

Pulses production

Apropos ‘Pulses need a production boost’ (April 17), it is unfortunate

that pulses, the essential protein providers, are slowly disappearing from poor people’s diet. This doesn’t augur well for the health of the nation and its development. There are several reasons for the fall in pulses production in the country. Expanding irrigation facilities have changed the cropping patterns and pulses cultivation has been replaced by rice and wheat. Further, soyabean, an import from South America, has been promoted so aggressively that it has replaced pulses cultivation over a large area, due to better income realisations. There is a need to promote the cultivation of pulses on a mission mode.

Kosaraju Chandramouli
Hyderabad

Shifting expectations

No respite from US inflation and geopolitical tensions

Despite the most aggressive and coordinated monetary policy tightening in decades, the global economy's strength has surprised many economists. The US economy, in particular, has demonstrated greater resilience than initially anticipated. The latest World Economic Outlook (WEO) of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), released this week, expects the global economy to grow by 3.2 per cent in 2024, 10 basis points higher than its January update. The US economy is expected to expand by 2.7 per cent in 2024, 60 basis points higher than the January projection. The projection for the euro area, however, has been lowered by 10 basis points and is expected to expand under 1 per cent. Meanwhile, growth projection for India has been improved by 30 basis points to 6.8 per cent for 2024-25. Projections for China have been left unchanged at 4.6 per cent.

As the WEO has underscored, stronger than expected private consumption, along with a tight labour market, has supported aggregate demand in some advanced economies, including the US. Further, higher government spending has supported aggregate demand. Among large economies, compared to October 2022 projections, additional budgetary support in the US was about 2 per cent of gross domestic product, while it was a modest 0.2 per cent in the euro area. Households in advanced economies are also drawing down savings accumulated during the pandemic. On the supply side, the easing of supply-chain pressures after the pandemic helped increase output. Thus, the risk of the so-called hard landing has not materialised so far. However, as the restrictive monetary policy stance begins to affect demand and output, central banks are again in focus with expectations of policy-rate reductions.

In this context, the IMF notes that with inflation projected to decline towards the medium-term target in advanced economies, major central banks are expected to start lowering interest rates in the second half of 2024. By the fourth quarter, for instance, the US Federal Reserve is expected to reduce the policy rate from 5.4 per cent to 4.6 per cent, which is similar to the projection made by Fed officials in the last meeting. However, the last stretch of disinflation to reach the inflation target is looking challenging in the US. The inflation rate for March, at 3.5 per cent, surprised analysts on the upside and reduced the possibility of policy-rate reduction. Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell noted this week that attaining the target of 2 per cent could take longer than expected and the central bank would maintain the current policy rate for as long as necessary. A shift in expectations on Fed policy action can significantly increase financial market volatility and affect capital flows. Renewed tensions in West Asia will only complicate matters further.

Although India has large foreign exchange reserves and portfolio flows have been positive in recent months, a significant increase in crude oil prices owing to geopolitical tensions and a spike in US bond yields, which have inched up over the past few days, can increase macroeconomic challenges. In this regard, the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India did well to leave the policy rate unchanged in its last meeting. Given the disinflation challenges being witnessed in the US, and potential volatility in oil prices, the wait to attain the 4 per cent inflation target could get longer for the MPC.

Healthy development

Consumer watchdogs must be more proactive

Even as domestic Ayurvedic products company Patanjali has drawn the Supreme Court's ire for misleading advertising, multinational companies (MNCs) like Mondelez are facing threats to entrenched markets following a commerce ministry order that e-commerce companies stop listing all drinks and beverages under the "health drinks" category on their portals. The order is the result of a yearlong inquiry by the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) centred on Mondelez's 78-year-old brand Bournvita. The advisory follows the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India's (FSSAI's) recent request to online shops not to categorise dairy, cereal or malt-based drinks as "health drinks" or "energy drinks" on grounds that such a categorisation misleads consumers. Online advertisements making these claims were also required to be removed. The latest notice is likely to apply to other popular drinks that claim some form of nutritional value for consumers. The principal objection, however, is a semantic one: The NCPCR found that there was no official definition of "health drinks" under the Food Safety and Standards (FSS) Act of 2006. It should be added that these brands do not label their products as health products on the packaging.

But this development points to a growing concern among health professionals about a range of food and drink promotions in India targeting children, a popular strategy deployed by domestic corporations and MNCs. The commerce ministry's notice on "health drinks" has its origins in a controversy raised a year ago by Revant Himatsingka, a social media influencer who reviews packaged food items. He uploaded a video pointing to Bournvita's high sugar content and its impact on children. Mondelez sent him a legal notice directing that the video be deleted. Lacking the resources to fight a case against the MNC, Mr Himatsingka complied and issued an apology. The food company also clarified that the sugar content in Bournvita was much lower than the daily recommended intake limit. But Mr Himatsingka's video had gone viral by then, prompting complaints to the NCPCR, which directed Mondelez to withdraw Bournvita's "misleading" advertisements, packaging and labels. Contrary to the company's claims, the NCPCR said Bournvita appeared to have bypassed the added sugar limit by using such labels as "Maltodextrin" and "Liquid Glucose", which needed to be displayed under the title of "added sugar", under the FSSAI's Labelling and Display Regulations, 2020. In December, the company reduced the amount of added sugar in Bournvita.

Both the NCPCR and commerce ministry actions are unexceptionable, but the question that arises is why the public custodians of consumer welfare have not been more proactive. The category of "health drinks" has been around for several years, but it took an activist influencer's campaign for the government to act. At the same time, hundreds of other influencers, a rapidly growing marketing category, extol the virtues of dubious food and drink products without regulatory checks and balances. The case before the Supreme Court involving Patanjali Ayurved highlights a similar gap. It was brought by the Indian Medical Association, when, as the apex court pointed out, the government was sitting "with its eyes closed". Given that the market for alternative medicine and packaged foods, especially those targeting children, is growing rapidly, a more robust consumer welfare watchdog is urgently needed.

Our forgotten neighbour

Recent trends in Myanmar civil war make a case for India to upgrade its links with anti-junta forces



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Myanmar shares over 1,600 km of border with India, spread across four northeastern states of Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. But one hears little about the country, especially since the coup by the Myanmar Army (Tatmadaw), led by General Min Aung Hlaing, on February 1, 2021, which seized control from the democratically elected government of the National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi (Daw Suu). So, what's been happening since? But before that, a quick recap of Myanmar's governmental history may be helpful.

After about 15 years of post-independence democracy, the long reign of military juntas took over, beginning with General Ne Win's coup in 1962. The widespread students-led revolts in urban areas in 1988 and the chance visit home by Aung San Suu Kyi from England (to tend her dying mother) ushered in the birth of the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by her. As the ferment and bloody suppression continued, the generals allowed the election of 1990, which, against all odds, was swept by NLD, though Daw Suu had already been placed under house arrest. Soon, the unpalatable (to the junta) election results were annulled and Daw Suu continued under house arrest for most of the next 20 years. With time, Western economic sanctions and the growing internal recognition of Myanmar's falling behind the rest of prospering Southeast Asia, nudged the military to craft the new 2008 Constitution (heavily tilted to favour a big military role in government) and held the 2010 election, with Daw Suu reverted to house arrest and the NLD boycotting the patently unfree election. The military government's party won handily and ruled till 2015, though with a lighter touch and with significant reopening of the isolated econ-

omy both internally and externally.

Daw Suu was freed in 2011, the NLD contested the 2015 election and, against all odds and expectations, won overwhelming victories in both Houses of Parliament and most state legislatures, an astonishing and globally unparalleled victory by the same leader and party after 25 years. But while the NLD formed a government, key ministries of internal order, defence and border affairs remained with the military according to the restrictive 2008 Constitution. In effect, the sweeping electoral victory gave Daw Suu and the NLD the right only to partner the military for the next five years (a crucial fact usually missed in most commentary). In the most recent general elections of November 2020, Daw Suu and the NLD won their third consecutive massive electoral victory. However, impatient military leaders and their due-for-retirement commanding general, Min Aung Hlaing, decided to get properly back into the saddle (or 'gaddi') and carried out the coup of February 2021. The election was cast aside, the NLD was outlawed, many of its leaders were imprisoned or killed and Daw Suu convicted, sentenced and imprisoned on several trumped-up charges, with ver-

dicts adding up to nearly 30 years of incarceration! The February 2021 military coup triggered massive protests across the country, especially in urban areas. The army responded brutally, killing thousands, imprisoning over 20,000, using airpower to bomb and strafe civilians, leading to over a million people being driven from their homes, tens of thousands to neighbouring countries, especially Thailand. By April, a loosely coordinated National Unity Government (NUG, mostly in exile) had been formed, including former NLD lawmakers, representatives of long-established ethnic minority insurgencies and

various minority parties. In May, the NUG announced a "People's Defence Force" (PDF). Both the NUG and PDF got off to a shaky start but, with time and against the prevailing conventional wisdom, gained popularity and strength, including, especially, through alliances with ethnic insurgent allies such as the Arakan Army, the Kachin Independence Army, the Shan State Army and the Karen National Liberation Army. Basically, Myanmar sank slowly but surely into a state of civil war, spawned essentially by the February 2021 military coup.

Over the past six to eight months, the tide of battle seems to have been going against the Tatmadaw, though one should never underestimate the lasting power of state military forces, with access to foreign arms supplies. Last October, the "Three Brotherhood Alliance" (consisting of the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and the Arakan Army) inflicted hundreds of casualties on the Tatmadaw and took a large number of prisoners (including senior officers) in the northern Shan State, bordering China. Although some sort of truce was patched up with Chinese mediation by January 2024, ethnic and people's democratic forces continued to win significant battles across the country. Drone attacks on the junta's forces, spread thin across the country, increased. Desertions from the Tatmadaw mounted. Feeling the growing pressure, in late February, the junta promulgated compulsory conscription for young men and women, triggering a flight of young Myanmarers to neighbouring countries. Early last week, the Tatmadaw lost control of Myawaddy, a key trading hub in the Karen state near the Thai border and even sought Thai help to evacuate some of its beleaguered forces.

On the other side of the country, a few days ago, the Indian government recognised the gravity of the situation and withdrew personnel from its consulate in Sittwe, the port on the Bay of Bengal. According to knowledgeable analysts, India's links with the NUG and other anti-junta forces have been relatively limited and low-level, probably dictated by the long-felt need for cooperation with the junta to manage cross-border insurgency elements in regions bordering our northeastern states. But, given the recent trends in the civil war in Myanmar, the case for upgrading our links with anti-junta forces is surely rising. Former foreign secretaries Kanwal Sibal and Shyam Saran have argued as much, including to act as a credible counterweight to the much deeper engagement of China on both sides of the Myanmar conflict (NDTV.com, March 26, 2024; and *Business Standard*, April 16). Who knows, perhaps this is already happening?

The writer is honorary professor at Icrier, formerly the longest-serving chief economic advisor to the Government of India, and author of An Economist at Home and Abroad (Harper Collins, 2021). Views are personal



A PIECE OF MY MIND

SHANKAR ACHARYA

Concrete jungles and Silicon Valleys

The Silicon Valley narrative holds a contemporary allure that inspires and drives millions of entrepreneurs — a saga of ingenuity, imagination, creativity, and perseverance. Simultaneously, it epitomises the transformation of cities into hubs of opportunity. It serves as both an economic blueprint and a reflection of social challenges stemming from the entrepreneurial boom. For San Francisco, Silicon Valley symbolises the pursuit of excellence in innovation, technology, and human advancement. However, irony unfolds as one confronts the escalating issues of homelessness and poverty in this land of promise. According to the 2024 Silicon Valley Index, the gross domestic product (GDP) share of the Valley (San Mateo and Santa Clara counties only) stood at 12.1 per cent, while San Francisco's share in California's total GDP was only 5.4 per cent. Yet, the report reveals glaring income and wealth disparities within Silicon Valley. The top 10 per cent of households control 70 per cent of the collective wealth, with median household income barely keeping pace with inflation.

While Silicon Valley and its impact in the United States and the rest of the world have rarely ever left the limelight, what is more often overlooked is the effect that such a phenomenon has on the larger urban dynamics of a region. Beyond economic productivity, it is crucial to understand the changing culture, the nature of jobs, labour-force participation rates, ease of living and pressure on municipal functioning. For instance, in 2021, *The New York Times* ran a headline saying, "They Can't Leave the Bay Area Fast Enough" while talking about the moving of many tech startups and their workers from the area. The reasons highlighted were the excessive rate of rents triggering a cost-of-living crisis for workers, and the glaring disparity between the high-rise offices of wealthy and more established giants like Google and Meta and the increasing numbers of tents for the homeless. The sheer juxtaposition of such eminence and deprivation begs an investigation into what start-

tups can offer to solve the urban crisis.

One of the primary drivers of homelessness in Silicon Valley is the exorbitant cost of living. Skyrocketing housing prices have reached unprecedented levels, making it increasingly difficult for low-income individuals and families to afford adequate shelter. As tech companies continue to expand and attract talent, demand for housing has surged, exacerbating an already dire situation. The result is a growing population of homeless individuals who struggle to find stable housing amid the region's housing crisis. Furthermore, the nature of employment in Silicon Valley contributes to this situation. While tech companies offer high-paying jobs to skilled workers, they also rely heavily on contract labour and gig-economy workers who lack job security and benefits. Many of these workers struggle to make ends meet, facing precarious living conditions and financial instability. Without access to affordable housing and adequate support systems, they are at increased risk of falling into homelessness. The homeless population in Silicon Valley is also diverse, encompassing individuals from various backgrounds and circumstances. Some long-term residents have been priced out of their homes due to gentrification and rising rents. Others are recent arrivals drawn to the promise of opportunity.

While Silicon Valley's story is familiar, it's not exclusive to this tech hub. Closer home, a city like Bengaluru, often dubbed India's Silicon Valley, is grappling with a mounting cost-of-living crisis amid climate change-induced resource strains, particularly on essentials like water. This isn't to demonise startups but rather to underscore the urban disparities accompanying their ascent. While the expansion of these conglomerates holds promise for urban devel-



CONURBATION

AMIT KAPOOR & BIBEK DEBROY

opment and prosperity, it's imperative to ensure our cities can cope with escalating demands in an affordable and scalable manner. This necessitates a shift towards more sustainable practices, both in terms of urban planning — considering space and density — and in the choices made by companies operating within these cities.

In this context, urban planning plays a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of startup ecosystems within cities. The spatial organisation, infrastructure provision, and regulatory framework set the stage for entrepreneurial activity to thrive. However, the current urban planning paradigm often struggles to keep pace with the dynamic nature of startup growth, leading to many issues ranging from inadequate infrastructure to soaring real estate prices. One of the critical challenges posed by the rise of startups is their strain on urban resources. As these companies expand, they consume vast quantities of water, electricity, and other utilities, exacerbating existing resource strains. This puts pressure on urban infrastructure, leading to service disruptions, environmental degradation, and heightened vulnerability to climate-related disasters. To address these challenges, urban planners must adopt a holistic approach that integrates sustainability principles into urban development. This entails promoting mixed-use development, investing in public transportation and green infrastructure, and implementing regulations that incentivise sustainable practices among startups and other businesses. Furthermore, fostering collaboration between startups and urban planners can yield innovative solutions to urban challenges. By leveraging technology and data-driven approaches, startups can help cities optimise resource allocation, improve service delivery, and enhance the overall quality of life for residents. In turn, urban planners can provide startups with regulatory certainty, infrastructure support, and access to markets necessary for their success.

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The plague as a metaphor



BOOK REVIEW

UTTARAN DAS GUPTA

A knight called Antonius Block returns home from the Crusades to find that his country is reeling from a plague epidemic. He, too, is about to die. But he challenges Death to a game of chess, believing that he will survive as long as he can stave off a checkmate. Such is the central conceit of *The Seventh Seal*, the 1957 film directed by Ingmar Bergman, which *The Guardian* in 2007 described as "an untarnished gold standard of artistic and moral seriousness". The film, which was also the first collaboration between Bergman and his favourite actor Max Von Sydow, ends with the Danse Macabre.

At once frivolous and terrifying, the Dance of Death, which depicted popes, emperors, children and labourers all dancing to their death, was an allegorical *memento mori*, reminding people of the fragility of their lives. The Dance of Death also graces the cover of the book under review, a collaboration between Berlin-based historian Julia Hauser and graphic novelist Sarnath Banerjee. A blond-haired woman, wearing black, can be seen being dragged away by Death in his hooded costume. But instead of the usual sickle that the Grim Reaper carries, here he is shown bearing a stringed instrument, something like a banjo. The effect is similar, scary and ridiculous.

The Covid-19 pandemic not only forced the world to press the pause button, sparked economic and political crises, and aggravated social inequalities, but it also led to an outpouring of books. Among the notable ones are *Intimations*, a collection of six essays on the

quarantine by Zadie Smith, and Orhan Pamuk's novel *Nights of Plague*. The book by Ms Hauser and Mr Banerjee is a suitable addition to this list, bringing together robust research, an engaging writing style, and some gorgeously created illustrations. It is an accessible history of how societies around the world have responded to pandemics throughout history, such as inhaling musk and rosemary in 14th-century Florence or beating their utensils and crying "Go, Corona Go!" in 21st-century New Delhi.

In the prologue, Ms Hauser, whose previous works include a history of vegetarianism, recounts reading Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, collection of short stories inspired by the Black Death, during the first outbreak, in 2020, of Covid-19 in Berlin. "I read the book mostly for pleasure, but also with an ulterior motive," she writes. "I had been wondering if, and how, Covid would change societies around the world." A little earlier in the book, in

an author's note, she writes about how plagues that had affected people around the world had been studied mostly from a Eurocentric perspective. "(E)ntire continents, especially Africa, had been forgotten," she writes.

To correct this perspective, she takes her readers on a roller-coaster ride "from sixth-century Constantinople



THE MORAL CONTAGION

Author: Julia Hauser & Sarnath Banerjee

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Price: ₹699

slums where mill and dock workers live in unsanitary conditions.

Laxmibai Tilak, a contemporary writer, recounts how plague camps, where patients were quarantined, were "kingdoms of the god of death". When bacteriologist Waldemar Haffkine invented vaccination for the plague,

many orthodox Paris and Brahmins refused to take it because the bacilli were sourced from the bodies of people of low repute and caste. Then, as now, people's choices on how they would fight a mortal disease depended more on reasons other than science.

While the stories, with their contemporary resonances, make the book immensely readable, Mr Banerjee's illustrations elevate the book. His interest in the macabre and the uncanny, evident since his early books such as *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* (2007) and *The Harappa Files* (2011), must have made the plague an ideal subject for him. His depictions of humans make no attempt at verisimilitude. Instead, the physical features of the characters reveal their psychological states — fear, desire, wickedness. They perfectly capture how a pestilence can also be, to borrow from Susan Sontag, a metaphor. For both the physical and moral decay of human societies, entrapped in a dance of death.

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OPINION

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{ OUR TAKE }

In Tamil Nadu,
clash of visions

The contest in the state involving BJP and Dravidian parties will have implications beyond the general elections

Tamil Nadu, the only large state to vote in a single day on April 19, the opening phase of the 2024 general elections, is significant for multiple reasons. One, it is the largest South Indian state in terms of Lok Sabha seats (39). Two, it is a state where regional parties hold sway even in the general elections. Three, it has resisted the advance of the BJP, even as the party has successfully expanded its footprint across India. Four, the BJP has invested heavily in its campaign, hoping to win a few seats (and a substantial share of the vote) and emerge as a major force in the state. Five, this is one of the two states that the Opposition almost swept in 2019 and where it hopes to repeat the performance in the upcoming polls as well. A decent tally from Tamil Nadu is necessary for the BJP to meet its target of 370 seats.

Tamil Nadu has been an outlier in national politics for more than half a century due to the presence of a substantive strand of linguistic subnationalism that also defined itself in opposition to all centralising tendencies. The Dravidian movement, which mobilised around Tamil subnationalism and promoted its values of anti-caste social justice politics, continues to influence the discourse in Tamil Nadu through the two main poles of state politics, the DMK and AIADMK. Not surprisingly, the BJP, which promotes unitarian politics, has found it difficult to find a foothold in Tamil Nadu.

The big question of this election is whether India's ruling party can break the Dravidian consensus and win Tamils over. In the decline of the AIADMK, the BJP spots an opportunity and has crafted an alliance that it believes can challenge the formidable DMK-led INDIA bloc. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been frequently visiting the state to sell his party to the electorate in Tamil Nadu. Over many years, the BJP has tried to evolve a political language and imagery that it hopes will appeal to Tamil political, cultural, and religious sentiments. The controversy over the Katchatheevu island was one such pitch. In his campaigns, Modi has targeted alleged corruption in the DMK and the dynastic tendencies within the party.

Tamil Nadu will test the BJP's resolve to become a pan-Indian hegemon. Mandate 2024 in the state is not merely a contest between the BJP and the Dravidian parties, but also a clash of distinct political visions regarding India — including federalism and linguistic identity. Its implications will resonate beyond the outcome on June 4, and both parties are aware that if the BJP manages to get its vote share close to 20%, it may well mean the end of the business-as-usual politics Tamil Nadu has seen since the late 1960s.

India the bright spot
in sluggish economy

The April edition of International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook (WEO) shows that the global economy has done better in the year than how the Fund expected it to do. Has the world managed a soft landing from the back-to-back shocks of the pandemic, war in Europe, and monetary tightening to rein in inflation? The tone and tenor of the WEO report suggest that while things could have been much worse, the picture is bearish if one were to make a long-term comparison.

The report also underlines that generating broad-based growth tailwinds is not going to be easy. Policymakers will have to be cautious in dialling back on monetary tightening, and be mindful of the growing national debt burden, especially in advanced countries. All this will have to be done while dealing with the political challenge of growing discontent against economic inequality across and within countries. These short-term challenges will be accompanied by medium-term geopolitical instability in Europe and West Asia and the slightly longer-term challenge of growing resistance to accommodating Chinese exports in new sectors such as electric vehicles and semiconductors. These are far too many problems to be solved with conventional policy tools.

India's economic story, as described in the WEO until 2029, is of course very different from the world at large. It will continue to be the fastest-growing major economy despite a moderation from current levels of growth. This is good enough to make India the darling of global capital, but might not be enough to give a sustainable boost to the living standards of most of its population. This calls for greater focus and innovation in economic policy.

President Biden's
Netanyahu burden

By allowing Israel to set an impossible war aim, ignore humanitarian concerns, paint any criticism as anti-Semitic and risk a wider regional war, Joe Biden has made the biggest mistake of his political career

In foreign policy, like in life, never let friends dictate your posture. The interests of your friends, even your closest ones, will not be identical as yours. At times, there can be a trade-off involved, for give-and-take is essential in diplomacy just like in any human interaction. But letting friends force or manipulate you to agree to their objective and get you to endorse and enable actions to achieve that objective — even if you know that objective is unattainable and is destroying your reputation globally and weakening you internally in the process — defies common sense.

Yet, that's exactly what Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has succeeded in doing to United States (US) President Joe Biden. Or, to put it more accurately, that is what Biden has allowed Netanyahu to do to him and the US.

A caveat is essential here. America's relationship with Israel is inti-

mate for a range of historical factors and cannot be understood through a narrow State-centric, interest-centric or sovereignty-centric frame. Biden is neither the first nor will he be the last US president to maintain a special relationship with Israel. After Hamas's terrible terror attacks on October 7, any US administration would have supported Israel unconditionally, unhesitatingly and fully. And Israel isn't the only actor at fault in what has happened in West Asia.

But just see a sample of what Netanyahu has got the US to sign on to in the past six months.

First, Israel decided that its war aim was to destroy Hamas altogether. This required the full invasion of Gaza. It was always clear that this would result in Israeli killing thousands given how embedded Hamas was in Palestinian society, even if the astounding nature and scale of what would turn out to be Israel's war crimes wasn't known. Biden endorsed this objective instead of telling Netanyahu on day one that the US was with Israel, but Tel Aviv needed to have a target that was more achievable and didn't entail this degree of human suffering.

Instead, Netanyahu used Biden's genuine ideological commitment to Israel's security and the surge in public sympathy for Israel to extract an American commitment to the goal of fully eliminating Hamas. If Biden thought Israel could pull this off, his

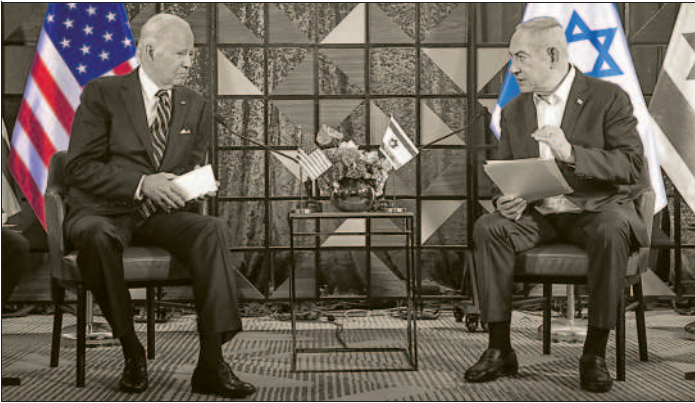
judgment was wrong; if he thought Israel couldn't achieve the aim, yet went along with it, he was being dishonest; if he thought human lives lost in the process didn't matter, it was cruel; and if he didn't realise that Netanyahu was setting up this aim with the intent of prolonging his own stint in power, the veteran American politician didn't read the Israeli leader's intent correctly. This was the first mistake.

Second, Netanyahu then refused to make space for any humanitarian concession for Palestinians in Gaza.

In the last six months, the US has had to exert tremendous pressure on Israel at every juncture — from the opening of Rafah and then the Kerem Shalom crossing to enable food and aid to Gaza to air-dropping aid directly to announcing its intent to establish a port to provide aid directly into Gaza to forcing Israel to promise more aid through other crossings in northern Gaza after a direct and blunt message earlier this month to forcing Netanyahu to pause his plans to attack Rafah.

The fact that Netanyahu hasn't cared about the plight of Palestinians one bit reflects poorly on Israel. But the fact that the US has had to invest so much for so little at every stage, and yet has protected Netanyahu and not called him out, reflects poorly on America and Biden.

Third, Biden allowed Israel, its



Netanyahu used Biden's genuine ideological commitment to Israel's security and the surge in public sympathy for Israel to extract an American commitment to the goal of fully eliminating Hamas.

proxies and the wider Jewish lobby in the US to paint any criticism of Israel's war aims or conduct as anti-Semitic instead of firmly defending the political space to criticise Israel. This enabled Netanyahu to have much greater sway over American public opinion even as he was being inhuman on the ground. Biden also allowed Israel to ignore global public opinion for months by offering him a blank cheque at the UN. This enabled Netanyahu to ignore the criticism across not just the Arab street but the wider Global South and even among people of conscience and colour in the West.

Biden thought this public display of solidarity with Israel would allow the US to privately shape Netanyahu's conduct. Instead, the US lost tremendous goodwill and credibility across the world, Biden got much weaker at home politically as his own base turned against him for being complicit in the war crimes, and all of this actually diminished American leverage over Netanyahu.

And finally, while there can be no defence of what Iran and its proxies have done across the region, Netanyahu stirred the pot by directly killing Iranian commanders at an Iranian

diplomatic facility in Syria. Given that the US has been so focused on preventing a wider regional escalation, if Netanyahu did this without telling the Americans — and the US insists it didn't know — he was once again forcing Biden's hand by sharpening the Israel-Iran conflict. If Israel did this while keeping the Americans in the loop, Biden allowed Israel to gamble with the possibility of a wider war. The US may have succeeded in helping Israel repel Iranian strikes for now but the situation remains fragile and continues to require a deft American balancing act.

Biden has been America's most effective president of this century. He rescued American democracy, brought the country out of the pandemic, offered a new economic blueprint, has been internally inclusive and offered a methodical and thoughtful approach to several foreign policy questions. He may still win the next elections too. But by allowing his Israeli friend, and a deeply unreliable and cynical friend at that, to set American policy, he has made the biggest political mistake of his life.

The views expressed are personal

The emerging election
mosaic in Uttar Pradesh

The big picture of Polls 2024 is emerging gradually from a collage of different miniatures. The same is true of the electoral scene in Uttar Pradesh (UP) as well. The picture in the state remains clear in some parts, and hazy in others. Let's try and see if we can decipher what lies ahead in UP, which elects 80 members to the Lok Sabha.

First, the upcoming parliamentary election is going to be a bipolar contest in most of the seats in the state, and triangular in some. Wherever it is bipolar, it will be a face-off between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the Samajwadi Party (SP)-Congress's INDIA bloc. It will be triangular where the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is alone or in a direct or indirect alliance with small parties such as the Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), Mahan Dal, All India Majlis-E-Itehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) presents a third front.

Second, the BJP is deploying all its political capital such as the popularity of Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi, Hindutva mobilisation, the network of government scheme beneficiaries (*labharthi varg*), the governance delivery of the Yogi Adityanath government in the state, micro-social engineering, Ayodhya temple consecration, and the party's unrivalled booth management. Thus, it has already taken the lead in attracting large sections of the state's people. On the other hand, the INDIA bloc has become limited to being an alliance between the Samajwadi Party and the Congress — the BSP, at the very outset, had rejected membership of the bloc, and parties such as the Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), Azad Samaj Party, and Janwadi Party deserted the SP.

The SP has failed to diversify its social base: It lost many of its allies, which were caste-based parties with local or regional presence. The SP could have achieved two things by continuing its alliance with them. First, this would have helped it project a large, rainbow alliance of various caste electorates, with obvious consequences for its eventual voting share in the state. Second, this would have helped the party break a commonly held stereotype about it — that it is a party dominated by a single caste, and therefore, bound to prioritise that caste's interests. Correcting its image and diversifying its social base has indeed been the key challenge for SP chief Akhilesh Yadav. Its major ally, the Congress, is not in a position

to attract an impressive number of voters towards the INDIA bloc in the state.

The BSP, or any third bloc, could lead to a fragmentation of the anti-BJP votes. It is also true that the BSP may create hurdles for the smooth movement of the Dalit voters in the state towards the BJP. The BSP's strategy for the 2024 elections is two-pronged. First, it is looking to create an electoral nucleus of Dalits and Muslims. And second, it is looking to attract votes from Other Backward Classes and upper castes by giving tickets to leaders from these groups. To forge a Dalit-Muslim electoral base, the BSP has named prominent Muslim faces such as Munquad Ali, Sham-suddin Rayeen, and Jafar Malik among its star campaigners. Except for Satish Chandra Mishra, who is a Brahmin, most of its campaigners are from the Jatav, Jat, and Bania castes. It has also projected leaders from the Pal community and other Most Backward Classes (MBC). Thus, the BSP has launched another attempt at micro-social engineering.

There are three reasons why the BSP could spoil the INDIA bloc's chances. First, in some of the seats, its candidates are from the same or similar social groups as those being fielded by the INDIA bloc. Second, the BSP hasn't fielded mere "vote *katwa*" candidates (those who are unlikely to get enough votes to win but can pull votes from a serious contender), but influential ones in a number of seats. Third, while the INDIA bloc, given its *pichre*, *Dalit aur alpsankhyak* (PDA) election pitch, views the backward classes, Dalits and minorities as its possible vote bank, the BSP is emerging as a strong contender for mobilising their votes.

In UP, while the BJP started working on its booth management long ago, the Opposition parties have mounted such efforts only recently. The BJP narrative is already set on the ground, centred on a Hindutva, development, anti-corruption, and anti-dynasty pitch. In contrast, the INDIA bloc has not yet framed its narrative. While the BJP's narrative and the public images of Modi and Adityanath seem to be without any inherent contradictions, the INDIA bloc has much to do to match or surpass the BJP.

Western UP matters a lot in any electoral planning for the state. Modi started his UP campaign from Meerut. Two days later, Amit Shah addressed a rally in Muzaffarnagar. In western UP, the BJP is following its earlier strategy of creating a broader rainbow alliance of various Hindu castes and communities. The emphasis is on consolidating the party's support base among the non-Jat, non-Jatav communities such as Saini, Gurjar, Kashyap, Thakur, Brahmin and Vaishya, and add to this Jat support, which has been strengthened by the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) joining the NDA. In Bundelkhand and eastern UP, the BJP is trying to get support from all Hindu castes. One can easily make out from the tone and tenor of the party's ongoing campaign that there is a concerted attempt to woo the Yadavs and the Jatavs, the core voters of the SP and the BSP, respectively.

The full electoral picture in UP, of course, is still to emerge. But the pointers to the future are very much there.

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The views expressed are personal



Prashant
Jha



Badri
Narayan



Ashish
Kothari

{ JAKE SULLIVAN }

US NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR

In the coming days, the US will impose new sanctions targeting Iran. These new sanctions will continue a steady drumbeat of pressure to contain and degrade Iran's military capacity

Two poll manifestos,
two different mindsets

As India gears up for history's biggest-ever elections, it is important to enquire about the mindset of its two biggest parties — the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) — which to some extent is evident in their poll manifestos.

Both are strong on welfare for the marginalised, education, health, economy, environment, jobs, defence and infrastructure. Both promise some progressive actions, for example, renewable energy, sustaining cultural heritage, multi-modal urban transportation, and cleaner air and water. On some specific counts, the BJP scores higher, such as the adoption of natural farming, promoting learning in the mother tongue and traditional sports, and advancing sustainable consumption. On others, the Congress scores: Examples include the promise of "same work, same wage" for men and women, self-reliance of *panchayats* in energy, climate resilience, free and universal health care, urban job guarantees, and linking ecological restoration to livelihood creation.

Sadly, some crucial actions that could lead India to achieve these goals are missing in both. For decades, heavy industrialisation-driven policies have led to jobless growth despite high economic growth. This has also led to the destruction of millions of traditional occupations like crafts. The parties could have prioritised reservation of several manufacturing and service sectors for micro and small production units. Multi-modal transport is essential, but neither manifesto explicitly prioritises cycling, walking and buses. Both list environment-related actions, but these lack coherence without a comprehensive land and water use, and environmental governance policy. Neither lists the need to diversify indicators of well-being, rather than relying on concepts such as GDP. Education in both remains top-down and homogenised rather than a localised, community-integrated, ecologically rooted approach built on multiple knowledge systems. While promising green energy, neither asks the question: How much energy demand is sustainable?

Instead, both promise ecologically and socially disruptive actions. The Congress lauds its record in ushering India into the global economy in 1991. The BJP promises an intensification of the same when it says India will become the world's third-largest economy and offers to turn nearly all sectors into "global" hubs or models with digitisation. Fragile areas like the islands are targeted for global tourist flow by the BJP; this is alarming, as indicated by a proposed mega-project in Nicobar that will destroy 130 sq km of prime rainforest and dispossess some of India's oldest tribal populations. Its focus on

mega-solar, wind, hydro and nuclear energy projects has also led to land-grabbing and ecological damage. Both, ironically, mention they will be mindful of sustainability.

Here, the similarities end. On many macro dimensions, there are crucial differences. While the BJP treats Bharat's people as recipients of State largesse (reinforcing the colonial "*mai-baap*" mentality), the Congress offers to empower citizens through rights they can use to hold the government accountable. In this, it is reviving its record of promulgating several rights-based laws in the early 2000s. The mention of "rights" comes only once in the BJP manifesto, and it offers nothing on strengthening democracy (other than the cliché of Bharat being the "Mother of Democracy"). The Congress notes the alarming reduction of citizens' spaces in recent years and promises several actions — reviving federalism (with specific mention of empowering Ladakh, Kashmir, Puducherry and Delhi), returning autonomy to academic institutions, the media, the judiciary, and constitutionally mandated institutions (like Election Commission, and Human Rights Commission), all of which have been severely undermined of late. It adds the establishment of an independent Environment Authority. It notes the need to safeguard personal rights and the right to privacy,

something the BJP is silent on other than promising a Uniform Civil Code, a move that has generated enormous controversy. The only concession the BJP gives to village governance is more fiscal autonomy to *panchayats*, an important proposal, of course, while the Congress says it will ensure *gram sabha* powers for all *panchayat* functions. It promises equality for women through several measures and specifically mentions the rights of disabled people and LGBTQIA+ (the BJP mentions only transgenders, and "*divyans*" in a limited context). An innovative promise by the Congress is a right to apprenticeship for all graduates, and its promises to unorganised workers are framed more in the language of empowerment than charity. It also lists actions to bring back communal harmony and stop hate speech and hate crimes. The BJP is silent on these issues.

We know that poll manifestos can be easily forgotten once a party comes to office. But they do indicate a mindset. On that count, given its focus on empowerment, decentralisation, democratic freedoms and rights-based justice, the Congress manifesto seems to score over the BJP's top-down patronage approach.

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The views expressed are personal



OUR VIEW



Birla's target spotlights the classic 'rule of three'

The group's aim to be among the top three in major financial-service markets evokes a 'rule of three' that top leaders of businesses in competitive markets find they must contend with

The 'rule of three' looks ripe for a return to management discourse. At the launch on Tuesday of an online platform designed to "acquire customers digitally at scale" that is expected to become a "full-stack financial services provider," Aditya Birla Group Chairman Kumar Mangalam Birla outlined the conglomerate's ambitions in this space. Armed with its new app, Aditya Birla Capital Limited (ABCL) is aiming to add 30 million customers in three years to its current user base of 35 million, he reportedly said, adding that the Group intends to rank among the top three players in the fields of lending, asset management and life insurance, given their high growth potential over the next three-to-five years. This aim needed no elaboration. In general, the number 'three' is special in many business contexts. Not just as a rule of memory—the top three brands are typically most cited in any market with high rivalry—but also as an organizational principle. As management scholars pointed out after India opened itself up to greater competition in 1991, competitive markets were often seen converging towards a three-player structure. In many industries, only three companies tended to capture the bulk of sales and profits, leaving little for the rest. With market forces at play and barriers dropping for mergers and acquisitions, this was expected to happen in several sectors. In response to this 'rule of three,' business groups with diverse interests embarked on portfolio reshuffles to focus only on enterprises that could be in the top three of their respective fields or were already counted as such. Also-rans, went the rationale, would not be worth the effort and were best sold off as assets that other players would better be able to run. In the three

decades since those exercises began, the rule has aged well. It remains in wide use as a test for whether to double down on market participation or withdraw. An in-depth take on the idea was proposed by Jagdish Sheth and Rajendra Sisodia in their 2002 book, *The Rule of Three: Surviving and Thriving in Competitive Markets*. They took the rule as a guiding force for the formulation of a business strategy in the face of dynamics observed in well-contested markets. In their analysis, success demands a competitive edge that's acquired best by focusing on three key aspects of a business: customer segments, strategic relationships and core capabilities. Making a difference needs mastery of each. First, they recommend identifying three distinct customer segments to target, so that offerings can be made on the basis of a duly close grasp of their differing but unique needs and preferences. Second, they advocate forging strategic relationships with suppliers, distributors and other stakeholders that could play a vital role in a company's success. Third, they argue that it's important for a company to develop and leverage three core capabilities that differentiate them from rivals and generate value. Ultimately, this is the saw that needs to be sharpened to sustain the market advantage acquired. Broadly speaking, this advice has also aged well over the past two decades. As far as competitive intensity goes, financial services are set for an online pivot that's likely to favour size even more dramatically, given the winner-takes-all tendency of digital spaces. ABCL's app will face rivals from Tata Capital, Bajaj Finance and also Reliance's Jio Financial Services. Let's watch how this game of apps shapes up. There's nothing quite like a classic old rule being tested in a whole new space.

GUEST VIEW

The abundance algorithm: Tech is re-wiring economic prospects

Plenty for all sounded like a utopian dream till new digital tools emerged to reveal their wonders



SAMIRAN GHOSH
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Stephen Covey propounded the abundance mindset, the basic proposition of which is that the world has more than enough resources to satisfy one's needs. Today's average person enjoys daily luxuries that the royalty of yore could not imagine: instant communication, broadcast TV, global travel and antibiotics. Abundance has long been part of the human discourse. Think of the Garden of Eden, Field of Reeds in Egyptian afterlife, or Sukhavati, the Land of Bliss in Buddhism. An ideal world has been a common theme in many ancient cultures. More recently, Adam Smith and David Hume discussed economic abundance through division of labour and free trade. Peter Diamandis and Steven Kotler explored technology-enabled abundance in *Abundance: The Future Is Better Than You Think*. Does that mean we have no scarcity anymore? In truth, abundance and scarcity coexist, and economic paradoxes support this. One notable example is Adam Smith's 'diamond-water paradox' or the 'paradox of value.' It highlights the oddness of high value placed on diamonds that have little practical use and the relatively low value placed on water, which is essential for life. The scarcity of diamonds drives up their perceived value, while the abundance of water explains its lower price. So, can utopian abundance extend

further? Can we have universal access to essential goods and services, especially in developing countries? How do we genuinely create abundance for all? BCG studies state that a 10% increase in digital payments adoption could add \$1.5 trillion to global GDP by 2025. Reducing the gender gap in the workforce could add upwards of \$28 trillion to global GDP by 2025, says McKinsey. According to the World Bank, achieving universal broadband access by 2030 could add \$2 trillion to the GDP of developing countries. The list goes on. So, abundance for all is an excellent old-fashioned selfish idea with monetary benefits. But how to execute it? One prerequisite is scale. Change needs to happen at scale and fast. No room for incremental gains. As per the Bank for International Settlements, India achieved 80% financial inclusion in 7 years; it would have taken 47 years by traditional means. India's tele-density went from 37% to 93% in 8 years, thanks to eKYC, while the cost of data plummeted to 0.17 cents per gigabyte. We now have a track record and have become an exponent of the digital public infrastructure (DPI) movement. What about other emerging markets? Modular Open Source Identity Platform (MOSIP), a not-for-profit founded in 2018, helps governments conceive, develop and implement ID systems. It has covered over 100 million individuals in 17 countries. Its cost of running a pilot? Zero. Ushahidi, another open-source platform, has empowered 25 million plus users to gather, analyse, respond and act swiftly on data. 50-in-5 is another campaign to help at least 50 countries design, implement and scale at least one DPI component in a safe, inclusive and interoperable manner by the end of 2028. It hopes to radically shorten implementation journeys by sharing learnings, best practices and built-for-purpose open technologies that can reduce costs and maximize the impact for all; 13 countries, including Bangladesh, Norway, Senegal and Sri

Lanka, are already on board. Back to India. Commercial inclusion is as important as financial inclusion for true abundance to become a reality. We remain a country of fragmented micro-economies with high transaction costs. Only 5-6% of about 100 million MSMEs sell their wares on digital platforms. Ride-hailing serves account for less than 6 million of 100 million daily public trips. Despite modern technology, 87% of retail is still unorganized and digital inclusion is just 7% of the market. This is so for most of the world. Of late, centralized platforms and online marketplaces have taken us away from the promise of equal-opportunity commerce. Timothy May, in his *Crypto Anarchist Manifesto* (which may have inspired Bitcoin), talks about total freedom to trade as essential to breaking away from centralized control. So, how do we decentralize e-commerce? Open operating models, perhaps? Data suggests that more inclusive business models aimed at low-income populations could generate \$1.3 trillion in market opportunities by 2030. The Beckn Protocol (championed by Nandan Nilekani, Pramod Varma and Sujith Nair) could answer these woes. It is a set of open specifications that lets buyers and sellers conduct transactions without intermediaries. The results are Beckn powers the Open Network for Digital Commerce, which processes 200,000 orders per day within a year of launch, and Namma Yatri in Bengaluru (125,000 daily trips), with numerous other implementations in progress. Internationally, governments in Brazil (Belem), Gambia (OGa) and cities like Amsterdam, Zurich and Paris (interoperable urban mobility) are leveraging Beckn. Free and fair abundance by design now seems possible, thanks to the D³ of open-source tech (decentralized, democratic networks and DPI) and thinking at scale. As Harry Bosch says, "Everybody counts, or nobody counts."

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

There are only two ways to establish competitive advantage: do things better than others or do them differently.

KARL ALBRECHT

MY VIEW | WORLD APART

Japan may have an answer to its demographic crisis

RAHUL JACOB



is a Mint columnist and a former Financial Times foreign correspondent.

Last week, the Japanese government announced it had passed an alarming milestone. The native population of the country had fallen by 837,000 in the 12 months to October 2023, a decline of almost 100 people an hour. The world has shifted from dire predictions in the 1960s of a population explosion to today's all-too-optimistic view that large youthful populations are a guarantee of demographic dividends in places like India and Africa, but Japan has always been an outlier. Call it the country of a population implosion. Last year, its labour force shrank for the first time. This is a milestone it has been able to navigate its way around in recent years because the labour force participation of women increased. And in February, the government announced that the number of babies born in 2023 showed a 5.1% decline. The number of people in the country above the age of 65 is almost 30%.

In a seemingly unrelated event, the other big headline out of Tokyo last month was

that Japan's central bank had raised interest rates for the first time since 2007. Rates rose to a marginal 0.1%, but proof that wages are rising at a decent clip of 4-5% suggests that inflation of about 2%, the central bank's repeatedly stated aim, may be here to stay. The central bank that pioneered quantitative easing and has run an ultra-loose monetary policy for decades finally appears to be saying the policy has served its purpose. The two seemingly separate events are connected, of course. It is precisely because Japan has been ageing so rapidly that savers have been content to leave their money with banks or post offices, even if an era of negative interest rates penalized them for doing so. Unusually for a developed country, more than half of Japanese savings are in deposits. Indeed, the stock-market bull run of the past year has been largely driven by foreign optimism about the country's prospects. Plenty of questions loom in assessing whether Japan is finally becoming a 'normal' economy, as the *Financial Times* asked in an article earlier this month. (A parenthetical question: Which major economy looks normal in a world of seemingly persistent higher inflation and high public debt?) While a recent round of wage negotiations saw large Japanese companies agree to

raises of 5.3%, it remains unclear they can pass them on to consumers. Retail spending has been strong, but that is strongly influenced by record tourist numbers last year. Izumi Devalier, head of Japan economics at Bank of America, told the *FT* recently that although some tourism industries are raising prices (rail fares are up, for instance), the country is not seeing "a sufficient breadth" of price increases. She notes that the Japanese government has—unusually—been encouraging smaller companies to stand firm in pushing for higher prices from large firms. But, with almost a third of its people above 65, this segment of the population may simply cut back expenditure if confronted with higher prices. The real issue is that, as with rapid population growth, governments everywhere struggle to turn demographic changes around. Rapidly ageing populations now characterize much of Europe and East Asia. Countries as diverse as South Korea and Nordic countries have very low fertility rates.

China too, after abandoning its misguided one-child policy, has found that fewer young women want to marry, let alone have children. In that sense, both in terms of exiting quantitative-easing holding hands that central banks had anticipated and arresting falling fertility rates, Japan is a mirror to the developed world, albeit of an unsettling kind. Last year, marriages dropped to less than half a million, the lowest level since the 1930s. Reworking Jane Austen's famous line, across East Asia, a single woman in possession of a job and graduate degree is less likely than ever to be in want of a husband. The Japanese government, run mostly by men, seems to feel this is all about the difficulties of child rearing in expensive, crowded cities. Its subsidies to induce couples to have more children include additional childcare handouts if couples have three or more kids. In January 2023, it quixotically introduced a \$7,600 incentive per child for those parents who move out of crowded cities and stay away for

five years. In fact, married couples in Japan have on average 1.9 children, which is close enough to the replacement rate, but fewer than ever are getting married. An aversion to living together, as so many couples do in the West, only compounds the problem. The Japanese government's social engineering on a grand scale has little to show for it thus far. Last month, a British academic writing to the *FT* may have come up with a better explanation than the government's: Japanese women graduates overwhelmingly want to marry graduates, but the trouble is there are more women graduates than men. A staggering one-fourth of Japanese men and women in the age group of 18-39 are estimated not to have had sex, according to data cited by the UK academic John Bateson. The aversion to living together without marrying worsens the problem of too few couples and too few children. Japanese law, meanwhile, allows only one family name after marriage; more than 90% of couples take the man's name. For professional women, this is almost certainly an issue. For Japan on the whole, the answer is immigration. One of the world's most closed societies has begun to open its doors to skilled workers from elsewhere. Last June, the number of foreigners living in Japan hit a record 3.2 million.

One of the world's most closed societies has found that its economy must open up to immigrants

Climate vs conservation

SC on solar energy vis-a-vis protecting the Bustard

Sanjay Notani
Naghm Ghei
Sarthak Yadav

On March 21, 2024, the Supreme Court recognised a fundamental right against climate change impacts, in a case focused on protecting the Great Indian Bustard (GIB) from threats like collisions with electrical cables.

The court revisited its April 2021 ruling, which initially prohibited overhead power transmission lines in a presumed GIB habitat spanning 99,000 sq km. Various parties contested this, arguing the protected zone exceeded the GIB's actual habitat and included areas suitable for solar energy production.

This case required the Supreme Court to do a balancing act, juxtaposing the need for promoting solar energy with the need for conserving the GIB.

The Court referenced India's commitments under international instruments including the Kyoto Protocol, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the Paris Agreement. Notably, it recognized that India's Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement, included a pledge to derive 50 per cent of its electricity from non-fossil fuel sources by 2030. The Court stressed that investing in renewable energy not only aligns with international obligations but also brings socio-economic advantages like energy security, affordability, and poverty reduction, crucial for India's future prosperity and resilience.

In contrast, the Court evaluated the imperative of safeguarding the GIB and examined the consequences of "undergrounding" as a means to achieve this objective. Emphasising the significance of alternative approaches, the Court concluded that undergrounding power lines was impractical and financially burdensome, posed risks to environmental integrity and human safety, and failed to comprehensively tackle all factors contributing to the decline in the GIB's population.

The Court expanded upon previous interpretations of the right to a healthy environment by recognising the right to be "free" from the adverse impacts of climate change. This right was read into both Articles 21 and 14 of the Constitution.

In conclusion, the prohibition on overhead power lines was revoked and an Empowered



PROTECTING WILDLIFE. The Great Indian Bustard

Committee tasked with undertaking measures to protect the GIB – including assessing the feasibility and extent of overhead and underground electric lines, exploring alternative construction methods, and suggesting additional protective measures to the Court. The Committee is required to submit a report by July 31, 2024, which the Court will review in the second week of August 2024.

THE IMPLICATIONS
The Supreme Court's decision to recognise an express right to be free from the adverse effects of climate change is linked to an understanding that combating climate change not only involves undertaking activities that reduce the negative impacts of climate change (i.e. "mitigation"), but also involves undertaking measures to adapt existing ecological, social or economic systems to such effects (i.e. "adaptation").

Thus, the right to be free from climate change's adverse effects encompasses both preventing further environmental degradation and adopting proactive measures like replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy sources.

The judgment reflects a careful balancing between conflicting interests.

Furthermore, the Court itself recognised the importance of climate change litigation as a tool in "advancing rights-based energy transitions".

Indeed, this judgment is the latest in a slew of climate-forward judicial pronouncements occurring across the globe.

However, in the absence of a specific directive to the Government, it remains to be seen how this "right to be free from the effects of climate change" will be prioritised by the government.

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AKSHAY GAMBHIR
PRITHA VENKATACHALAM

This month marks 10 years since India became the first country in the world to mandate CSR by law — requiring companies that fulfilled certain profitability criteria to spend at least 2 per cent of their average net profits over the preceding three years on social responsibility programmes.

What began as a unique experiment has unleashed significant capital for the social sector and the nation. CSR giving unlocked a total of ₹1,53,000 crore worth of capital towards social impact from FY15 to FY22, and a 2022 Bridgespan Group report noted that CSR giving represents the second-largest source of social sector funding in the country. At this rate of growth, CSR could channel an additional ₹6,38,000 crore of capital for social development through 2033.

Before the law was implemented in April 2014, corporate giving was largely voluntary and unregulated, encouraged by the Ministry of Corporate Affairs. Whilst several companies gave back to society historically, many others began CSR in earnest only after the law came into effect, strategically aligning their CSR focus with business priorities.

In the initial years, a compliance mindset reigned with companies funding safely within the boundaries of the law what was convenient or proximate to their locations, and, often, what could get them publicity.

COMPLIANCE TO IMPACT
With a decade of experience, the focus of some CSR organisations has gradually shifted to the impact of their initiatives on both society and the business. They are investing in projects with clear, measurable outcomes, and beginning to bring a geographic and thematic focus to their work — believing that effective CSR programmes do fewer things well, rather than many things in a fragmented way.

For instance, JSW Foundation, the social development arm of the JSW Group, has sectoral heads for areas like agriculture and livelihoods, health and nutrition, and education, in addition to location heads in regions like rural Maharashtra and Karnataka.

The focus on impact has also changed CSR staffing from lone CSR leads — frequently double-hatting in their roles with administrative or HR or marketing functions — to dedicated CSR teams across roles and functions.



KARTHIKEYAN G

CSR is carving out an impact

COMING OF AGE. From mere compliance, CSR activity has now scaled up, bringing about genuine social change

They are bringing valuable corporate strengths, such as strong programme management skills, and organisational capabilities in finance, HR, technology, and communications, to the work.

Often, top leadership is part of the team to inject a longer-term impact outlook. CSR teams also began engaging with the boards more often, outside the mandate of board meetings.

There has also been a cultural shift in how corporates approach CSR — viewing employees as important stakeholders and instilling a sense of ownership and pride by involving them in field visits and volunteer opportunities. As part of their employee engagement programme, EdelGive Foundation has connections with different non-profits that staff members can contribute their skills and expertise to, for example.

For impact to scale to

Only 2 per cent of CSR funding goes towards districts identified as aspirational by the government.

population-level change, investment should reach underserved States with higher levels of poverty and lower SDG scores, and sectors that have historically not attracted private funding.

Yet, a forthcoming study by Give Grants building on Bridgespan's analysis indicates that only 2 per cent of CSR funding currently goes towards districts identified as aspirational by the government. On the other hand, the wealthier States of Delhi, Goa, and Maharashtra receive the most CSR funding, on a per capita basis.

SKEWED FOCUS
Similarly, education and healthcare have been the highest funded sectors in the last eight years, with less than 1 per cent of expenditure directed towards solving socio-economic inequalities.

Therein lies the opportunity for CSR in the next decade. Corporates can catalyse impact at scale, over the long term, by scaling-in — deeper impact for select communities, for example, reaching aspirational communities around factories, across their social needs. Or they can do it by scaling-out — reaching a wider population, for example, through national initiatives

that address the root causes of inequalities.

There is also a need to fund innovative solutions. Bajaj Finserv's partnership with Neomotion, a start-up that creates wheelchairs and other vehicles for the differently abled, is a worthy example.

Investing in multi-year grants that enable NGOs to be more nimble and agile will create sustainable impact. Nanhi Kali's girl child education project, which reached 2,000 girls in 2012, is now impacting nearly 20 lakh girls with multi-year support from KC Mahindra Education Trust.

The CSR law has led to a reliable, growing stream of funding for vital social change and has elevated social impact work to the highest levels of corporate decision making. Alongside India's economic growth, a sustained effort from CSR leaders/corporate boards, non-profit partners, and the government can help address long-standing developmental and inequity challenges — to truly unlock greater potential of CSR giving in the coming decade.

Venkatachalam is a partner and co-head, Asia and Africa, and Gambhir is manager, at The Bridgespan Group

thehindubusinessline. TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

April 18, 2004

Interest rate cap on NRE deposit cut

The Reserve Bank of India on Saturday capped the interest rate on Non-Resident External (NRE) deposit schemes to LIBOR/SWAP rates with effect on close of business in India on April 17. Earlier NRE deposit schemes attracted a rate of 25 basis points above LIBOR/SWAP.

Tardy implementation mars India Inc's investment plans

Corporate India has announced huge investments for 2003-04. But there appears many a slip between the announcement and its implementation. For every Rs 100 worth of investments announced, only Rs 38.34 worth of projects have taken off, according to a survey conducted by Projects Today, a division of Mumbai-based Economic Research India Ltd. This ratio has not changed much from the previous years.

RBI tighten norms on import credit

The Reserve Bank of India has tightened the screws on import credit. Henceforth credits up to \$20 million per import transaction will be permitted only for "imports of capital goods". This measure pertains to import transactions with a maturity period exceeding one but less than three years, said an RBI press release.

A poll agenda for the environment

S Balaji

The seven-phase general election is starting on Friday. But protection of environment and forests has not received the prominence it deserves in poll promises. We have a responsibility to protect our present environment and bequeath it to the next generations. The Supreme Court has recently declared the right to clean environment as one of the fundamental rights of the citizens under the Article 21 of the Constitution.

In view of climate change, we are experiencing increase in temperature and frequent recurrence of extreme climate events.

Forests are threatened due to habitat destruction. Forest diversion and development close to forests should be avoided for minimizing human-animal conflicts afflicting several States. Increasing the carbon stock of our fragile forest ecosystem is possible through promotion of assisted natural regeneration. Conservation of flora

and fauna and sustainable use of non-timber forest produce in the forest will help in protecting livelihood of the tribals.

Protection of mangroves along the coast will act as bio-shield against storms and tsunamis. Agro-forestry has great potential and must be promoted in a massive scale for realising the national goal of 33 per cent green cover as well as improving the economic condition of dryland farmers.

Conservation of our wetlands especially in urban areas is need of the hour. They provide water supply and recharge groundwater. Rivers, lakes and tanks in the cities are getting increasingly polluted by sewage and garbage. Several lakes are being encroached with impunity in cities like Chennai and Bengaluru.

It is high time that a policy decision is taken to survey and demarcate wetlands in cities and their supply channel using GPS and declare them as protected areas under proper legislation. Several projects have been implemented since 1970 to clean up the



POLL FOCUS. Green issues/ISTOCKPHOTO

river Cooum and Adyar in Chennai city without much success. Political will is required to implement river cleaning.

Urban forestry can play a major role in combating air, water and noise pollution through proper designing and upkeep. City parks are important for children, youth, women and elders. Any new city expansion project should be mandated to keep one-third of the land area under tree cover.

Urban roads have number of competing demands such as stormwater drain, water supply and sewage lines, electricity cables and Internet cables besides metro rail. Therefore, avenue trees must be planted in such a way that they do not

interfere with these facilities while at the same time the trees get enough space for rooting and branching.

The environmental agenda for this election could be to:-

* Protect the existing forests and improve their density and promote the forest-based livelihood by 2030.

* Protect the urban wetlands from pollution and encroachment.

* Increase urban tree cover to more than 20 per cent of the city area through urban forestry and parks to improve the quality of life and increase green jobs in cities.

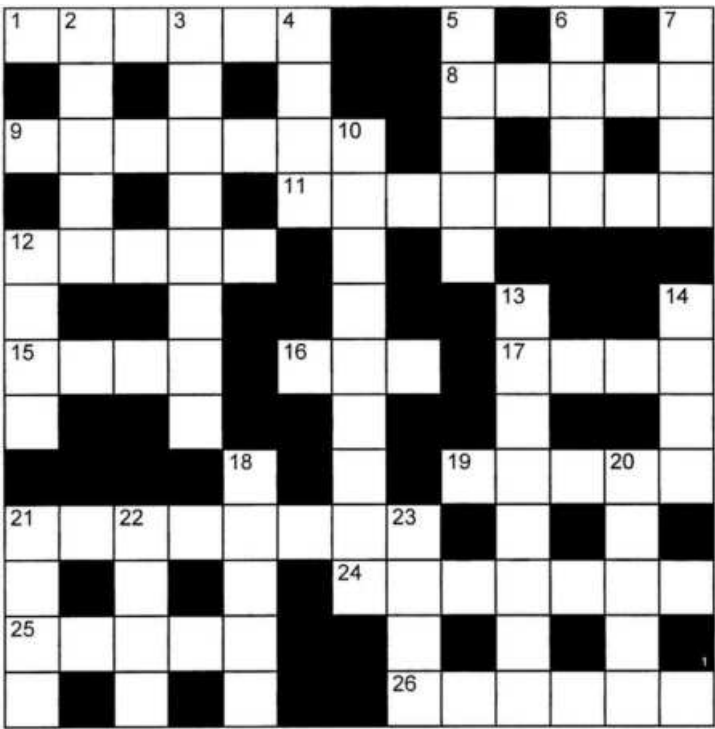
* Implement massive agroforestry to enhance green cover and mitigate ill effects of climate change and improve the farm income substantially.

* Check industrial pollution effectively and promote ease of doing sustainable business.

* Promote solar and wind energy, and e-vehicles to check the perils of climate change.

The writer is former Principal Chief Conservator of Forests of Tamil Nadu

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2420



EASY

ACROSS

- Return to type (6)
- Fire-corner (5)
- Andiron (7)
- Makers of woolly garments (8)
- Proof of postage (5)
- Quartet (4)
- Recede, as tide (3)
- Express boredom (4)
- Convivial get-together (5)
- Paintings (8)
- Takes a casual walk (7)
- Ape (5)
- In fashion (6)

DOWN

- Have actual being (5)
- For all time to come (8)
- Accepted (4)
- Great dirt (5)
- Shivering fever (4)
- Masses of water (4)
- Small, irritating wounds (4-5)
- Secure (4)
- Tree (8)
- Except that (4)
- Feeling, intuition (5)
- Roofed in a certain material (5)
- Device to draw from well (4)
- Arrived (4)
- Let original stand, from correction (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Right to turn out: go back to where one was (6)
- Cosy corner to mix, not having married ... (5)
- ...where stands this and iron in one (7)
- Their occupation is needling: they furrow their brows (8)
- Firmly put one's foot down to get ready for posting (5)
- A number in favour of socially-acceptable inclusion (4)
- Go out as it will do by the beach (3)
- Gape wide among certain wayfarers returning (4)
- A political lot, thrown in an entertaining way (5)
- Films epic development with rust (8)
- Takes an easy walk South with the goblins (7)
- Copy another operatic heroine at the beginning of Carmen (5)
- Attempt to hold conclusion that's fashionable (6)

DOWN

- Actually to be a cricket team, is French to get around it? (5)
- Continually multiplying for all time to come (8)
- Was a thief to get the go-ahead? (4)
- Very dirty stuff found if returning lath after a loss (5)
- An illness that is indefinite when unbegun (4)
- Soundly observes Black and Red, for instance (4)
- They are irritating, being bitten: gas can give rise to them (4-5)
- Fast – but not in danger (4)
- Score may make arrangement for the tree (8)
- Except that there are no brothers or sisters for this child! (4)
- The feeling I have that is prominent between the shoulders (5)
- Having built a roof, it got back and went ahead (5)
- Keep trying to get information: move handle up and down (4)
- Turned up with box for pictures artist left (4)
- In haste translated it, but let it stand (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2419

ACROSS 1. Propitiates 8. Emporium 9. Near 10. Aster 13. Calf 16. Moon 17. Pier 18. Nets 20. Glean 24. Aver 25. Antidote 26. Greenhouses

DOWN 2. Rope 3. Paris 4. Truce 5. Tunic 6. Sentimental 7. Preferences 11. Twang 12. Raise 14. Aria 15. Coat 19. Serge 21. Lunch 22. Adieu 23. Poset

The IndianEXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

The Mahayuti’s dilemma



SUHAS PALSHIKAR

Maharashtra coalition’s seat-sharing troubles show clever politics isn’t always good for healthy competition

SENSE OF AN OPENING

BJP’s attempt to gain foothold in Tamil Nadu can open an alternative to Dravidian politics — if voters find an echo

IN THE LAST lap of his high-octane campaign in Coimbatore, where he is the BJP candidate, K Annamalai told this newspaper that the party will win seats “in double digits”, coming in second “in all the remaining seats” in Tamil Nadu this time. As all 39 seats in Tamil Nadu go to polls on Friday, the confidence the party’s state president exudes frames the salience that Tamil Nadu has in the BJP’s electoral calculus. The southern states — Tamil Nadu, in particular — are key to achieving the party’s goal of “400 paar”. The BJP believes that the formidable wall of Dravidian politics will be breached this year, with the electoral contest in Tamil Nadu becoming a three-cornered one.

In a state that has kept national parties at bay for five decades, this is easier said than done. The first challenge for the BJP has been to rid voters of the impression that it is just another party trying to control the state from far-away Delhi. Ever since the CN Annadurai government rode to power in Madras state in 1967 and inaugurated the Dravidian era in Tamil politics, power has alternated between the DMK and AIADMK. With that landmark victory, the belief that national parties can only damage Tamil interests took deep root. Through its embrace of state-specific issues during its 2024 campaign — including the dispute over the island of Katchatheevu, over which it targeted both Congress and the DMK — the BJP has sought to correct this impression. Its eagerness to shed its image as a “centralising” party is also evident in the free hand that it has given its state president. For example, when Annamalai’s persistent attacks on the AIADMK came in the way, from the BJP’s perspective, of a much-needed alliance last year, the response from Delhi was muted. The BJP’s other great challenge in the state is overcoming what is seen as an unbridgeable gap between a party of Hindi-speakers and an ancient, proud culture. To that end, the BJP has enthusiastically sought to champion the Tamil language and culture at every level — from playing up the centuries-old connection between the north and south via the Kashi Tamil Sangamam, started in 2022, to giving the Sengol, an ancient Chola symbol of power, pride of place in the inauguration of the new parliament building. The Prime Minister himself has frequently invoked the state’s contributions, including tracing the lineage of Indian democracy back to an over 1,000-year-old inscription in Tamil Nadu’s Uthiramerur.

At the booth, where most voters have been loyal to the symbols that have long dominated the state’s political landscape — the DMK’s rising sun and the AIADMK’s two leaves — the BJP’s lotus has been a rare sight. The BJP may see an opening for a third party in Tamil Nadu. How voters respond to this call will shape the party’s future in navigating the formidable challenge of creating an alternative to Dravidian politics.

UNDIPLOMATIC

In his defence of the government, India’s Ambassador to Ireland also sounds like a functionary of the ruling party

OF COURSE, INDIAN diplomats stationed overseas should showcase the values of Indian democracy, stand by them, defend them when they are under attack. A newspaper editorial, howsoever critical it may be, is hardly an attack that needs an Ambassador to get so riled up. But skins are thin these days and Indian Foreign Service officer and Ambassador to Ireland Akhilesh Mishra did get riled up. And in what looks like a zeal to appear more loyal than professional, he shot off a rejoinder that makes him look prickly, not exactly the mature voice representing a global power. The Irish Times editorial, headlined ‘Modi tightens his grip’, predicts a “comfortable third term” for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and argues that his “undoubted personal popularity and economic success... will play the major part in his victory.” It then goes on to say that he has “leant heavily on a widespread crackdown on free speech and opposition parties” and refers to the role played by Central agencies and the arrest of Arvind Kejriwal.

Mishra’s rejoinder lists key achievements of the government and praises the PM’s “impeccable personal character” and “unprecedented popularity.” It’s right to underline that “Hindus of India possess incredible diversity of thought, ways of life and political beliefs, covering the entire spectrum from extreme left to extreme right...” and “regularly vote to power non-Hindu nationalists.” Where Mishra blurs a professional line is when, to make his case, he attributes Modi’s popularity to “the fight against the deeply entrenched ecosystem of corruption (created by the 55-year rule, including the first 30 years by a single dynastic party in India)”. He uses brackets but the punctuation isn’t the point. This makes his rejoinder a political rebuttal rather than a note from a diplomat.

In a constitutional democracy, bureaucrats are meant to be above the political fray, and represent, serve and defend the country, not a government. This is why the All-India Services (Conduct) Rules unequivocally state, “Every member of the Service shall maintain... political neutrality.” Mishra’s swipe at the Congress, unfortunately, betrays a broader trend across ideological lines and governments. In West Bengal, the transfer of senior IPS officers and even a chief secretary became politicised. Earlier this year, officials at the Union Finance Ministry helped prepare a “White Paper” on the economy and referred to “our government.” Bureaucrats, of course, should be free to express their personal opinion — that, indeed, enriches public discourse. But in the discharge of their duties, they must remember they work for the Government of India — not the party in power. That’s not an academic distinction, it’s what safeguards the institutions and the Constitution. On X, the handle of the Indian Embassy in Ireland is an active one, showcasing events that reflect the richness of India — from a Tamil festival to a Kerala tourism briefing. Surely, Ambassador Mishra doesn’t need to sound like a party activist to make a diplomatic point.

THE ARTIST IS DISMISSED

A Munich museum’s actions against an employee for hanging his artwork in its gallery is a letdown

TAKE IT UNTIL you make it” is an aphorism liberally preached across societies. How else, the hustle culture asks, will one move ahead of the herd and make the cut from could-be to she-whose-time-has-come, if not without a display of a bit of spunk and make-believe? In October last year, for instance, Bonn’s Bundeskunsthalle Museum discovered an uncatalogued painting among its exhibits in a show on identity and immigration while dismantling it. On its Instagram feed, the museum put up the painting, Georgia, and identified its artist, propelling its sale.

A technical staff at the Pinakothek der Moderne museum in Munich, however, found out to his peril recently, that the dictum might not hold true for everyone. The technician was laid off for having hung one of his own artwork in the modern and contemporary section of the gallery that features artwork by Andy Warhol, Paul Klee and others. He had hoped for a career break as an artist. Instead, the painting was removed after visiting hours, the employee dismissed and a criminal complaint for wilful damage to property filed against him by the museum. The employee was also barred from visiting the museum premises.

Who would not be inspired when surrounded by greatness or by the prospect of a guaranteed audience? The museum’s action also points to a less validating dimension of such spaces. In their role as gatekeepers of high art, there remains an element of asymmetry between their purpose of allowing everyone to partake of their cultural repositories and determining how and what visitors consume as art. A more appropriate gesture, in this case, perhaps, would have been a warning and a second chance — at the job and at having his painting assessed, for better or worse.

WITH 48 SEATS and an all-round political chaos, Maharashtra is emerging as one of the most watched states during this Lok Sabha election. In the last two elections, the state witnessed a complete domination of the BJP and Shiv Sena. The two parties together polled 48 per cent votes in 2014 and crossed the halfway mark in 2019. This dominance could have transformed the framework of political competition in the state. But Lok Sabha victories also brought to the fore the state-level ambitions of both parties. After their early taste of power in the state in 1995, both the BJP and Shiv Sena were sulking that power eluded them in the Maharashtra assembly after 1999. But when the opportunity did come in 2014 (and then in 2019), both parties wanted to encash the opportunity at each other’s cost.

For the BJP, state parties have often been stepping stones and after the rise of Narendra Modi in 2014, the newly-aggressive BJP was in no mood to play second fiddle to its state partner. On the other hand, the dramatic improvement in its performance in both parliamentary elections convinced the Shiv Sena that it deserved to lead the state rather than let the BJP dominate.

Their 2019 break-up made headlines, but the two parties have never been comfortable with each other since the Lok Sabha victory of 2014. They parted ways in the 2014 assembly election, only to patch up post-election. Thus, the destabilisation of the framework of competitive politics in Maharashtra began with the sudden rise of the BJP as the main player in the state’s politics in 2014. This process continued after the assembly elections of 2019. “Smart politics” resulting in splits in the Shiv Sena and NCP helped Fadnavis and BJP make a comeback. Thus, developments since 2019 and more so following the fall of the Sena-NCP-Congress government were only a part of the more long-term and ongoing process of party fragmentation and reconfiguration.

The question is: How have these developments affected the BJP in its search to be the single dominant party in the state? It has not been able to get the chief ministership even

Politically, the current moment is an enigma: Traditional electoral calculations about the strength of each party either in different regions or among different communities are no longer relevant. In fact, this is a moment of complete fragmentation and fluidity that may see a prolonged life. While the BJP may be hoping to do well because it is contesting a larger number of seats against Congress and the NCP, there is no certainty about which social forces may support which party — in fact, the more likely scenario is the fragmentation of most social forces.



OOPALEE OPERAJITA

ROGER EDWIN MARK Lee, (1940-2024), Mark Lee, to the world, was an outstanding educationist and thinker who served the Krishnamurti foundations (started by Jiddu Krishnamurti) in America and India and taught in its schools for close to six decades. Lee was a teacher, school principal, school founder, director (of Oak Grove School, California), foundation director, and, finally, a trustee of the Krishnamurti schools; and, then, of the foundations. If you had to count the people who were closest to Krishnamurti on the fingertips of one hand, Mark Lee would be right there and rather prominent. It was in the nature of who he was that he never spoke of, or broadcast, that most vital personal connection.

Before Krishnamurti passed away, he had asked Mark Lee to bathe his body prior to his cremation. To my mind, Mark was the son Krishnamurti never had. His quotidian life bore — and radiated — truth, tangible peace, integrity, and joy, all of which he shared with his friends, and us, his beloved students.

Lee was my English teacher at Rishi Valley School when I was eight years old. He arrived at school close upon the heels of the departure of our English teachers Hilda Yarrow, and her sisters, Eva, Edith, and Mary, of Cornwall, England. I stayed close to him right until he passed away. Now that he is gone, the miracle of being taught by — and remaining in constant contact with — someone inherently noble in thought, and deed, bears the stamp of the magical. In the

A TEACHER LIKE NO OTHER

Mark Lee brought creativity, an inquiring spirit to teaching, life

Mark and I often had conversations, across the world, about Krishnamurti, consciousness, awareness, love, fear, death, and the power of silence. He once told me of a discussion he had with Krishnamurti about the overwhelming proliferation of evil and how we might deal with it. Mark asked me what I would do when I encountered rank evil. My response: ‘Surround it with love’. ‘No,’ Mark replied, ‘surround it with goodness.’

back of my mind, I had always prepared myself for this loss, but no amount of theorising sets you up for the actual passing. This is a void beyond all voids — it is akin to losing a parent.

As a teacher, Mark brought creativity, an encouraging and inquiring spirit, excellence, compassion and patience to his classroom. He introduced us to Miguel de Cervantes, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and other writers, when we were eight, and asked me to write the script for ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, when I was nine, which was then produced as a play. During that year, Mark also asked me to write the script for a puppet production of Homer’s *The Odyssey*. Mark’s style of teaching was noted for its broad range, commitment to the highest benchmarks of creativity, kindness, gentle discipline, and attention to — and consciously including — students who were shy, and not academically strong. In the puppet show he and I collaborated on, the most shy and hesitant students participated, and shone — they had been accorded major roles.

We waited, and waited, each week, to listen to him read to us from *Stuart Little* and then, *Charlotte’s Web*, in one of Rishi Valley’s enchanting outdoor classes. We could never have enough of those readings.

Mark possessed integrity, kindness, goodness, and an unstinted affection for us and for almost everyone he met. He was strikingly handsome, at six-feet-and-five-inches tall, and the irrepressible warmth he

generated was in proportion to his height. He had a winsome smile, and was always accessible across campus — this made us feel not merely comfortable with him, but trust him, and hold him close to our eight-year-old hearts.

It was Mark who repeatedly invited me to give Odissi dance recitals for Krishnamurti in California. Those were memorable visits — I was invited to lunch each day with Krishnamurti and a few others at Arya Vihara; and, after lunch, Mark would ask me to walk back with Krishnamurti.

In large measure, Mark was an embodiment of what Krishnamurti spoke about; and he told me that Krishnamurti himself was an embodiment of his own teaching. Mark and I often had conversations, across the world, about Krishnamurti, consciousness, awareness, love, fear, death, and the power of silence. He once told me of a discussion he had with Krishnamurti about the overwhelming proliferation of evil and how we might deal with it. Mark asked me what I would do when I encountered rank evil. My response: “Surround it with love”; “No,” Mark replied: “Surround it with goodness.” That’s what Krishnamurti had said to him.

The writer was appointed Distinguished Fellow at Carnegie Mellon University in 1990. She is also a global advisor on public policy, communications, and international relations, and an Odissi and Bharatanatyam artist and choreographer

APRIL 18, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

HINDU LEADER KILLED

SIX PERSONS WERE killed and eight injured in Punjab and Chandigarh during the past 24 hours while night curfew was imposed in Patiala. Tensions were high in the Golden Temple Complex at Amritsar. Inder Pal Gupta, President of the Hindu Suraksha Samiti was shot dead and seven other persons sustained injuries when three young men, riding a scooter, ran amuck with a stent gun and bomb.

HARCHAND V JARNAIL

THE GOVERNMENT HAS adopted a cautious line of approach to solve the Punjab tangle in

view of the open fight between supporters of the Akali Dal chief, Harchand Singh Longowal, and the militant Sikh leader, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, within the Golden Temple Complex. Though the differences surfaced two months ago, it has now come out as a fight between the two groups.

OPPOSITION UNITE

THE NON-BJP-LOK Dal opposition parties reaffirmed their resolve to continue to mobilise public opinion against the government’s failure to maintain national unity and contain growing unemployment and rising prices but made it clear that their coming together did

not mean that they would contest the elections unitedly. The CPI-M general secretary E M S Namboodiripad, who moved the draft declaration for adoption at the convention of opposition parties admitted differences on policy issues.

CROSS-VOTING IN MH

AT LEAST 13 Congress (I) MLAs cross-voted in the biennial elections to the Maharashtra Legislative Council, enabling the Opposition to win an additional seat at the cost of the ruling party. What may have shocked the party leadership was the blatant defiance of discipline.



A trusted mediator

Switzerland’s initiative to bring countries to negotiating table to discuss the Ukraine–Russia war is in keeping with its standing as a peacemaker, including in several difficult conflicts



CHITRA SUBRAMANIAM

AN INTERNATIONAL PEACE conference on Ukraine organised by the Swiss on June 15–16 will be a masterclass in understanding the art and craft of the impossible. There will be no grandstanding nor will there be a final declaration. But there will be no disappointment either because the process between now and June will be a shock absorber that, at the very least, will succeed in placing all thorny issues on the table.

In this article, I write about why I believe Swiss diplomats are well-placed to shepherd this difficult international dossier. Before I do that, let me tell you what happened last weekend to drive home the point that the tiny Alpine nation has a long history of working in conflict zones because it enjoys the trust of warring parties.

On the night of Saturday and Sunday, April 13–14, when Iran bombed Israel, Swiss diplomats were in constant touch with the crisis room at the White House in Washington. They transmitted a message they had received from Tehran telling them about the attacks, the nature of which would be “destructive.” Was it just a message or is there more, considering that this is the first time Iran attacked Israel directly? France, the UK and the US were on the ground defending Israel. The dossier is very “live” here as all wait for Israel’s actions.

Switzerland represents the US in Iran since the 1979 hostage crisis. It has a task force on the Middle East and backs a two-state solution to the Israel–Palestine question. Swiss diplomacy does not take a stand on terrorist organisations but departing from practice, it recently called Hamas a “terrorist organisation”. Berne made it clear that Hamas is not Palestinians – and vice versa. It has offered its good offices to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to speak to all parties in the Middle East to find lasting peace in the region.

Now, I turn to the Ukraine peace conference. Swiss President Viola Amherd and Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis told journalists they are aware of the unknowns leading up to June but “in view of the long-standing diplomatic tradition and encouraging feedback during the exploratory phase, it considers it its responsibility to contribute to the peace process in Ukraine.”

The Swiss Foreign Office says that there is now sufficient support for the international conference. In addition to achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace for Ukraine in accordance with international law and the UN Charter, the meet aims to create a common understanding of a framework favourable to this objective and a concrete roadmap for the peace process.

American President Joe Biden is expected to bring with him the heft of Western democracy. China is currently sitting on the fence, but a wait-and-watch position is their signature when it comes to their ally Russia. Russia has said it will not come to the meet in June but continues to engage with the Swiss, including recently when Cassis met his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in New York. Diplomats from both countries are in constant parleys. A diplomat from a Western P5 nation told me the first day of the meet might be used to call on Russia to



CR Sasikumar

attend or engage formally.

It doesn’t help that Switzerland has frozen the assets of Russian oligarchs in Swiss banks as a punishment for invading Ukraine. These are estimated to be \$8.81 billion and media reports say four Swiss bankers are hiding Vladimir Putin’s monies in Swiss banks. Switzerland is also planning a Ukraine Mine Action Conference in October to de-mine the country and has pledged CHF 100,000 over four years, in addition to expertise and other aid. Swiss media reports regularly on Putin’s family living in the country.

At the time of writing this piece, comes the news that Russia wants to penalise Switzerland for its stance in the Ukraine war by relocating the South Caucasus talks from Geneva to another country. This only underscores the fact that Moscow takes Swiss action on Ukraine seriously and has its eyes peeled on every move in the run-up to June.

Ever since Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy asked for Switzerland’s support in organising the conference in Davos last January, Berne has been in direct contact with numerous states. Switzerland has held talks with the G7 members, EU representatives as well as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia are also in the loop. Over 100 countries have agreed to attend the meeting.

Foreign minister Cassis had travelled to India in March to meet his Indian counterpart S Jaishankar to discuss the peace conference. At that time, it was believed India could use its good offices with Russia to persuade President Putin to attend. The Indian ambassador’s office told me they have informed New Delhi about the June meet and they are waiting to hear back.

No roles for countries have been assigned as yet and it will be interesting to see if the conference falls into the usual North–South divide or ploughs new terrain.

Why is it that the good offices of the Swiss are sought by several states? Discretion, even devotion to the cause, and a strong work ethic make Swiss diplomacy stand out. Some of the world’s most thorny diplomatic issues have been handled by Switzerland. In 2021 Geneva played host to a Biden–Putin summit – a first face to face between the two since Biden took office. Arms control was high on the agenda. There was no breakthrough but there was much bonhomie when the two met.

Why is it that the good offices of the Swiss are sought by several states? Discretion, even devotion to the cause, and a strong work ethic make Swiss diplomacy stand out. Some of the world’s most thorny diplomatic issues have been handled by Switzerland. In 2021 Geneva played host to a Biden–Putin summit – a first face to face between the two since Biden took office. Arms control was high on the agenda. There was no breakthrough but there was much bonhomie when the two met.

The Cold War thawed when US President Ronald Reagan and Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev met in Geneva in 1985. Several Middle East talks have been held in the city, as have the Bosnian Peace negotiations that culminated in the General Framework for Peace in Bosnia, the Dayton Agreement, in 1995. These are examples of governments using Swiss back channels. The late Archbishop of South Africa was often in Geneva before the fall of the racist regime and ushering in of democracy by Nelson Mandela. I have reported on all of them.

One of the modern world’s oldest democracies, the Swiss value the importance of rule-based progress. A fully literate population means people receive a lot of reading material at home to get a grip on issues, and their lawmakers. On a single ballot, votes are sought for issues as diverse as a village cycle stand and a decision to elect a politician at the federal level. Local, cantonal and federal politics are given equal weightage. Broad consultation slows down progress but it a cornerstone for confidence building.

Ask yourself how a country of some nine million people produces 10 of the world’s best-known brands from watches to chocolates to machine tools to banking and insurance. The magic wand here is called respect for work and a shared capacity to pull in the right direction as democratically agreed.

The June meeting is aimed at getting as many countries around the table as possible to discuss Russia’s frontal attack on Ukraine. The meet also hopes to look at some basic tenets of human rights values in a tumultuous world that challenges what is “human” and what is a “right”. The Russian attack on Ukraine has shown the continent’s vulnerability -- a first since the guns fell silent following World War II in 1945. The frontal aggression by Russia has not only challenged Europeans on their turf but also questioned some of the critical bearings of human rights laws. The Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols (1950), that form the core of humanitarian law, are wartime discussions and laws.

There won’t be a final document at the end of the June meeting. It will most likely be a salute to gradualism and back-channel diplomacy. Some of the biggest successes in democracy often have humble beginnings.

Subramaniam is an award winning journalist and author

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“Hamas’s leaders should understand that no Iranian-backed offensive will rescue them because the US, despite its recent quarrels with the Netanyahu government, remains committed to Israel’s security. Both conflicts still appear far from resolution.”
— THE WASHINGTON POST

Correcting wrong, laying a path

SC verdict in Delhi Metro case has implications for public service delivery in partnership mode. It sets right precedent for litigation on infrastructure



M JAMSHED

THE CASE INVOLVING DMRC (Delhi Metro Rail Corporation) and DAMEPL (Delhi Airport Metro Express Pvt Ltd) that has been in and out of courts for over a decade, has concluded with the Supreme Court verdict on April 10. This judgment is rare, momentous and could be the guiding precedent for arbitration tribunals and courts. It also has implications for the delivery of public services in partnership mode and is a marker in how we litigate around infrastructure and build resilience into the projects that will be needed to build India’s future.

While deciding the curative petition, the bench headed by CJI D Y Chandrachud observed in a rare departure that the Court in deciding the civil appeal and the review petition had erred by interfering with the decision of the Division Bench of the Delhi HC. It also observed that the interference by the Court had resulted in restoring a patently illegal arbitral award, causing grave miscarriage of justice. The judgment upholds the order of the Division Bench of the Delhi High Court which had set aside the arbitral award granted to DAMEPL, thereby granting major relief to the DMRC.

This curious case has its origin in the Airport Metro Express Line, developed and operated in 2011 under a PPP model between DMRC and DAMEPL. Under this arrangement, all civil structures, including tunnels, viaducts and station buildings were constructed by DMRC and laying of tracks, OHE, signalling and procurement of rolling stock, etc., were done by concessionaire DAMEPL. The saga begins with the suspension of operations on this line by DAMEPL in 2012, citing defects in civil engineering works done by the DMRC. It was requested that these defects be cured within 90 days, failing which it would be treated as material breach entitling DAMPL to terminate the agreement. Subsequently, DAMPEL issued a notice of termination, stating that the defects could not be cured by the DMRC.

Conciliation proceedings initiated by the DMRC could not succeed. Interestingly, in the meantime, the identified defects were fixed, and a joint application was submitted by the DMRC and DAMPEL in November 2012 to the commissioner of metro rail safety for inspection and granting of permission to commence operations. Train operations were restored by DAMPEL on the airport line in 2013. By March, the speed of trains on this line increased to 80 kmph. In June 2013, however, DAMPEL advised their unwillingness to continue to operate this line and ceased operations almost immediately. In the larger public interest, the DMRC took over the almost abandoned airport line and started operating trains and other ancillary services. The subsequent claims and counter claims resulted in the formation of an arbitration tribunal. The next decade was witness to a fascinating process of litigation. The tribunal declared the termination notice given by DAMPEL as valid and awarded

termination payment of Rs 2,782 crore along with interest.

The DMRC challenged the award by filing a petition before the single-judge Bench of the Delhi High Court. It upheld the tribunal award in 2018 on the general premise and principle that so long as the award was reasonable and plausible, no interference was required. The petition by the DMRC was dismissed. It filed an appeal against the order before a Division Bench of the Delhi HC. The Division Bench took note of the tribunal’s lack of deliberation on the safety aspects, inspection of CRMS, the efforts made by the DMRC in curing the defects, lack of interpretation of clause 29.5.1(i) and the ambiguity about the date of termination itself, allowed the appeal, and set aside the arbitration award.

But this wasn’t the end with Special Leave Petitions filed in the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court set aside the order of the high court and restored the arbitral award in September 2021. A review petition filed against this judgment was also dismissed.

As a last resort, a curative petition was filed by the DMRC.

This was entertained by the apex court in exercise of its inherent powers under Article 142 of the Constitution.

The judgments considered several factors — including the factual background, the DMRC’s claim and the tribunal’s findings, the decisions of the High Court, the judgment of the apex court in appeal, issues in the curative petition and the submissions made by the counsels for the petitioners and the respondents. Its analysis covers in detail the invoking of curative jurisdiction in the event of miscarriage of justice and scope of interference of courts with arbitral awards.

The Court held that, in essence, the arbitral award overlooked vital evidence and failed to reconcile inconsistencies. It held that the Division Bench of the High Court correctly held that the award suffers from perversity and patent illegality. It is also held that by setting aside the judgment of the Division Bench, the Court restored a patently illegal award, which saddled a public utility with an exorbitant liability. This caused grave miscarriage of justice.

Almost following the principle of *fiat justitia ruat caelum*, the curative petition was allowed on April 10 and the parties were restored to the position in which they were on the pronouncement of the judgment of the Division Bench of the High Court. An *ex debito justitiae* for the DMRC. It was also observed in the concluding paragraph that, “We have applied the standards of a ‘grave miscarriage of justice’ in the exceptional circumstance of this case where the process of arbitration has been perverted by the arbitral tribunal to provide an undeserved windfall to DAMEPL.”

There are many lessons to be learnt from this judgment, specifically, the roles and responsibilities of arbitration tribunals, and the requirement of careful and in-depth examination of agreements and contractual clauses. This judgment shall be the guiding light in deciding innumerable pending arbitration and court cases specifically in the infrastructure sector.

The writer is former member, Central Administrative Tribunal and former member Indian Railway Board



MANOJ JHA

Misusing Babasaheb

While seemingly invoking him, ruling party leaders show disregard for his beliefs

WE, THE PEOPLE of India, have inherited a rich culture of legal critique and constitutionalism from our freedom struggle. This is no coincidence because many of our leaders in the anti-colonial movement were lawyers and legal scholars. Collectively, Indians care so much about the Constitution because following BR Ambedkar’s view, we recognise that it serves as a bulwark against tyranny and ensures the protection of citizen’s rights. For those trampled by small and large tyrannies in India, Babasaheb’s Samvidhan is not a mere legal document.

However, it would be a mistake to imagine that they view it like a holy book. Babasaheb’s Samvidhan is a social contract embodying the aspirations of the marginalised, poor and powerless people of India.

Central to Ambedkar’s vision of the Constitution was the pursuit of social justice. He believed that as a tool for social transformation, it would address historical injustices and thus empower the marginalised sections of society. Babasaheb recognised that society is constantly evolving and advocated for a robust system of checks and balances to prevent the concentration of power and to safeguard India against authoritarianism. His insistence on the inde-

pendence of institutions such as the judiciary and the Election Commission was to ensure that the Constitution remains resilient in the face of societal upheavals.

It is this spirit of Babasaheb’s conviction regarding the culture of constitutionalism as a force of dignity and equality in India that is under threat from the current government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The unprecedented concentration of power has long moved to direct and full capture of various agencies of the state by the ruling party. BJP leaders have openly and brazenly spoken about changes in the Constitution.

Indeed, the BJP has made promises of such changes in its manifestos, forced its agenda in Parliament to enact such amendments without due deliberation, and indulged in practices that amount to gross disrespect of the Constitution of India.

By repeatedly using his own name and third-person pronouns, a now familiar trademark, the PM’s way of capturing attention feeds his need for validation as a person above all others. This is apparent in his claims that he is the one who “brought Ram”.

In his speech made at a recent election meeting in Barmer, Rajasthan, the PM said,

he said, “It is Modi who first started to celebrate the Constitution Day” and that, “It is Modi who has developed the five pilgrimage sites pertaining to Babasaheb”. He claimed that the INDIA leaders insulted the Constitution and Babasaheb, but he went on to say, “As far as the Constitution is concerned, you can rest assured, and mark Modi’s words, that if Babasaheb Ambedkar himself came he would not be able to end the Constitution”.

By invoking Ambedkar in such a manner, the PM not only violates inherent respect for the deceased leader and his legacy, but also undermines his contributions and memory.

At first glance, the PM’s argument relies on an “appeal to authority” of Babasaheb but it represents utter disregard for the complexity of his beliefs and the context of his work. Just because Babasaheb cannot physically come back to oppose the whitening down of the Constitution does not mean he would endorse the approach of this government if he were alive today. By attributing malafide intentions to statements and actions of deceased leaders, especially those who dedicated their lives to the empowerment of marginalised com-

munities and to the development of a fledgling country after Independence, the PM has been exploiting their legacy for his political agenda since he became known as a public figure.

Attributing an intent of abolishing the Constitution of India to Dr Ambedkar is a misrepresentation. It implies a lack of understanding or deliberate disregard for the principles and objectives of Babasaheb. By portraying him as unable to abolish the Constitution even if he were to come back from the dead, the PM diminished Babasaheb Bhim Rao Ambedkar’s agency and ignored that he would never have wanted the abolition of the Constitution in the first place.

Babasaheb Ambedkar’s living memory in Indian politics is a testament to his commitment to empowering marginalised communities. We invoke his name and memory to underscore the importance of his work and the values he stood for. PM Modi’s invocation was not just an affront to Dr Ambedkar but also to the communities he served.

The writer is a Rajya Sabha Member of Parliament, Rashtriya Janata Dal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SECURING FUNDING

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Moving past bonds’ (IE, April 17). PM Modi’s assertion that no electoral bonds mean the return of black money only betrays the fact that despite all the hullabaloo, his administration has failed to address the issue of black money. Donations through the EB route accounted for only a part of the overall revenues from voluntary contributions. Even the BJP got a significant share of its funding from non-EB sources. Now that the EB channel is closed, the government should deliberate on other ways of political funding. However, it is crucial that no single party — like the BJP presently — manages to secure the bulk of the total since this would undermine the level playing field required for a free and fair election.

Kamal Laddha, Bengaluru

DIPLOMATIC BALANCE

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘The world in the manifesto’ (IE, April 17). Irrespective of the political party in power, India’s interests are sacrosanct. Neither the US nor China should use India’s shoulder to intimidate the other. Our foreign policymakers must mend ties with smaller neighbours that have recently started straying

away due to the nefarious intentions of adversaries. Digging up old territorial issues for domestic political gains will only harm India’s interests. We need fewer enemies. But as goes the saying, “There are no permanent enemies, and no permanent friends, only permanent interests” — so we need to look after our permanent interests by striking a diplomatic balance.

Manish Mishra, Bhopal

SIGN OF FREE SPEECH

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Rushdie writes back’ (IE, April 17). The publication of *Knife: Meditations after an Attempted Murder* will be welcomed not only by Salman Rushdie fans but also by all those who support democracy. The re-emergence of Rushdie after the near-fatal attack on him in 2022 in New York is proof of the resilience of the human spirit. Symbolically, it is the victory of the liberal voices against reactionary forces that are out to silence the small but significant voice of art and literature. More than a periodical electoral event, democracy is the acceptance of dissent and ceding space to those who think, speak and write differently. Rushdie’s phoenix-like rebirth in the face of near-death is a harbinger of hope to votaries of free speech worldwide.

Narendra Dani, Lucknow



Fiscal democracy

Kelkar is right in denouncing high GST rates, and seeking larger fiscal roles for states and local bodies

FORMER FINANCE SECRETARY Vijay Kelkar has recently renewed his pitch for simplification of the “unnecessarily complex” structure of India’s Goods and Services Tax (GST) and called for further democratisation of its administration, and the resource-sharing mechanism. His preference for a single GST rate (12%) hogged the headlines, but a few other suggestions made by the veteran policymaker need greater attention. Kelkar has virtually debunked the practice of setting tax rates “largely with the objective to maintain revenue neutrality”. He called this “counter-productive”, and pointed out that high rates would make it lucrative for the fraudsters to evade taxes. This is when policymakers in the saddle are contemplating to raise the average GST rate by a substantial 5-6 percentage points to the so-called “revenue neutral rate” (which means rate increase for a broad set of goods). Kelkar also advocated “equitable” sharing of GST proceeds among the three tiers of government that includes the local governments (gram/block/zilla panchayats and municipal corporations), and a larger role of states in the GST Secretariat. These are sage counsels, and would require to be acted upon with a sense of urgency by the new government after the polls, if India were to take its indirect tax reforms to its “natural destination”. Unlike many others, Kelkar doesn’t seem to think that wholesale rate hikes are indispensable to improve the tax-GDP ratio. Bibek Debroy, chairman of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, too, had underlined the need for a less complex, single-rate GST, but he said, “We must either be willing to pay higher taxes or settle for reduced delivery of public goods and services.” Debroy feels that the continuing wide gap (8% of GDP) between tax revenues and the requirement of government spending on infrastructure, education, healthcare and defence, would need to resolved without any further delay, and this might also need higher tax rates. Evidence shows revenue mop-up doesn’t require loading (high) taxes onto a narrow base, but a broader base for the levies. Several countries including Japan, South Africa, and Malaysia that have embraced GST regimes over the last decade and more, have kept rates low and bases wide, and seen rise in revenue buoyancy. A broader and enduring consumption revival is essential for meeting India’s goal of sustainable 7%-plus economic growth. The country can’t afford to jack up prices with higher indirect taxes, which are, by nature, regressive. Come July, India’s GST will have completed seven years, but the tax reform won’t have yet yielded much incremental fiscal or economic dividends. The GST-GDP ratio remained a lowly 6.2% for five years, and improved to 6.6% in 2022-23, and further to 6.9% in 2023-24. Despite the revenue guarantee enjoyed by them during the first five years of GST, state governments “own tax revenues” have stagnated at 6-7% of GSDP over the last decade. The growths envisaged by the last two Finance Commissions (FCs) on tax devolution haven’t been achieved either. During the first four of the 15th FC’s six-year award period, states have lost around ₹65,000 crore as grants. The local bodies are left high and dry, even though the Constitution was amended three decades ago to empower them fiscally. Kelkar is right when he says that, to deepen democracy and governance at the grassroots level, the states’ say in GST administration, and local bodies’ fiscal base must both increase. But differential tax rates still have relevance for India.

Social media's age limits won't protect your kids

MOMENTUM HAS BEEN building to force social media companies to make their products safer for kids. But some of the solutions getting the most attention, while well intended, don’t address the underlying problem: the way these apps prey on developing brains. A new report from the American Psychological Association highlights solutions that follow the science. That’s an important message for policymakers, parents, and the companies themselves. Because if we want to see meaningful improvements, we need to focus on what’s actually causing the harm. That’s not necessarily the age of children on social media — the focus of many current policy efforts — but the products’ features, and how those features affect young minds. As the APA report points out, the teen brain is still learning skills like impulse control, planning and prioritisation. That makes them especially vulnerable to the infinite scroll or the pull of followers, “likes” and “shares”. The APA’s brief list of recommendations follows its social media advisory from last year, which demanded better science about how platforms like TikTok and Instagram affect kids’ brains. But some of the responses from policymakers and thought leaders were not always aligned with the science, says Mitch Prinstein, the APA’s chief science officer. Too much of the policy focus narrowed to a simple idea: age limits. But drawing a bright line on age is not a cure-all. Moreover, the age limits we already have aren’t working. Tweens and teens are notoriously more tech-savvy than their parents. They excel at finding workarounds to age restrictions and time limits. “There aren’t simple solutions to a complex problem,” says Dave Anderson, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. Social media isn’t going anywhere, and teens are going to use it. “We need to tailor our solutions to the risks [identified by] the science, rather than the risks amplified by the zeitgeist.” What could that look like? Prinstein offered a template for safer social media accounts that sounded pretty good to this parent of a tween. “I would love to enter my child’s age and have all of the guardrails automatically put into place,” he says. The default would be to protect a child’s data, turn off the endless scroll, disable likes, and bar certain types of sensitive content. Those settings could be tweaked for more mature children. “It doesn’t seem like a lot to ask,” he adds. Age limits alone are too blunt a solution. Yes, policy makers have always needed to make somewhat arbitrary choices about when kids are ready for certain responsibilities. But some kids can benefit from access to social media. And yet solutions to its inherent faults have focused on banning access altogether or putting the onus on parents to muddle through. As I’ve written before, parents play an essential role in their children’s transition into a healthy digital life. But even the most diligent parents can’t navigate this environment alone. We need social media companies to step up — not with token changes, but substantive modifications to their platforms that address what is a problem. Another thing that social media companies need to do: Share their data on how kids are using their platforms. Progress towards real transparency feels frustratingly slow. Earlier this year, the Center for Open Science announced a partnership with Meta to facilitate certain researchers to access data that could help them better understand the relationship between social media and well-being. That’s a start, if a small one. Companies could accelerate this research into the ways social media is used by and affecting kids. They could offer up data from experiments they have already run on how to engage teens. Surely they know a lot about which features make their products even more problematic for teens. They should disclose them and fix them. If we focus on the easiest fixes rather than the more nuanced solutions indicated by the science, nothing will change. Social media firms seem interested in doing just enough to keep their CEO out of the Congressional hot seat. Lawmakers seem interested only in symbolic political victories. Parents need to keep advocating for real reform.



LISA JARVIS

Bloomberg



● LUNAR PROGRESS

ISRO chairman S Somanath

“Now, we want to continue the Chandrayaans series till an Indian lands on the Moon. Before that, we have to master many technologies, such as going there and coming back. That we are trying to do in the next mission

● INFILTRATION OF AI

AS IT CONTINUES TO RESHAPE SECURITIES TRADING, REGULATORS MUST REMAIN VIGILANT

Regulating AI

SANDEEP PAREKH

Managing partner, Finsec Law Advisors



ket, such as research and placement of orders, hardly incorporated technology. The focus on use of technology began with some seriousness after the introduction of dematerialised shares. From then to now, India has taken the lead in introducing a T+0 settlement cycle. With the introduction of AI, the securities market is set to witness another transformation. However, one of the pertinent concerns in this regard would be around data privacy. As AI and AI-generated algorithms permeate various sectors, including the securities market, regulators face the challenge of crafting laws that govern these technologies effectively.

Algo trading and robo advisory

Currently, algo trading is defined as trading carried out through automated means. Recent suggestions by Sebi to regulate algo trading have received mixed reviews, with the regulator’s approach towards meeting that end facing some criticism. It should be remembered that AI can effectively write codes based on instructions fed to it. Thus, creating an algo, in the near future, may not be the exclusive domain of a trained IT professional. In a situation where the deployment of an AI-created algo results in violation of securities laws, the question arises on the extent of culpability to be ascribed to the person who used AI to create the algo. The principle that the developer of an AI, or the human behind the ‘machine’, is responsible exists; how-

ever, with the advancements in AI, which are unpredictable at this stage, it may have to be revisited. As AI changes the landscape around us, our laws must keep pace to ensure that rights and obligations of the parties concerned are laid down in advance. Additionally, robo advisory is presumably going to take centre stage in the distant future. For instance, with the vast amounts of data points analysed in a few moments and investment strategies being created in seconds instead of weeks, it is not too far-fetched to presume a considerable shift in the manner in which investment advisory service is carried out today, which may warrant a revision of the extant regulatory framework, requiring both strengthening and rationalisation of regulations.

The securities market is set to witness another transformation. However, one of the pertinent concerns would be around data privacy

Grievance redress and enforcement

AI may eventually be used for dispensation of justice by appropriately (and safely) integrating it in our judicial systems. In fact, it was recently suggested that AI may be used to resolve minor traffic challans, to begin with, after adequately building up such capability. Similarly, the securities regulator may consider initiating the process to develop AI that can effectively monitor, supervise, and assist in the enforcement of securities laws. Additionally, with the recent focus on online alternative dispute resolution mechanisms for the securities market,

minor issues, depending on the complexity, quantum of money/assets, and the nature of the dispute, AI can serve as an arbiter or mediator.

Pattern recognition and predictive analysis

In a potential game changer for regulators, developing AI models are becoming increasingly efficient at recognising patterns, and thus predicting the ‘future’, depending on the data points that the AI has access to, and how it is ‘coded’ to ‘think’. While algos are already deployed by regulators around the world to identify and/or track suspicious activity, AI can be of immeasurable assistance in this regard. For instance, Sebi has, in the recent past, issued circulars introducing the use of blockchain to verify information, and to ensure transparency among intermediaries and entities. The integration of AI in such systems can lead to predicting any defaults or preventing violations, thus safeguarding investor interest. However, any such technology should be used with caution, and strict safeguards should be built around such systems to prevent any misuse.

Thus, while the adoption of AI in the securities market would lead to increased efficiency, reduced costs, and enhanced decision-making capabilities for market participants, it raises significant concerns regarding market manipulation, algorithmic biases, data privacy, and systemic risks, which warrant regulatory scrutiny and the need for comprehensive legal frameworks to address issues emanating out of using AI. As AI continues to evolve and reshape the landscape of securities trading, regulatory authorities must remain vigilant, adaptive, and forward-thinking in their approach, and strike a balance between innovation and regulation, thereby navigating the complexities arising out of the intersection of AI and the securities market. It would be better to delay introducing too many regulations till the dust has settled on the field.

Co-authored with Parker Karia, senior associate, Finsec Law Advisors

Higgs and lows of academia



ATANU BISWAS

Professor of statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata

AS THE LEGENDARY British physicist Peter Higgs passed away at the age of 94, it marked the end of an incredibly exceptional academic career in the present-day publication-hungry academic climate. Higgs showed how the boson helps bind the universe together with his groundbreaking theory of the Higgs boson. The particle was the missing piece in the Standard Model of particle physics, which was predicted in 1964 by Higgs. After 48 years, scientists using the \$10-billion particle collider located in a 27-kilometre tunnel beneath the Swiss-French border at CERN, the European Organisation for Nuclear Research, announced in 2012 that they had finally found a Higgs boson, marking one of the biggest breakthroughs in physics in decades. About 50 years after his revolutionary discovery, in 2013, Higgs, dubbed the “Particle Man” in a 2013 BBC documentary, won the Nobel Prize in physics. The Higgs boson is considered the holy grail of physics since it reveals the mechanism by which subatomic material acquires mass. For us, it also serves as a poignant reminder of the eminent Indian physicist Satyendra Nath Bose. Although several Nobel Prizes have been awarded for research related to the concepts of the boson, Bose-Einstein condensate, and Bose-Einstein statistics, Bose was sadly never a recipient of the Nobel Prize. Higgs boson is often known as the “God particle”. The term was popularised by the 1993 book *The God Particle: If the Universe Is the Answer, What Is the Question?* by 1988 physics Nobel Prize winner

Leon Lederman and scientific writer Dick Teresi. Among others, Higgs has been a harsh critic of the term. “That name was a kind of joke, and not a very good one...it’s so misleading,” Higgs said. Higgs’ academic career offers society an opportunity for introspection. Since today’s academics are expected to collaborate and churn out papers constantly, Higgs really doubted that a breakthrough similar to the discovery of the Higgs boson could be made in the current academic environment. Travelling to Stockholm to accept the Nobel Prize in 2013, he spoke with *The Guardian* and stated, “It’s difficult to imagine how I would ever have enough peace and quiet in the present sort of climate to do what I did in 1964.” There has been a seismic shift in the academic environment everywhere in the world since the 1960s. From appointments to promotions, tenure to salary hikes, research funding to dignity — almost everything in today’s academic environment is directly proportional to research publications. Further, the quality of research articles is generally assessed based on the relative standing of the journals that publish them. The motivation behind research in most parts of the world is peer pressure to publish; presently, academics are often forced to follow the maxim “publish or perish”. The most crucial measures of a researcher’s advancement and research prowess, regardless of

experience levels, are publication metrics. And instead of focusing on high-quality research, this has turned academia into an unending rat race of publishing metrics. From the Far East to Europe and the US, academics are enmeshed in a tangle of “compulsory” research projects. Universities nowadays are highly focused on their international rankings done by various organisations; a university’s ranking depends partially on the publications of their faculty members. But, some people question the value of these rankings as well. Peter Higgs published less than 10 papers following his epoch-making 1964 publication. Furthermore, in his 2022 book *Elusive: How Peter Higgs Solved the Mystery of Mass*, scientist Frank Close cited Higgs, stating that the concept of the Higgs boson was “the only really original idea I’ve ever had”. Higgs was honest enough to acknowledge that. And he had no desire to create a lot of non-consequential work. In effect, Higgs essentially became “an embarrassment to the department”. Every academic institution periodically conducts research assessments, and at Edinburgh University, when they asked around the department to give a list of recent publications, Higgs would reply “None”. Higgs believed that in today’s academic system, no university would have employed him since he would not be deemed “productive” enough. In fact, if he

hadn’t received a 1980 Nobel nomination, he most likely would have been fired! Things have gotten worse since Higgs’ remarks. The journal *Nature* posted a Facebook message in September 2016, requesting scientists beginning their first independent position to share their experiences. According to the study, researchers faced increased pressure, fewer resources, and less job stability. Regardless of whether their study is credible and verifiable, people who consistently publish “new and exciting” research will receive the best grants and positions under the current “publish or perish” system. The *Nature* survey found the majority of researchers only dedicate around 38% of their time to research; the remaining portion is typically divided between administrative and teaching obligations, both of which are necessary to secure employment at a university. Still, the system wonders why there are no modern Einsteins, Feynmans, or Marie Curies! According to Bruce Alberts, a biochemist at the University of California, San Francisco, the pressure placed on scientists today promotes “mediocre science”. “It’s not about fairness. It’s about how to get the best science for the dollar,” he stated. The story of Peter Higgs, arguably one of the last stalwarts to maintain his own academic freedom by eschewing the relentless publication pressure, may highlight the absurdities of the current global culture in academia. Further, his case suggests that deep introspection by society towards expectations from academia is also necessary.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

EV subsidy

While subsidies can promote the sale of electric vehicles in the short run, price reduction can pose a challenge to fulfil the sudden rise in demand, impacting sales in the long run. Often, the subsidy is largely transferred to suppliers or lost due to inefficiency, yielding limited benefits to the end consumer. The incentive comes with a

hidden cost of direct/indirect taxation. Experts advise that free market forces should determine if a business survives or not. Subsidising a non-viable business by distorting the market and preventing efficient outcomes by diverting resources doesn’t serve the economy. India’s desire for large-scale manufacturing relies on a stable supply and import of raw materials for lithium-ion cells from

China. Hopefully, our law-makers are vocal about local cell manufacturing. —Girish Lalwani, Delhi
Vehicle cost matters
Apropos of “Recharge the EV space”, cost is paramount for Indians. To help them shift from internal combustion engine to electric vehicles (EVs), the government must ensure that buying and running costs remain affordable.

No doubt, the Centre has been pushing for cleaner fuel, but it would do better to engage all stakeholders including manufacturers. Only when overall cost of manufacturing is low can companies offer EVs at cheaper prices. Strengthening the charging infrastructure should also continue. —Bal Govind, Noida

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

— Ramnath Goenka

TESLA IS COMING, BUT BUYERS DESERVE A WIDER CHOICE

TESLA is finally coming to India. The electric vehicle pioneer is scrambling to set up plush showrooms and service hubs in big cities; and it has begun producing right-hand-drive vehicles in Germany to serve the Indian market. Tesla is an iconic brand that has been a global leader in building not only EVs but upstream sustainable energy options like solar plants and advanced rechargeable lithium-ion batteries. It is no wonder the Indian government has been keen on wooing Tesla's chief, Elon Musk. Negotiations for the car maker had, however, hit a wall as the completely-built units it wanted to import attracted 70-100 percent duty, which would make the cars unaffordable. Things have suddenly changed. Tesla, which was dragging its feet earlier, is now in a hurry to drive into India. Its recent poor performance in global markets has contributed in no small measure to this change of gears. Falling sales and an intensifying price war has forced the car maker to lay off more than a tenth of its global workforce. The company's stock, too, has fallen 31 percent so far this year, even as traditional auto companies such as Toyota and GM have fared far better. India's new EV import policy, introduced last month, has been a shot in Tesla's arm. The policy now allows imports at a knocked down duty of 15 percent on vehicles costing \$35,000 and above, as long as the importer invests half a billion dollars in setting up manufacturing facilities in India. The government has been at pains to point out that other auto companies, including those from China, can also import cars under the new policy. However, by making the lower duty applicable only to the premium segment priced \$35,000 (₹25 lakh) and above, it is hardly a secret for whom it is tailored. The government has tried to protect Indian auto companies in the economy segment; but in the premium class there are competitive global models—from Volkswagen and Polestar to BYD—that should also have easier entry. It will give Indian consumers a wider premium choice. Moreover, this is the first time auto investment has been linked to concessional imports. Tesla's cheapest cars—Models 3 and Y—will cost ₹30 lakh and ₹45 lakh, respectively. We are talking about a very small, very rich segment; and very few cars. Is the concession worth it?

SC GIVES SHAPE TO NEW CLIMATE JURISPRUDENCE

THE Supreme Court judgement on the conservation of the Great Indian Bustard and Lesser Florican, two critically endangered species, will go down as a landmark in more ways than one. Moving well beyond the protection of birds in the *M K Ranjitsinh* case, the top court has gone on to create an architecture for climate justice in the country. The bench, led by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud and comprising justices J B Pardiwala and Manoj Misra, held that citizens have a right to be free from the adverse effects of climate change, which it said flows from Articles 21 (right to life and personal liberty) and 14 (right to equality before law) of the Constitution. The SC recognised the bouquet of existing laws and policies towards clean environment and its protection, as well as measures to combat climate change, but felt that the people's rights to be free from the adverse impacts of climate change had not been articulated yet. "As the havoc caused by climate change increases year by year, it becomes necessary to articulate this as a distinct right. It is recognised by Articles 14 and 21," the top court observed. The SC expanded the premise of conservation of the two vulnerable species from overhead power transmission lines to a far bigger canvas. It examined human rights in the context of climate change, how it can present diverse challenges to different geographies, leading to increased suffering for poorer communities, impacting their right to equality and affecting gender justice. The court elucidated how climate change may impact the constitutional guarantee of the right to equality. CJI Chandrachud kept in perspective India's international obligations, its climate commitments to emission reduction and the greater need for switching to renewable energy. More significantly, the verdict addressed the conventional narrative of conflict between development and environment, saying, "It is not a binary choice between conservation and development, but rather a dynamic interplay between protecting a critically endangered species and addressing the pressing global challenge of climate change." Pondering over the future, the top court also looked at climate change litigations in a global context. In doing so, it has not only focused on the larger interests of the country and its people in view of the imminent impact of climate change, but also set the path for the future of climate jurisprudence in India.

QUICK TAKE

PROTECTING THE HEALER

A resident doctor in a Puducherry government hospital survived with a gash on his neck after a patient's father lunged at him with a knife. The attack was arbitrarily aimed; the doctor was not related to the case. Such violence is not new in India. A 2018 study in the *Indian Journal of Medical Research* showed it's the patients' relatives and political goons who are more likely to be violent on doctors. We must protect our healthcare providers. Hospital security teams need training to deal with such offenders. But in the long term, we need to instil trust by instituting a system that holds doctors accountable for proven lapses.

Angst over migrants is endemic in the Northeast, as most ethnic communities are small. Their fear of being marginalised is a big factor in opposing the CAA

WHY ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL OF NORTHEAST

PRADIP PHANJOUBAM

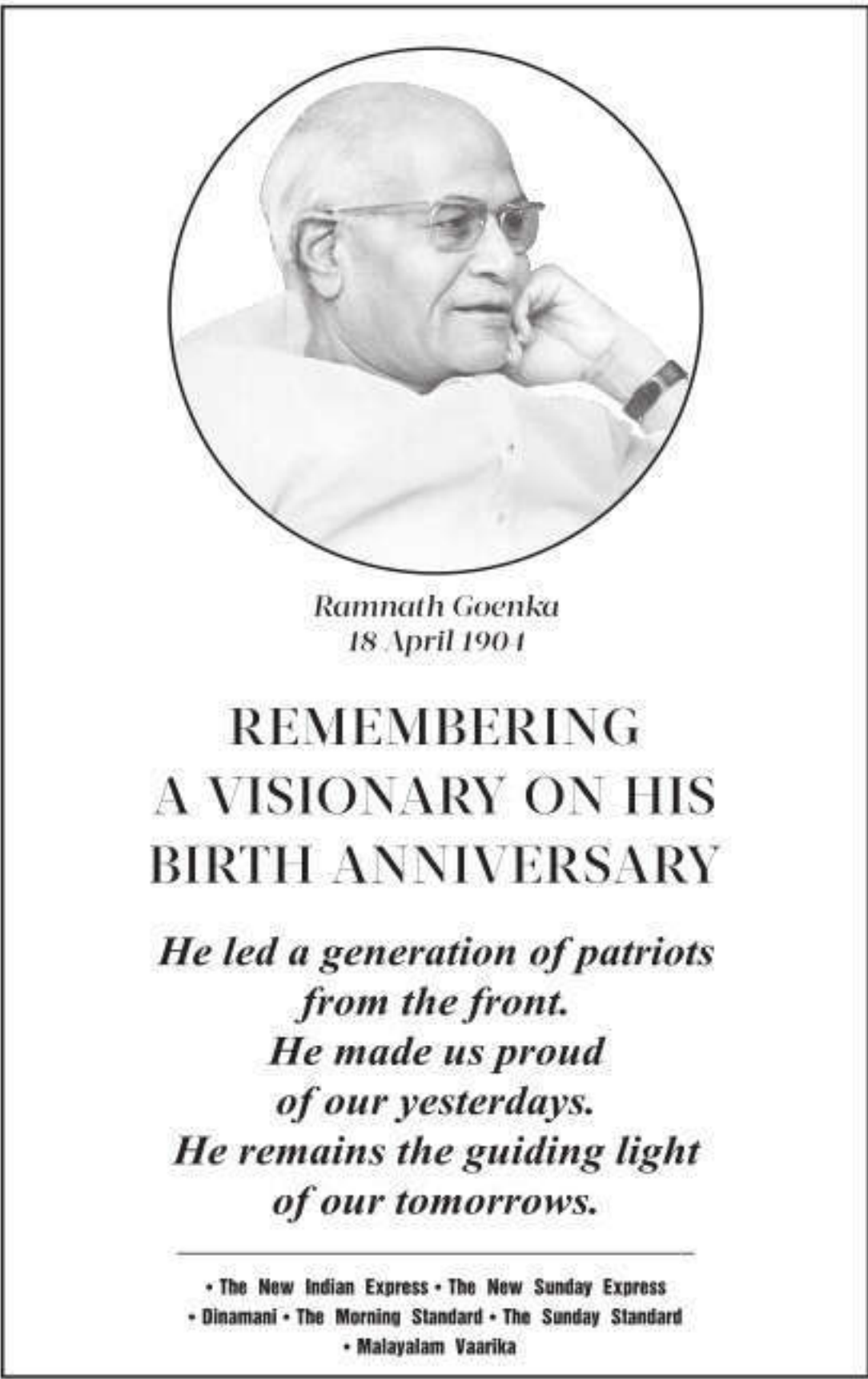


Editor, Imphal Review of Arts and Politics

THE violent deaths of two non-tribal residents at Ichamati town near the Indo-Bangladesh border in March should serve as a reminder of how sensitive the issue of immigration is in the Northeast. The deaths followed a rally against the Citizenship Amendment Act organised by the Khasi Students Union. The two victims, Ishan Singh and Suji Dutta, were apparently stoned to death not long after the rally concluded. The event should also be a reminder that the concerns here are not always congruent with those in the rest of the country—so one-size-fits-all policies can backfire. The CAA was pushed strongly in the runup to the 2019 parliamentary election by the ruling BJP and passed by parliament in December that year, only months after the party returned to power with a resounding mandate. On the eve of another election now, the CAA has been notified for promulgation from March 11. Expectedly, the move is being met with celebrations as well as protests in different parts of the country. It must be added that, unlike the last time, there is a sense of resignation among those opposed to the Act and their protest is rather muted. Judging by its timing, as well as the results of the last Lok

Sabha election, this sharp and emotive divide seems calculated to benefit the ruling party in consolidating its vote base. CAA amends the Citizenship Act 1955, to make the route to Indian citizenship faster and easier for Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, but makes no mention of Muslim migrants. The Act relaxes the 11-year residence requirement under the Citizenship Act to five years for migrants belonging to the specified categories who entered the country before December 31, 2014. While the celebrations among migrants whose statelessness is promised a quicker and honourable resolution is natural, the objection to it is much more complex. For instance, if the protest against CAA elsewhere in India is largely about a perceived discrimination against Muslims migrants, thereby giving Indian citizenship a colour of religious nationalism, this cannot be said of the Northeast, especially Assam and the states that were once a part of it. Meghalaya is one of them. People here are less discriminate and want all immigrants out, regardless of religion. The angst over inflow of migrants is endemic in the Northeast. The popular explanation is that ethnic communities here,

with the exception of a few, are demographically tiny and vulnerable to being marginalised by an influx of communities far superior in numbers. Few have empathised more with this predicament than Nari Rustomji, a civil servant in the crucial years before and after independence. In his *Imperilled Frontiers: India's North-Eastern Borderlands*, while acknowledging the inevitability and universality of the march of development and population movements, he pleads that these changes be regulated to ensure these small communities are able to absorb the changes without detriment to their own social organisms. When this is not so, Rustomji rightly predicted, the consequence will be social friction. In Assam, this apprehension is most profound and complex. Though not in watertight compartments, the state is today geographically and linguistically divided between the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys. Assamese speakers in the former are generally opposed to the CAA, while Bengali Hindus in the latter welcome it. The six-year 'anti-foreigner' agitation that concluded with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 was a high point of this friction. There have been other tragic flashpoints. The Sylhet Referendum on the eve of Indian independence is one. When the Radcliffe Line was being drawn to decide the contours of East Pakistan in this sector, the Hindus in Sylhet hoped to belong to India and be a part of Assam. However, the Assamese leadership at the time, nurturing the hurt of Bengali dominance during British days, refused this as with Sylhet, Assam would become a Bengali majority state. The history of colonial Assam, which then was almost the entire Northeast, should provide some answers. Assam was annexed by the British and merged with Bengal after the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. Assam then was backward and largely unfamiliar with British administration; therefore the latter brought in educated middle class Hindu



Ramnath Goenka
18 April 1904

REMEMBERING A VISIONARY ON HIS BIRTH ANNIVERSARY

*He led a generation of patriots from the front.
He made us proud of our yesterdays.
He remains the guiding light of our tomorrows.*

• The New Indian Express • The New Sunday Express
• Dinamani • The Morning Standard • The Sunday Standard
• Malayalam Vairika

Bengalis well acquainted with the British system, largely from Sylhet, to run their bureaucracy. This Bengali middle class came to dominate affairs and treated the Assamese with a measure of condescension. In 1837, they influenced the British to make Bengali the official language of Assam, arguing that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali. The nascent Assamese middle class did little, but the seeds for future conflicts were sown. As the Assamese middle class strengthened, resistance grew. In 1873, they caused Assamese to be restored as the official language in five districts in the Brahmaputra valley. The following year, Assam was separated from Bengal to become a chief commissioner's province. There were also Bengali Muslim peasants flooding into Assam, but this peasantry came with no baggage of superiority and initially had no trouble integrating, identifying themselves as Assamese speakers. But this was destined to

change. As the Indian freedom struggle intensified and acquired the face of a rivalry of religious nationalism between Muslims and Hindus, it manifested as a unique triangular fight in Assam—a clash of linguistic nationalism between Assamese and Bengali speakers, and of religious nationalism between Hindus and Muslims. The undercurrents of the former rivalry remain strong even today. This long history of rivalry between ethnic sub-nationalities cannot be easily dismissed as being anachronistic. A deeper reconciliation would have to begin from an understanding of a citizenship free of nationalistic colours, with a premium on consensual and need-based rights—first on the broader canvas of the nation, and then the regions as well. Failing this, the potential for periodic friction, such as the one promising to explode again in the wake of the CAA, will continue to fester. (Views are personal) (phanjoubam@gmail.com)

THE SHADOW THEATRE OF INDONESIAN POWER PLAYS

SHANKARI SUNDARARAMAN



Professor at School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

ASIAN AXIS

THE left. This approach was considered more Indonesian in character; *gotong rojong*, which basically meant mutual cooperation. However, the period was complex, with highly centralised power and political chaos leading up to the elimination of the Partai Komunis Indonesia in 1965. The 1965 *coup d'état* ushered in the New Order (*Orde Baru*) regime, backed by the



ASSOCIATED PRESS

This February, Indonesia chose about 20,000 representatives to national, provincial and district seats on a single day. Prabowo Subianto, the new president, is expected to have a strong focus on domestic issues and continue the nation's free and active foreign policy

military, and followed a developmentalist agenda while clamping down on political rights, with the *pancasila* as the state's philosophy; it lasted till the 1998 *reformasi* in the aftermath of Suharto's fall. From 1999, the reversion to multiparty democratic model has been fraught with challenges, particularly on how the formation of coalition governments tests the political process. While *reformasi* has ushered in a democratic shift, the complexities of power-sharing pose the problem of deteriorating norms. First, a multiparty system with a common political ideology is lacking, leading to the movement of political elite between parties. While it helps in cobbling coalitions to retain power, it often limits the capacity of the legislature to

move forward on key issues, particularly where differences in ideology emerge. The February elections were among the largest voting exercises in the region, as polls for national, provincial and district-level representations were held simultaneously; electing approximately 20,000 representatives. Among the parties with a strong presence are the PDIP (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle) led by Megawati Sukarnoputri; former President Joko Widodo held two terms in office through the PDIP. The other significant players are the Democrat Party, to which former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono belonged; the National Awakening Party, ideologically at the centre with *pancasila* and pluralism as its founding principles; the Golkar party, a remnant of the military's political ambitions and helps in sustaining coalitions like the one led by Widodo. A few things stand out after February. First, the unstinted support given by Widodo to newly incumbent President Prabowo Subianto. It is Jokowi's son Gibran Rakabuming Raka who was Prabowo's running mate; while Gibran was formerly affiliated with the PDIP, he ran as an independent this time. Meanwhile, Subianto, a former general and son-in-law of Suharto, was also a commander of the Kopassus, the army special forces implicated in human rights violations during Suharto's rule. What is likely to emerge is a nationalistic leadership that will focus on domestic issues. There is likely to be a continuation of the free and active foreign policy that Indonesia always follows. Steady progress is expected of its bilateral ties with India. On regional issues, ASEAN will be at the core of foreign policy projections. On maritime issues in Indonesian waters and economic zones, there will undoubtedly be a strong stand. With Widodo in the backdrop and Gibran as vice president, the coalition will seek to continue the amalgamation of different parties to support the president. Another phase of coalition politics awaits. (Views are personal) (shankari@mail.jnu.ac.in)

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Changing Constitution

Ref: No bid to change Constitution: Modi (Apr 17). Narendra Modi's claim that the BJP or even B R Ambedkar, who led the drafting of the Constitution, cannot change it is yet another example of the lies he and his party are spreading. The Constitution is not an immutable document engraved in stone. The document itself lays down clear procedures for changing it. It has been changed several times in the past. Ranjan Das, Ludigaon

Oratory skills

The BJP won the last two elections solely with the help of the speeches given by Narendra Modi. Today, the need of the hour for Congress is to identify its best speakers to tear into the ruling dispensation. We need to ensure not just a good government but also a strong opposition who can save Indian democracy by raising their voices when the ruling party misses the track. Paidi Visweswar Rao, Srikakulam

Health, education

No party has talked about improving the quality and affordability of education and healthcare. All politicians are living in a glass house and throwing stones at each other while taking voters for granted. Voters must choose one who is responsive and would work to develop his constituency instead of those changing parties to protect their illegal activities. Chandrashekar S, Secunderabad

Online voting

When most government and financial services can be done online, why can't voting be done online as well? Especially for those who move around constantly. When so much checking is done to ensure genuine voting, the ECI should work towards ensuring all genuine voters get a chance to vote despite geographical constraints. R Ganesan, Chennai

Maoist menace

Ref: 29 Maoists killed in biggest encounter (Apr 17). It is deplorable that 29 young people from SC/ST communities, disillusioned by poverty, unemployment and marginalisation, joined the Naxals and got killed. Hope the government finds a way to mitigate this menace, which is shedding the blood of both civilians and armed forces. PH Hema Sagar, Secunderabad


Check drivers

Frequent bus accidents are a matter of great concern for all. Despite many precautions, terrifying accidents are taking place due to rash and negligent driving. A CCTV camera should be installed in all buses to monitor the drivers, especially if an accident occurs. B Chandra Sekhar Achary, Kalahandi

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A thought for today
*Once you lose your credibility,
you can never restore it*
REINHOLD MESSNER

Trust Is Key

As SC again hears petitions on poll process, EC should consider increasing VVPAT verification

Supreme Court is back to dealing with the tricky issue of trust in the integrity of India's election process. It's an important issue, but one where the apex court's repeated interventions have failed to quell doubts. We are now in the midst of one more attempt.

EVMs to stay | EVMs were introduced for 2004 Lok Sabha elections. Govts have come and gone since, and in general EVMs are seen as an improvement over paper ballots. Therefore, SC did well to quash the idea calling for a return to ballots.

VVPAT comes in | A voter verified paper audit trail is connected to an EVM device. It allows a voter a chance to verify that the choice is captured accurately and also creates a paper trail to resolve any subsequent dispute. It was SC in 2013 (*Subramanian Swamy vs UOI*) that ordered the introduction of VVPAT. Its logic was that it's an essential part of the election process.

This intervention was meant to get adequate buy-in of the electorate in the integrity of elections. However, till this day it's an issue that hasn't been laid to rest. It can't be ignored as an electorate's trust in an election's integrity is what holds up democracy.

2019 intervention | Ahead of 2019 LS elections, SC took an extra step (*N Chandrababu Naidu vs UOI*). In response to a petition seeking verification of 50% of VVPAT slips in each constituency, EC put out a statistical reason to oppose it. Indian Statistical Institute had told EC that 479 randomly picked EVMs for VVPAT verifications would generate results with over 99% accuracy. EC said it was already verifying eight times the number. Once again, to buy-in electorate trust, SC ordered a five-fold increase in VVPAT verification.

Time's not the issue | Any increase in VVPAT verification will delay results, said EC in court. But time's not anymore a relevant issue. To illustrate, in 2004, LS polls along with that of four state assemblies were completed in a little over three weeks. This year, the polls will take a little over six weeks.

US has been a deeply divided society after the breakdown of trust over election results in 2020. India shouldn't go that way. But having introduced VVPATs to quell doubts in 2013, we remain unsure of the adequate level of verification needed. EC should consider increasing VVPAT verification.

The Pain In Spain

*Thoughtless tourism damages the places we seek out,
and the people who live there. We can change this*

Go home, the placards tell you clearly. The Spanish have had enough of tourists. Local govts in Spain have raised tourist taxes. Overtourism, though, isn't a European problem. It has afflicted iconic landmarks and famous landscapes in other parts of the world. Tourism has increased because of higher incomes and cheaper travel. A study found that 80% of the world's travellers go to just 10% of the world's tourism destinations – and these destinations have finite capacities.

While travel is an expansion of the imagination, and certainly should not remain an elite indulgence, tourism is too often about seeking and finding cliches, a frenzied ticking of boxes, a 'bucket-list' of places to go and things to do. Instead of meshing unobtrusively into a living environment, we often see it as mere backdrop for ourselves. It's a familiar story in India too, our hills and coastlines are clogged with junk and single-use plastics we leave behind. Tourist hotspots become reliant on seasonal income. Economic benefits are clear. But there are also unseen costs on local populations and environment.

Irresponsible tourist infrastructure in protected areas is one of the big reasons for habitat fragmentation and loss. If done right, though, tourism and its revenues can also be a driver of conservation, if tourists and the tourism industry move from a consumer mentality to one of collective stewardship. Leaving a place as we found it is a basic courtesy, to make sure that those who live there and future visitors can savour it too. Sustainable travel means examining the impact of our actions – from the way we travel to the experiences we seek, to being mindful about our effects on local communities and nature. We can chase our individual dreams without collectively savaging the earth.

Blood on the sand

*Black bucks sans EBs. Hear
apun ka Salman story*
Bachi Karkaria

Scary to read about bike-borne gunmen firing at Salman Khan's house in blood-for-blood *badla*. Blackbuck-worshipping Bishnois keep trying to avenge the macho actor's killing of two of these beasts in the forests outside Jodhpur during the 1998 filming of *Hum Saath Saath Hain*.

The law too hounded King Khan with Bollywood-grade tamasha till 2018, when he finally got bail. Last Sunday's sequel is even more of a masala movie, starring smouldering-hero gangster, Lawrence Bishnoi. In Bihar jail since 2021 under the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act, he wreaks remote justice via voice-over IP calls to his still-free accomplices. My buckbuster is set not in Bihar but Thar: It too centres on a dead endangered deer, and climaxes with a hair-raising car ride to escape the consequences – like Salman's with his stellar *saathiyon*.

In the early 70s, I went to cover the first Desert Festival at Jaisalmer. We got up close with camels, sword dances and the world's longest moustache, winding up with dancing at dusk on the surreal dunes of Sam. Then I drove off, along with two newfound male friends also headed to Jodhpur, to catch my early morning flight. Suddenly, a violent thud shattered our slumber. The driver had hit a chinkara – and bust the radiator. Both lay oozing into the sand. 'Ouff! paled to OMG!! This was Bishnoi territory, and surely even less-sacred deer carried some blood-price? Furtively covering the tell-tale stain, we hefted the dead giveaway into the boot. Instead of a dreamy ride, the boys pushed the crippled car across the darkened desert.

Staggering into Pokhran, we found a sleepy mechanic. After fiddling around for ages with a primitive welding rod, he announced, '*Ban gaya!*' The water poured out with a mocking gurgle. Several agonising attempts later, the radiator held. The chastened driver raced cautiously through the breaking dawn, my heart keeping pace. The boys said, 'Don't worry, flights from Jodhpur are never on time.' Perversely, this one was. The evening plane I had to take was four hours late. Chinkara? Don't ask, won't tell.

Alec Smart said: "Will fish jibe make BJP *rui* the day, *katla* up its Bengal dream? Il-eesh!"

Vote Counting: How To Get It PAT

Optimal level of EVM-VVPAT tallying is context-dependent. For example, narrow victory margins may call for more tallying. Key is choosing EVMs randomly for VVPAT auditing

Atanu Biswas



It may be hard to have a Lok Sabha election these days without contentious debates about EVMs. The voting process is basically the soul of democracy. Assuring its sanctity and, by extension, its unbiasedness is undoubtedly a prerequisite for democracy. However, convincing voters of the impartiality of the voting process is no less important.

A question of balance | The demand for tallying more VVPAT counts to corresponding EVM counts is not new.

Guidelines for VVPAT-auditing five EVMs in each assembly constituency were established by Supreme Court in 2019.

However, the ideal number of EVMs for a VVPAT audit is a difficult one to determine. The answer is contingent on human resources, prompt result announcements, and unquestionably demonstrating the voting machines' fairness.

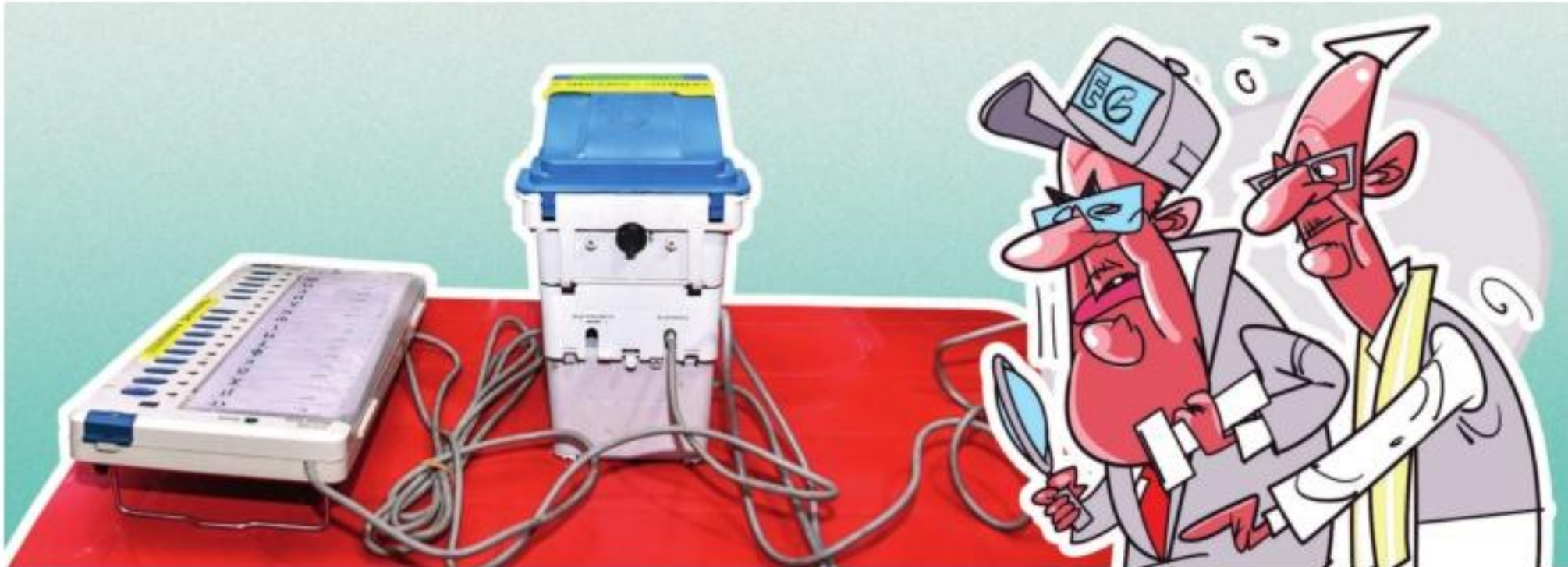
Reducing time and effort is the primary goal of employing EVMs, and it would be defeated if we counted too much. However, voters and political parties may continue to have worries about the accuracy of election results if an inadequate number of EVMs are audited. So, one must maintain balance.

Less tampering needs more counting | Are there any statistical solutions? Yes, depending on specific requirements and constraints. On average, there are a little over 3,300 EVMs in each LS constituency. To obtain 99.9% statistical assurance of detecting tampering will need 66 EVM-VVPAT tallying per LS constituency if as many as 10% EVMs have been tampered with, but 342 EVM-VVPAT tallying if only 2% EVMs have been tampered with.

One may approach the issue from various angles, though. Suppose that after EVMs are counted, the victorious candidate's "provisional" victory margin is noted. Assuming that an EVM can be manipulated to

change an average of 400 votes, or any other realistic figure, one can apply a preset rule (similar to Duckworth-Lewis method in cricket) to determine how many EVMs need to be VVPAT-audited to find at least one tampered case.

For instance, one EVM tampering might be sufficient to change the outcome if the winning margin is smaller than 800 votes. Again, in order to alter the result, about 25 EVMs must be tampered with if the margin is 10,001-20,000. In the first scenario, 100% of EVMs must then be VVPAT-audited in order to determine whether the necessary tampering has occurred, whereas in the second scenario, 908 VVPAT-auditing is sufficient.



Importance of randomness | To ensure that rice is cooked to perfection, one should mix the boiling rice with a spoon and then test a small sample of the grains. It's crucial that EVMs be "mixed" and chosen at random for VVPAT auditing. Furthermore, a large number of VVPAT audits are required if perceived amount of EVM tampering is low, in order to guarantee a high likelihood of discovering at least one tampered EVM in the sample.

None of the above approaches, however, can be claimed to be the "best". And when a court decides on how many VVPATs are to be audited, it also takes different kinds of info and logistical constraints into consideration and makes the best possible decision.

Trust – the Trump challenge | It's not that there were no allegations of election fraud in the era of paper ballots. But the real problem is that millions of ordinary people don't comprehend the technology.

The New Clear Chinese Strategy

Beijing's growing nuclear and missile inventory is aimed at both US and India.
New Delhi should prepare countermeasures

Jayant Prasad



Recent testimony to the US Senate Armed Services Committee by the head of US Strategic Command, Gen Anthony J Cotton, confirms that China is accelerating the upgradation of its strategic deterrence. It has augmented the types, quantities, and quality of its nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Cotton stated that China's land-based intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launchers currently exceed those of US. The outsized Chinese nuclear ambition is to become a strategic co-equal of Russia and US, which is disquieting for India, necessitating Indian countersteps.

Chinese missile muscle | Missile clusters in Kunming, Yunnan province, and Xining, Qinghai province, target Indian locations. Additionally, continuing transfer of Chinese nuclear and missile materials and technology to Pakistan forces India to face a trichotomous strategic challenge.

Since Xi assumed office, PLA has established a new Rocket Force to oversee its nuclear and conventional missiles, and PLA Strategic Support Force to handle counter-space, cyber, and electronic warfare. Chinese National University of Defence Science and Technology researchers have reported the formation of a new 'Near-Space Command' equipped with hypersonic, highly manoeuvrable missiles that travel at Mach-5 speed.

Modernisation overdrive | The road-mobile, multiple independent re-entry vehicle (MIRV)-capable D-41 ICBMs best demonstrate the modernisation of Chinese nuclear arsenal. The advanced missile now under development reportedly

has an MIRV capacity of seven warheads, compared to three for DF-41. China has also built extensive tunnel networks and extended the range of its ballistic missiles. These make Chinese nuclear forces more effective and difficult to target and destroy.

It has been known for a few years that China is building over 100 hardened silos each in Yumen, Gansu, and near Hami, Xinjiang, and an unspecified number at Yami, Shaanxi, to house its strategic DF-5 missiles, increasing Chinese ICBM silos 10 times.

Dragon's nuclear teeth | China is developing air-launched ballistic and cruise missiles delivered by new platforms, including the H-20 strategic stealth bomber and unmanned aerial combat vehicles to close its air-delivery capability gap.

Chinese nuclear triad includes JL-3 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) on six JIN-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), the newer versions of which are quieter.

The erstwhile Chinese nuclear posture stands altered since SLBMs must have nuclear warheads mated with missiles. A Chinese SSBN first appeared in Indian Ocean in 2014, causing India to speed up the strengthening of its anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capability.

Production of highly enriched uranium and reprocessed plutonium is increasing in China, which has stopped the annual voluntary declarations of its plutonium stocks to IAEA since 2017. Researchers headed by Hans M Kristensen have published in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* that the Chinese stockpile "now includes roughly 500 nuclear warheads with more in production". By 2030, China

Convincing the public that EVMs are, in fact, unbiased is essentially the task of the institutions. Yes, our institutions have made a sincere effort to do so. EC has also thrown open challenges for the EVM hackathon. Numerous legal challenges to EVMs have been made over the years, and nearly all of them have been rejected by the courts or have resulted in decisions that support EC and EVMs.

Media and experts both play significant roles in influencing public opinion. However, it turns out that people's beliefs are more influenced by what their leaders say. All throughout the planet. For instance, polls suggest that about one-third of American voters, or roughly two-thirds of Republican voters, still believe

that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump. No matter what the experts, media, and courts opine, they believe what their political hero says. Sadly. Same is true in India. Notably, a majority of the main political parties have attacked EVM at some point or other.

Blockchain future? | Reverting to paper ballots may be nearly impossible in a country with 96.8 crore voters. Conversely, technology will keep

advancing. For instance, voting based on blockchain technology, which is more advanced and believed to be more difficult to tamper with, may be adopted in the near future.

But the general public is not familiar with the technology underlying EVM-VVPATs, and they won't be familiar with any more advanced technology either. Furthermore, their viewpoint will be shaped by what authorities, media, experts, and, above all, politicians have to say.

But public opinion is crucial in democracies. Therefore, the institutions may try to bring all the major political parties into confidence, whether using EVM-VVPAT or another technology. A utopia? Perhaps. However, that might be the only way to persuade the common people. And EVM-VVPAT or any other sophisticated technology will have to continue to wrestle with the astounding legacy of paper ballots.

The writer is Professor, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata

Calvin & Hobbes



Talking Back To Your Inner Demons

Marguerite Theophil

At times, when feeling down or angry, we may hear an inner voice; it's as if another person is talking to us but not in any positive way. This inner voice is what some refer to also as an inner critic – even 'inner demon', since it can be destructive if we let it get its way.

This in no way implies that one is possessed by a malignant spirit, but that our own fearful, negative or dismissive thoughts begin to disturb our inner peace and fill us with negative emotions.

In more extreme cases, if we let these inner demons take over, ignoring our own power to discern and choose, it might cause us to act differently from how we generally are, resulting in actions that may hurt ourselves and others.

Now the thing is – hard as it may be to accept – we all have these parts of ourselves that we don't like to acknowledge, but that lurk inside us – causing us to act thoughtlessly and irrationally out of fear for ourselves. We also call this denied aspect our shadow side.

These hyper-critical inner voices start out as a self-judgment – first as 'I am' thoughts that soon morph into 'You are' statements: you are incompetent, unworthy, unlovable, wicked, or whatever harsh judgement can pierce you.

These inner demon voices can be in response to experiences in the past that caused you to feel angry, sad, unloved and overall – helpless. That time may have passed, but you can get triggered whenever similar instances of criticism, neglect, fear, pain, or inadequacy occur.

If you try to block them out, they persist and grow louder. You might distract yourself drowning in work or competition or use addictions to numb your mind and keep a lid on them. They return.

To deal with them effectively, firstly, you need to acknowledge that inner demons may perversely be allies, actually pointing to some flaws to help you know yourself better and more honestly. They also help you face important things that you may well be avoiding.

Lines from Rumi's *The Guest House*, bring out this truth: "This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness... Still treat each guest honourably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the

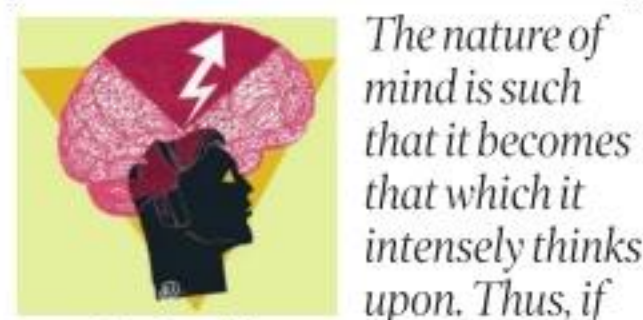
malice; meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in. Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent, as a guide from beyond."

Inner demons emphasise negativity. Consciously focusing more on positive things is an excellent way to counter them. Practise gratitude, make an effort to notice the good things around, successes and achievements that you are ignoring.

Another way is if you feel or hear these voices – *talk back*.

Learn to talk back to the demon inner voices, calmly and firmly. Therapists suggest doing this out loud, silently in your mind, or in writing – whichever works for you. You can go further – you can thank these voices and comments. Rather than trying to silence them completely, ask them to step back for the moment, so you can think clearly. And bit by bit, take back control.

Sacred space



The nature of mind is such that it becomes that which it intensely thinks upon. Thus, if you think of the vices and defects of another man, your mind will be charged with those defects and vices at least for the time being.

Swami Sivananda



THE SPEAKING TREE

Bite Into More Valued Chunk of Apple's Pie

Let's target high-end components and design iPhones are powering electronics into the top five export categories from India. This is being driven by PLIs to Apple and Samsung, designed to meet ambitious export targets and seed the ecosystem for domestic manufacturing. Apple is the biggest contributor to the growth in mobile handset exports. But the newcomer from Cupertino adds relatively modest local value to the phones it manufactures in India. In comparison, Samsung has progressed further down the localisation path by virtue of its longer manufacturing presence in the country. Exports are expected to gain from both enhanced Indian capacity and deeper localisation built into the PLI scheme. Down the line, however, the input duty structure may have to be tweaked to compete with other local production bases for the world's leading phone makers.

The nature of manufacturing also contributes to local value addition. Apple products leave far less on the table for their contract manufacturers than Samsung, which makes them in-house. In either model of production, high-end components and design soak up a significant part of value that India should target to strengthen its position as a manufacturing base for electronics. This process, as rightly highlighted by Ashwini Vaishnaw to ET this week, needs to run in parallel with the development of domestic manufacturing capacity. Without technology and design capabilities, local value addition will be limited to half or two-thirds of the value of mobile handsets exported from the country.

India must leverage its software advantage to build a moat around its emerging hardware capability. Localisation of materials such as circuit boards and displays for phones will have to be augmented by chip-manufacturing capability and greater inputs in software development. India's mobile export trajectory will eventually plateau, unless it can create its own brands that count in technology, design and marketing. It should use the momentum created by local manufacturing of established global brands to build capacities to outlast them.

Ease Casting Votes for Displaced, Migrants

On Monday, Supreme Court rejected a plea seeking voting facilities for 18,000 people displaced due to ethnic strife in Manipur. It stated that its interference, particularly at this late stage, would create problems for the polling process. The internally-displaced people (IDPs) wanted the court to direct EC to set up booths at their current locations outside Manipur. To be sure, EC will set up booths at relief camps within Manipur. But thousands — there are no official figures for IDPs in India — are forced to move out of their homes due to political violence, infrastructure projects and climate change.

Along with IDPs, economic migrants miss out on voting rights. For most of them, going back to their home constituencies to vote would mean losing wages, as well as incurring additional costs of travelling. In 2019, 300 mn people — twice Russia's population — didn't get to vote. EC also acknowledges that internal migration is a prominent reason for low voter turnout. In 2023, EC sought a discussion from political parties on the multi-constituency remote electronic voting machine prototype, which would streamline voting for economic migrants. But, in 2023, GoI said there was no proposal to introduce remote voting yet. In some cases, the poll panel has made welcome relaxations. Recently, it eased paperwork for people who shifted from Kashmir to Jammu and Udhampur in the 1990s to cast their votes, facilitating their participation.

India is justifiably proud of its elections. It would be much better if thousands were not left out of the process not because of unwillingness to participate, but because of political circumstances and economic compulsions. If there's a will, there'll be a way to bring more under the poll umbrella.

JUST IN JEST

More than Noah-level rains, the emirate seemed hit by an Old Testament threat

Was Dubai Struck by 'Biblical Proportions'?

By Tuesday, inhabitants of Gosh City a.k.a. Dubai found themselves uncontrollably belting out that old Silk Route song, 'Dooba dooba rehta hoon ankhon me teri', as the rest of us reacted to images from there with four parts shock, one part schadenfreude. For, after being bombarded by 24 hours of over 5.59 in of rain — the average year in Dubai sees 3.73 in — the damage done was of Biblical proportions.

Speaking of the good book, from Dubai if you cross the Saudi peninsula in space and aeons in time, you land in Egypt of the Old Testament when 'Ten Plagues' struck the pharaonic kingdom. Like this week's flood in the desert emirate — and more fatally in Oman — Egypt was also completely unprepared for the 'God of Israel' inflicting (un)natural disasters to force the pharaoh to free the Israelites in his land. Of the 10 biblical plagues, one involved 'rain' — 'The Lord sent thunder and hail, and the fire ran along upon the ground' (Exodus 9:23). The earlier Noah-era flood of Genesis was the result of much more prolonged rainfall, and not the flash flood experienced by Dubai (and Egypt). So, as far as Biblical proportions go, is this week's freak rains in 'Dooba' a dire, divine message for a neighbourhood whose modern-day pharaohs have a nasty habit of letting rockets rain down on innocents? Oh, let's stay meteorological, shall we?

Things don't look too good for those seeking to migrate to the US, especially Indian nationals

American Dream Fading?



Lubna Kably

Recently, US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) proudly posted on X that a 99-yr-old woman from India had been awarded citizenship. They say age is just a number. That seems true for this lively 99-year-old who became a new US citizen in our Orlando office. Daibai is from India and was excited to take the Oath of Allegiance...

Indians tired of waiting for an employment-based green card (GC) for decades did not take too kindly to this post. One person responded to USCIS with, 'LOL. Soon you will give green cards posthumously!'

A GC is the first step on the path towards US citizenship. In general, only after five years of holding a GC (reduced to three years, if you are married to a US citizen) can you apply for citizenship. The catch — it's a decades-long queue if you are from India.

The US has restricted legal immigration since the 1920s. David J Bier, director, immigration studies at Cato Institute, points out that the system utterly fails those aspiring to pursue the 'American Dream' in lawful and orderly ways. His Feb 2024 study, 'Green Card Approval Rate Reaches Record Lows', shows that only 3% of those who have submitted GC applications will receive permanent status during FY2024 (fiscal ending Sept 30, 2024).

As of Oct 1, 2023, nearly 34.7

mn applications were pending — up from about 10 mn in 1996. Bier adds that many of these are not applicants in the true sense. Most (read: largely Indians) are waiting for a cap number to become available, after which they can file a formal GC application.

In addition to the overall caps, be it for employment- or family-based GCs, no country can receive more than 7% of the GCs (the country caps). This cap adversely impacts Indians and, to an extent, Chinese nationals.

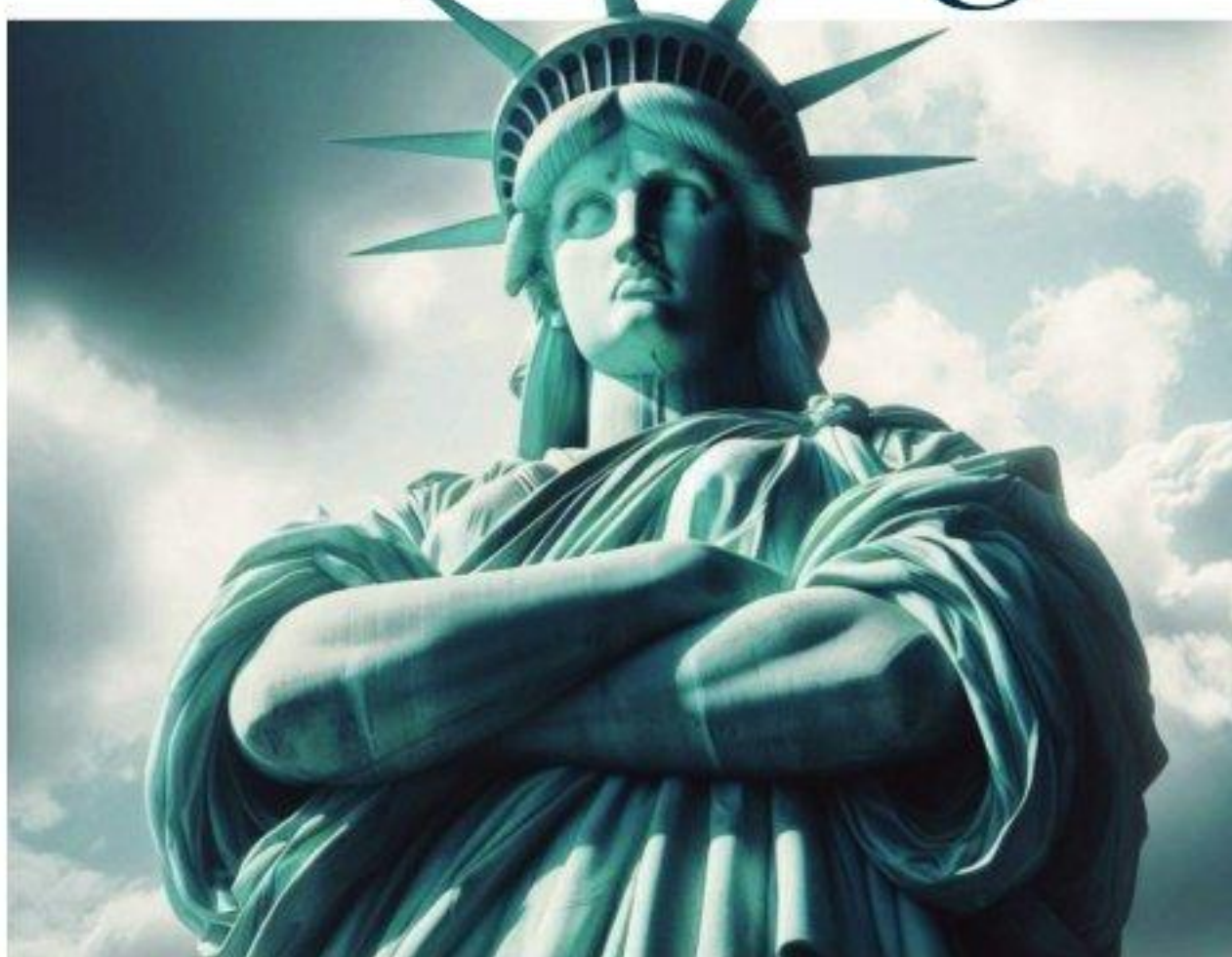
National Foundation for American Policy, which recently analysed immigration statistics, states that over 1.2 mn highly-skilled Indians, including their dependents, are waiting in the first, second and third employment-based GC categories.

► **Employment-based GCs** The overall cap is set at 1.4 lakh a year, plus any unused family-sponsored GCs that are passed on to this category. In FY2024, 'about 8% of pending employment-based applications will be approved for a green card. But most of these... will not go to the applicants who have waited the longest. Instead, because of the country caps, applicants who apply over the next year will pass applicants from China and India — many of whom have already waited more than a decade. In fact, Indians — who make up half the applicants in the employer-sponsored categories — must wait more than a century for a green card,' explains Bier.

His earlier study had shown that the employment-based GC backlog from India (EB-2 and EB-3 skilled category) crossed 1 mn in March 2023. If factors such as death and 'ageing out' are considered, the wait for a GC is 54 years. Otherwise, it's 134 years.

414 lakh Indians waiting in this category will die before they receive a GC. More than 1 lakh children of Indian families will age out (turn 21), and their dependent visa will no longer be valid, and they'd drop off the GC queue. For these 21-yr-olds, it means a transit to an international student visa centre, or

Trump's anti-immigration stand will only intensify. From the Indian diaspora's PoV, scrapping of citizenship by birth will be a sore point



Keep standing in line, peeps

self-deportation. Post-study, if they wish to continue a US stay, history tends to repeat itself, with attempts at H-1B and a GC backlog.

► **Family-sponsored GCs** There's a cap of 2.26 lakh for spouses and minor children of GC-holders. Even adult children and siblings of US citizens fall in this category. Here, those from Mexico and the Philippines have the longest waits.

► **Biden's past promises** In his 2020 campaign trail, Joe Biden had promised reforms to the legal immigration system. On his first day in office on Jan 21, 2021, he sent the US Citizenship Act to Congress. Of key interest to the Indian diaspora — and, indeed, to those aspiring to migrate to the US — were proposals to clear employment-based visa backlogs, recapture of unused visas, reduction of lengthy wait times and elimination of per-country visa caps.

The bill also provided dependents of H-1B visa holders work authorisation, and children were protected from 'ageing out' of the system. These reforms — even as various other bills, including bipartisan ones that followed — have not fructified. Biden's campaign logo for 2024 is, 'Let's finish the job.' As of now, focus in political debates and tira-

des is on border control. The Indian diaspora waits...

► **Trump's proposed plan** Donald Trump's anti-immigration stand will, reportedly, only intensify. Mass deportations, scrapping of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) that offers pro-

Indians — who make up half the applicants in the employer-sponsored categories — must wait more than a century for a green card

tection to those who entered the US as children of undocumented immigrants, and travel bans for those from Muslim countries seem to be on the cards.

From the Indian diaspora's PoV, scrapping of citizenship by birth will be a sore point. Trump is likely to crack down on legal immigration as well. We could again see policies relating to scrapping of work permits for H-1B spouses, capping visa tenure for international students, limiting post-study work programmes for them and introducing strictures in the H-1B visa programme, such as allotting these visas to the highest wage-earners.

Winds of change for the legal immigrant do not seem to be on the horizon.

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THE SPEAKING TREE

Placebos and Nocebos

NARAYANI GANESH

The placebo effect is when a person gets healed even though the medicine that she is given is only a harmless dummy made to resemble the real thing. What, then, is the nocebo effect? 'Placebo is defined as an inert substance that provokes perceived benefits, whereas the term nocebo is used when an inert substance causes perceived harm. Their major mechanisms are expectancy and classical conditioning.' Basically, the nocebo effect kicks in when a patient manifests side effects with a dummy drug, symptoms that could occur when the real drug is used. This happens because the patient believes she is being given the real drug that could have troubling side effects that she is aware of.

Charlotte Blese, researcher at the Department of Women's and Children's Health at Uppsala University, has, along with colleagues at Brown University and the University of Zurich, come out with a book titled *The Nocebo Effect: When Words Make You Sick*. She says, 'I think it's the idea that words really matter. It's fascinating that how we communicate can affect the outcome.'

When we hear good things about us, our work or relationship, we tend to happily accept those compliments and behave in a manner that fits that perception. Conversely, when we are told negative things about our work, relationship or our personality, we tend to subconsciously live out those perceptions. Hence, sages tell us to always keep the mind centred and cultivate moderation and equanimity. An evolved person is likely to say good things rather than focus on the negative.

Chat Room

Arm's Length, Not Arm-Twisting

Appropos the Edit, 'Intimidation is Not Investigation' (Apr 17), the Indian law enforcement agencies are long used to intimidation and physical torture in order to get confession out of the accused. It is doubtful whether the high court's disapproval will have a salutary effect on the manner in which investigations are conducted. Lazy investigations are the main reason why the conviction rate in India is low. So, crime in India is a low-risk, high-profit business. The police training manual has to change and personnel training given a makeover in the manner of conducting investigations. Long-term planning and implementation is the only way a change can be made.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES
Mumbai

Recarpeted Road For the Iconic EV

This refers to the Edit, 'Dear Elon, Have No Fear, India is Here' (Apr 17). GoI is all set to lay down the red carpet for one of the world's richest billionaires, Elon Musk, who has expressed a desire to set

up shop in India. While this could unnervingly the Indian domestic vehicle sector, Musk may not find it easy to brush them all aside, even if backed to the hilt by GoI. The arrival of Musk should also lead to the creation of more employment opportunities and, on this score, Musk and his ilk richly deserve a warm reception.

CV ARAVIND
Bengaluru

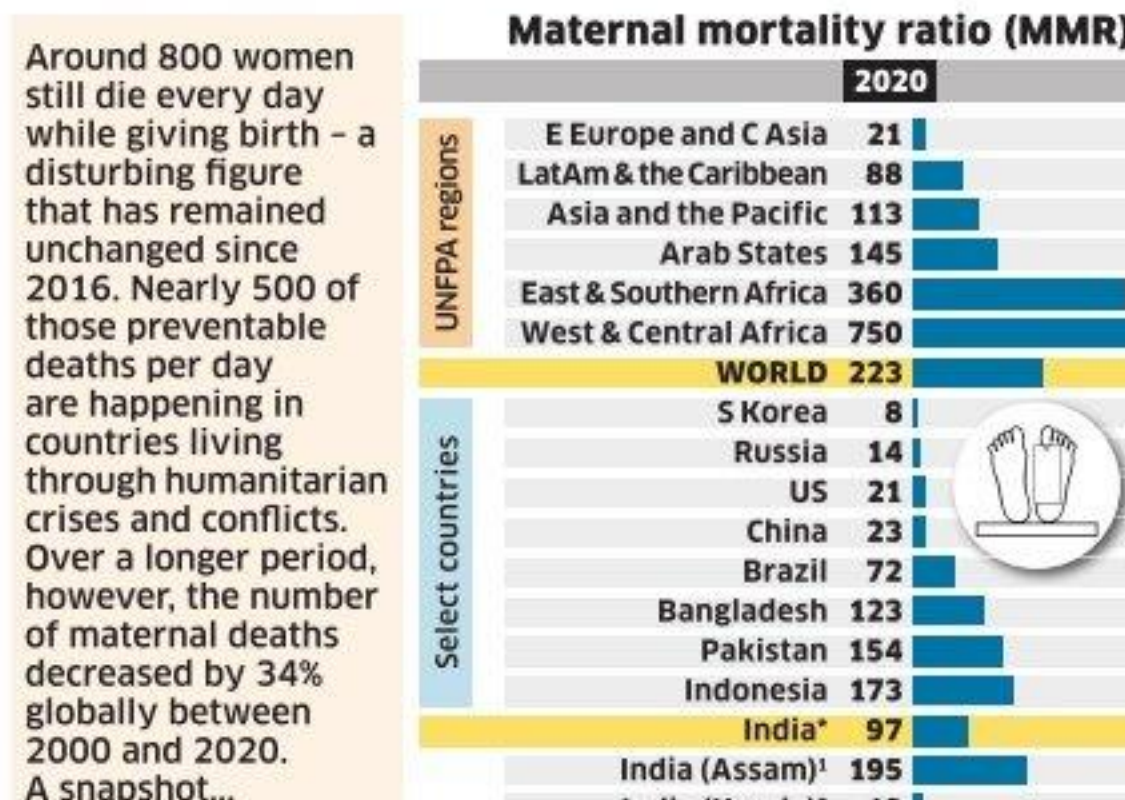
Stronger Roots for The Money Plant

Appropos 'Provide a Visible Hand' by Arun Maira (Apr 17), wealth inequality is inevitable in an unrestricted free-market capitalist economy. Rightly, without stringent regulations, such an economy will only move towards more inequality. Growth accompanied by more disparity, between the rich and the poor, is quite meaningless. The GDP (PPP) per capita will not get any better if we remain mere spectators and wait for wealth to 'trickle down' as the economy grows. If we are to repair the economic machine, GoI must implement sterner policies to keep the system in check, so that India can set an example for others to follow.

ABHIJOY PRABAL
Jamshedpur

Letters to the editor may be addressed to
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Preventable Maternal Deaths



Bell Curves

■ R Prasad



50 lakh rupees for just one appearance? Gods appear cheaper!

Start Up with Gov'nance



Kunal Bahl

Startup governance has dominated headlines recently, captivating the attention of founders, investors, media, public markets, regulators, and stakeholders at large. This surge in interest is no coincidence. Startups are laying the groundwork for a new and dynamic India, poised to reclaim, with determination and confidence, its position as a global economic leader. So, given its pivotal role in shaping our collective future, India's startup sector must rest on a robust foundation of good corporate governance.

While startups thrive on innovation, disruption and rapid growth, this growth need not come at the expense of robust governance practices. In fact, a well-crafted corporate governance framework can guide startups through favourable and challenging phases.

There's a belief that governance concerns are pertinent only in the later stages of a startup's journey, and that all focus should be on growth in the initial phase. However, this notion overlooks that distractions and pressures will always exist, presenting seemingly valid reasons to delay the adoption of governance norms.

Hence, embedding the principles of good corporate governance from the outset is crucial. Over time, these principles become ingrained in an organisation's DNA, steering the startup and its stakeholders through various growth stages. The challenges in implementing governance norms stem from two key factors:

► **Lack of opportunity & experience** In the nascent stages, founders are consumed with establishing and stabilising the business. As the focus shifts to attracting investors and expanding the team, there's a need to earn investor trust by demonstrating growth.

Lean teams and a dynamic work culture often lead to a lack of formal processes and documentation in the early years. This deficiency persists as the company grows, resulting in oversight gaps and misuse. Without structured governance, organisational growth and expansion become muddled. Limited experience compounds the issue, as founders may lack exposure to governance practices, further impeding adoption.

► **Lack of resources** Startups allocate financial and managerial resources to reward rapid growth, as valuations hinge on performance metrics rather than governance quality. Governance demands time, money and effort, including processes like regular audits and investor relations. Consequently, governance often takes a back seat amid the drive for growth.

Governance responsibilities lie primarily with founders, who are often overwhelmed with building the business, managing teams and navigating investor relationships. This responsibility must be shared among all stakeholders — founders, management, board members and investors. Early-stage investors and directors are crucial in promoting governance practices based on their experience.

While governance requirements may vary based on a startup's life cycle, core

principles such as accountability, transparency, fairness and responsibility remain constant. CII's initiative to formulate a governance charter tailored to startups offers guidance across different growth stages — from inception to going public.

This governance framework for startups covers a spectrum of governance aspects, including board formation, internal controls, risk management, compliance, stakeholder engagement and financial management. Complemented by an online self-evaluation tool, this framework empowers startups to assess their governance performance and identify areas for improvement.

Good governance transcends regulatory compliance. It fosters ethical decision-making, reduces conflicts and promotes long-term strategic thinking. It enhances transparency, enabling startups and investors to collaborate with mutual trust based on predictable revenue and growth forecasts. At the earliest stages of a startup, governance can mean that investors are sent regular business updates with monthly financials.

As the startup scales up, effective governance encompasses risk management, succession planning, diversity, equity, inclusion, environmental sustainability and board functionality. It necessitates proactive planning and structured monitoring to prevent reactive measures.

While governance challenges aren't unique to India's startup ecosystem, the sector's youth — it's barely 15 years old — adds complexity to its coming-of-age issues. However, with startups poised for sustained growth, it's imperative to cultivate an ecosystem that rewards innovation and sustainable practices.

By embracing sound governance practices, startups can unlock tangible benefits — long-term value creation, stakeholder trust, improved access to finance and heightened survival prospects. This, in turn, will nurture a generation of startups equipped to lead India's economic transformation.

The writer is chairman, National Startup Council, CII, and co-founder, Snapdeal



Drill it into the system

SC votes for EVMs

The apex court has summarily rejected the idea of reverting to ballot papers for registering votes

General elections would be held through Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) as the Supreme Court has voiced its disapproval of criticism directed towards them; it has summarily dismissed the idea of reverting to ballot papers. This statement comes amid debates regarding the reliability of EVMs. Many Opposition leaders have publicly expressed scepticism regarding the accuracy of EVM results, citing concerns of tampering and the potential undermining of the democratic process. The Supreme Court's stance underscores the need for a pragmatic approach towards electoral reforms, demanding concerns of transparency and efficiency in democratic practices. The use of EVMs in elections has been a subject of contention since its introduction in India in the 1990s by the Congress Government. While proponents argue for its efficiency, accuracy and ability to streamline the voting process, critics raise concerns over potential vulnerabilities to tampering, hacking and manipulation. These concerns have fuelled



calls for a return to traditional paper ballots, perceived by some as a more secure and transparent method of voting. However, the Supreme Court's recent remarks shed light on the practical challenges associated with such a regression. The transition from paper ballots to EVMs was a significant leap forward in the electoral process. Reverting to paper ballots would not only be a step back in terms of technology but also pose logistical challenges in managing large-scale elections in a country as populous as India.

The Supreme Court is right in its stand as replacing EVMs with paper ballots will be a humongous exercise. However, there is a middle ground called VVPAT — the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT). A tangible link between electronic voting and the traditional paper ballot system, it provides voters with the opportunity to verify their vote by displaying a paper slip containing the chosen candidate's name and symbol. A little tweaking of the system to collect paper slips with the candidate's name the voter voted for and counted along with the electronic votes would go a long way in making the system transparent. Critics of EVMs have often pointed to instances of alleged tampering and discrepancies in election results. While these concerns merit attention, it is essential to distinguish between genuine issues and unsubstantiated claims driven by political agendas. The integrity of the electoral process is paramount, and any allegations of malpractice should be thoroughly investigated and addressed. Perception plays a crucial role in shaping the legitimacy of election outcomes, and measures to strengthen transparency and accountability are essential. Rather than advocating for a wholesale rejection of technological advancements, the focus should be on enhancing the security, transparency and accountability of the electoral process. Making VVPAT counting and matching mandatory would indeed go a long way in clearing the doubts about the EVMs.

PICTALK



National Cadet Corps perform a drill during their 10-day summer season camp at Nagrota, in Jammu

PTI

The new age of quantum technology

The scientific community celebrated April 14 as World Quantum Day to raise awareness of quantum science's impact across diverse fields

The world of science is on the cusp of a transformative era driven by the burgeoning field of quantum technology. Quantum science is founded on several key principles that underpin the behaviour of particles and systems at the quantum scale.

The term "quantum scale" refers to the realm of physics that deals with phenomena occurring at very small scales, typically at the level of atoms, subatomic particles and fundamental particles. It encompasses the principles of quantum mechanics, which govern the behaviour of particles and systems at these tiny dimensions. At the heart of quantum technology lies the principles of quantum mechanics, a branch of physics that describes the behaviour of particles at the smallest scales. Quantum mechanics introduces uncertainty and the notion of superposition, where particles can exist in multiple States simultaneously. Furthermore, entanglement, another fundamental quantum phenomenon, links the properties of particles regardless of distance, enabling instantaneous



communication between them. These counterintuitive phenomena, once relegated to the realm of theory, are now being harnessed to create groundbreaking technologies with the potential to revolutionise numerous fields. India has a long and rich history in quantum science. Pioneering work by Satyendra Nath Bose on quantum statistics laid the groundwork for many modern quantum technologies, including Bose-Einstein condensation, quantum superconductivity and quantum information theory. Over the past few decades, advancements in quantum science have surged, laying the groundwork for a new era characterised by unparalleled computational power, secure communication and transformative applications across various sectors. One of the most captivating applications of quantum mechanics is the

development of quantum computers. These machines leverage the power of superposition to perform calculations exponentially faster than traditional computers. By manipulating qubits (quantum bits) that can be 0, 1, or both simultaneously, quantum computers can explore a vast array of possibilities concurrently. This unparalleled processing power holds immense promise for drug discovery, where simulating complex molecules can accelerate the development of life-saving medications. Another revolutionary application of quantum technology is in secure communication. Quantum key distribution (QKD) utilises the principles of quantum mechanics to establish secure cryptographic keys between parties. By encoding information into the quantum States of particles and leveraging entanglement properties, QKD ensures that any attempt to intercept or eavesdrop on the communication would disturb the quantum State, thereby alerting the parties involved. Quantum cryptography safeguards sensitive information

in critical areas like financial transactions, national security communications and protecting intellectual property. By exploiting the extreme sensitivity of quantum systems to minute changes, scientists are developing sensors capable of detecting the subtlest variations in magnetic fields, gravity and temperature. This has profound implications for medical imaging, where ultra-high-resolution MRIs can provide detailed analyses of tissues and organs, aiding in early disease detection and personalised medicine. In navigation, quantum sensors can lead to more precise GPS and navigation systems, which are crucial for autonomous vehicles and various scientific endeavours. The Government of India, under the Department of Science and Technology, has initiated the National Quantum Mission (NQM), which aims to harness the transformative potential of quantum technology to address national challenges and foster innovation. (The writer is an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies; views are personal)



BIJU DHARMAPALAN

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Showdown in Karnataka

As Karnataka braces for the Lok Sabha elections, the political arena is set for a fierce clash between the Congress and the BJP-JD(S) alliance

The Lok Sabha elections are coming up in Karnataka and will be held in 28 constituencies on April 26 and May 7. The Congress party and the BJP-JD(S) alliance will compete to win voters' support. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has visited the State multiple times to campaign for BJP candidates. BJP has the support of former chief minister Yediyurappa, who is widespread among the Lingayat community and is a significant vote bank in the State. These elections are crucial for Karnataka's future and mark a pivotal moment in its history.

Karnataka has been a stronghold of Congress for many years. It supported Prime Minister Indira Gandhi even after the Emergency, is a testament to its political significance. This historical significance is evident from the victories of Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi, who both won seats in Karnataka for the Congress party.

These elections are not just a contest but a high-stakes battle between Congress, BJP and the Bharatiya Janata Party-Janata Dal (Secular) alliance. They symbolise the BJP's re-entry into Karnataka's political landscape. The election could shift policy priorities and governance style, potentially impacting various sectors of the State's economy and society. The results will have significant consequences for people's lives, making their participation and understanding of the process crucial. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) seeks to emerge victorious in the upcoming Karnataka elections to solidify its regional dominance in the South, enhance its standing in national politics and extend its sphere of influence in southern India. In contrast, the Indian National Congress is committed to protecting its Government in the State. At the same time, the Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)] endeavours to survive in a highly competitive political climate. In essence, JD(S) is striving to attain political longevity. The BJP's campaign in Karnataka centres around PM Modi's achievements and Congress's fail-



ures. It targets two influential communities, the Lingayats and Vokkaligas, who are crucial to its electoral strategy. The Lingayats, being a dominant community in the State, have traditionally supported the BJP. In contrast, the Vokkaligas, another influential community, has been a JD (S) stronghold. Winning over these communities is crucial for the BJP's electoral success. The BJP faces some local conflicts. For the first time since 2014, the party has had an open rebellion. The reason for this is the BJP-JDS alliance, which has yet to be well received. The Congress, too, has its rebel candidates. Congress is targeting SCs, STs and Muslims in Karnataka. The Congress Government implemented five essential poll guarantees promised last year, which included free bus rides for women, increased funding for education and job creation. These promises were designed to address specific concerns of the region's voters and reflect the party's commitment to social welfare and economic development. Three pre-poll surveys by Edina, News 18 and India Today Group predict con-

“THE CONGRESS GOVERNMENT IMPLEMENTED FIVE ESSENTIAL POLL GUARANTEES PROMISED LAST YEAR, WHICH INCLUDED FREE BUS RIDES FOR WOMEN, INCREASED FUNDING FOR EDUCATION AND JOB CREATION

flicting results for Karnataka's upcoming elections. Edina predicts Congress will win 17 seats and the BJP-JDS alliance will bag 11. News 18 forecasts NDA will win 25 seats, Congress only 3. India Today Group predicts NDA will win 24 seats with a 53 per cent vote share. The INDIA alliance, a regional party alliance, is expected to secure only four seats with a 42 per cent vote share. These surveys provide a snapshot of the current political landscape. They can help readers gauge the potential outcomes of the election. There is a significant shift from the 2019 polls when Congress and JD(S) were allies. The BJP aims to secure the Vokkaliga vote in Old Mysore and tilt the election in their favour. The Vokkaligas, a dominant community in the Old Mysore region, have traditionally supported the JD (S). The BJP's strategy to win over this community involves a combination of caste-based outreach, promises of development and highlighting the failures of the JD (S) Government. If successful, this strategy could significantly impact the election outcome and the State's political landscape.

The BJP has fielded a top cardiologist, a member of the Mysuru royal family and an ex-chief Minister among its candidates. It has also fielded some new faces. The Congress has many ministers' relatives and these candidates can impact the result. Since the BJP formed its first Government in 2008, the 'toppling game has been ongoing. Money and positions often play a significant role in luring legislators to shift loyalties, adding another layer of complexity to the State's political landscape. Both parties are willing to spend money. The upcoming election in the State poses a decision for voters. They must choose between supporting the Congress party they previously elected in the Assembly polls or the BJP, which had held power earlier. While some may prefer the Congress, the BJP still has a loyal following. Suppose the voters choose to reject the BJP. In that case, it'll signify that the political party's access to the South has been closed, at least temporarily and the return of Congress is on the right track. (The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MEDICAL SUPPLIES SCANDAL

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Delhi Government's Vigilance Department Exposes Kejriwal", published on April 16, this is my response. Recent revelations concerning irregularities in medical procurement by the AAP-led Delhi Government raise serious concerns. The findings of the Vigilance Department indicate a pattern of favouritism towards specific individuals and companies during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in significant losses for the Government. The involvement of high-ranking officials, including the Health Minister's OSD RN Das, in managing tenders to benefit particular entities is troubling. The exploitation of the pandemic crisis to swindle funds from the public exchequer is deplorable. The notice's assertion that procurement procedures were blatantly ignored, coupled with allegations of cartelisation among suppliers, paints a grim picture of corruption within the health department. The revelation that certain companies, allegedly linked to influential individuals, secured lucrative contracts further deepens suspicions of foul play. While the AAP-led Delhi Government dismisses the allegations as baseless, the call for accountability is paramount. Swift and transparent investigations are necessary to restore public trust and ensure such egregious malpractices are rooted out effectively.

Vishwajeet Apartha | Jaipur

NATO'S EVOLVING CHALLENGES

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Challenges galore for NATO@75", published on April 16, this is my response. NATO, an alliance born in the aftermath of World War II, faces a multitude of challenges as it marks its 75th anniversary. Criticism from within Europe, coupled with the rise of right-wing nationalism, underscores the need for NATO to adapt. Its traditional focus on military might must now contend with non-traditional threats like cyber warfare and terrorism. Moreover, NATO's credibility is under

The power of young citizens



Apropos the news article, "A call to vote responsibly beyond party lines", published on April 16, this is my response. India's youthful population wields immense power through their vote, a power intrinsically tied to responsibility. As we step into adulthood, we're not just celebrating a milestone but embracing a civic duty to shape the nation's

future. The call is clear: transcend party lines and scrutinise progress objectively. Our nation's trajectory demands introspection—are we advancing equitably? Are policies benefiting all strata of society? The electoral process is our mechanism for accountability, a tool to measure leadership against promises made. Infrastructure, industry, healthcare, education—these sectors reflect our collective welfare. As citizens, we must assess policies impartially, ensuring transparency and inclusivity. Our vote signifies unity, transcending divisive lines for the greater good. Informed decision-making isn't just a privilege but a necessity. Our diverse nation thrives when every voice is heard and every concern addressed. Let's harness the power of our vote to pave the path towards a stronger, more inclusive India.

Keerti Punia | Chandigarh

scrutiny due to perceptions of American hegemony and its military interventions worldwide. The proposed aid package to Ukraine highlights NATO's role in geopolitical tensions, particularly concerning Russia. However, India's rejection of a US offer to join NATO signals a broader reluctance among nations to align too closely with Western military alliances. As NATO faces an uncertain future, navigating the complexities of global power dynamics will require strategic reforms and a renewed commitment to its founding principles of security and cooperation.

Aryan Kant | Sonipat

MENTAL IMPACT OF NUTRITION

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Mangoes are nature's antidepressants", published on April 15, this is my response. Poor nutrition doesn't just affect our bodies—it deeply impacts our mental well-being too. In an insightful exploration by Rajdeep Joshi, the link between nutrition and mental health is emphasised, with a focus on the often overlooked benefits of mango consumption. Nutrition is the

cornerstone of good health and its deficiency is intertwined with mental health issues like depression and anxiety. While various factors contribute to depression, nutritional imbalances are often sidelined. Key vitamins and minerals play pivotal roles in managing psychological well-being, influencing optimal brain function and stress levels. Mangoes emerge as natural mood enhancers, packed with serotonin-boosting tryptophan and vital minerals like potassium and magnesium. Incorporating mangoes into our diet not only promotes physical health but also aids in relieving nervous tension and improving mood. The recipe provided, a nutritious mango salad, offers a delicious way to harness the mental wellness benefits of mangoes, blending their goodness with other wholesome ingredients. It's a flavorful reminder that what we eat profoundly impacts not just our bodies, but our minds too.

Jitu Majumdar | Kolkata

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

SPIRITUAL APPROACH TO CLIMATE CHANGE

To return to a life of harmony with nature, we need to realise our spiritual identity



RAJYOGI BRAHMAKUMAR NIKUNJ JI

A few centuries ago no one worried about climate change, because there was no reason to do so. But as humans extracted more from nature and dumped an increasing amount of waste, including highly toxic substances, on it, the ecological balance began to get disrupted. This process has accelerated over the centuries and brought us to the present situation where, according to some experts, the entire human race faces extinction shortly. Climate change and global warming are sometimes thought of as things that will happen in the future. But scientists are finding increasing evidence that the planet is changing now - and that people must take a large share of the blame for this phenomenon. They further explain that excessive carbon emissions through industrial and vehicular pollution, use of CFCs and plundering of forests and natural resources have depleted the ozone layer. This has trapped more and more solar radiation inside the earth's atmosphere. As a result, the earth is heating up which has begun to trigger a chain of natural upheavals like floods, earthquakes, tsunamis and landslides in recent times. To prevent such an eventuality, humans need to work on themselves. Man does not need to master nature. The human soul is the master of all that is material. It is when the soul begins to identify itself with the body that it comes under the influence of matter and vices. In the Golden and Silver Ages, when all human souls had self-awareness and divine qualities, nature was their obedient servant. The elements of nature made life pleasant in that era, which is remembered in religious texts as paradise or heaven.



Because the divine beings of that world were free of vices, they never exploited or despoiled nature. Instead of having to be environment-friendly, they had a truly friendly environment. They were friends not only to their fellow beings but also to all matter. This State of affairs continued till the beginning of the Copper Age when the souls forgot who they were and began to come under the influence of the body and the vices. They then began to exploit natural resources, gradually harming the environment. In return, nature too ceased to obey souls who had lost mastery over themselves. As the influence of the vices grew, so did the plunder of nature and what was once a harmonious relationship turned more into one between an exploiter and the exploited. The Prime Minister of India in his speech at the UN said “We can achieve the same level of development, prosperity and well-being without necessarily going down the path of reckless consumption. It doesn't mean that economies will suffer; it will mean that our economies will take on a different character. For us in India, respect for nature is an integral part of spiritualism. We treat nature's bounties as sacred. Yoga is an invaluable gift of our ancient tradition. Yoga embodies unity of mind and body; thought and action; restraint and fulfillment; harmony between man and nature; and a holistic approach to health and well-being. It is not about exercise but to discover the sense of oneness with yourself, the world and nature. By changing our lifestyle and creating consciousness, it can help us deal with climate change.” Now, if we wish to go back from the brink and return to a life of harmony with nature, we need to realise our spiritual identity and values. Such awareness will make us naturally eco-friendly and send out a positive energy that will bring the elements of nature into harmony with us again. If a critical mass of humans begin to live with this spiritual awareness, nature will by itself become our friend and humanity will look at a golden instead of a doubtful future. *(The writer is a spiritual educator and a popular columnist; views are personal)*

The roots of Wahhabi extremism

The world reels under the grip of Wahhabi terrorism, orchestrated by Saudi rulers with Zionist affiliations, masquerading behind a façade of Islam



HASAN KHURSHID

Today entire world is gripped in the clutches of Wahhabi terrorism spearheaded by Zionist Saudi rulers, wearing the cloak of pseudo-Islam, who are hiding their faith in Judaism. All terrorist organisations, such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Lashkar e Taiyaba, Lashkar e Jhangvi, etc; follow the ideology of Wahhabism, a newly created cult of Saudi rulers, the pseudo-Muslims. The activities of this cult can be best explained through the words of renowned British historian Charles Allen, who in his book, God's Terrorists -The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad, writes, “Wahhabi is a guiding ideology behind modern Islamist terrorism. In the 18th century, a violently intolerant re-interpretation of Islam took root in the Arabian desert. Its followers became known after their founder (Sheikh Muhammad Najdi ibn Abd-al Wahhab), as Wahhabi. The creed was then exported to India and its north-west frontier Afghanistan.” Sheikh Najdi was born in 1702, in the desert of Najd, a rocky plateau of the Arabian Peninsula. About Najd, Charles Allen writes, “Indeed for many Arabs, Najd had only negative associations. There was a popular saying that ‘Nothing good never came out of Najd’ and it was related in the Hadith that the Prophet had three times been called upon to ask God to bless Najd and had three times been called upon to ask God to bless Najd and had three times refused, answering on the third occasion, ‘Earthquakes and dissension are there and there shall arise the horn of Satan.’ In the years following the ministry of Al-Wahhab, there were many who argued that this prophecy had been confirmed.” In 1744, Najdi ibn Wahhab, sidelining the preaching of true Islam by Prophet Mohammed, created a new version of




WAHHABISM IS NOTHING BUT PSEUDO-ISLAM. HOWEVER, WHEN OPPOSITION MOUNTED AGAINST HIS IDEOLOGY, NAJDI WAS SHREWD ENOUGH TO FIND A PATRON IN MUHAMMED-IBN-SAUD, A BEDOUIN TRIBAL CHIEF, WHO MADE USE OF HIS NEW VITRIOLIC VERSION OF ISLAM FOR POLITICAL CONSOLIDATION

Islam called Wahhabism. His ideology is enshrined in Kitab-al Tawhid (book of unity), which prescribes the forceful conversion of Muslims and non-Muslims to his Salafi or Wahhabi ideology, wherein he manifestly says, “Follow my ideology, else get ready to be killed.” His ideology was strongly opposed by Muslim masses, including his father and uncle. So, Wahhabism is nothing but pseudo-Islam. However, when the opposition mounted against his ideology, Najdi was shrewd enough to find a patron in Muhammed-ibn-Saud, a Bedouin tribal chief, who made use of his new vitriolic version of Islam for political consolidation. Ibn Saud belonged to the Jewish tribe of Anza Ben Wael. Islam is not the original religion of Saudi Arab rulers. Sheikh Najdi, also belonging to Jewish ancestry, not only made an alliance with Ibn Saud but also got his daughter married to Ibn Saud's son Abd-al-Aziz ibn Saud. Thereafter, the faith was of Sheikh Najdi and the sword was of Ibn Saud. A dynastic government was established as a result of this partnership, which is continuing in the name of Saudi Arabia. In 1766, Muhammed ibn Saud was killed and his son Abd-al-Aziz took over as Emir (temporal leader). He introduced firearms in the holy war or jihad, replacing conventional weaponry. He accelerated his attacks in a spectacular bid to extend his territory and as Allen says, “He issued every holy warrior a ‘firman’ or written order addressed to gate-keeper of heaven, requir-

ing him to be admitted forth-with should he die on battle.” Since then it has been the common schismatic, fraudulent practice of terror operators to misguide and exploit the youth for recruitment with the promise of paradise. The history of Wahhabism has been written with the blood of innocent people. On June 2, 1792, Sheikh Muhammad Najdi-ibn-Abd-al Wahhab died, leaving his 24 wives and 18 children and his son-in-law Abd-al-Aziz speeded up his violent actions and conversions. In 1802, he attacked Karbala in Iraq, desecrating the holy shrine of Hazrat Imam Husain. Lieutenant Francis Warden wrote, “They pillaged the whole of it and plundered the tomb of Hazrat Imam Husain, slaying in the course of the day, with circumstances of peculiar cruelty, killing about 5,000 of the inhabitants. A huge amount of booty was seized.” In 1803, Abd-al-Aziz ibn Saud obtained a visit permit from the Shareef of Mecca on the pretext of performing Hajj; whereupon his Wahhabi fighters laid waste in Islam's holiest shrine (Kaaba), like the accused Yazid had desecrated it in 682 AD. According to T.E Ravenshaw, author of A Memorandum on the Sect of Wahhabis, “They robbed the splendid tombs of the Mahomedan saints, who were interred there; and their fanatical zeal did not even spare the Prophet's Mosque (in Medina) which they robbed of the immense treasures and costly furniture to which each Mahomedan Prince of Europe, Asia and Africa had contributed his share.” In 1804, a Wahhabi gang again crossed the great desert in the Hijaz and destroyed tombs of the Prophet's family members at Jannat-ul-Baqi, the ancient century of Medina and even despoiled the grave of Prophet Mohammed. In 1925, Wahhabis demolished the holy shrines of Hazrat Fatima Zehra, daughter of Prophet Mohammed and his grandsons, as well as the birth-place of Prophet Mohammad. In India, the 500-year-old Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was demolished on December 6, 1992, by a radical Hindu mob led by Sangh Parivar leaders. Intellectuals across the globe, irrespective of caste, creed, religion or region, condemned the demolition. Muslims across the world protested. Several lives were lost. In its landmark judgement of 2019, the Supreme Court held that the demolition was illegal and directed the authorities to allot an alternative plot for a mosque as compensation. On the other hand, the more heinous crime of multiple demolitions of holy shrines, relics and heritage sites together with massacres took place in Saudi Arabia at the behest of Saudi Arab's Wahhabi/Salafi rulers of Zionist ancestry, on 8th Shawwal 1344 Hijri (1925 A.D), but surprisingly no Muslim of any sect reacts or protests against the pseudo-Muslim Saudi rulers. Is it because those perpetrators are Muslim for name sake? *(The writer is a legal journalist and author. The views expressed are personal)*

Temperature soars as our ignorance threatens Earth's future


The relentless rise in global temperatures paints a stark portrait of humanity's disregard for the environment, echoing a dire warning for the planet's future



KALI DAS

The temperature in the world is increasing day by day, due to the ignorance and carelessness of the people. The problem of rising temperatures is seen all over the world. The world's Climate changes day by day. The rising temperature is a bell of danger for the living world. If we are not aware, then we will not be able to deal with the problems of the future. All living beings need water, air and heat to survive. The changes in the quality and quantity of water and air will give birth to uncountable problems. When the atmosphere or the climate changes the changes are also seen in the living world, as we see now. The desert's biome is differ-

ent from Iceland's biome. In Australia we can see its national animal kangaroo, In Iceland we can see polar bears and penguins. Fruits, vegetables, flowers and forests also differ due to climate change. When the temperature of the earth is increasing, it poses a big threat to everyone. We don't know whether we will get the same fruits and vegetables tomorrow that we get now. Today the animals, birds or insects that we see all around us will they extinct or survive we don't know. We don't have any information about living beings, how many species of them have already extinct every year is not known doubt they enrich our lives. We



which does not allow the heat to go away from the glass house. It is used to save the trees. The greenhouse effect is seen in the increase of carbon dioxide and methane gas. When the temperature increases by one degree, it greatly affects our environment. The ice accumulated

the heat increases, the rivers will cause flood and they will join the sea with the flood water. Many intellectuals of the world are concerned about the increase in global temperature. The solution to these problems is only by planting trees The only way we can save our planet is by plantation and forest protection. Trees give us oxygen and reduce the amount of carbon in the atmosphere. So planting trees is only one solution to the problem. The tree planting program should be carried out regularly. When the Seawater rises it enters nearby cities and villages. In the fourth chapter of the twelfth skanda of the Bhagavatam, there is a description of the flood or the pralaya where the matter of Prithibi becomes hot and causes a flood or pralaya. It is also said that the rays of the sun will destroy the living world. How to save the living world should be the main subject of our course of studies in educational institutions. As long as the world is standing at the door of destruction we should not count the numbers of profit and loss but the message of collective development and collective happiness and peace should be spread. The intellectual people of India always sent messages of peace and goodwill to the world. Today let India be the guide of the world to protect the planet. *(The writer is a columnist, poet and social worker; views are personal)*

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Mob violence

Onus on states to take firm action

THE Supreme Court has told various state governments to apprise it within six weeks of the action taken in cases of mob lynching and cow vigilantism. The apex court is hearing a plea filed by a women's organisation, which has sought directions to states to take immediate steps in accordance with the 2018 court ruling in the Tehseen Poonawalla case to effectively deal with violence perpetrated by cow vigilantes against Muslims. The petitioner has pointed out that in Madhya Pradesh, an alleged lynching had taken place, but the FIR was registered against the victim on the charge of cow slaughter. The court, however, has made it clear that the relief sought cannot be religion-specific.

Activist Poonawalla had asked the court to intervene for checking the increasing incidents of cow vigilantism. Observing that mob justice in any form was opposed to the principles of a legal system and inconceivable in a civilised society, the court had issued a set of guidelines, including the trial of cases in fast-track courts and the appointment of a nodal officer in each district to curb such incidents. Notably, the new criminal statute, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, has incorporated murder or 'grievous hurt' by five or more persons on specified grounds as a separate category; these grounds include race, caste, sex, language or personal beliefs. The punishment for this heinous crime ranges from life imprisonment to death sentence.

It is worrisome that the mob mayhem has not abated despite repeated advisories issued by the Centre to states and UTs for prompt and strict action against miscreants taking the law into their own hands in the name of cow protection. These vigilantes, some of whom double as extortionists, are emboldened by political patronage and the laxity or bias of law enforcement agencies. With 'police' and 'public order' being state subjects, state governments need to be proactive about cracking down on the culprits and ensuring that the victims are not treated as criminals.

Bastar encounter

Sustained vigil against Naxalism needed

THE encounter in Chhattisgarh's Bastar division on Tuesday, resulting in the killing of 29 Maoists, underscores the government's efforts to contain the Naxal menace. While the operation marks a significant victory in the fight against Naxalism, it also serves as a reminder of the persistent threat posed by left-wing extremism. Continuous vigilance, especially in the light of the upcoming elections, is the need of the hour. The operation, conducted by a team of the District Reserve Guard and the Border Security Force, has shown the effectiveness of intelligence-driven strategies in neutralising Naxal threats. The recovery of a substantial cache of arms and ammunition is a big blow to the Naxal network.

With Naxalism posing a significant threat to development, peace and the future of the youth in the affected areas, a concerted government campaign to tackle the problem is underway. It is evidenced by the steady decline in Naxal violence over the past few years. A multi-pronged approach, encompassing security measures, development initiatives and community outreach, reflects a comprehensive strategy aimed at addressing the root causes of left-wing extremism. Initiatives such as the Aspirational Districts Programme demonstrate a commitment to holistic growth in Naxal-affected regions.

However, the prevalence of improvised explosive devices remains a weighty threat, highlighting the need for relentless demining operations. Also, allegations of fake encounters conducted by security forces need to be probed. Proactive steps and sustained vigilance are needed to pave the way for long-term peace in the disturbed areas. As the nation braces for the elections, heightened security measures are imperative to ensure the safety of voters and the smooth conduct of the electoral process, particularly in regions vulnerable to Naxal violence.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, APRIL 18, 1924

Government and the Sikhs

WE agree with Sardar Mangal Singh, President of the Central Sikh League, that in appointing a committee "to ascertain the wishes of those considered most competent to advise and report as to the principles on which a measure might be framed for dealing with the administration and management of Sikh gurdwaras and shrines," without first creating the conditions in which such an inquiry could be made with any expectation of its leading to fruitful results, the Punjab Government has put the cart before the horse. The committee is to ascertain the wishes of those most competent to advise. How on earth is it to do so when most of those who are "competent to advise the government" are in prison? Are these men to be ignored or are they to be consulted with the halter of convictions, actual or potential, around their neck? And should not past experience have told the Punjab Government that there was no likelihood of the Sikh community generally or its vocal section in particular considering any proposal for gurdwara reform or, indeed, for any other purpose, so long as so many of its representatives and leaders were in prison because of their very zeal for religious reform? It was on this precise rock that most of the previous attempts at a solution of the problem were wrecked, and the fact that another attempt is being made in the same direction without keeping clear of the dangerous rock shows that the Punjab Government is either unwilling or unable to profit even by its own recent experience. In truth, it is absurd for the Government to think of solving the Sikh problem with the SGPC declared as an unlawful body and with its most distinguished leader rotting in prison.

Four decades of Operation Meghdoot

It's vital for India not to fritter away the military gains atop Siachen Glacier



MAROOF RAZA
STRATEGIC AFFAIRS ANALYST

IT'S been 40 years since the first batch of Indian troops was moved posthaste to the Siachen Glacier to prevent Pakistani occupation of the world's highest, coldest and perhaps the most demanding frontline. Operation Meghdoot was launched by the Indian Army and the Indian Air Force (IAF) on April 13, 1984.

Clearly, there was more to the boundary claims of both sides than met the eye. The Pakistanis were working towards a plan hatched in China in the 1960s to not only connect northern parts of Aksai Chin but also to harness 100 million acres of freshwater resources (which Siachen possesses) that China and Pakistan directly need — Pakistan for building more dams and generating hydroelectric power and China for realising its ambition of becoming a microchip giant. Apparently, every 10,000 litres of fresh river water can be mixed with desert sand and chemicals to produce a 30-cm square sheet of silicon wafer. And there are a lot of glaciers in that area (242 in the Shaksgam valley itself in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir) that Pakistan handed over to China in February-March 1963, months after India's 1962 debacle.

Siachen is wedged between the Shaksgam valley and Aksai Chin. So, it carries a key strategic benefit for India. India's military presence on the icy heights around the glacier was initiated with the government's permission in 1984 on the recommendations of Lt Gen ML Chibber, then Northern Army commander. He said: "But the strategic importance of the area was not a major consideration,



HISTORIC: The April 1984 operation involved airlifting of Army soldiers by the IAF and dropping them on the glacial peaks. **AN**

nor was our purpose to capture any territory... It was simply to ensure that we were not presented with a fait accompli like that in Aksai Chin in the early 1950s." Since the Chinese invasion of 1962, New Delhi had been understandably sensitive to cartographic ambiguities at its borders.

In fact, the origins of the dispute over Siachen lie in a cartographic controversy. The Line of Control (LoC) of today is the 1949 CFL (Cease Fire Line) with some modifications. This de facto boundary line begins north of Jammu and ends abruptly at a mountain height called NJ 9842. Beyond that lies the glacier in no man's land, as per the India-Pakistan agreements of Karachi (1949) and Suchetgarh (1972). But since the 1970s, several international maps had begun to depict the Siachin Glacier as part of Pakistan. This included the National Geographic Society's *Atlas of the World*, University of Chicago's *A Historical Atlas of South Asia* and *The Times Atlas of the World*, published in Lon-

Siachen is wedged between the Shaksgam valley and Aksai Chin. It carries a key strategic benefit for India.

don. All these showed the CFL extending from NJ 9842 in a northeasterly direction right up to the Karakoram Pass and onto the Chinese border. This, until then, had not been done even by Pakistani maps. Apparently, this cartographic confusion came from some maps that were initially produced by the US Defence Mapping Agency, which depicted the LoC running from the vicinity of NJ 9842 northeast to the Karakoram Pass in the 1970s and the 1980s. The best explanation for

this error by America's map-makers appears to lie in the possible 'translation' of air defence information zone (ADIZ) markings into a boundary line, which provides zoning boundaries for air traffic controllers in civil/military aviation. This gave the impression of the extension of the LoC from NJ 9842 to the Karakoram Pass, and thus became an article of faith for the Pakistanis. However, there can be several ADIZs that could pass through one country, and these are not national boundary lines. But the publication of such maps by many of the world's leading atlases further encouraged the Pakistani army to contest the sanctity of the LoC beyond NJ 9842, and that's where the Siachen area lies.

Initially, under then President Gen Zia-ul-Haq — prodded on by ambitious military commanders — Pakistan made plans to occupy the glacial heights around Siachen. Military men would know that you can defend territories by occupying heights. And in this case, the Saltoro Ridge is our wall against Pak-

istan's adventurism. Holding on to the western wall of the glacier in the initial stages amid a lack of acclimatisation led to hundreds of casualties. But the Indian Army held its ground, with logistics provided by the IAF. In the 1984-87 period, our soldiers gained complete dominance over the glacier by controlling the heights. All this took Pakistan by surprise and its many attempts to dislodge Indian troops since then have been unsuccessful. Now, they talk about going back to the pre-1984 positions because the Pakistani army is embarrassed to admit these reverses in public, thanks to the grit and determination of our forces.

And as Pakistan now cannot take back what the Indian Army holds on the Saltoro Ridge, its troops have to camp (and look up in awe at India's soldiers) from the lower valleys, even as its military brass has spread the lies of its failed operations in Siachen for 40 years. A section of the Pakistani media has created the opinion that the maintenance of troops along the glacier is unaffordable for India. On the contrary, India can easily afford it. At a cost of about Rs 2,000 crore per annum, Siachen takes up a small part of India's defence budget, which has now risen to over Rs 6.21 lakh crore.

Primarily, the bilateral talks are centred around India's insistence that Pakistan acknowledge the gains that Indian troops have made along the glacier and accept the 110-km-long Actual Ground Position Line before any troop withdrawal takes place. The Indian Army wants ironclad guarantees from Pakistan following the Kargil experience of 1999, including verification of troop positions and signed maps that confirm India's military gains. But the Pakistanis are unwilling to do this. If India gives away the hard gains made by many gallant men, the scenario will be similar to the disastrous Simla Agreement of 1972.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

You are required to ensure the security of this country against any offence. —Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

Good Samaritans saved the day

Lt GEN RAJ SUJLANA (RETD)

THE pitfalls of overdependence on technology were offset by the strong bonds of brotherhood during my trip to New Delhi. The ubiquitous mobile phone is an integral part of our lives; it is one's passport to almost everything. Such is the reliance on it that without one, even routine chores can come to a standstill. I realised this the other day when I landed in a tricky situation.

I arrived by cab at New Delhi railway station, only to be engulfed in the confused web of traffic that welcomes all passengers. I paid the cabbie and walked hurriedly to avoid missing the train. A little distance away, I reached for my phone, but there was no sign of it. I had possibly left it in the cab. I raced back, but the cab was nowhere to be seen. Reality struck: I neither had a virtual ticket nor a hard copy of it. I was stranded. I recalled the lines: "Technology has brought us closer, then made us more distant. Made us more aware, then made us doubtful of ourselves." Whom to call and how? The saving grace was my wallet, which contained cash and debit cards.

I spotted two cabbies with mobile phones. I walked up to them and spelt out my problem. I asked if they could call on my phone number. 'Number bolo,' Vikas and his partner said in unison. Two attempts got no response. They asked me for the cab number and the driver's name. I remembered that it was Sunil. That's a very common name, they said. Still, the cab centre was called, but without luck.

I then requested the cabbies to make one last try. Lo and behold, Sunil responded! Thereafter, with military precision, the two drivers coordinated with each other. We three met at a mutually convenient place. I had my phone back. Indebted to Sunil, I offered him money, but he refused, saying that he had helped me without expecting anything in return. Wishing me well, he drove off. Then Vikas said: 'Uncleji, get inside the cab. I will drop you back at the station, lest you should miss the train.' He did the needful. I requested him to accept a token of my appreciation, but he too refused it, saying that he had done it as a goodwill gesture and not to cash in on my predicament. The best that I could do was offer a silent prayer for these down-to-earth Good Samaritans.

When most would have avoided getting involved, they went out of their way to help. In their act of compassion and empathy, they followed the dictum: 'Be nice to people... maybe it will be unappreciated, unreciprocated or ignored, but spread the love anyway. We rise by lifting others.' Back home, I called both to thank them, but could only contact Vikas. 'Sir, your call has made my day. It means much more to me than the money you offered,' he said. Here was a stranger who had proved no less helpful than a friend.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Freedom to criticise religion

Refer to the editorial 'Resilient Rushdie'; the Mumbai-born author has remained a strong votary of free speech despite the near-fatal attack on him in August 2022. His life had long been under threat since the publication of his controversial novel, *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie's resilience and defiance in the face of a looming threat to his life are commendable. Religion is such a sensitive issue that communal violence erupts the moment any dissenting view is expressed. Free discourse on religious matters must not be prohibited. Freedom of thought, even on religious matters, is as necessary as political or socio-economic liberty.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, LADWA

The right to be offensive

With reference to the editorial 'Resilient Rushdie'; the freedom to dissent is the bedrock of a flourishing culture. With his new memoir reflecting on the 2022 knife attack on him, the fearless writer has once again risen and stood up for his right to freedom of expression. In an age of increasing censorship and attacks on creative freedom, Rushdie's return is a reminder that the right to express oneself, even if it involves provoking or offending some sections of society, is the cornerstone of democracy.

SK SINGH, BY MAIL

Ensure wellbeing of patients

Refer to the editorial 'Ailing healthcare'; forcing a patient to share a bed with a corpse reflects the highly irresponsible and callous attitude of the Ludhiana Civil Hospital authorities toward the wellbeing of patients. The incident needs to be looked into. Adequate facilities and infrastructure at hospitals, the establishment of new medical colleges and nursing institutes and the contribution of the pharma industry to ensure the availability of essential medicines at affordable prices are the need of the hour. It is important to remember that healthy citizens are the real wealth of a country.

SUBHASH VAID, NEW DELHI

Conduct checks at hospitals

Apropos of the editorial 'Ailing healthcare'; the Punjab Government makes tall claims about providing better healthcare facilities to residents, but such incidents reflect poorly on it. A distressing incident like this can erode public trust in the system. While the state government has announced a hike in the healthcare budget and proposed initiatives like the establishment of new medical colleges and mohalla clinics to provide medical facilities to patients at their doorstep, the shortage of doctors and a lack of medicines and other facilities have left the healthcare system ailing. Regular reporting, monitoring, surprise checks and audits at health facilities can help address the issue.

NK GOSAIN, BATHINDA

Don't discredit AAP gov't's efforts

Refer to the editorial 'Ailing healthcare'; the episode is just an isolated case that should not be used to discredit the efforts made by the AAP-led state government to revolutionise the health sector. So many mohalla clinics have been opened in Punjab to ensure that residents have easy access to services. There is no doubt that the government should take a serious view of the incident at the Ludhiana hospital. But the government should not be blamed for it. Let us not forget how, in 2022, Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann sacked the state's then health minister, Vijay Singla, over allegations of corruption. That shows the AAP government's commitment to good governance.

BM SINGH, AMRITSAR

Voters' time to decide

With reference to the article 'The winnability factor and the failure of NOTA'; for a vibrant democracy, it is important for the electorate to vote to power a candidate who is honest, capable and known for his commitment to public welfare. If no candidate in the fray meets the standards set by the electorate, it would not be wrong for the voters to go for the 'NOTA' option. With the General Election around the corner, the ball is in the voters' court. They can decide if they want to have a clean candidate in power or one with criminal antecedents.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

BJP's manifesto outlines path ahead for 'Bharat'



VIVEK KATJU
FORMER SECRETARY, MINISTRY
OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

AMID expectations that the BJP will win the Lok Sabha elections and PM Narendra Modi will retain power, foreign governments and Indian analysts are closely studying the external affairs sections of the party's manifesto. The document lists the Modi government's foreign policy achievements over the past decade and highlights the goals for the years to come.

The first striking aspect is the repeated use of the word 'Bharat' in the English version of the manifesto. This applies to the foreign policy sections as well. It has now become common for the Modi government to use the word 'Bharat' instead of 'India', in many settings, while referring to the country. Apart from the constitutional primacy of the word 'India' in English, this country's current international personality is also founded on that word. That is how India is known the world over, and that is the name used for it in the United Nations (UN). However,

some Indian leaders have referred to India as 'Bharat' while using the English language. Perhaps the most notable case was that of President Droupadi Murmu, whose G20 invite to foreign leaders last year described her as the 'President of Bharat'.

Countries do change their names. For instance, Myanmar — which was earlier known as Burma — changed it in 1989 and informed the UN about the same. There are no commonly accepted global rules for countries to change their names. Sovereign states only need to inform the international community, and the name change is accepted. Naturally, governments have to fulfil internal constitutional processes for the purpose. In Myanmar's case, many Western countries continued to refer to it as Burma because they did not recognise the military government which had changed the name.

The question that some observers will ask is: Will the Modi government, in its third term, seek to bring in constitutional changes to modify the country's name to 'Bharat' in English? This will be in line with its ideology. Naturally, once the constitutional changes are made, no external power will have any problem dropping the word 'India' and only using 'Bharat'. Pak-



NOMENCLATURE: One of the striking aspects in the English version of the manifesto is the repeated use of the word 'Bharat'. ANI

istan will be happy with our country being known as 'Bharat' because, at the time of the Partition, the Muslim League had argued that 'India' was a thing of the past and the two 'successor' states should be known as 'Pakistan' and 'Hindustan'.

A section of the manifesto, entitled 'Bharat on the global stage', lists out 11 achievements of the government. At the top of the list are the successful evacuation of Indians from war zones and the hosting of the G20 summit. There is no doubt that the outcome document of the summit amid the polarised global atmosphere was a

At the time of the Partition, the Muslim League had argued that 'India' was a thing of the past and the two 'successor' states should be known as 'Pakistan' and 'Hindustan'.

diplomatic achievement, as was the success in bringing Indians in distress back home from conflict areas. However, previous governments also came to the rescue of Indians in difficult times. Also, the Modi government has claimed credit for being the voice of the Global South. It is true that many countries in the Global South look up to India, but there is nothing unique about this. New Delhi's role in decolonisation and its leadership in securing the interests of the Global South in its different iterations — Third World, underdeveloped and developing countries — has been accepted

through the decades.

The title of one section — 'Modi ki Guarantee for Vishwa Bandhu Bharat' — is interesting, for it is not India that is giving a guarantee that it will act in the interests of the world but PM Modi. Indeed, just as he has given guarantees to the Indian people, he is doing so for the world. It is also noteworthy that the word 'Vishwaguru' has not been used. The last sentence of the introduction to this section states: "We will strengthen our position and conduct our policies to further our national interests with the spirit of Vishwa Bandhu." In other words, Modi has guaranteed that India will seek to reconcile Indian interests with those of the world and shun the path of pursuing naked national interests. The PM is showing a noble instinct, but is it practical in a world order that is under challenge? Besides, how does it square with the assertion of a 'Bharat First' foreign policy?

Eight of the 10 objectives and paths to pursue mentioned in the section are not new. For example, India's aim of becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council and strengthening global cooperation against terrorism has been part of its diplomatic agenda for the past three decades. It is laudable that the BJP would seek to build partnerships for mineral security, for it is essen-

tial to promote manufacturing. However, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor is a project that will be difficult to implement. And the pursuit of the Neighbourhood First policy is challenging because of the ingress of China into India's immediate neighbourhood. It is good that External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has consistently acknowledged this fact, but mere acknowledgement does not push India's interests.

In the third section on foreign policy, the manifesto focuses on the promotion of Indian soft power. The first point relates to the establishment of Thiruvalluvar cultural centres to promote Indian cultural traditions. It is not clear if these will be different from the current Indian cultural centres that are performing the exact functions. Will the latter be renamed, or will both exist simultaneously?

The manifesto says, "We will launch a global outreach programme for documenting and promoting the tangible and intangible legacy of Lord Ram in all countries." This can be controversial, as the Ramayana has several variants in Southeast Asia that are vastly different from the version accepted in India. How will the BJP deal with the controversies that such versions will inevitably generate?

Reduce out-of-pocket expenditure to revitalise healthcare



SUBIR ROY
SENIOR ECONOMIC ANALYST

A recent editorial in *The Lancet*, a leading medical journal, has stated that healthcare has fared poorly under the Narendra Modi government. "Government spending on health has fallen and now hovers around an abysmal 1.2 per cent of the gross domestic product, out-of-pocket expenditure on healthcare remains extremely high, and flagship initiatives on primary healthcare and universal health coverage have so far failed to deliver services to people most in need," the editorial says. It adds that 'persistent inequity' in both access to and quality of healthcare is well recognised, but a major obstacle that India faces relates to health data and a lack of data transparency.

According to internationally available data, the Indian government spends much more per capita than Bangladesh and Nepal on healthcare, as do Indians out of pocket. But Indians live shorter lives. Something is not right somewhere, and it has to be corrected.

India's spending on healthcare is the lowest among the G20 countries; unsurprisingly, it has the lowest per capita income in the group, according to a *Lancet* study. India's effort to use its G20 presidency to become a pole for the Global South can hardly happen if it remains handicapped by a poorly delivering healthcare sector, whose corollary is a population in indifferent health.

It is not as if the government has not been trying. Over half a decade ago, it launched the Ayushman Bharat health insurance scheme. Under it, a family classified as 'deprived' is entitled to Rs 5 lakh per annum for secondary or tertiary care hospitalisation.

It promises to reduce out-of-pocket expenditure by the poor, provides critical medical treatment and emergency care which was earlier unaffordable (many poor families were rendered destitute after paying from their pocket), and its impact is most pronounced among marginal communities like Scheduled Tribes.

Though healthcare is a state subject, the Centre has become associated with the delivery of free healthcare irrespective of which party is in power in which state. Particularly, states in the south, mostly ruled by Opposition parties, which already had their own healthcare schemes and relatively bet-



UNDER SCRUTINY: Questions are being raised about India's health data. ISTOCK

ter healthcare infrastructure, have made the most of the Ayushman scheme. In states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and even Maharashtra, which had low health insurance coverage before the Ayushman scheme, renamed Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY), came along, the scheme has provided benefits to significant portions of their population.

Out-of-pocket healthcare expenditure, which was running at 62.6 per cent in 2014-15 of the total household health expenditure, dropped to 47 per cent by 2019-20. This has happened in part through the increase in social expenditure on health enabled by government allocation for PMJAY.

Promises like making India a developed nation by 2047 can fetch votes, but getting there entails an arduous journey in several sectors, including healthcare.

Social security expenditure on health rose from 5.7 per cent in 2014-15 to 9.3 per cent in 2019-20. Average medical expenditure per person ranged between Rs 11,315 and Rs 21,778, depending on whether a person is from SC, ST or OBC communities and resides in rural or urban areas. The sum of Rs 5 lakh available per family per year has gone a long way in mitigating this and keeping destitution at bay for the poor.

While the above data speaks well of the government, there are questions regarding its reliability, as pointed out in *The Lancet* editorial. The 2021 Census is yet to take place. This leaves several other surveys in limbo: if you don't know how many Indians are there, how

would you work out per capita data for matters like out-of-pocket expenditure and morbidity. The data officially made available need not be rejected, but it has to be kept in mind that such data is somewhat dated.

It is axiomatic that a high middle-income or high-income country needs to have citizens who live long and healthy lives. People also must follow a nutritional diet and remain physically active.

To be a healthier nation, India needs to devise special programmes or take forward existing ones focused on maternal health, medically assisted pregnancies and deliveries and nutrition. Children also must not be as stunted and underweight as they are. The government has in place programmes that have deployed ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) and Anganwadi workers who visit homes to render maternity advice and administer vaccines. The pay for these has also been recently raised. These worthwhile programmes need to be taken forward.

The government and the public also need to focus on the state of private healthcare. The ills afflicting this sector are many. Many doctors and consultants attached to private hospitals promptly prescribe a whole set of diagnostic tests, from whose expenses they get a cut.

Private hospitals routinely overcharge and a patient who has been officially discharged is often unable to go home as the agent of his health insurance company and the hospital cannot agree on the admissibility of all the charges levied. Eventually, the patient's family has to pay out of pocket quite a bit simply to take the patient home. Private hospitals which are empanelled for cashless treatment often turn patients away as they claim that a lot of their bills remain unreimbursed.

While the government has to do its bit, including changing the attitude of officials who have to clear reimbursement bills, civil society has a lot to do. There need to be periodic surveys that give us a non-official sense of the healthcare reality on the ground. Some socially minded doctors are running their own hospitals, some of them in non-urban areas, where they are charging moderately and affordably and are still able to break even.

Indian healthcare is ailing, and various stakeholders have to help set it right. Promises like making India a developed country (*Viksit Bharat*) by 2047 can fetch votes, but actually getting there involves undertaking a long and arduous journey in several sectors, including healthcare. Otherwise, India will remain a low middle-income country with entrenched poverty.

QUICK CROSSWORD

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ACROSS

1 Divert attention of (8)

5 Long arduous journey (4)

9 Encumbered (5)

10 Abbreviate (7)

11 Silent movies comic policemen (8,4)

13 From a confidential source (6)

14 Photographer's workroom (6)

17 Deliberately snub (4-8)

20 Set aside for a purpose (7)

21 A plaster surface for painting (5)

22 City of Homeric legend (4)

23 Semi-dramatic choral work (8)

DOWN

1 Overcast (4)

2 Sorrow (7)

3 Position giving very close view (8,4)

4 Business patronage (6)

6 Proportion (5)

7 Capital of Jamaica (8)

8 Is revealed (5,2,5)

12 Unobtrusive (8)

15 Kitchen sideboard (7)

16 Worker in a seaport (6)

18 At a very slow tempo (5)

19 Unaccompanied (4)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Trumped-up, 8 Slash, 9 Subdued, 10 Fulfil, 11 Bedlam, 12 Of course, 15 Diligent, 18 Averse, 20 Almond, 21 Horizon, 22 Louse, 23 Sweet-talk.

Down: 2 Route, 3 Middle, 4 Evermore, 5 Pseudo, 6 Fanfare, 7 Challenge, 11 Bald eagle, 13 Cut above, 14 Clamour, 16 Ganges, 17 Depict, 19 Seoul.

SU DO KU

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MEDIUM

FORECAST

SUNSET: 18:52 HRS

SUNRISE: 05:51 HRS

THURSDAY

FRIDAY

CITY

MAX

MIN

Chandigarh

36

20

New Delhi

36

22

Amritsar

32

19

Bathinda

32

19

Jalandhar

32

18

Ludhiana

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Bhiwani

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22

Hisar

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Sirsa

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Dharamsala

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Manali

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05

Shimla

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11

Srinagar

18

10

Jammu

32

18

Kargil

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02

Leh

12

-01

Dehradun

34

17

Mussoorie

22

12

TEMPERATURE IN °C

CALENDAR

APRIL 18, 2024, THURSDAY

■ Shaka Samvat 1946

■ Chaitra Shaka 29

■ Vaishakh Purnimite 6

■ Hijari 1445

■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 10, up to 5:32 pm

■ Ganda Yoga up to 12:43 am

■ Aashle Nakshatra up to 7:57 am

■ Moon enters Leo sign 7:57 am