Preserving a brand

Amicable Godrei split has a lot riding on it

he Godrej group, over its 127-year history, has developed a remarkably strong brand, by some estimates one of the 10 most recognised and valued in the country. It has grown the value of its products, particularly in consumer-facing sectors over the past decades. But it has done so while struggling on internal coordination and institutionalisation of family control. In fact, there's no real "Godrej group" as such, uniting its various enterprises. Efforts such as the creation of a family business board over a decade ago did not quite pan out. In India, as tight leadership from the early founders of a family-owned group gave way to multiple stakeholders with differing visions in subsequent generations, this has often been a recipe for disaster.

However, the split in the Godrej family holdings that has just been announced — which is said to be an "ownership realignment" — seems to be a relatively low-impact and amicable manner of managing such disagreements. It seems that, by and large, the shareholders in the listed Godrej companies would avoid the wealth destruction that previous family disputes have caused. The various listed companies, including Godrej Consumer Products Ltd and Godrej Properties Ltd, will go to one side, run by the families of Adi and Nadir Godrej; their cousins Jamshyd Godrej and Smita Godrej Crishna will take Godrej Enterprises Group, dominated by the unlisted firm Godrej & Boyce. Many were interested, in particular, in how management of the vast land bank in Vikhroli that the latter controls would pan out. This land, an over 3,000-acre parcel that has been in the family for almost a century, occupies an enviable position alongside the Eastern Express Highway in Mumbai.

The family did not address the question of this land's future directly in its main press release; however, another press release struck a calming note by insisting that Godrej & Boyce, as owner and developer, its subsidiary Godrej Construction, and Godrej Properties as the development manager and marketer, would continue to collaborate on the land. Not all the land is suitable for development, but 1,000 acres of Mumbai land would be enough to cause fatal acrimony in most families. It appears, fortunately, that the Godrej family has avoided that. However, how this land will be developed — and whether the Adi Godrej side of the family has lost out in terms of controlling its value — remains to be seen. Given the size and environmental sensitivity of the land, as well as the scarcity of real estate in Mumbai, there are deep questions of trusteeship and stewardship at stake here that involve not just the family but also the people and government

Extra value in any development of the land will come, in part, through trust in the Godrej brand name. The broader question, thus, is how both these separated entities — which will, apparently, continue to share the familiar Godrej brand and logo — can manage to retain the aura that the brand has acquired over the past century and more. In concrete terms, how will any one side manage situations in which it feels the other is diluting the shared brand value? In the absence of any clear institutional framework, this will come down to goodwill.

Unfavourable conditions

Workplace culture remains hostile for women

ne of the less publicised aspects of the post-Covid bounceback in business around the world is the lack of progress in improving workplaces for women. This was the key message from consultancy firm Deloitte's global Women@Work survey, 2024. The report talks of an "uncomfortable truth" — that women's progress is stagnating both inside and outside the workplace. In particular, the transition to full-time work has resulted in difficult adjustments for women. The survey covered 5,000 women across 10 countries, including India, suggesting that the problem was more or less widespread. The root of the problem appears to be uncongenial workplace environments. Almost half the women reported higher stress levels than a year ago, only slightly lower than the 53 per cent in 2022, when workplaces started returning to normal, and about 40 per cent said they got mental health support from their employers, a statistic almost unchanged over the three-year period. A greater point of concern is the fact that only a third of women said they felt comfortable discussing their mental health with their employers, down from 43 per cent in 2022. A key related issue is the disproportionate burden that women bear of household responsibility. Between 40 and 50 per cent of the women surveyed said responsibilities for child care, domestic chores or caring for another adult devolved on them.

The evidence of the survey suggests that corporate cultures are still perceived by women as fundamentally hostile. For instance, 95 per cent of women believed that taking advantage of flexible work arrangements would negatively impact career progression. Roughly a third reported being excluded from decision making or interactions because of hybrid work arrangements and limited exposure to leaders. Nearly half of women remain concerned about workplace safety, and 43 per cent said they experienced "non-inclusive behaviours" at work over the past year — the bulk of it in the form of micro-aggression rather than outright sexual harassment. That said, there were some positives that suggest the direction of cultural reform at corporations. Though a concerning 27 per cent of women said they did not feel comfortable speaking up on personal issues like periods, menopause or fertility, only 15 per cent said they thought speaking up would negatively impact their career progression, and 13 per cent said their company culture did not encourage such openness about these topics.

It appears that more inclusive cultures remain in the minority. Deloitte identified a group of Gender Equality Leaders, organisations that, according to the women surveyed, created genuinely inclusive cultures. However, just six per cent of the women surveyed work for one of these organisations. Such organisations reported high levels of loyalty — including in the form of being recommended to other women — and their employees were likely to stay with them longer because they saw a path to career progression. The survey focused on the corporate workplace. The concern for India, however, is that the poor standards in office environments translate into even worse conditions on factory floors, where work cultures tend to be less sophisticated. But it is to the factory as much as to the white-collar office that India needs to encourage women to come. India's unsafe and hostile factory environment is unlikely to achieve this unless these institutions change their cultures too.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



A Chinese invasion of the auto landscape

As seen in Australia, tariff cuts may have an unwelcome outcome for domestic car makers

AJAY SRIVASTAVA

he Indian automobile industry is poised for disruption with the large-scale entry of Chinese auto firms, especially in the electric mobility sector. These changes will affect the fortunes of existing automakers, as well as jobs and imports.

In the next few years, Chinese companies could make one in every three electric vehicles (EVs), along with numerous passenger and commercial vehicles on Indian roads, either directly or through joint ventures (JVs) with Indian firms. Just one JV between SAIC Motors (owner of the MG brand) and India's JSW Group aims to sell over 1 million new energy vehicles by 2030. The JV wants to recreate the "Maruti Suzuki moment" of the 1980s that revolutionised the Indian auto sector. SAIC Motors is one of the "Big Four" state-owned

Chinese automakers. In 2007, SAIC Motors acquired British car maker MG Rover's assets after it went bankrupt. It uses a plant in Halol, Gujarat, previously owned by General Motors, to produce vehicles like the Hector and the ZS EV for the Indian market.

SAIC Motors is not alone. Chinese car company BYD (Build Your Dreams) Auto sells a range of electric vehicles in India, as well as buses, trucks, cars, and sports utility

vehicles (SUVs). BYD entered the commercial vehicle sector independently and through a partnership with Megha Engineering under the Olectra brand. Recently, BYD has also started importing ready-todrive cars in completely-built-unit (CBU) form. Similarly, Volvo cars are also being imported from China in completely-knocked-down (CKD) kits.

Chinese companies like Changan Automobile, JinkoSolar, and several bus and truck manufacturers, including Zhongtong Bus and Foton Motor, contribute to China's automotive presence in India. Additionally, several others like Great Wall Motors and Haima Automobile are looking to enter the Indian market. Moreover, e-rickshaws and two-wheelers on Indian roads are made using Chinese parts. India provides much-needed relief for Chinese firms. China's EV exports to the European Union and the United States are declining due to anti-subsidy probes and increased trade restrictions on the export

of subsidised cars and EV batteries from China. Indian auto industry's impressive credentials: The sector is the largest industrial ecosystem in India, accounting for over one-third of the country's manufacturing gross domestic product (GDP) and providing 20 million direct and indirect jobs.

India is the fourth-largest car producer in the world, after China, Japan, and the US, having produced 4.6 million cars in 2023. It ranks tenth in car exports with a 2.4 per cent global share. The turnover of India's auto

> ed \$150 billion in FY23. The export figures were significant, with automobiles at \$8.7 billion, two-wheelers at \$2.8 billion, and auto components at \$7.3 billion.

and auto component industry exceed-

The Indian auto sector took a leap in the early 1980s with a JV between the Indian Maruti Udyog Limited and the Japanese Suzuki Corporation. Japanese technology and India's expertise in casting, forging, and fabrication enhanced the domestic auto

sector's productivity by 250 per cent over the next 20 years and set it on a high growth path.

Subsequently, three government decisions shaped the industry: The imposition of high import tariffs ranging from 70-125 per cent on completely built cars and motorcycles, but a low 7.5-10 per cent tariff on parts and components to allow the import of inputs; not cutting tariffs under the free-trade agreements or FTAs; and allowing up to 100 per cent foreign direct investment through the automatic route.

While high import tariffs sheltered firms operating in India from external competition, the presence of many top global firms making cars in India

Many experts question the rationale of high tariffs. The example of the Australian auto industry, however, suggests an unwelcome outcome of tariff cuts. In 1987, Australia produced 89 per cent of the cars it used, protected by a high 45 per cent import duty. However, as Australia gradually reduced these tariffs, the proportion of locally produced vehicles decreased. Today, with import tariffs at just 5 per cent. Australia imports nearly all of its cars. Major manufacturers like Nissan. Ford, General Motors, Toyota, and Mitsubishi, which once produced vehicles in Australia, have since closed

The growth of the Indian automobile industry is assured due to the low number of cars per person; only 22 out of 1,000 Indians own a car, compared to 980 in the US and 164 in China. Rising purchasing power, increasing urbanisation, and government initiatives also help. These are the key reasons for global automakers' interest in India.

Current industry structure: About 70 per cent of India's passenger cars are made by companies controlled by foreign firms like Suzuki, Hyundai. Kia. Toyota, Honda, Ford, Skoda, Renault, Nissan, and Mercedes. Key Indian firms are Tata Motors and Mahindra & Mahindra. Emerging players in the EV space, like Ola Electric and Ather Energy, are making

The entry of top Chinese firms into the Indian market will surely eat into the share of Japanese, Korean, and European firms. They will also impact the domestic auto/EV manufacturers, firms working in the EV value chain space, and battery development.

Nearly a quarter of India's auto component imports come from China. India's dependence on China will increase sharply as more Chinese firms making cars in India import most parts and components from China.

The government has reduced the import duty on electric vehicles with a minimum value of \$35,000 from 70-100 per cent to 15 per cent. Concessional duty imports can be made only by original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) that commit a minimum investment of \$500 million to set up local manufacturing within a three-year period. Such OEMs can import up to 40,000 vehicles over a five-year period.

Such tariff cuts will benefit Chinese manufacturers directly or indirectly, as they are the dominant suppliers of EVs and batteries. Supply chain dependence on China will sharply increase even when non-Chinese companies (Tesla, Vinfast) set shop in India.

Recommendations: The government must promote investments in R&D on the next generation of battery technology instead of subsidising EVs on the road. The import intensity of EVs exceeds 70-90 per cent, and most imports, including batteries, are from China. With over 70 per cent of power being generated from coal, EVs will not be green enough in India.

India needs to think strategically and long-term. Automobile associations, caught between the competing interests of foreign and Indian car makers and import supporters, might not be effective in guiding the industry's direction.

The writer is the founder of Global Trade Research Initiative

The ominous shadow of global debt

he clouds of a potential debt crisis are threatening to cast an ominous shadow over the global economic landscape. The International Monetary Fund's (IMF) latest Fiscal Monitor (April 2024) has flagged grave concerns. Even four years past the Covid-19 outbreak, fiscal deficits and debts remain elevated worldwide compared to pre-pan-

The IMF's latest Global Debt Monitor, which tracked data until December 2022, reported total global debt (private plus public) to have risen to \$235 trillion, equivalent to 238 per cent of the global gross domestic product (GDP) — a good 9 percentage point above its pre-Covid level, driven primarily by the mounting debts of economic powerhouses China

and the US. Remarkably enough, China's debt explosion, outpacing the rest of the emerging world, accounted for over half of the increase in global debt ratios since 2008 - asobering statistic that underscores the gravity of the situation.

The April Fiscal Monitor further highlights that fiscal prudence may take a back seat in 2024, the "Great Election Year," when 88 economies. representing more than half of the world's population, are scheduled to

hold elections. Electoral compulsions leading to populist measures and profligate spending (to woo voters) could exacerbate deficits and debts globally, compounding the looming debt crisis and jeopardising long-term economic stability.

With the global economy settling into a new normal of lower potential growth and tighter monetary policy, the debt runup seems poised to regain fresh momentum. The ramifications of excessive debt are going to be far-reaching and potentially catastrophic.

First, as interest rates remain elevated to combat lingering inflation, with the US federal funds rate now between 5.25 per cent and 5.5 per cent, its highest since 2007, the debt servicing cost will continue to spiral. Over the last decade, US interest payments have more than doubled, crossing \$1 trillion in 2023. driven by a record \$34 trillion debt on its account. In China, the debt-servicing burden is projected to increase by 7.8 per cent to a record 1.27 trillion yuan (\$177 billion) in 2024. Such massive debt overhang

by straining government finances, corporate balance sheets, and household budgets, choking off credit and investment — the lifeblood of economic growth.

Second, unsustainable debt levels will further worsen sovereign ratings in many countries and constrain governments' ability to make productivity-enhancing public investments. For example, Moody's rates Italy, sitting on a €2.4 trillion debt pile (144 per cent of its GDP), just one notch above junk (investment) grade with a negative outlook. The debt burden has also left little fiscal space for public investments — so much so that Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has embarked on a massive €20 billion disinvestment plan for its national entities to avert economic stagnation.

Third, overleveraged corporations will likely face heightened bankruptcy risks as economic growth falters and borrowing costs escal porate debt has surged to nearly 80 per cent of GDP — double its level in the early 1990s. S&P Global forecasts default rates for below-investmentgrade bonds to reach 4.75 per cent by the end of 2024. Such a wave of insolvencies could trigger mass layoffs, depressed consumer spending, and a severe credit crunch, throttling US

economic vitality with a global cascading effect. Fourth, at the household level, countries like Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands have witnessed household debt soar past 225 per cent of their disposable income. Such precarious household finances portend drastic consumer spending cuts amidst job losses or higher borrowing costs, thereby stifling aggregate demand.

Fifth, the debt crisis has also affected developing economies, accentuating their vulnerabilities. According to UNCTAD's Trade and Development Report Update (April 2024), nine low- and middleincome countries (LMICs) had fallen into debt distress with an additional 25 on the brink. In many LMICs, public external debt payments are consuming over a fifth of government revenues. A full-blown debt crisis in these vulnerable nations could reverse decades of progress on poverty, disease, education and development.

Sixth, sovereign debt crises have proven to be a

tinderbox for social unrest, conflicts and geopolitical frictions, disrupting trade and investment flows. The Greek debt crisis inflamed tensions in the Eurozone, while Sri Lanka's debt default fanned violent protests that led to a constitutional crisis. Such a breakdown of global order imposes systemic risks far beyond any single nation's finances

So what's to be done? As the IMF rightly emphasises, piecemeal solutions won't cut it anymore. We need a comprehensive, coordinated action plan to rein in the looming debt storm. For starters, governments especially across the advanced economies — need to articulate binding multi-vear fiscal consolidation road maps to restore debt sustainability over the medium term. However, as Greece's experience showed, indiscriminate austerity may be self-defeating. Fiscal reforms should focus on boosting long-term revenue streams and target unproductive expenditures.

For corporations, deleveraging through reta earnings, asset sales, and tighter financial policies aligned with stringent risk management shall be crucial. Regulators, too, must maintain a watchful eye, ensuring banks and shadow lenders build adequate capital buffers to absorb increased corporate defaults without transmitting shocks across the financial system. For debt-distressed economies, timely and comprehensive debt restructuring is imperative. This shall require unprecedented coordination between creditors like China, multilateral lenders like the IMF and World Bank, and private sector bondholders. From maturity extensions to haircuts, all options must be pursued to restore fiscal sustainability.

Finally, the global debt binge underscores an urgent need to reform the international financial architecture. Building deeper and more liquid capital markets, harmonising cross-border bankruptcy regimes, and adequately funding multilateral safety nets could go a long way in preventing and containing future debt crises. This gathering economic storm necessitates a response commensurate with its scale — a globally coordinated, multi-stakeholder action plan accommodating national constraints while upholding debt transparency, accountability and sustainability as core tenets of the policy responses. Further inaction and complacency risk unleashing the full destructive fury of the burgeoning debt crisis. The time to act is now.

The writer is a professor at IIM Ranchi

Dr Subbarao's book of revelations



BOOK REVIEW

A K BHATTACHARYA

n 1974, a bright young assistant collector from the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) did something that, by his own admission, was not straightforward. He had topped the 1972 batch of IAS candidates and reckoned that to enjoy the powers of a magistrate as part of his career advancement, he would need to preside over at least a dozen disputes that go through the process of arguments and are not mutually settled leading to their withdrawal, also known as "contested disputes".

What worried him was that as his

training period as an assistant collector was about to end, there were only ten such cases to his credit. He was desperate $to \, preside \, over \, two \, more. \, A \, case \, with \, two \,$ men involved in a street brawl appeared to offer an opportunity. In the normal course, this would have been settled mutually. But then, the case would not count as one of the "contested" cases he needed for career progression. So he struck a deal with the lawyers in

which they would argue the case, at the end of which the presiding officer would let off both men on the premise that no offence had been committed. It appeared to be a workable deal until conscience struck the young IAS officer. Breaking the understanding he had reached with the lawyers, he issued an order sentencing the accused to one month's jail each. All hell broke loose. The matter was referred to his immediate boss, who ordered the officer to take that judgement off the record and rewrite it suitably. That episode offered a lesson on the limitations of his knowledge and powers as an IAS officer.

About a year later, after the Emergency was imposed by Indira Gandhi, this officer, posted in a Naxaliteinfested district of Andhra Pradesh, decided to deliver justice in a way that displayed his "youthful arrogance and enthusiasm" and blinded him to the risks of disciplinary proceedings. He would employ a novel method to punish big farmers who would hold stocks of food grain over prescribed limits. Since many of them would exploit loopholes in the judicial system and get stocks released in notime, he decided to ask these farmers to donate a significant amount to the Prime Minister's Relief Fund and be let off the hook in return. This method was neither right nor legal and it was sheer good luck that he was not hauled up by higher authorities in government.

Many such riveting anecdotes that bring to light the questions, doubts and dilemmas that a civil servant faces have

been recounted in this book. Its author is a well-regarded civil servant, who rose to become the finance secretary at the Centre and later served a five-year term as the governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). It requires courage and candour to confess to such injudicious

UST A MERCENARY?

AMARENDU NANDY

acts at the start of one's career. Few civil servants would make such disclosures. But Duvvuri Subbarao is an exception. His ability to look at himself and his work dispassionately and often in a selfdeprecating manner makes his account

refreshing apart from offering insights into how governments really function in India at various levels. His account of how his final interview for the IAS examination, which was nothing short of a disaster, is also an example of how Dr Subbarao can laugh at himself.

This approach fits well with the objective that the author set for himself. Dr Subbarao describes the book not as a

memoir, but a collection of notes from his life and career. In the process, it stands apart from his earlier book, Who Moved My Interest Rate? which was an autobiographical account of his stint as RBI governor. The structure of this book is different. In short sections, he

NOTES FROM MY LIFE AND CAREER Author: Duvvuri Subbarao

Publisher: Penguin Viking Pages: 435+XVI **Price:** ₹799

summarises how he spent the first day and the last day as an IAS officer and also as RBI governor. He is an excellent storyteller. The drama and suspense he creates

while recounting how he got to know of his success at the civil

services examination or how he failed to keep the rupee stable in spite of raising the interest rate by one percentage point will make many an accomplished writer envious. His account of how he had to deal with NT Rama Rao, then Andhra Pradesh's chief minister, is a lesson on governance challenges for a civil servant.

The last section written as a letter to

his mother provides a peek not only into his close personal equation with his parents but also into how they helped build his value system. However, the short insets on a wide range of issues often disrupt the narrative. Perhaps they could have been made part of the larger storyline.

Those who have read Who Moved My Interest Rate? may not find anything substantially new in the short sections on his days as a central bank chief. This is understandable. But his account of stint as finance secretary is lively and informative. His stance on the idea of a "presumptive loss" of revenue in the grant of telecom licences, also known as the 2G scam, is a revelation of how two senior IAS officers could take a different view on how and why a government could accept a revenue loss and under what circumstances. What the reader will miss is how as the finance secretary he dealt with INX Media's controversial investment plan. But even without that account, this book is a delightful read, providing a deeper understanding of a sensitive person with a clear sense of what is right and what could be wrong.

WORDLY WISE

WHEN A PERSON IS LUCKY ENOUGH TO LIVE INSIDE A STORY... THE PAINS OF THIS WORLD DISAPPEAR.

— PAUL AUSTER

The Indian EXPRESS

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A HEALING TOUCH

After a year of ethnic strife, Manipur requires a combination of economic, political and administrative remedies

YEAR AFTER it was jolted by ethnic violence, Manipur continues to be on the edge. The state has not seen large-scale violence in the last eight months. However, lives continue to be lost in clashes between Meiteis and Kuki-Zomis, belying Chief Minister Biren Singh's repeated claims of peace "gradually returning" to the strife-torn areas. The scars created by the conflict are admittedly deep - more than 200 people have lost their lives, families languish in refugee camps and there have been reports of gruesome violence against women. Vigilante groups continue to take the law into their hands. But great harm has also been done by the state government's lack of will to initiate a meaningful dialogue between the warring communities. That much needs to be done to repair the broken trust between neighbours was underscored by an incident two days after the conclusion of round two of the Lok Sabha polls. One person lost his life and two others were injured after residents of two adjoining villages waged a gun battle in the early hours of Sunday. A day earlier, two CRPF personnel were killed and two others sustained injuries following a blast at the paramilitary force's outpost in Bishnupur district — one of the most brazen attacks on security forces in the past year. Violence against security forces has, in fact, been one of the recurring features of the conflict, highlighting that force alone cannot quell a situation that requires sensitivity and compassion in equal measure.

After the first conflagration on May 3 last year, Union Home Minister Amit Shah announced the formation of a committee with representatives from different ethnicities, political parties and civil society, to begin the process of healing. That the committee ran into internal differences soon after does have much to do with the complexities of Manipur's society. The situation is also made more fraught by landholding patterns and the continuing impact of colonial policies that segregated the state's tribal-dominated hill areas from the Meitei-dominant Imphal Valley. But in the past year, Singh's government has done very little to assure communities, especially the hill tribes, that his administration is above the identity politics that has pushed the state to the brink. His regime has, instead, stoked tensions and aggravated faultlines with its incessant evocation of the insider-outsider trope.

The Manipur government has done well to crack down on drug smugglers. But it continues to gloss over political and administrative failures by blaming the problem on illegal migrants from Myanmar with whom the Kuki-Zomis share a common ethnicity. In all this, measures to improve livelihoods in a state that has the third lowest per capita income in the country — it ranked the highest in the northeastern region in the 1990s — have taken a backseat. The healing touch Manipur requires must necessarily be a combination of economic, political and administrative measures. The Biren Singh government would be failing its mandate if it did not recognise this imperative, even after a year of strife in the state.

Don't go by April

Reduction in Delhi pollution shouldn't lead to complacency. Much needs to be done to reduce city's burden of emissions

OR 23 DAYS in April, the residents of Delhi breathed less noxious air than they do the rest of the year. On these days, the air quality index (AQI) was below 201 – compared to 17 days during the same period in 2023, none in 2022, 18 in 2021, 12 in 2019 and eight in 2018. According to the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM), the improvement can be attributed to "favourable meteorological/weather conditions coupled with consistent, comprehensive, concerted efforts" to control air pollution in the national capital region. Is this, then, good news on the ever-grim air quality front in Delhi?

There seems to be a suggestion of overall improvement in air quality in Delhi and its adjoining areas in the data released by CAQM at the end of last year: Not counting the anomalous conditions in 2020 (when Covid-related restrictions resulted in a sharp drop in activity, and therefore, pollution levels), the period from 2018 to 2023 showed a steadily declining daily average AQI — from 225 in 2018 to 204 in 2023. There was also a rise in the number of good air days (with AQI between 0 to 200) — from 159 in 2018 to 206 in 2023. Yet, when looked at closely, the picture is not quite so rosy: AQI was between 0-50 only on one day in 2023, a dip from the grand total of 3 in 2022, although an improvement over zero days in 2018. Most of the "good" air days were in the moderate category of 101-200 AQI. The fact is that the air in Delhi — indeed, most Indian cities — remains bad because the baseload emissions are very high. There are no shortcuts to reduce this. Occasionally, meteorological or external conditions reduce or sharpen the impact of pollution — like this April, or when a recordbreaking La Nina event in the Pacific Ocean led to cleaner-than-usual air in the winter of 2022. And emergency actions, like the highly publicised odd-even scheme and construction bans, cannot address what is patently a problem in need of a long-term strategy.

Delhi's air pollution may not always be as visible as it is during the winter months, but any plan to tackle it must be designed with short-, medium- and long-term measures, including targeted interventions in airsheds — localities in cities or contiguous small urban and rural centres, whose peculiar geography may hinder the dispersal of pollutants. This also requires greater coordination between local, state and central bodies, enabled by the CAQM, which has so far acted more like a regulatory body, focused primarily on implementing emergency responses.

ACTS OF FAITH

Paul Auster's fiction explored what remains when old certainties give way

T IS A truth widely acknowledged that a first novel is often a thinly-veiled account of a writer's own life. For Paul Auster, though, the writer and the person were often indistinguishable, enmeshing fact and fiction, reality and make-believe over a course of a long, brilliant career that ended with his death on Tuesday at his home in Brooklyn, New York. Auster was 77. In the Auster counterverse, life was a prototype of fiction in which "All men contain several men inside them, and most of us bounce from one self to another without ever knowing who we are". In books such as The New York Trilogy (1985), In the Country of Last Things (1987), Moon Palace (1989), Leviathan (1992) and Baumgartner (2023), this entanglement assumed an investigation of identity, of love and loss and what remains when old certainties give way.

When he was 14, Auster had had his first encounter with chance. He had been on a hiking tour when a young boy next to him was struck dead by lightning. The memory of it never quite left the writer. In his Man Booker Prize-shortlised 2017 novel 4321, in which four different versions of the protagonist's life play out to different ends, one version has the lead character, Archie Ferguson, die at a summer camp under similar circumstances. Chance

and a dexterity with form would become the leitmotif of Auster's prodigious fiction. In many ways, writing was, for Auster, an act of faith. In an interview to Paris Review, he spoke of the curiosity that fuelled his fiction: "So many strange things have happened to me in my life, so many unexpected and improbable events, I'm no longer certain that I know what reality is anymore... Novels are fictions, of course, and, therefore, they tell lies (in the strictest sense of the term), but through those lies every novelist attempts to tell the truth about the world."

The trade push



Pickup in global growth should spur India's exports. But fallout from geopolitical tensions need monitoring

Dharmakirti Joshi, Adhish Verma and Meera Mohan

OVER THE PAST few years, global trade has been very volatile, first on account of the Covid-19 pandemic and then due to geopolitical conflicts. Since the middle of 2022, the value of global merchandise trade has shrunk continuously as per data from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. In fact, in 2023, global merchandise exports fell by 4.6 per cent. The January-March 2024 quarter, though, saw some sequential improvement.

India's performance has been largely in line, with merchandise exports falling 4.7 per cent in 2023. This, however, was better than developing Asia as a whole, which saw merchandise exports decline by 6.8 per cent. In 2023-24, India's merchandise exports stood at \$437.1 billion, down 3.1 per cent from 2022-23. But the monthly data does suggest a pick up – after a 8.9 per cent contraction in the first half of the year, exports grew by 2.8 per cent in the second half. In the last quarter of the 2023-24 – a period when the threat of Red Sea disruptions on exports was partly playing out exports grew at a faster pace of 4.5 per cent.

Besides an uncertain global environment, India has also had to deal with lower international commodity prices, which have reduced its export bill measured in dollars. Most international commodity prices (both energy and non-energy) have been declining after spiking due to the geopolitical conflict in Europe post February 2022.

In 2023-24, the sharp decline in crude oil prices was a big contributor to the fall in India's overall merchandise export bill. India's petroleum export bill was \$13.3 billion lower, as crude oil prices fell \$13 per barrel. With more than a 20 per cent share, oil is India's single largest export item and hence, its movement has a large bearing on total merchandise export earnings. In volume terms, though, India exported more petroleum products last year.

Excluding petroleum and gems and jewellery exports (the other top export item which was also down 13.8 per cent last year), core exports were up 1.4 per cent, despite the

It is a matter of concern that exports of labour-intensive sectors such as gems and jewellery, textile products (largely ready-made garments), leather and leather products, marine products and plastics, declined last year. In fact, the share of most of the labourintensive categories in the country's merchandise exports has come down drastically over the last decade. For instance, the share of gems and jewellery exports in India's merchandise exports fell from 13.2 per cent in 2014-15 to 7.5 per cent in 2023-24. Similarly, the share of textile exports is down from 11.1 per cent to 7.5 per cent. Arresting this decline must

be a priority.

broad-based decline in international commodity prices. This indicates that India was able to ship a higher volume of goods. According to quick estimates of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, items with as much as 45 per cent share (in dollar terms) in India's merchandise exports managed to grow last year.

The impressive 24 per cent growth in electronics goods exports last year reflects surging exports of telecom instruments or mobile handsets, spurred by the Production Linked Incentive scheme. The heft of electronics exports is visible from the fact that barring these, core exports registered a marginal decline last year. The share of electronic goods in the country's merchandise exports has risen significantly – from around 2 per cent in 2017-18 to 6.5 per cent in 2023-24. While India continues to have a deficit in electronics goods trade, the ratio of value of electronic exports to imports has improved from 0.11 to 0.34, largely led by a surge in the share of telecom instruments.

Other large core categories such as drugs and pharmaceuticals, engineering goods and agricultural goods also saw healthy export growth. It is also noteworthy that despite the ban on non-basmati rice and wheat and some other curbs from time to time, overall agriculture and allied exports growth, led by other categories such as meat and poultry products, spices, fruits and vegetables, oil meals, oil seeds and unmanufactured tobacco remained healthy.

In terms of the country of destination, oddly, goods exports to the US — India's largest market with solid economic growth in 2023 – contracted in 2023-24 as its growth was largely led by the services sector. However, there has been an uptick over the past few months. On the other hand, exports to the Euro region grew last year despite a sharp economic slowdown in the region, which has also been vulnerable to geopolitical uncertainties. While exports were largely led by petroleum products, other key items such as machinery, pharmaceutical products and auto and auto parts also rose.

India's exports to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries also rose, reflecting a further increase in exports to the UAE — the largest export destination of Indian goods in the GCC region. It is noteworthy that India's gems and jewellery exports to UAE increased by a whopping 42.3 per cent during April-February 2023-24 even as India's overall gems and jewellery exports declined by 14.5 per cent during this period.

However, it is a matter of concern that exports of labour-intensive sectors such as gems and jewellery, textile products (largely readymade garments), leather and leather products, marine products and plastics, declined last year. In fact, the share of most of the labour-intensive categories in the country's merchandise exports has come down drastically over the last decade. For instance, the share of gems and jewellery exports in India's merchandise exports fell from 13.2 per cent in 2014-15 to 7.5 per cent in 2023-24. Similarly, the share of textile exports is down from 11.1 per cent to 7.5 per cent. Arresting this decline must be a priority.

That said, over the past few quarters, goods exports have fared well. What also bodes well for India's exports is the upward revision to global growth and trade projections by multilateral agencies. S&P Global expects global growth at a healthy 3.2 per cent in 2024 compared to 2.8 per cent earlier. WTO projects world trade volume to grow 2.6 per cent in 2024 from -1.2 per cent in 2023. Bilateral free-trade agreements with major economies and the ongoing push to manufacturing should also spur India's exports in the near to medium term. In the base-case scenario, exports should grow at a healthy rate and contribute to the overall growth momentum. The spoilers would be uneven global growth and geopolitical tensions which will bear watching.

> Joshi is chief economist, Verma is senior economist, and Meera Mohan is economic analyst, CRISIL Ltd



A MATTER OF IMPUNITY

Prajwal Revanna case shows how the political class fails the accountability test

PRAJWALREVANNA, JDS MP and joint BJP-JDS candidate in Hassan, has reportedly fled to Germany after multiple videos depicting sexual assault on women — some government employees — started circulating online and an FIR was registered based on a complaint by a former employee. In this story, what is notable is the context which empowered and protected the disgraced MP. Clearly, there was knowledge of his behaviour. Yet, not only was no action taken against him, he was made the joint candidate for the BJP-JDS alliance, with

the Prime Minister campaigning for him.

This tells us something about our political sphere. First, our political class — especially the ruling party – has repeatedly shown itself to be incapable of setting a bottom line for acceptable behaviour. Members of the BJP, or those close to it, have displayed a proclivity for defending men with serious allegations against them — Prajwal, Brij Bhushan, Bilkis Bano's rapists, Kuldeep Sengar — but an instrumental detachment from norms exists across party lines. Sengar reportedly made his way across all parties in Uttar Pradesh; Prajwal has been the joint candidate of two opposing alliances. It is true that in many instances, this detachment is an outcome not of active permissiveness but intense partisanship. This has made the acquisition and consolidation of power the supreme value. However, it would be wrong to argue that this detachment arises solely from political constraints, rather than also from a sense that ethical norms are dispensable. The callous way in which the sexual assault videos were made public, exposing the victimised women to further scrutiny, is indicative of this dispensability — the desire

Members of the BJP, or those close to it, have displayed a proclivity for defending men with serious allegations against them — Prajwal, Brij Bhushan, Bilkis Bano's rapists, Kuldeep Sengar but an instrumental detachment from norms exists across party lines. This detachment is often an outcome of intense partisanship. However, it would be wrong to argue that [it] arises solely from political constraints, rather than also from a sense that ethical norms are dispensable.

to secure justice for the women concerned is of secondary importance.

It is also evident that democratic politics is ultimately about the commons. Prajwal's behaviour was known and documented in thousands of video clips, and in a letter to the BJP state leader. Even in the case of other offenders, it strains credulity that the truth about their behaviour became known to the party apparatus only when it became known to the public. But in each instance, what propelled the party into action — whether suspension or expulsion or a slowing down of ascent — was public outrage. Here too, what made the two parties distance themselves from Prajwal was not his reprehensible behaviour, but the separate fact of his behaviour becoming public.

Third, it is evident that for all the rhetoric on women's empowerment, women's issues have not solidified into enforceable normative standards. Consequently, women are mobilised as voters and are targets of welfare schemes but issues such as respect, equality, agency, and security remain on the periphery. In fact, even when such issues are articulated, they remain in the rhetorical realm as campaign promises or as part of partisan one-upmanship. It would also be a mistake to see representation alone as shorthand for political empowerment. Equitable representation is an end in itself in a democracy. However, political empowerment goes beyond representation to the ability to set normative standards and enforce them either through organisational or collective consciousness. The cynical and trivial exertions of the National Women's Commission and selective silences of women representatives

have shown that representation must go hand in hand with norms to translate into empowerment for the community.

This also points to another aspect of our democracy: The acquisition of power and its exercise remain top-down. The "people" are not coming together to power the rise of a party or a leader but are instead being mobilised from the top through a complex web of messages and party machinery. Consequently, representation often reflects top-down delegated power; nor is the electorate able to cohere together as "the people" to extract any meaningful accountability from representatives and/or political parties.

These aspects of our political sphere interact with each other to produce a culture of impunity in which norms cannot be reliably enforced. The onus of pursuing accountability has fallen on individual women. In Prajwal's case, it is not clear whether the videos going viral alone would have been sufficient to impose tangible consequences if not for the courageous woman who came forward to file a police complaint. The Unnao rape survivor was able to get Sengar convicted but paid a heavy price for it, losing her family members in the process. While systemic impunity extracts a high price from the women who speak up, it diminishes those who operate under it too. Prajwal had enviable access to power, which he could have exercised to do good for his people. Instead, the pervasive environment of impunity allowed him to wield his power in ways which limited his horizon to his own person.

> The writer is the executive director of Future of India Foundation

May 2, 1984, Forty Years Ago

BANGLADESH DEADLOCK

THE MILITARY GOVERNMENT of President H M Ershad and the 15-party opposition alliance led by Hasina Wajed, president, Awami League, have failed to reach an agreement on the modalities of withdrawal of martial law and transfer of power. The alliance's demand includes lifting of martial law, return of the army to barracks, holding elections to sovereign parliament before other polls, restoration of democracy and fundamental rights.

BANS UNDER UAPA THE GOVERNMENT HAS reimposed the ban on the activities of the National Council of Khalistan and the Dal Khalsa and declared the two organisations unlawful. Both organisations had earlier been banned on May 1, 1982 for two years under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

CURBS ON THE PRESS

NEWSPAPERS HAVE BEEN caught in a triple bind of unserviced allocations of imported newsprint by the State Trading Corporation, having to make good the deficit through reliance on high-cost domestic newsprint whose prices have been arbitrarily raised and through a newsprint policy that constricts growth. Together, it constitutes a crippling burden on their strained economies and threatens the freedom of the press.

May Day In Delhi

LAKHS OF WORKERS all over the country celebrated May Day by holding meetings, taking out rallies, and expressing their solidarity with workers all over the world. In the Capital, May Day was marked by innumerable processions, taken out by workers carrying red flags. They belonged to different unions, including Centre of Indian Trade Unions, Hind Mazdoor Sabha, All-India Trade Union Congress and others.

INDIAN EXPRESS

- THE DAILY STAR, BANGLADESH

THE IDEAS PAGE

Sunlight, science & state

Involvement of publicly-funded institutions in Surya Tilak project shows how our prior ideas of what is ethically and constitutionally defensible can be challenged



GAUTAM I MENON

THE SURYA TILAK project at the Ram temple in Ayodhya has been the subject of recent public interest. It involved constructing a mechanism to direct sunlight onto the forehead of the idol. This was to first happen at noon on April 17, the occasion of the festival of Ram Navami this year. The mechanism was to be designed so as to repeat its task every year on the festival date.

The difficulty is that this festival follows a lunisolar calendar. Purely solar or purely lunar calendars follow the motion of the sun or the moon respectively. Special festival dates, if they follow a solar calendar, are the same each year. However, if such festival days are at all tied to the phases of the moon, they will fall on different calendar dates each year.

Dates for most Indian festivals, including Ram Navami, have a lunar calendar component. Lunisolar calendars combine lunar and solar cycles. In Indian calendars, Ram Navami falls on Chaitra Shukla 9. The Navami is the lunar component, referring to the waxing of the moon, or Shukla; the solar Chaitra month relates to the positioning of the constellations.

For the Surya Tilak, once this date is calculated each year, this would translate into changing the position of the mirrors according to the shifting position of the sun to direct the sun's rays appropriately. To design a system that ensures that sunlight falls precisely on the idol each year thus requires some calculation.

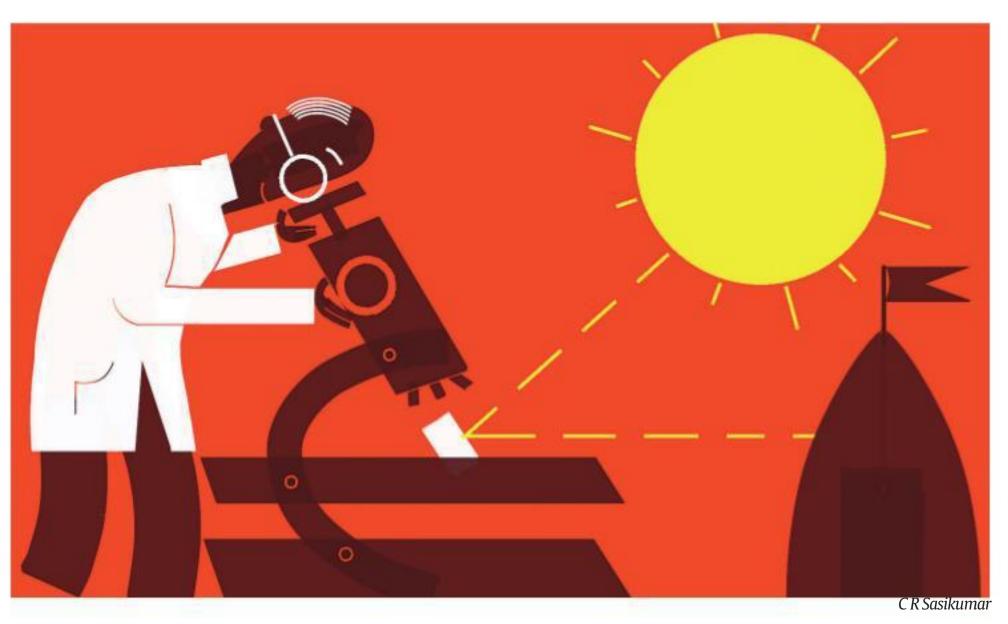
Given the complexity of problems that typically occupy astronomers, this is not excessively difficult. The appropriate dates corresponding to a lunisolar calendar can be calculated as far in the future as we want (Indeed, there are phone apps for this).

The setting up of the necessary equipment was done by scientists and engineers at two government-funded organisations, the Indian Institute of Astrophysics (IIA) in Bengaluru and the Central Building Research Institute, Roorkee. IIA is an autonomous institute wholly funded by the Department of Science and Technology (DST). The Central Building Research Institute (CBRI), a government institution, is under the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research.

In a post on X, viewed more than four million times at last count, the Secretary of the DST highlighted the work of these two organisations, speaking of "the accurate calculations and well-optimised design" of the Surya Tilak.

The comments on his post provide an interesting window into modern India. A random sample of these comments reads: "Our ancestors did this also without the help of modern tech. Good to see we are following our ancient roots in the new world also"; "Is there caste reservation in IIA?"; "The divine culmination of Bhakti and science, just like how it used to be in the ancient days"; and "What high school kids in other countries do as a project for a science fair ends up as a something that astrophysicists on Govt pay

in India do for a temple". Is this really a high-school science-fair



project? The computation of the 19-year cycle, the Metonic cycle, after which the Ram Navami date repeats, is not too complicated. Such calculations were known to ancient astronomers. The design of the periscope arrangement needs expertise. Constructing the actual periscope arrangement using a system of mirrors, capable of movement in a graduated manner, is not as easy as it might sound. Some knowledge of telescope design is called for. Also a familiarity with design and machining, but perhaps not of the sort of accuracy that might require high-precision equipment.

It would have been possible to construct a combined electronic and computational mechanism that would have directed the mirror arrangement. However, keeping in mind the need for robustness, the designers took the not-unreasonable option of designing a manual system that only required adjustment once each year.

The core question, though, is whether such a project, explicitly politico-religious in character, should at all have been taken up by government institutions, required to function within the letter and spirit of our Constitution.

Since Independence, we have largely followed the principle that public institutions should not be asked to participate in explicitly religious activities. This in no way restricts scientists and engineers at those institutions in doing so on their own time. It is possible that this happened here, although the DST secretary's highlighting this achievement from a laboratory directly under him, admits no such nuance.

But how can publicly-funded institutions push back against such demands? Can they refuse such directions, even if routed indirectly via the government agency that funds them? What's to prevent another government, with different priorities, directing research institutions funded by it, to controversial political uses?

It is interesting that even the small number of distinguished former administrators of government funding bodies who have written in favour of the Surya Tilak project, have tended to evade these questions, focusing instead on its value as science outreach.

These are relevant especially in a country where essentially all funding for research flows from the government. India spends close to just 0.7 per cent of its GDP on research, a figure that is much smaller than what China or the USA spends. The slack, pushing scientific funding to 3 per cent or more of GDP in developed countries, is taken up by the private sector. Unfortunately, private-sector science research involvement in India is still at a nascent state.

What alternatives could reasonably have been explored? The Ram temple authority could have announced that it would fund a competition to find the best technical solution. Scientists associated with institutions such as the IIA could have, in their own time, and voluntarily, evaluated these solutions. An Atal Tinkering Laboratory, from about

10,000 across the country, could have been asked to help with the hardware implementation of the successful idea, with funding for this taken from private individuals or the temple trust. None of this would have required requests to government-funded institutions that would further a religious aim, even ignoring its political overtones.

In political science, the Overton window refers to the range of ideas and policies for which there is large-scale public support. Shifts in the Overton window bring new possibilities, hitherto unacceptable, into the mainstream. Such shifts can happen naturally, as society itself changes, or can be encouraged through deliberate political reframing.

The saga of the Surya Tilak project is instructive because it is a test of how we choose to define and implement the secular character of our state. It illustrates how our prior ideas of what is ethically and constitutionally defensible can be challenged, even as what is done is presented as a fait accompli.

Once we get used to the idea that the government of the day can make such requests, whether directly or indirectly, it would be hard to turn the clock back.

Menon is a professor at Ashoka University, Sonepat. Views expressed are his own and do not represent those of his institution

A tax on

"The US government should pay heed to the demands of pro-Palestinian protesters. What we have seen so far is a display of double standards and flouting of international and humanitarian laws in Gaza, and these students have been

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

The rich have ways and means to avoid paying inheritance tax. It is the middle class and youth that will suffer

aspiration



trying to bring focus on that."

GOURAV VALLABH

THE CONCEPT OF inheritance tax has recently sparked significant debate in our country. This policy involves taxing the assets and properties that individuals inherit from their deceased ancestors. Congress leader Sam Pitroda's suggestion to discuss and debate the implementation of the inheritance tax has brought this tool back into the spotlight. Pitroda cited a US example where the government takes 55 per cent of the deceased's wealth as Inheritance Tax, while the remaining 45 per cent is distributed among the legal heirs or children.

The Congress party has distanced itself from Pitroda's views, stating that they are his own and do not represent those of the party. But timing is crucial in politics. It is important not to dismiss Pitroda's opinion as merely personal, as he is a respected mentor to Congress and has long been associated with the party.

Inheritance tax, which is also known as "estate tax" and sometimes referred to as "death tax" or duty is present in several forms across multiple countries such as South Africa, Brazil, and the US. A few emerging economies like India and China don't have the provision for such a duty. Let us examine what such a tax would mean in these countries.

A look at the share of wealth with the top 10 per cent of the population is instructive: It is at 85.6 per cent in South Africa, 79.7 per cent in Brazil, 70.7 per cent in the US, 68.8 per cent in China and 65 per cent in India. The above data clearly shows that an inheritance tax can't be used for equitable wealth distribution.

The top 10 per cent of the population's share of the total national wealth is higher for South Africa, Brazil, and the US than India and China. Inheritance tax can be easily avoided by the wealthiest individuals, either by utilising assets exempt from the tax — such as business, agricultural property, and pension funds — or by transferring their wealth above the taxable threshold well before their death. Ultimately, this tax will be collected from every aspiring middle-class household.

Implementing an inheritance tax will hamper economic growth and middleclass aspirations, young Indians' dreams, and wealth creation efforts due to the following reasons.

First, inheritance taxes create disincentives for wealth accumulation and investment, potentially hindering entrepreneurship and capital formation, leading to reduced savings and investment, ultimately slowing down economic growth.

Second, an inheritance tax may force

beneficiaries to sell assets like family businesses or real estate to pay taxes, resulting in inefficient asset allocation and the disruption of family enterprises. Third, inheritance tax can provoke significant resistance due to its visibility and

perceived burden. Taxpayers may focus only on the apparent burden, disregarding the broader context of lifetime tax liabilities, leading to distorted perceptions of fiscal policy. Fourth, the inheritance tax creates sig-

nificant administrative burdens, especially for widows and non-resident Indians. Tax regulations and procedures can exacerbate emotional and financial stress, emphasising the need for simplified and accessible tax frameworks. Fifth, although the purpose of inheri-

tance tax is to redistribute wealth, its ability to achieve equal outcomes is disputed. Wealthy individuals frequently use sophisticated estate planning techniques to reduce tax liabilities, which lessens the effect of the tax in reducing wealth inequality. This leaves the middle class more susceptible to taxation.

Finally, India lacks robust social security systems, and people rely heavily on family support. Introducing an inheritance tax during economic strain may worsen investment and wealth generation, incentivise capital flight, and drive young talent abroad. Enforcement challenges and tax avoidance may limit revenue generation.

The global economic scenario suggests that the next 50 years will be India's years. The country's capital market is hitting new records every day. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has set a goal of making India the third-largest economy during his third term and achieving the vision of a "Developed India" by 2047. However, the chief opposition party's mentors' recent proposal to discuss implementing an inheritance tax seems a step backwards. It gives the impression that the Opposition

lacks innovative ideas to take India ahead. Discussing such policies only encourages capital and talent flight abroad and penalises the aspiring middle-class wealth generation efforts more. This is detrimental to the nation's growth and is equal to killing the dreams of India's youth.

In the long run, wealth and income equality can be achieved only by including the middle and bottom of the pyramid society as part of the wealth creation effort of our country, not by negatively affecting their aspirations and dreams.

The writer is professor of finance, Xavier School of Management, Jamshedpur. He is a member of the BIP



Only the .001 per cent

DEAR EDITOR,

I DISAGREE

A fortnightly column

in which we invite

readers to tell us why,

when they differ with

the editorial positions

or news coverage of

'The Indian Express'

A wealth tax on billionaires and centimillionaires is feasible and needed

Jayati Ghosh

IT IS DIFFICULT to think of a more "harebrained, retrograde" piece than the Indian Express editorial on wealth tax ('Retrograde', *IE*, April 25) — but the more correct phrase may well be "behind the times". The editorial betrays a deep ignorance of the explosive nature of wealth inequality in India as well as a lack of awareness of rising support for wealth taxes from policymakers across the world.

Arguments for taxes on extreme wealth have been gathering pace in many countries, even becoming the most important agenda item for the G20 thanks to Brazil's Presidency this year. An idea advanced in the 'Global Tax Evasion Report 2024' by economist Gabriel Zucman and colleagues is now finding support from many governments. Finance Ministers of four major countries — Brazil, Germany, Spain and South Africa — recently argued for a two per cent tax on dollar billionaires. And it may surprise the editors of this newspaper to learn that at the tax discussions at the United Nations, the representative of the Indian government (currently led by the same BJP) that is so critical of the Congress Party's proposal) has also voiced support for this, agreeing that "governments should make a highlevel commitment to reach agreement on the taxation of wealthy individuals within the United Nations framework convention

on international tax cooperation". Why such widespread support from apparently unlikely quarters? Essentially, because more people in power are realising that the current extreme inequalities of income economies and increasingly divided and unhappy societies. The injustice and social and economic tensions created by such inequality are well known. Indeed, even the IE editorial admits: "That concentration of capital is a problem, that marginalised sections must get a leg-up, that efforts must be made to address inequalities of opportunity, expand the pie, is beyond debate." There are several strategies required to ad-

dress this, but one of the more obvious and immediate policies is the imposition of taxes on extreme wealth and inheritance.

India currently has the third highest number of dollar billionaires in the world – 200 according to the Forbes list, up by 31 from the previous year. Mumbai and Delhi alone are home to around 350 centimillionaires (those

who hold more than \$100 million in assets). These numbers ballooned over the last decade and are set to increase even more rapidly in future.

All this is happening in an economy where real wages have barely increased for most workers and have even declined for regular workers and construction workers, over the past decade. A recent study by the World Inequality Lab titled 'Economic inequality in India: The 'billionaire raj' is now

and wealth are creating dysfunctional more unequal than the British colonial raj' has found that between 2014-15 and 2022-23, inequality of wealth and income rose dramatically to reach their highest levels since the colonial period, to the point that the share of the top one per cent in total income is now among the very highest in the world — even worse than South Africa, Brazil and the US. Even worse, the study found that the Indian tax system could even be regressive (falling

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more heavily on lower-income groups) when considered in terms of net wealth.

The authors of that study noted that taxing only 167 families just two per cent of their net wealth would have provided 0.5 per cent of GDP in revenue in 2022-23. To put this in perspective, it would allow central and state governments together to increase their public health spend-

ing by more than 50 per cent. But such a tax would barely be noticed by the very wealthy, since — even if they choose to spend billions of rupees in pre-wedding bashes for their children — they are scarcely able to spend enough to make a dent in their vast riches. In such a context, a wealth tax and an in-

heritance tax for the super-rich should be a no-brainer, even for the harebrained! It is really surprising that wealth taxes are being actively considered in other countries that

are not as unequal as India, yet so bitterly resisted by our own elites.

The usual argument against wealth taxes is one that is repeated by the editorial: That they are too complicated to administer and generate very low revenues that are not worth the costs of collection. (Funnily enough, the same people seem to take for granted that a much more complicated tax the property tax applied to real estate — can continue and is feasible.)

One obvious problem with the previous attempts to impose wealth taxes in India was that the threshold for wealth tax collection was placed too low. This affected many people who were not so extremely wealthy and clearly did involve high costs of implementation. But the world has changed. It is now much easier to get access to information about financial wealth held by high-net worth individuals, even when these are held in other countries, because of the automatic exchange of banking information across 142 jurisdictions, including India.

So a wealth tax imposed only on the 200-dollar billionaires or the thousand-plus centimillionaires would be relatively easy to collect and could yield significant tax revenues. It would not affect 99.999 per cent of the population.

The real obstacle to such a policy comes from the lobbying power of the super-rich.

The writer is professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and was previously with JNU

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

POLITICS' LOW POINT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The Republic and its people' (IE, May 1). It appears that the BJP's lofty goal of "crossing 400 seats" in the ongoing general elections is facing hurdles. The rhetoric has now moved to tapping religious narratives. The lowest point was in conveniently interpreting the Congress party's manifesto on income distribution and inequality. The BJP wants to win more than 400 seats in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls to make changes to the Constitution. They (BJP) are walking on the path of dictatorship and are destroying democracy. The writer has rightly stated that the people of India must vote to save the secular credentials of the country which are under threat.

SS Paul, Nadia

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The Republic and its people' (IE, May 1). The essence of India lies in its remarkable diversity. Our Constitution stands as an enduring beacon, safeguarding fundamental rights rooted in the very fabric of our existence. Attempts by politicians to exploit it for personal gain threaten the stability of our nation. Just as a holy book remains unchanged, so must our Constitution to prevent chaos and preserve the integrity of our democracy. The Supreme Court's assertion that the basic structure is inviolable reinforces the imperative of protecting our constitutional framework. Let us unite to safeguard our constitution and uphold the principles of democracy.

Ajay Corriea, Vasai

A SMALL PRICE TO PAY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Selected

to office' (IE, May 1). The universally accepted definition of democracy is a government of the people, by the people and for the people. And this is achieved through free and fair elections when people exercise their franchise to elect their representatives in the government. In Surat and Indore Lok Sabha constituencies, BJP candidates got elected unopposed because rivals' nominations were either found invalid or withdrawn. As a result, millions of electorates' right to vote became infructuous. In effect, the candidates are nominated to office by the BJP. This has happened many times since independence. ECI could easily revise its rules and subject these seats to a by-election. This will be a small price to pay to save the essence of democracy.

LR Murmu, New Delhi

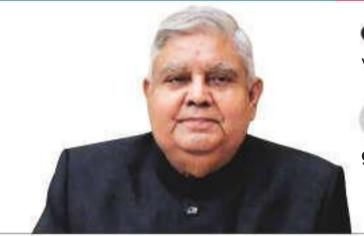
SILENCE & INJUSTICE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Look beyond the sexual abuse clips' (IE, May, 1). The sex scandal surrounding the incumbent member of parliament Prajwal Revanna, has again accentuated the vulnerability of women to men in positions of power. Another disquieting thing is the silence of the ruling dispensation and its alliance partners. This has ultimately led to the language for empowerment sounding hollow. How much more will women suffer? When will we as a nation come together against gender injustice?

Nupur Sharma, Ghaziabad



THURSDAY, MAY 2, 2024



THE GREATEST TREASURE

Vice president Jagdeep Dhankhar

What is the greatest wealth? The greatest wealth is knowledge. And, what is the greatest gift? Education

A good template

Family empires should learn from the Godrej success in splitting the group without a whiff of conflict

T'S NOTTHE first amicable division of a corporate family empire in India. A few others have done it in the past — Bajaj Auto, the highly diversified TVS group, the RP Goenka group, and the Munjal family, etc. Even then, the Godrej group's success in splitting the 125-yearold conglomerate without a whiff of conflict is unique. For, it's never easy to ensure a harmonious "realignment" of a group with tangled cross-holdings in dozens of industries. In the case of the Godrej family, where different scions run different businesses within the group, parcelling them out was a difficult task. The credit for this equitable split should go to the transparency and meticulous planning with the help of trusted external advisors. At the end of it all, the agreement, which took over two years to come to fruition, clearly sets an example for many business families which find passing the baton to the second or third generation extremely difficult.

By exiting each other's companies, and divesting their stakes, the Godrej family has delineated clear boundaries on succession planning, ensuring that successors understand their respective roles and responsibilities. Adi and Nadir Godrej will divest their stakes in Godrej & Boyce, while Jamshyd and his family will transfer interests in Godrej Consumer Products and Godrej Properties. Earlier this year, Adi and Nadir resigned from the Godrej & Boyce Board, while Jamshyd left his seat on the boards of GCPL and Godrej Properties. Even details such as a no-competition agreement and each group being free to use the Godrej brand name have been thrashed out. The most contentious was the agreement over the family's huge landholding of around 3,400 acres, including a single parcel of 3,000 acres in Mumbai. Even that was sorted out with the family members agreeing to hold it under Godrej & Boyce. A separate agreement on ownership rights will mitigate any potential source of contention pre-emptively.

In a statement that reflects the maturity with which the issues were settled, the group acknowledged that the division was necessary in view of the "differing visions" of the family members. Such a difference is only natural when the third generation comes into the business. While the first generation is typically an entrepreneur who has an idea and starts a business, the second generation, in contrast, grows under the shadow of the patriarch/matriarch, learning tricks of the trade, understanding wisdom, and values. As the family tree expands faster with the addition of the third generation, aspirations, ideas and thoughts on managing business invariably starts to differ.

Owners of family businesses in India need to understand that they can't keep these issues under the carpet for too long. Corporate history has shown us how founders are great at starting and building, but usually terrible at letting go and allowing the organisation to grow into a second phase of life without them. What emerges clearly is that most of their companies sank because the families that owned them couldn't sort themselves out. In this kind of scenario, when family feuds break out, and division of assets is forced between family members, wealth built over decades is wiped out within weeks at the altar of greed. This is important as India needs its family-owned businesses to do well as even now, over 70% of the top 500 firms in BSE are family-controlled. The Godrej group has given them a good template.

THE US, TIKTOK, AND UKRAINE

US CONGRESS PASSES 4 CRUCIAL BILLS; GOVT KEENLY AWARE OF GEOPOLITICS IN INDO-PACIFIC

Biden overcomes a logjam

VER THE PAST week, the US Congress achieved a significant legislative milestone by passing four crucial bills. Among these are three distinct pieces of legislation aimed at providing emergency appropriations to Israel, Ukraine, and the Indo-Pacific region through various federal agencies. Additionally, a fourth bill was introduced with the intent of banning the popular social media platform TikTok. The allocation comprises \$60.8 billion designated to bolster Ukraine, while Israel is slated to receive \$26.4 billion, including \$9 billion specifically allocated for humanitarian aid intended for civilians affected by conflict, such as those in Gaza. A sum of \$8.1 billion is set aside for the Indo-Pacific region, with a specific mention of Taiwan. Moreover, the bill encompasses provisions aimed at imposing punitive measures on officials from Iran and Russia. Additionally, the bill mandates the sale of TikTok by its parent company, ByteDance, a Chinese entity, or face a ban on its operations within the US.

For months, the bills have languished in the US House of Representatives due to fierce disagreement between Republicans and Democrats over two key issues. Originally introduced in the House, these bills collectively amount to \$95 billion. Republicans within the Congress viewed this deadlock as an opportunity to stall the bills and pressure the Democratic Biden administration into accepting stringent border control measures. One of the primary concerns driving Republican opposition is the perceived failure of the Biden administration to effectively address immigration issues. With as many as 7.2 million illegal immigrants having crossed the southern US border since the administration took office, Republicans aim to leverage this as a focal point to secure more votes in the upcoming elections. Republicans have intertwined the

VIVEK MISHRA Respectively, vice president, studies and foreign policy, and fellow, Americas, ORF

HARSH V PANT

issue of aid to Ukraine with border security in southern US, urging the Biden administration to address illegal immigration and deportation concerns. Their demands include expedited deportation of illegal immigrants and tightening the entry verification process for those seeking entry into the US. Ultimately, the decision to introduce

the bill in the House was made by the Republican Party under the leadership of House Speaker Mike

Johnson, despite ongoing resistance from the ultraconservative faction within his party. Speaker Johnson found himself at a pivotal juncture, balancing his political fortunes against his legacy. Recognising the potential consequences of a continued deadlock in the US Congress, particularly regard-

ing aid to Ukraine, Johnson chose to align himself with what he perceived as the "right side of history," avoiding a fate similar to his predecessor, Kevin McCarthy. Critical to Johnson's change of heart were intelligence briefings with the CIA chief regarding the evolving situation in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Despite facing entrenched opposition within his own party, including threats of deposition, Johnson was swayed by the urgency of the situation. Several factors likely contributed to Johnson's eventual decision to introduce and pass

the bill, despite opposition. Firstly, there was a noticeable softening of Donald Trump's criticism of the border bill, coinciding with his legal troubles in New York. Secondly, mounting pressure on the US Congress to break its legislative inertia intensified as Ukraine faced escalating Russian aggression and suffered strategic setbacks on the battlefield, compounded by continued attacks on critical infrastructure by Russian forces.

The predominant question surrounding these bills Republicans concerning Ukraine is whether the aid package viewed this will suffice. In recent deadlock as an months, Ukraine has sufopportunity to stall fered significant losses, the bills and including strategic territories like Avdiivka and pressure the Biden Bakhmut, with Russian administration forces now targeting the critical city of Kharkiv in Eastern Ukraine. Assess-

> ments indicate the potential for another Russian offensive during this summer. The proposed package could potentially bolster Ukraine's air defence systems, crucial in thwarting further assaults from Russia. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has openly acknowledged the asymmetric gap between Russian missile capabilities and Ukrainian defences.

The initial allocation of supplies, valued at \$1 billion, includes a range of crucial resources such as air defence missile systems, HIMARS munitions, artillery projectiles, armoured vehicles, precision

Powering India's developed nation goal

Advanced analytics

can help assess any

demand additions,

changing load

profiles, integration of

distributed energy

sources, and demand

migration from open-

access users in detail

aerial munitions, anti-tank weaponry, small arms, equipment, and spare parts. Despite the aid package being labelled as assistance for Ukraine, a considerable portion — up to \$48 billion — is earmarked for American defence contractors. This allocation is intended to replenish depleted US inventories resulting from the prolonged conflict or to manufacture additional weaponry for Ukraine.

Arguably, the aid allocated to Israel holds equal significance for the Biden administration as it does for Ukraine. The issue of ceasefire in Gaza has ignited protests on college campuses across the US, prompting Biden to carefully calibrate his stance and actions in support of Israel. Consequently, his firm message to Netanyahu that the US will not engage militarily in Israel's escalation against Iran, along with the construction of a pier for aid in Gaza and advice against the Rafah offensive, have all contributed to Biden narrowing the polling gap with Trump domestically. The aid package to Israel serves a dual purpose of reinforcing its defence systems, such as replenishing the Iron Dome, while also providing assistance to Gaza. However, the Biden administration has taken care to ensure that the approved funding does not flow to UNRWA, the primary UN agency for Palestine.

Amidst these, the Biden administration remains keenly aware of the geopolitical landscape in the Indo-Pacific and the escalating competition with China. In response to mounting concerns about China's potential access to US user data via TikTok, one of the bills passed imposes a one-year ultimatum on ByteDance to divest all its assets in the US within 270 days. This legislative action underscores the broader information warfare dynamics shaping contemporary geopolitics, signalling a potential new great game between the US and China in the digital realm.

Amazon's top-to-bottom Al spending is paying off

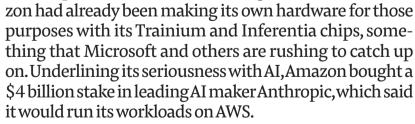
THE STORM CLOUDS are finally starting to clear over the head of Amazon.com Inc. Chief Executive Officer Andy Jassy.

After taking over from Jeff Bezos, Jassy has mostly been confronted with challenges. Regulators have been on his back. The e-commerce business needed some serious reining in after overexpanding during the pandemic. Amazon's grocery stores have been a disappointment. He's laid off thousands of employees and shut down some projects.

Amazon Web Services, the golden goose cloud business that has long girded the company's profit margins, was under pressure from cash-strapped businesses seeking a better deal during the pandemic. Revenue growth slowed. Then, when Microsoft Corp. entered a partnership with OpenAI, there was worry that AWS' market share might suffer as businesses flocked to invest in the artificial intelligence offered by Amazon's biggest cloud competitor.

Jassy, who had been responsible for AWS' rise as the division's CEO before taking the top job, kept a level head. He assured investors that Amazon had been working on AI for years — long before ChatGPT set the tech world alight with the promise of worldchanging possibilities. Amazon's message was that while OpenAI may have been grabbing headlines, investors should think of AWS as the Swiss Army knife for AI, one where businesses could run any number of cutting-edge AI models without worrying about shifting their sensitive data from one cloud provider to another.

To answer worries about the availability of computing power, which had driven up the cost of procuring Nvidia Corp. hardware to do AI training and inference, Ama-



On Tuesday, the company's first-quarter earnings showed these investments are starting to pay off, prompting an after-hours stock price boost of as much as 6.5%. Jassy's reassurances have proved accurate, and more good times are on the horizon. As Jassy predicted, clients that had pulled back cloud investment in the "survival mode"

of the pandemic have started to pick up the pace and shift more of their spending to the cloud. "I think people have moved to newer initiatives that at a macro level I would describe as modernising their infrastructure and then trying to drive value out of generative AI," he said on a conference call to discuss the results.

DAVE LEE

Bloomberg

Operating margin for AWS in the quarter was a record 37.6%, thanks to cost cuts and heightened demand. In all, Amazon's cloud business was "climbing out of what was a pretty tough year", Jefferies analyst Brent Thill said on Bloomberg TV. "Investors aren't paying for Twinkies and toilet paper being delivered to your house. They're paying for these high-margin, recurring businesses like AWS."

The strong quarter meant Amazon could get away with vague pronouncements like saying it would "meaningfully" step up its capital expenditure this year to pay for all this AI infrastructure — without putting a figure on it. Unlike Meta Platforms Inc., which was punished for saying its spending would increase, Amazon can get away with bigger investments because of its strong presence in multiple layers of the AI "stack": the bottom infrastructure layer for AI model builders, the middle layer of developers working with AI, and the top layer of consumer-facing software applications like chatbots.

It all puts Amazon in excellent stead amongst this fiercely competitive AI crowd. The initial money is being made on the bottom and middle layer, but there's no reason Amazon can't have a commanding presence in consumer-facing AI as well — this week, it fully rolled out its competitor to Microsoft's code-writing AI assistant, CoPilot. In other words, Jassy has seized the agenda and set Amazon up to both sell the shovels and dig for the gold.

SUVOJOY SENGUPTA SATYA KOMARAGIRI

Respectively, partner, and associate partner, McKinsey

AN EFFICIENT POWER sector is a crucial enabler in India's journey to sustained economic growth and development. While the country's distribution companies (discoms) have significantly raised operational and financial performance, they face two challenges keeping up with fast-expanding demand, and providing high-quality and reliable power supply. Measures such as using data-driven forecasting to plan and deliver power optimally and strengthening distribution networks will help the sector rise above these challenges.

India's power sector has attained 100% electrification and has been integrated in a single grid across the country. Daily power availability has increased to 20 hours in rural areas, and 23.5 hours in urban centres. The aggregate technical and commercial (AT&C) losses have narrowed from 21.2% in FY21 to 15.4% in FY23, according to power ministry data — sufficient savings to power the state of Karnataka or eliminate the need for building a 20 gigawatt (Gw) coal-fired power station. The sector's payables fell from 200 days in FY21 to 120 days in FY23, while capital expenditure increased to ₹70,000 crore in FY23.

However, power demand has been growing at 8-9% per annum, outstripping the baseload capacity additions at discoms. In FY23, as demand levels reached or exceeded baseload contracted capacities, the government directed imported coal-based plants to

run at full capacity and domestic power plants to import coal for blending. Several discoms also resorted to expensive short-term procurement from power exchanges, raising power prices by 71 paise per unit during FY23. But only 46 paise were passed on to customers, widening the gap between discom revenue and power costs.

At the same time, the quality of power supply in India could still improve. Metrics that measure average system interruption frequency and duration reveal that

urban areas in India face 120 outages and 131 hours of power cuts annually. This compares to less than one outage and one hour of outage in two years in developed economies.

To be an enabler in India's economic development the power sector could focus on four aspects. First, generating a granular forecast to

allow discoms to plan power procurement with high-fidelity and ensure resource adequacy will be helpful. Advanced analytics can help assess any demand additions, changing load profiles, integration of distributed energy sources, and demand migration from open-access users in detail. Such forecasting would let discoms optimise the supply mix across long-term and shortterm power purchase agreements as well as purchases from power exchanges.

Measures like using data-driven forecasting to

deliver power optimally and fortifying distribution

networks will help the sector rise above challenges

Second, an improved distribution network will ensure reliable supply. Investments in loss reduction works, prepaid smart meters, additional transformative capacity, and system redundancy would be key. Smart solutions such as GIS mapping of assets, predictive maintenance and network automation tools can boost operational efficiency.

Third, a renewed customer focus is key, especially as enterprises and households demand higher reliability. Ensuring 24/7 supply

will nudge commercial and industrial customers away from diesel or gas backup gensets. In other examples of customer-centric efforts, discoms could

reduce the time to get new connections, facilitate solar installations, promote digital payments, and provide visibility on outages. They could also leverage

smart meter data through analytics to unlock value-added services.

Lastly, discoms need a clear road map for seamless integration of renewable energy, with 322 Gw of the planned 469 Gw capacity addition till 2032 expected from renewable sources. However, as solar and wind power generation are intermittent, discoms need to plan for 24/7 availability through energy storage, hybrid power plants, green hydrogen, etc. Additionally, demand-side strategies like time-of-day tariffs and demand response management would incentivise customers to shift consumption to peak solar hours.

Some discoms have already started taking steps in this direction. City discoms in Mumbai and in Delhi have invested in building network redundancy and smart solutions for reliable power supply; they are improving consumer experience by developing dedicated apps, messaging systems, and realtime usage monitoring. States such as Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Odisha have implemented green tariffs for high tension consumers. The use of AI is also picking up, with implementation of a demand response system incentivising consumers to modulate demand in Mumbai.

The availability of affordable and reliable power is a prerequisite for India's journey towards greater economic development. Timely investments by the distribution sector to build adequate resources, strengthen capabilities, and improved customer service will be essential to fuel this progress. Further, as the share of renewable energy in the power mix grows and more consumers demand green energy, discoms need to innovate to mitigate renewable intermittency challenges. Some of the discoms have taken the lead towards these goals; it is time for the entire distribution sector to work together and emerge as a lynchpin in national development.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Supreme Court's question to ED

It is heartening to see that the Supreme Court has raised a pertinent question to the Enforcement Directorate (ED) about the timing of the arrest of Arvind Kejriwal, barely a week after the Model Code of Conduct for the Lok Sabha election came into force. When the learned judges are also well aware that the arrest of an

opposition leader like Kejriwal by the ED is only to stall the active participation of opposition leaders in the election campaigns and crush them, one only feels that the apex court should have raised this question to the agency immediately after the arrest, instead of waiting for so long. In the case of Kejriwal, the honourable court has questioned the ED after a lapse of 42 days since his arrest on March 21. —Tharcius Fernando, Chennai

Indian varsities slip

Apropos of "Indian varsities fall behind, China dominates top 10" (FE, May 1), irrespective of the sanctity of ranking criteria, it is imperative that our premier engineering, medical, science, and management institutions usher in an era of research, global exposure, and faculties' varied experience. Practical experiences of teachers will hugely benefit students. But it is surprising how reputable

institutions such as AIIMS, ISRO, SPA Delhi, IIMs, IITs, VIT, and JNU ended up lagging behind, given that their graduates get prestigious placements within the country and abroad. The ranking standards should also evaluate students' ability to build their own start-ups and business enterprises, besides securing coveted placements. —Vinod Johri, Delhi

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Pay for Content, Slice For Responsible AI

Engagement on mutually beneficial terms

Separate deals between Google and OpenAI with Wall Street Journal and Financial Times suggest a way out for technology firms to avoid bruising EP battles over training generative AI on LLMs. Content and AI creators have a symbiotic existence at this stage of tech development. AI trains best on information created by humans, while the output quality degenerates when trained on synthetic content. This makes the archival material of media organisations a vital resource in tech development, one that Big Tech is ready to pay for. Google, for instance, has agreed to pay WSJ \$5-6 mn annually to develop new AI-related content and products. The alternative, of news sites denying access to content crawlers, reinforces bias that AI has the potential to magnify. That would reinforce the need for tighter regulation of a transformative tech.

Negotiated settlement between content creators and



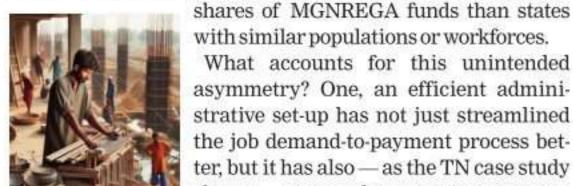
tech developers is also needed because AI is expected to eventually supplant human effort. Symbiotic existence between media and technology will strengthen as more AI is used to produce information. It is all the more desirable that the engagement starts out on mutually beneficial terms. Media

and technology have had a complicated relationship since the dawn of the internet, with accusations of revenue cannibalisation accompanying staggering increases in distribution reach. Media is a frontline industry for disruption by AI and, this time, media-owners are determined to get their due at the outset.

Which is good news for the millions of content creators that feed all manner of platforms from social media to ecommerce. They can be assured of a monetisation model that encourages their creativity. Individual content creators have negligible bargaining power with Big Tech and are forced to seek legal redress for copyright violation. Terms that tech companies strike with media organisations can work as guides to compensating smaller content creators, who also serve technology development. For AI to be responsible, it must be so at the training stage as well.

Mystery of MGNREGA Demand Asymmetry

Popularity of the MGNREGA scheme in poorer states is wellknown. But a new data analysis reported in this paper has thrown up an interesting fact: Tamil Nadu, one of India's most industrialised states, takes a much larger share of funds under the rural employment guarantee scheme than Bihar, one of the country's poorest and more populous states. Over the past five years, TN accounted for 10-15.3% of India's annual work demand submitted by individuals under MGNREGA, while Bihar made up for 4-5.7%. As for person-days generated, TN's annual share has been 8.6-13.1% over the same period, compared to Bihar's 5-8%. Other progressive southern states like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala have also been cornering larger



with similar populations or workforces. What accounts for this unintended asymmetry? One, an efficient administrative set-up has not just streamlined the job demand-to-payment process better, but it has also - as the TN case study shows - managed to execute a geograp-

hical exercise where labourers can find work at a place not far from their homes, thereby reducing the need to travel far, never mind migrate. The other factor is higher participation by women. 80% of active MGNREGA workers in TN are women, while in Bihar, the corresponding figure is about 54%. The high number of female workforce participation in MGNRE-GA work can be attributed to decades of the southern state's progressive politics, policies and supportive ecosystem.

While GoI should delve deeper into this 'north-south' asymmetry, laggard states must learn how to utilise the scheme better and weed out roadblocks in MGNREGA implementation. Essentially, make it work better for those who need this economic cover.



American Campuses Going Our JJJ Ways

Reputations make you see one thing, and blind to another. For yet-to-viksit Indians, no matter how well-versed with the world they are, proper nouns like JNU, Jamia Millia and Jadavpur University conjure up only visions of student protests, clashes, sloganeering, and what selectively genteel sensibilities process as 'radical', or even 'anti-national'. It is keeping this anarchic vision of non-IIT, non-IIM higher education in mind that they do everything within their powers and pelf to pack their precious kids off abroad so that they can study, and not get caught up in this kind of 'onlyin-India' bakwaas. Well, here goes your bubble.

Over the last few weeks, campuses in 'First World' America - not in 'ghettoes' or boondocks, mind you - have been out-JNU-Jamia-Jadavpuring themselves. On Wednesday, ABVP...oops, anti-pro-Palestinian groups clashed with protesters at UCLA. Eyewitnesses claim that campus security personnel looked on while attackers and protesters thrashedit out. Familiar, eh? Places like University of Austin in Texas have resorted to online classes as a result. For those here who think that institutions with protesting students only have students protesting and no academic activities, comparisons from America are showing that students can be politically active and pursue studies. Yes, even in our anarchic JJJs.

Are Meta and GoI really tussling over encryption? Or are we watching covert mutualism at play?

WhatsUp, ShadowBoxers?



Ateesh Tankha & **Syagnik Banerjee**

here are four types of symbiotic relationships in the natural world: • Mutualism In which both parties benefit from each

Commensalism In which only one party benefits, but does not adversely impact the other.

Parasitism Where one party benefits by ignoring or actively harming the needs of the other.

Ocompetition A struggle for resources while maintaining balance in the ecosystem.

Meta's unequivocal assertion on April 25, that WhatsApp would quit India if it was forced by GoI to compromise the messaging service's end-to-end encryption standard, suggests that the demands of parasitism can only go so far. GoI, on the other hand, maintains that theirs is a perfectly commensal relationship, in which WhatsApp can continue to benefit from access to the mar-

ket, as long as it complies with the law. In truth, both contentions could very well be disingenuous, because the ruling dispensation and Meta share a mutualism that may be irreversible.

India is WhatsApp's largest market with about 400 mn active users, yielding about \$1 bn annually. By comparison, Brazil, with just over 100 mn users, drives more than \$5 bn a year.

Revenue growth in India is an uphill task for two reasons:

Only a handful of users are willing to pay for a messaging service. Businesses are loath

to pay for ads, the targetcomplexity, Meta has ing efficacy of which is blunted by consent-linked privacy protection. Despite these seem-

ownership where ingly insurmountable issues, India continues to be WhatsApp's second-



The show must go on

CAUTION

Buck Passing

By citing cost and

left the door open

for GoI to assume

Meta cannot cede

responsibility

ly used by Meta to test-launch new services that it hopes to monetise, like WhatsApp Business API—arguably a future money-spinner as a customer relationship management (CRM) tool for SMEs - WhatsApp Flows and WhatsApp payments.

GoI, on the other hand, leverages WhatsApp's large and active user base to concentrate and disseminate information, align policy perception and communication directly where necessary. As such, it fully realises that the plat-

form is invaluable both for itself and the public, and cannot be replaced or replicated indigenously at scale in the near future. However, realising that

WhatsApp's viral speed and scope could work both for and against it. GoI has been trying to get Meta — first by request, then by invoking the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021 to enable traceability of any published content up to, and including, the originator. This represents, by Meta's own ad-

mission, a technical and

India overtook China in 2023 to become the biggest market for

electric three-wheelers. According to the IEA Global EV Report 2024,

Light-Duty EVs

fastest growing market, and is regular- commercial hurdle for WhatsApp, because it would mean storing hundreds of millions of messages for an extended period of

Meta's

government

not without prece-Google Gol fully realises took a stand that WhatsApp against Chiis invaluable nese authoriboth for itself ties to prioritiand the public, se protection and can't be personal replicated data of its cliindigenously ents ostensibat scale in the ly because the

was pursuing dissidents online. Both the international media and public applauded this

near future

move to protect free speech. But the truth is that Google's choices were limited. If it refused to comply with the government in Beijing, it would lose users in mainland China. If it complied and blocked the most trafficked keywords, it would lose its targeting and revenue-generating advantage. Hence, it chose to gain brownie points with the 'free world', exiting under protest, hoping that China would reverse course in the future. That its vir-

tue signalling doesn't work any more, anywhere, is a testament to its true ambitions today.

Knowing that India cannot afford to allow WhatsApp to cease operations, will Meta allow GoI to call its bluff and pull the same muscle-flexing stunt of shutting down its services as it did in Australia during the pandemic, even if for only a few days? Probably not. Because, in 2024, such signalling will have a limited impact given that it continues to be prosecuted by Western governments for internal privacy and antitrust violations.

Moreover, by doing so, it may awaken an implacable spirit — absent from symbiotic relationships in the natural world - that could lead to an uncerta-

ty, Meta has left the door open for GoI to assume ownership where Meta cannot cede responsibility. If, for instance, GoI paid for the cost of storing and protecting a copy of encrypted WhatsApp records for up to three years, only to be decrypted by Meta on an exceptional basis-acts of terrorism, money laundering, incitement to riot, etc — by a

> WhatsApp public utility could be mutually assured by auginclude client

compact between

regulator

the government as

and

Alternatively, an alliance could al-

In the classic example of mutualdatory polyp.

Tankha is founder-CEO, ALSOWISE Content Solutions, and Banerjee is professor

in stalemate: the sovereign ego.

Instead, by citing cost and complexiurt of law, the current

mented roles that and surveillance vendor, respectively. After all, if private contractors today can perform military functions at the behest of a government, is surveillance so very improbable?

so be forged between Meta and a local player, say, Reliance, so that GoI can maintain its veneer of sovereignty and show off Meta as a visibly submissive partner.

ism, a clownfish, apparently trapped in the tentacles of a sea anemone, remains impervious to the latter's deadly toxins while actually enjoying its protection. In exchange, the clownfish acts as a magnet for other ravenous fish that fall prey to the pre-

of marketing, University of Michigan, US

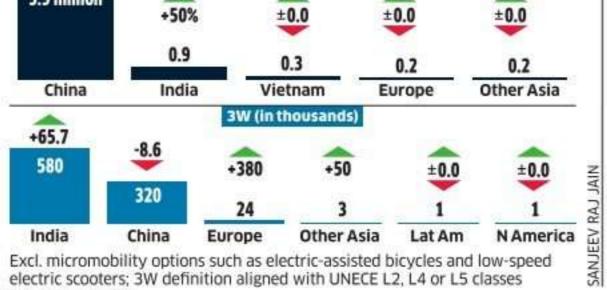
ChatGPT sh**ai**ri OF THE DAY In the race for sales, they're all in, As elections grind on

with a grin. Businesses hop on the trend, Selling caps, shirts and pens,

Profiting from the

chaos therein!

3W EV sales picked up in India, rising by almost two-thirds in just one year to 580,000. But China dominates the global electric two-wheeler market, with sales of almost 6 million vehicles last year. A snapshot: Countries/regions with the highest sales of 2W, 3W in 2023 Change from 2022 (in %) 5.9 million +50% ±0.0 ±0.0 0.9 0.3 0.2 Vietnam China India Europe



electric scooters; 3W definition aligned with UNECE L2, L4 or L5 classes Source: IEA, Statista



Which side do you align with in the class struggle between capitalists and crony capitalists?

No, Not UBIquitous Yet THEPLATE



Atanu Biswas

A day after International Labour Day. imagine if all citizens received a monthly payment from the government, with no strings attached. That's the concept of universal basic income (UBI). UBI has gained significant traction in policy discussions on widening inequality and growing threats of AI, drawing support across Left and Right due to post-pandemic economic challenges.

The concept of 'basic income' is not new. It can be traced back to Kautilya's 2nd c. BCE manual on politics and economic policy Arthashastra, and in Thomas More's 1516 sociopolitical satire, Utopia. Closer to our timeline, 'father' of neoliberal economics Milton Friedman saw UBI as a substitute for state-run social assistance and welfare programmes, including removing a legislated minimum wage.

In contrast, direct job-creation programmes, which provide workers with dignity and represent a step towards full employment, were propagated by economists like Hyman Minsky.

Many countries have tested UBI or its variants, including municipalities in the Netherlands, Barcelona, Stockton in California, Maricá in Brazil, Kenya, the Otjivero-Omitara area of Namibia, Gyeonggi province in South Korea and a part of Madhya Pradesh.

In 2017-18, Finland conducted a randomised controlled trial (RCT) of UBL The treatment group consisted of 2,000 unemployed people, and each received €560 monthly. Their average life satisfaction improved compared to that of the control group, and a small rise in employment was also observed. However, according to the chief researcher of Finland's government-run VATT Institute for Economic Research, 'This was a big carrot, and we can see it didn't fully work.'

Amid the pandemic in 2020, Spain launched a programme to give up to €1,015 a month to the poorest to supplement their income. But the question of 'dignity', perhaps, can't be ignored. Interestingly, around 77% of voters in a 2016 Swiss referendum opposed UBI. Arvind Subramanian's 2017 Economic

Survey sparked a debate about UBI in India. GoI runs many cash transfer programmes and other welfare initiatives. But they are mostly without a 'U', and are frequently 'targeted' at a particular societal group. UBI—with a 'U'—of ₹5,000 a month

would cost roughly 10% of GDP. If 25% of people opt out, it would cost roughly 7.5% of GDP. Should the sum be halved for children under 14, the expense would become 6.25% of GDP. If a few ongoing welfare programmes were eliminated simultaneously, the economic burden would be much lessened. But, in that case, will our wallets fill up with cash, instead of the state's growth programme withering?



Whetting appetite or damp squib?

The long-term implications of many current welfare schemes are social and economic. For instance, midday meal programmes give children required nutrients, encourage parents to bring their kids to school rather than work, create jobs for midday meal workers and foster

children. UBI is not a panacea. In a complex and unequal culture like India's, where caste, religion and gender variations play significant roles, money can't wipe out disparities, even though evidence from smaller studies suggests that UBI's benefits could include better health and higher school attendance.

a sense of social equality among the

Discussions related to UBI frequently serve as a stand-in for more general concerns regarding function of the state, role of markets and distribution of power within societies. Annie Lowrey described UBI as a lesson and an ideal, not just an economic policy, in her 2018 book, Give People Money: How a Universal Basic Income Would End Poverty, Revolutionise Work, and Remake the World.

However, Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze opposed UBI, arguing that it was premature for India, and more of a strategic than an ideological decision. Others hesitate to support it because it would be nearly impossible to undo such a populist programme.

But in contrast to those from the Left who view UBI as a bailout from the 'wrath' of the 'reserve army of labour'. capitalists support UBI because it breaks the link between work and pay, and gives employers and workers the relative flexibility to transition to high-skilled jobs in the rapidly automating age without any binding minimum wage. Even with a 'U', UBI seems affordable and may bring the Left and Right together. Yet, achieving a comprehensive UBI may, oddly, remain elusive.

> The writer is professor of statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata

Le Du Banakok

There's more to Bangkok than great street food, and that 'more' can be encapsulated in two short words, 'Le Du'from the Thai word for 'season'. This Bangkok establishment has been the last word for Thai haute cuisine - with subtle French-European touches—since 2013 under the chef-tainship of Thitid 'Ton' Tassanakajohn.

Since being renovated in late 2023 under the watchful eye of star architect Amata Luphaiboon, Le Du has been transformed into a magical space with a ceiling installa-



door diamond sky, the palate is treated to delights including scallop and local greens, and squid canape with Bearnaise sauce and a peanut and chilli dressing.

But the standout dish—for seafood aficionados — has to be khao kluk kapi: butterflied river prawn from the Tapi river in southern Thailand, grilled and served with risotto made from two types of northern Thai black rice mixed with sauce made from tom yum kung (hot and sour shrimp

soup) and prawn head cream. Chef Ton's abode is the perfect, sparkling space to taste what happens when the finest ingredients meld with the 'dark art' of astounding cooking.



THE SPEAKING TREE

Life is But A Dream

SANT RAJINDER SINGH

We are living in a dream state. We take this physical world to be our home and take our body - a vehicle made of matter—to be our true identity, not realising that we are, in reality, spirit, the power that enlivens the body.

Our attention remains focused on the attractions and distractions of the outer world as we invest time in amassing material wealth. However, all of this is temporary, fleeting and ever-changing. We take none of it with us when we depart from this world.

Everything in this physical world is made of matter, which is made of particles constantly in motion. Just as everything in nature changes from one moment to the next, our lives also change continually. This change brings turmoil, agitation and, inevitably, loss, sorrow and pain.

Spiritual masters help us awaken from this dream-like state to experience peace, calm and joy. They remind us that this human existence is a brief sojourn in our soul's long voyage back to its Source. For now, it is up to us to make the most of our time here on earth, to love each other, serve each other; be kind and compassionate, and face the ups and downs with calm and equipoise while recognising the temporary nature of life on earth.

By teaching us meditation, saints help us withdraw attention from the fleeting outer world and focus it on the steady permanence of the inner spiritual worlds. Embarking on the inner spiritual journey, we experience ourselves in our true form and awaken to the reality of life.

Chat Room

India, a Fly in Your Condiment

Apropos the Edit, 'More Guts for Our Food Regulators' (May 1), are all the food items and medicines we Indians—right from infants to children to adultsconsume completely safe? Can we fully trust the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI)? As it turns out, government authorities have not been able to flag health and safety issues with at least hundreds of food products we consume. Is it not shameful that food authorities of other countries are pointing out our non-compliance?

VIVEK G LAGHATE Pune

Teeming With T20 Talent

This refers to 'India's 15 For T20' by Anand Vasu (ET Sport, May 1). The T20 World Cup squad is out and, as expected, there are hundreds of 'he should have been picked' and 'he should have been dropped', etc, comments. The reality is that India should ask



should let the second team play in the qualifiers. Britain has four teams ld Cup. Similarly, being a crick-

et super power, we should show our strength and depth in the sport by asking for more teams. If Australia with a population of 25 mn and New Zealand with just 5 mn can put up a team each, then we with 1.4 bn should have at least five teams.

TRRAMASWAMI Mumbai

Robotaxi: Move. Cattle: Moo

Apropos the Edit, 'In the Driver's Seat Of Driverless Cars' (May 1), one curiously wonders if Tesla's robot-driven cars will be able to negotiate stray cattle that wander right into the middle of streets and highways, ignore feverish honking and refuse to budge till they are physically driven away. Perhaps the occupant of a robotaxi will need to get off and drive them away, just in time to get back inside before the automated vehicle speeds away. Elon Musk and his team of engineers will have to introduce special features in Tesla cars to overcome such everyday encounters even in urban India.

CHANDER SHEKHAR DOGRA Jalandhar

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{ OUR TAKE }

Reading caste in inequality debate

The relations between social and economic deprivations are complex and play out in a complicated manner in electoral politics

y making a caste census the central pitch of its election campaign, the Congress has made this among the most important questions of the 2024 general elections. Is this a wise strategy in terms of potential rewards for the Congress? The answer depends on the relationship between caste and economic inequalities in present-day India and the possible political manifestation or lack of it in the elections.

The lack of comprehensive and recent data is a big constraint in answering this question objectively. India does not have any official statistics on income data. Survey-based asset data from the National Sample Survey Office's (NSSO) All India Debt and Investment Survey (AIDIS) is from before the pandemic and only gives us data at the broad social group level, namely, Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC) and those who do not belong to any of these groups. This data shows that it is SCs and STs who face the worst form of relative discrimination when it comes to asset poverty. As far as OBCs are concerned, they are almost equally represented within the ranks of the rich and the poor. This, in a way, reaffirms the need for caution in treating OBCs as a monolithic socio-economic block in India.

To be sure, the AIDIS data also offers other and perhaps, more important insights about the roots of inequality in India. Urban populations have a much larger share in assets than their rural counterparts and the ability to get out of agriculture is an important determinant in overcoming asset poverty. This is in keeping with the well-accepted economic transformation challenge in India which requires shifting labour from low-income farming to highincome non-farm activities. The ability of a caste census that will primarily increase the representation of OBCs within the ambit of reservation and other affirmative action programmes to deal with this transformation challenge will at best be limited.

So, will the Congress's pitch of caste census to reduce economic inequality resonate politically? Historical data shows that the Congress's long-term decline was a result of the party losing support across communities rather than among a particular social group. Can the Congress make a political comeback by aggressively wooing just one section of the society this time? Or should it have focused on a more broad-based catch-all political approach in keeping with its historical trajectory? We will know the answer on June 4.

Does India's T20 WC squad lack vision?

ndia established itself as the T20 capital after a refreshingly young side led by MS Dhoni pulled off an Lastonishing win in the inaugural T20 World Cup in 2007. It was a moment in history that sparked the Indian Premier League (IPL) in 2008, and the tournament has continued to grow in financial heft with cricket's biggest global names making a beeline to it every summer. Since then, leagues have sprouted across the world, but IPL remains the biggest cat in town.

The Indian T20 team, however, have not been able to match the glorious high of 2007. Since then, they have won no T20 title, and the closest they have come was in 2014 when they lost the final against Sri Lanka. One reason for this is that the biggest lessons from the 2007 triumph — picking horses for courses and giving a shot to younger players — seem to have been forgotten. So much so that performances in IPL — it offers a steady stream of new players every season, especially batters weaned on power-hitting—appear to weigh less than reputations built over years across formats.

On Wednesday, the Indian selectors named a side filled with established stars, many of whom failed to make an impact in previous editions of the T20 World Cup, rather than opting for players hungry, buzzing with energy, and eager to push the envelope in a still-evolving format. So, when you go with Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli as the main batters, Hardik Pandya as the principal pace-bowling all-rounder, and a fast-bowling attack of Mohammed Siraj and Arshdeep Singh to complement Jasprit Bumrah, you're betting for assurance over abandon. These are method picks for a format that requires madness — particularly at a time when 200-plus totals are becoming the norm and Kohli's high run aggregate at a relatively low strike rate may be costing his team (Royal Challengers Bangalore are in last place in this year's IPL) rather than helping their cause. The squad has been named, and all the best to the boys. But the selectors could've bolstered their chances by remembering what 2007 taught Indian cricket.

Truths, myths about the low voter turnout

Very little is known about the causes and consequences of turnout change. So, caution is advised on drawing broad inferences from any turnout number

he decline in voter turnout in the first two phases of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections — 66.1% and 66.7%, respectively, compared with 69.4% and 69.2% in the 2019 polls has attracted considerable attention. Several theories on both the causes and consequences of this turnout dip are being discussed.

What has led to the decline? And, which party will benefit or suffer the consequences of the turnout in 2024? More importantly, what does historical data on turnout inform us about Indian politics? The short answer is we do not know much about both the causes and consequences of turnout change. And, we must be very cautious in drawing conclusions.

Quite like any other indicator, voter turnout can't always rise (or always fall). It is likely to revert to the mean after multiple increases or decreases. The overall turnout increased between 2009 and 2014 (from 58.2% to 66.4%), and then to 67.4% in 2019. Since 1952, the voter turnout has never increased for three consecutive elections. so, though two-thirds of the Parliamentary Constituencies (PCs) are yet to vote, there is a high probability that the turnout will

stagnate at or decline from the 2019

The turnout declined by approximately three percentage points combined in two phases over 2019. These are normal fluctuations. To illustrate, the highest decline in turnout, of seven percentage points, was in 1962 (from 62.2% in 1957 to 57.4%), and the highest increase of approximately eight percentage points was in 2014. It is true that in some states and constituencies, the change may be in double digits, but

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these will be statistical outliers. However, one must also factor in the turnout baseline in different states to make any conclusions based on such large changes. Analysis of election data suggests the turnout rates in north and central states have rarely crossed 70% in the last three decades, whereas the south-

ern and eastern states continuously register above 80%. The migration of a significant portion of the working-age pop ulation from Hindi-belt states is an important reason for this gap.

The literature on turnout from various countries indicates that temperature shocks, the length of the election schedule, and voter fatigue or apathy with the political process have very weak correlations with turnout figures. Political competition, i.e., uncertainty around the winner is positively correlated with turnout rates. And, cadrebased parties are much better at mobilising their voters even in low turnout scenarios.

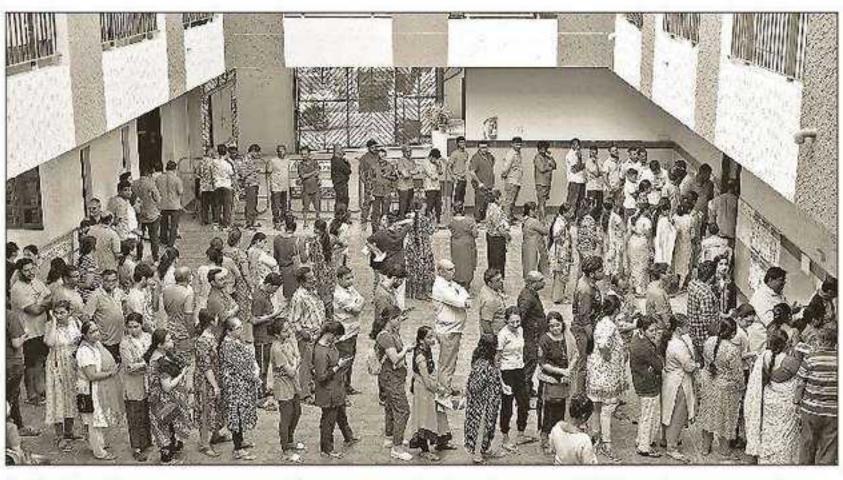
In India, the turnout rates for assembly elections are higher than those for

the general elections. And, in seats where the margins of victory are low, the turnout is higher. However, we do not find any effect of political parties on the turnout. Our knowledge about the variation in turnout rates remains limited because, despite substantial efforts by the Election Commission of India (ECI) to revise the electoral rolls before every election, the presence of names that should not have been on the rolls inflates the denominator and leads to a downward bias for the turnout esti-

mate. This happens because dead voters or those who have permanently moved out of a locality/village remain on the voter list. The National Election Studies (NES) survey conducted by Lokniti-CSDS in 2009 indicated that at least 20% of the registered electors should not have been on the electoral rolls as they either did

not live in that locality or were dead. We also need a careful analysis of the effect of Covid-19 deaths on the electoral rolls. There may be state-level variations in the cleaning of the electoral rolls on that account.

Several scholarly analyses of both parliamentary elections as well as assembly elections have shown that there is no relationship between an increase or decrease in voter turnout on the re-election chances of an incumbent party. These findings are robust even after controlling several confounding factors and have been tested using sophisticated statistical tools. So, more than aggregate turnout, what matters for election outcomes is which groups are turning out above/below the aver-



In India, the turnout rates for assembly elections are higher than those for the general elections

age. Researchers rely on survey data to estimate the turnout differential among groups, because the ECI only releases gender disaggregated electors and voters data, not on any other demographic metric, at the constituency level.

To illustrate, the pre-poll survey conducted by Lokniti-CSDS in March 2019 indicated the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had an advantage among the voters who were more likely to turn up at the booths. The data suggested that people from the underprivileged castes, Muslims, and the poor were less likely to turn up to vote in 2019. The pre-poll surveys in 2024 point to a very similar pattern of divergence in turnout preferences among the BJP-leaning and Opposition-leaning voters. This was most likely driven by low uncertainty in the final election outcomes as the voters decided to bear the cost of turning up at the booth based on their ability to influence the results.

It is possible that as the campaign for 2024 progressed after the announcements of candidates (and the war of words between the parties over manifestos), the gap in turnout preferences among the BJP-leaning and Oppositionleaning voters either closed or reversed. This can happen if the organisational machinery of various political parties manage to reach out to their respective voters and convince them of the cost of not turning up. There is no gain in highlighting the differences between both

online and offline organisational capaci-

ties of the BJP and Opposition parties. Is the high-pitched negative campaign from both sides post the first phase aimed at increasing the emotive quotient in this election, which has been certainly lower than in the previous two? The emotive elements in the 2014 and 2019 campaigns had a definite role in the BJP's ability to win seats, with a higher probability where the turnout rise was sharper. How will the decline in 2024 affect the BJP's chances to repeat its performance? Is the decline higher among the BJP-leaning fence sitters? Is the decline a result of voters' unhappiness with the BJP government's performance (but not willing enough to switch sides) or because the party and its candidates have over-relied on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ability to

draw voters to the booth? While we will know the results of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections on June 4, any meaningful conclusion on the effect the turnout had on the outcomes would require several days of careful analysis. This would largely depend on the availability of PC-level results broken into assembly segments, and randomly sampled representative post-poll surveys. Till then, we must not get carried away by any turnout-related myths.

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Educating the ladies, an update from Bollywood

100

Krishna

Kumar

f your faith in education is waning and you want to restore it, watch Laapataa Ladies. It is an exciting, and at the same **1** time, sobering experience. It is exciting because one of its two heroines exemplifies the full meaning of determination to study further. And it is sobering because you learn how dangerous a girl's journey toward higher learning can be in our society. Though paradoxical, it is thoroughly entertaining, but one can't miss its sociology. Returning home, you feel you've been on a crash visit to a strange and difficult land where girls live. I thought I knew the lay of this land well because I had spent a few years writing a book about girlhood. How wrong I was!

The story is located in Madhya Pradesh (MP). The rural setting is so quiet and sylvan that you don't anticipate the emotional vortex you face in the second half. Two young women get lost — almost immediately after their wedding — and a comedy of errors ensues. The first bride goes through

a predictable experience. We have seen such in other movies. But the second bride scripts her own adventure. She uses her predicament to attain her goal in life after nearly losing it. She didn't want to marry, but she had no choice. Like countless others, she had to surrender to family black-

She was passionate about studying — but not in a general sense. Unlike millions of teenagers who can't decide what they really want to do in life, she was clear. She saw her future in science — that of agriculture. How did she escape the lure of NEET and JEE, you wonder. She wanted to be an expert in organic farming. She is convinced that organic methods will dominate agriculture and its market within another 15 years. Like so many village girls, she is pushed into marriage. It is an awful match and it nearly finishes her off. She is saved because she gets lost. The police find it difficult to locate her because she makes herself untraceable. She uses technological strategies to hide herself and confuse others, including the police. It is a tale of skillfully applied grit. In the end, when she wins, she breaks her marriage, and off she goes to Dehradun to study organic farming. Moved, speechless, we see her last boarding a vil-

Unlike the common stereotype of rural

THE STORY OF LAAPATAA LADIES IS LOCATED IN MADHYA PRADESH. THE RURAL SETTING IS SO QUIET AND SYLVAN THAT YOU DON'T ANTICIPATE THE EMOTIONAL VORTEX YOU FACE IN THE SECOND HALF. TWO YOUNG WOMEN GET LOST — IMMEDIATELY AFTER THEIR WEDDING — AND A COMEDY OF ERRORS ENSUES

girls, she is fiercely self-confident. She is also clever and has guts enough to hoodwink. What shaped her personality, you wonder! It can't be the school, of course, especially in MP where rural schools had taken a sharp downward turn well before the BJP's regime began more than two decades ago, but the BJP chose not to bother about reverting this trend. Teachers lost whatever status and dignity they had. They were in no position — and had no clue how

 to practise the publicised norms of childcentric education. Schooling under such circumstances could hardly encourage a girl to rebel, that too in the matter of a marriage forced upon her. It is the other heroine of Laapataa Ladies who represents a mindless education system faced with aggressive cultural practices that promote docility and self-abnegation.

Thus, the film juxtaposes two contrary characters caught in an identical predicament. That a rebellious young woman can be the heroine of a popular film is a testi-

> mony to cinema as an art form. Its layered capacity permits rival truths to enter the viewer's vision. In one, we encounter ideologically upheld traditional values; facing the other, we hold our breath when a hapless bold girl is about to lose her battle against the disruption of her educational dream. In a charged, dramatic scene, she hands

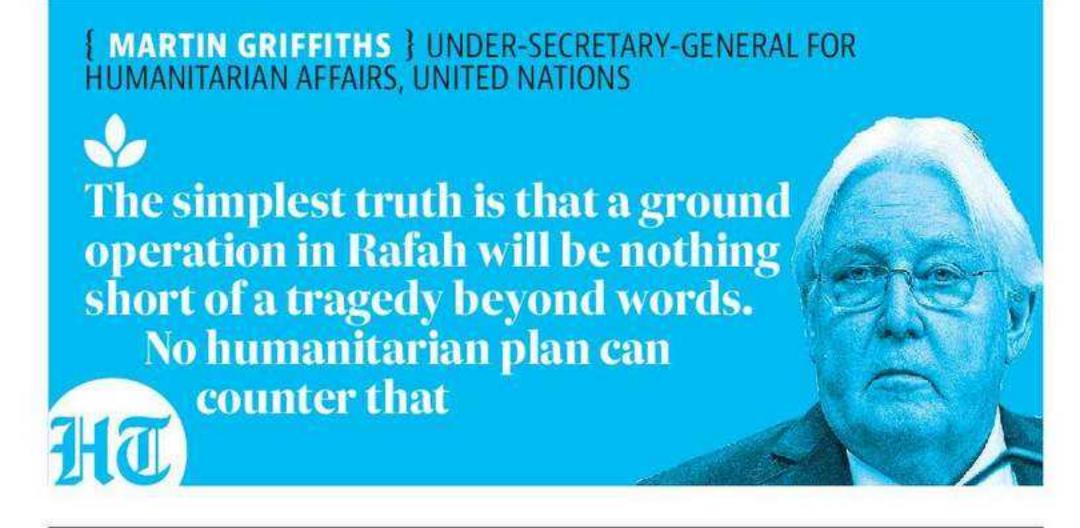
over her mangalsutra to a police officer, thereby announcing the break up of her recent marriage. It is a historic scene. In it, we witness something unreal turning into

an emotionally charged reality. Bollywood specialises in constructing such moments, but even by Bollywood standards, this is a rare one. Not many film scripts have shown a village girl opting to walk away from her marriage in less than a week. Her brutish husband is confused. His wealth, status and aggression don't help him. The audience enjoys the moment of his disgrace.

Renowned historian and the director of the Nehru Museum (now renamed), Ravinder Kumar, used to say that even if a village school seems poor, a little girl's walk from home, in a uniform, socks, and shoes can be transformative. Of course, it is a romantic thought, but it has truth. Laapataa Ladies reveals a deeper truth — that education by itself is not enough. To realise its potential for social change, education requires an encouraging ethos in society and within the family. A hostile home and wider ethos can destroy what little schools might have

achieved. A major study had found a few years ago that girls use education to postpone marriage. When parents and relatives push them, they beg to be allowed another year or two. Marriage will end my education, say the girls while the parents, strategically, retort that the in-laws might allow them to attend college. In Laapataa Ladies, we hear both arguments, and the story shows which one is right.

Krishna Kumar is a former director of NCERT. His new book Thank You, Gandhi, will be published in September. The views expressed are personal



New civil servants need to usher in culture of access

the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) recently published the results of the civil services examination held last year. Among the total of 1,016 selected candidates, 180 have been recommended for appointment to the Indian Administrative Services (IAS), 200 to the India Police Service (IPS), 37 to the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), and 599 to the other services.

So far, the selection procedure has been remarkably free from scandal or complaints of malpractice. Neither charges of blatant political interference in day-to-day administration nor cases of corruption by public servants have diminished the allure of the services for the nearly three lakh youth who compete annually to join.

Two features of the civil services selection stand out. More than a third of the selected candidates are women. And reservation has ensured much-needed diversity. The spectrum of academic disciplines—electrical and mechanical engineering, architecture, anthropology, medicine, and geography, among others — that the new recruits come Raghavan

from adds strength to the bureaucracy.

No longer are the IAS and IPS the pre-

tion is still poor.

serve of arts and science graduates. A substantial percentage of the selected candidates belong to the lower economic stratum. This is how it should be in a country where a large sec-

These factors would lull us into a belief that everything is hunky dory. However, many aspects of our civil services remain disappointing. The Union and state governments have ushered in many schemes that benefit the poorest. But many beneficiaries still have to bribe the lower levels of government to access these. To an extent, the direct crediting of benefits to the beneficiaries' bank accounts has remedied this. But, what about non-monetary benefits? Substantial leakage still occurs here and has proved almost impossible to plug. The entrants to the civil services have a huge duty to excise this canker. Unfortunately, junior civil servants trying surgical interventions have been intimidated and forced to look the other way.

The greatest harm done to a well-conceived machinery is entrenched corruption. The economic progress made in the past few decades is getting eroded by this evil, especially in rural settings. The common man still complains about the money he has to shell out to buy services to which he is entitled to as a citizen. There are no signs that this will change in the foreseeable future. What can a young IAS or IPS officer do to pull us out of this morass? This is a question that is rarely asked, and rarer still, answered satisfactorily.

The minimum we can demand of young officers is that each of them should set an example for rectitude. Unfortunately, however, there is growing evidence to the contrary. The high levels of political corruption prevalent in almost all regions of the country are often cited as being responsible for the young officers falling prey to corruption early. This explanation is only partially acceptable.

The building of moral fibre among young recruits is the responsibility of both institutions and senior officers. There has, however, been no major exercise in this regard at the national level. Ultimately, it is the individual officer who should choose honesty over graft. Fortunately, a major-

ity of recruits currently seem to believe in this ideal. That however is no guarantee that they will not throw in the towel later.

Another disconcerting feature of government offices is that senior officials are seldom accessible to the public. Given the incredible advances in communication technology and their percolation down to the lowest layers, is there a need for physical meetings

which become a barrier between officers and the common man?

Simple devices and procedures will facilitate face-to-face interaction with the common man who has many grievances but rarely gets the opportunity to voice these before the relevant officials. New entrants to the civil service must usher in a new culture of access.

It is difficult to exaggerate the joy of the poorest in a rural area who get to meet a senior officer and convey their genuine problems to a sub-collector or an assistant superintendent of police, two critical functionaries at the sub-division level. A posting in a semi-urban area may be low on personal comfort, but the satisfaction that one derives from working at the grassroots is extraordinary.

I remember how my superintendent of police cut my travelling allowance during my training days in Thanjavur because I returned home after a village visit without halting there for the night and making myself available to the local people to hear their representations. Such rigour prepares you to meet the challenges in a democratic system.

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OUR VIEW



KYC jinx: Shareholders deserve better than this

It's unfortunate that so many investor accounts have been put 'on hold' for identity data gaps. Yes, compliance matters. But companies and mutual funds could have put up a better show

ew Know-Your-Customer (KYC) regulations effective from 1 April have sent many investors into a tizzy, as they find their accounts locked for failing to meet yet another demand by authorities for verifiable data to establish their identities. Yes, we had a fresh round of KYC compliance. Under revised rules, holders of securities regulated by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) had to validate their email IDs in addition to phone and Aadhaar numbers, the latter duly linked with PAN cards issued for taxation. Past KYC okays obtained with utility bills or bank documents were left invalid by this exercise. As the number of people affected by the lock-out is substantial, this is large-scale disruption. According to a joint release by India's five KYC registration agencies (KRAs), as many as 12% of the over 108 million investor accounts under Sebi's oversight have been put "on hold." These can no longer be operated by investors, as their KYC data was found to have gaps. As a result, they can neither invest further at these windows, nor withdraw funds for any exigency. Even if it is temporary, it's harsh. By and large, we can assume these are their own reserves assets acquired with hard-earned and tax-paid money—that they have been barred from. That too, with less than fair notice, as the high lockout proportion indicates. So many accounts cannot all be fraudulent, surely.

With scarce information on what exactly went wrong, locked-out investors have fumbled around to figure out how to rectify the situation. To be sure, KYC rules are necessary. Equity and mutual fund (MF) holdings must not end up in the wrong hands. Fake accounts need to be nabbed and asset fraud stamped out. Our digital

identity system, which hosts biometric details, is designed to aid this endeavour. To the extent tax authorities need to check tax evasion, the PAN link could be justified too. But coercive action of this sort is best avoided. Rather than a shuttering, even if done only after repeated deadline extensions, a gentle policy nudge may have achieved the purpose. Accounts that lack a KYC update could have been slapped with an extra fee, for example, the payment call of which would have shaken asset holders into action. This would especially have been of help to elderly investors, many of whom are neither tech-savvy nor attuned to regulatory shifts and find it difficult to keep up with frequent resets of the maze that online validation is.

Given the puzzle that KYC can be for so many of us, a better approach would be for the onus to be shared more widely. Not just KRAs, which have helplines, even companies should make a greater effort to ensure law-abiding investors do not get barred from their holdings just for KYC neglect. In the case of MF investors, for instance, fund houses should take it upon themselves to see that people's folios are compliant. Similarly, publicly listed companies should display the grace to keep all their shareholders in the loop of changes that have a bearing on their ownership status, guide them on what exactly is needed, and work with them to get the requisite updates done. These guidance efforts need to go well beyond the mass despatch of confusing and perfunctory messages that are dense with jargon. Regardless of how tiny the stakes of investors in these companies are, they happen to be part-owners, after all, and deserve the courtesy of a proper heads-up-via personal engagement over the phone, if it comes to that. Asset ownership must not be taken lightly.

GUEST VIEW

Public policy education in India deserves much greater attention

A wider and better understanding of India's challenges could improve our policymaking processes



SHOBHIT MATHUR are, respectively, a former Union cabinet minister and vice chancellor, Rishihood

ndia's rapid economic growth and increasingly complex social and public challenges underscore the need for robust public-policy education. However, public policy programmes fall short of adequately preparing the next generation of policymakers, civil servants and engaged citizens.

Traditionally, public policy education in India has been confined to post-graduate degree programmes, often offered in isolation from the real-world complexities that policymakers face. These programmes focus on theoretical frameworks and case studies from the West, without addressing the unique social, cultural and political dynamics that shape policy challenges in India.

To truly empower the country's citizens and public sector, public-policy education must evolve to become more accessible, practical and contextually relevant. This means expanding the avenues through which people can engage with public policy beyond the traditional degree programme format.

To begin with, public-policy education should be integrated into the curriculum of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across all disciplines. Even students pursuing degrees in engineering, business or arts should be exposed to the basics of public policy, systems thinking and the role of citizens in shaping their communities. This cross-pollination of ideas will help

bring forth a generation of problemsolvers who understand the interconnected nature of societal challenges and are able to contribute meaningfully to policymaking processes.

Education does not end with graduation. Executive programmes on public policy matters should be made available to working professionals across diverse sectors. Many of the most pressing policy issues—from urban planning and environmental protection to healthcare and education-have become ubiquitous concerns in the workplace. By offering executive-level programmes, workshops and short courses, we can equip professionals with the knowledge to navigate these complex challenges, ultimately improving the quality of decision-making and service delivery. It is not obvious but important to

recognize that public-policy education can also play a key role in empowering the country's entrepreneurs. Too often, budding business aspirants become so sharply focused on developing products or services that they fail to adequately consider the domestic and international regulations that can significantly impact their operations. Many owners of startups only realize the importance of public policy when they encounter unexpected legal or bureaucratic hurdles that threaten the viability of their ventures. By integrating public policy curricula into entrepreneurship programmes and offering specialized courses for business founders, we can equip the next generation of business leaders with a deeper understanding of the policymaking landscape.

This will not only help entrepreneurs navigate the complexities of regulation and compliance, but also enable them to become active advocates of policy reforms that support innovation and the growth of small businesses. As India positions itself as a global hub for entrepreneurship, public-policy education could become instrumental in fostering a thriving, informed and resilient startup ecosystem.

Public policy is a fascinating subject. The pedagogy should leverage innovative delivery formats, such as immersive travel programmes, hybrid models for working professionals and intensive summer schools. These alternative models can provide learners with hands-on experience, exposure to diverse perspectives and opportunities for collaborative problem-solving, all of which are crucial for developing a nuanced understanding of public policy. Through immersive learning, learners can engage with a wide range of experts from policymakers and civil society leaders to academics and social entrepreneurs. This multidisciplinary approach will not only deepen their knowledge, but also foster a network of like-minded individuals who can share ideas and work together long after the academic programme has ended.

The ultimate goal of re-imagined public policy education should be to create a more informed, engaged and empowered citizenry. When people from all walks of life have a deeper understanding of the policymaking process and the ways in which they can influence it, they become more invested in the well-being of their communities and the country as a whole.

Moreover, by exposing a diverse pool of talented individuals to the challenges and complexities of public service, such programmes can help create a robust pipeline of future leaders for the public sector. Local governments, state agencies and national ministries could tap this talent pool, attracting the brightest minds to tackle the country's most pressing issues.

In a time of rapid change and rising uncertainty, India needs a public-policy ecosystem that is responsive and capable of addressing the unique needs of its people. By rethinking the way we approach public-policy education, we can encourage a new generation of engaged citizens and policy entrepreneurs to help us collectively shape a brighter future for the nation.

10 PCARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

My mantra about everything that has to do with public policy is: identify and reject the false choice.

KAMALA HARRIS

MY VIEW | WORLD APART

We are in a frantic race for post-industrial dominance

RAHUL JACOB



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

he scale of investment by the world's two superpowers as they conduct a proxy war through aggressive industrial policies is epic. Given the opaque nature of China's Communist Party government, the most cited estimate is that even five years ago, China was spending 1.7% of GDP on industrial-policy projects. That ratio has surely gone up since. This January, the government expanded its goals to include an emphasis on "photonic computing, brain-computer interfaces, nuclear fusion," according to The Economist, and in a classic Beijing micro-management mandate, decreed that research institutes "spend more than half of their basic funding on scientists under 35 years of age."

The US spends less than China as a proportion of GDP, but a JPMorgan report last year estimated that the three bills passed in 2021-22 with industrial policy aims would lead to investment of \$2.4 trillion.

Some find it fashionable to credit China's leaders with omniscience, but despite China's lead in, say, manufacturing large bat-

tery cells, electric cars, wind turbines or solar panels, US efforts seem better aimed. Improving its creaky infrastructure and making semiconductor chips are worthy goals, especially given the real danger of Beijing invading Taiwan, which dominates global chip production. The risk for the US is that these initiatives might over-stimulate its economy and keep interest rates high. For Beijing, it is larger still—public debt could rise to unsupportable levels.

Beijing's industrial policy dividends have

Beijing's industrial policy dividends have been impressive thus far. The Rhodium group estimated that in 2020, China's spending on science and technology was 2.8%. The Economist in April quoted the Australian Policy Institute's list of 64 "critical" technologies and said that China leads the world "in all but 11." The list suggests China leads in 5G and 6G telecom, drones, radar and robotics. At many levels. China is a serial overachiever. The same article pointed to an index published by the World Intellectual Property Organisation that uses vardsticks such as infrastructure patent awards and citations. "A middle-income country with China's GDP would expect to rank in the 60s. China ranks 12th."

So far, so impressive—if occasionally so gullible. There have been questions raised about the Chinese race to publish intellec-

tual property papers, for example, and the country is yet to build gigantic chip manufacturers such as Taiwan's TSMC.

The real challenge, though, is that President Xi Jinping's China has kept investment as a proportion of GDP at above 40%, a distorted-reality view of economics, while effectively suppressing

domestic household consumption. Gross capital formation in China is 43.3% of GDP. By comparison, the OECD average is just 23.7%.

It is becoming harder to argue for Chinese exceptionalism in fiscal management. Xi seems keen to emulate the Soviet Union's late Nikita Khruschev in his threats aimed at the US in the context of a post-industrial race for the future. But the backdrop of a housing bubble deflat-

ing and impoverished local governments an integral part of China's alternately impressive and wasteful infrastructure rollout of the past couple of decades—hurtling towards *de facto* bankruptcy would make these grand plans difficult to achieve. Bloomberg estimated that at the end of 2022, property developers owed \$2.5 trillion while local government financing vehicles owed \$13 trillion. This is a debt problem on the scale of Japan's after its bubble burst in the early 1990s, but with less capable macroeconomic management. The FT reported

recently that directives from the State Council to 10 **Industrial policy** highly indebted provinces and two large cities barred is playing a role them from building more that's subject highways and government buildings. Banks have been to the risk of directed to lend to highprofile manufacturing proresources being jects instead that President Xi has clunkily called "new misallocated by quality productive forces.

policymakers

Even economic experts are voicing concern, which takes special courage in Xi's China. The truth is that is movie before. Earlier ver-

we have seen this movie before. Earlier versions starred China taking advantage of its 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization (and the world's naivete) to dump products in markets abroad because large-scale subsidies had been part of its game-plan well before industrial policy became

the global epidemic it has in recent years.

In a chilling chart, the JPMorgan report shows that in the decade from 2010, opioid use in the US rocketed, inversely tracking the loss of manufacturing jobs there. "A total of 5.7 million factory jobs (in the US) were lost from 2000 to 2010—nearly 10 times more than during the previous 30 years, from 1970 to 2000." The political climate in the developed world will no longer allow China to export its way out of the economic doldrums, heightening the risk of massive overcapacity in future-focused industries.

By comparison, India's industrial policy seems a familiar tale of too little, too... er, too little of it thought-through, actually. It is hard to categorize a subsidy scheme for textiles or white goods as 'strategic' when the sensible thing would have been to sign free trade agreements with the EU years ago to allow our garment exporters to compete on a level field. *Mint* reported recently that imports from China grew from \$70.3 billion in 2018-19 to \$101.75 billion in 2023-24. Are we really weaning ourselves off Chinese exports? As an IMF report notes, well designed policies to improve the business environment would have been better than targeted government interventions that carry the risk of resources being misallocated.



GUEST VIEW

What will the rising mercury this year mean for inflation in India?

India's balance of food-supply likelihoods has raised the question of whether fiscal 2024-25 will see monetary easing at all



is executive director and senior economist at **DBS Bank**

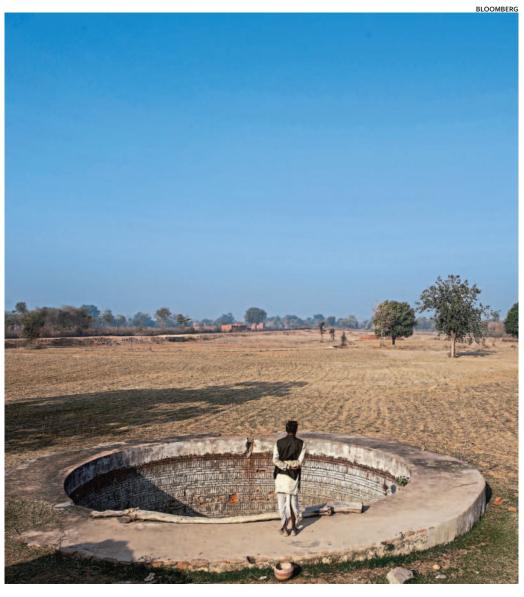
 $emperatures\,continue\,to\,hit\,new\,highs$ every subsequent year. In its March 2024 update, the World Meteorological Organisation's (WMO) annual State of the Global Climate report confirmed that 2023 was the warmest year on record, with the global average near-surface temperature at 1.45° Celsius above the pre-industrial baseline. Add to this, it was the warmest 10-year period on record. The agency added that the 2023-24 El Niño had peaked, but was still one of the five strongest on record. While the weather pattern was gradually weakening, it will continue to impact global climate, with above-normal temperatures predicted over almost all land areas between March and May this year.

The India Meteorological Department recently predicted that above-normal temperatures are likely to prevail over most parts of the country during the 2024 hot weather season (April to June), except some parts of east, northeast and northwest India. In official parlance, a heatwave is recorded if the maximum temperature of a station reaches at least 40° Celsius for plains and 30° Celsius or more for hilly regions. A departure from normal in the range of 4.5-6.4° Celsius is viewed as a heatwave, while anything more than 6.4° Celsius above the norm is termed a 'severe' state.

Bolster defences: Indian authorities have taken proactive measures to mitigate the impact of heat. For instance, power ministry officials have held reviews on ensuring uninterrupted power availability in cooperation with counterparts like India's coal and railway departments. Coal stocks have also been built up to meet peak demand, which is likely to be higher this year than experienced in past summer months. The ministry has projected 260GW peak power demand in the second quarter of 2024, higher than the record set by the third juarter of 2023. Despite greater installed capacity for renewable energy, the country's base load is

Concurrently, a two-decade long emergency provision has also been invoked that will require idle gas-fired power stations (left unused due to commercial concerns) to operate through May and June to meet an increase in electricity demand and prevent shortages akin to 2022. Earlier, an emergency rule for coal imports was invoked; it was supposed to be in force till June, but will now run through the end of the third quarter. Lastly, regular maintenance of power plants will be deferred to the monsoon period and new capacity additions will be fast-tracked. The general elections underway will span May, with results due on 4 June.

Economic impact: The economic impact of heat is likely to be the most telling on perishable cropsespecially vegetables beyond the T(omato) O(nion) P(otato) three—and food-led inflation, aggravating the seasonal increase in prices during summer,



VIEWS

apart from on public health. The zaid season—i.e., the period between *rabi* and *kharif*—covers shortduration crops, including some vegetables, fruits and fodder. While the impact on *rabi* crops is likely to be limited, as harvesting is already underway, daily data shows that select vegetable prices have risen, impacted by inadequate cold-chain infrastructure and the fallout on standing crops.

Food has already punched above its weight in the past 7-8 months, with vegetable inflation unlikely to materially recede from the prevailing 28% year-on-year pace. Notably, costs did not correct to the extent expected during winter, with high temperatures now likely to keep year-on-year growth in double digits over the next few months. The retail prices of potatoes were up 22%, onions 40% and tomatoes 36% in March 2024 from a year before, with other seasonal varieties also likely to be vulnerable. If the month-on-month increase in sequential food inflation quickens from our baseline of 1.1% quarter-on-quarter in April-June 2024 to 1.8-2.0%, headline inflation can potentially jump by 50-70 basis points in the quarter, taking fullyear inflation 40-50 basis points above our baseline at 4.5% year-on-year in 2024-25.

Short-term solutions—such as improved supply networks, better inter-state movement and rotation of short cropping cycles—can be deployed, but are unlikely to provide immediate relief. The strengthening of India's cold-chain infrastructure and handling of produce will gain importance. Reliance on the upcoming monsoon is high. Today's reservoir level is at about 31.4% of full

capacity, lower than 39% in the comparable period last year. Rains are dearly needed. Dissipating El Niño and the start of La Niña in the third quarter would bode well for crop output and resultant farm income levels, but the spatial and temporal variation of monsoon rains will be equally pertinent.

Policy impact: RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) has maintained a cautious and hawkish stance. The impact of weather conditions on food inflation—and consequently on inflationary expectations—will be closely monitored. Given the global conditions, including delays in the US ratecutting cycle, higher oil prices and fluctuations in the value of the rupee, we expect the MPC to extendits wait-and-watch mode and track the monsoon's progress. The debate over RBI's policy path ahead has shifted from what 'the scale of cuts' will be to whether there will be 'cuts at all' in 2024-25. Upside risks to the central bank's inflation forecast of 4.5% for 2024-25 are also likely to delay any change in its policy stance to 'neutral.'

Domestic 10-year bond yields have corrected from their mid-April highs, but a dip below 7% is unlikely amid still-high oil prices, a strong dollar and hardening US Treasury yields. The next catalyst for debt markets will be the upcoming index inclusion of Indian bonds, with the first of the global benchmark indices due to start this process in June 2024 and another in January 2025. Mindful of the volatility that could accompany these inflows, India's monetary authority has steadfastly kept the currency on an even keel, whilst absorbing incremental inflows into its foreign exchange buffer.

MINT CURATOR

Indian banks are slipping on a banana peel of tech adoption

Rapid progress in digital banking has exposed the system to risks



industrial companies and financial services

fter being saddled for years with the biggest bundle of bad loans anywhere in the world, India's financial system had only recently found its footing. But with profitability at a decade high and capitalization in excess of the regulatory minimum, the country's banks have begun slipping again. This time, they're falling on the banana peel of technology.

The latest casualty is Kotak Mahindra Bank. Last week, the regulator ordered what was until recently India's fourth-largest lender by market value to stop taking new customers via its online and mobile banking channels and refrain from issuing fresh credit cards. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said it had found "serious deficiencies" in how the bank manages user access, vendor risk and data security. This is stiff punishment. More than 98% of the transaction volume in Kotak's savings accounts were from digital or non-branch methods in the December quarter; 99% of new credit cards and 95% of personal loans it sold were also online. While Kotak says it has already taken some steps and will "swiftly resolve balance issues at the earliest," the brazenness of last year's scam at UCO Bank is likely to make RBI cautious in lifting the ban. UCO is a small, state-owned lender based in Kolkata. Last November, it found some customers had got nearly \$100 million via interbank electronic fund transfers, but accounts at the sending institutions hadn't been debited.

This month, investigators said that this was no error, but a scam. A couple of outside engineers had allegedly fiddled with UCO's servers, creating money out of thin air, and crediting it to different accounts. Several account holders made "wrongful gains by withdrawing the proceeds,

according to the bank's police complaint. This is the crux of the issue. RBI's press release highlighted "frequent and significant outages in the last two years" in Kotak's services that inconvenienced customers. While these are annoying, the big risk is a UCO Bank-type scenario where the same money can be spent twice because it shows up in two accounts. If something like that happens at scale, it could pose serious risks to financial stability. All benefits from digitization pale in front of such a threat.

Digitization has undoubtedly brought benefits, particularly to non-state-owned lenders. Take Kotak, which now has 8.5% of the deposits of State Bank of India (SBI), compared with less than 6% seven years ago. This gain didn't take a commensurate expansion in physical presence. SBI has added nearly 5,000 branches since 2016 -



Kotak Mahindra Bank has had some digital operations clamped by RBI

10 times as many as Kotak. Even as they have gained from it, banks paid insufficient attention to tech. In December 2020, RBI barred HDFC Bank, India's largest private lender, from issuing new credit cards and launching fresh digital initiatives. The card ban was lifted after eight months; the digital blockade lasted over a year.

This isn't just an Indian problem. Singapore's DBS Group, which has aspired to rank alongside some of the world's most admired tech brands, has also stumbled on small things like an overheated data centre.

In India, fintech sped up money transactions, but it has also meant complexity. An otherwise staid banking system, running software on servers on bank premises, faces a tsunami of tiny transactions coming via intermediaries that mostly do cloud computing. A widely used smartphonebased protocol, UPI, logged more than 100 billion transactions last year. There are some 50 million merchants accepting online money via QR codes, but the regulator isn't sure if all are legit. Fast and furious may have opened the floodgates to fraud.

A rattled RBI is in a mood to punish. Earlier, it instructed Paytm, the homegrown payments pioneer, to freeze its banking business because of persistent non-compliance. Separately, it asked Visa Inc to stop the use of its business cards for commercial payments with a fintech firm in between.

Drastic supervisory steps may be necessary at times, but they will not be enough. The Indian regulator needs to update its own understanding of technology-the last edition of RBI's 164-page financial stability report devoted a mere four paragraphs to digital safety, even though the central bank's survey showed cybersecurity as a 'high-risk" category.

Threat levels are rising. A 2022 study by DeepStrat, a New Delhi-based consulting firm, had raised concerns about what it called a "fraud stack"—a large number of bank accounts "controlled by crime cartels without their owners being aware of their identities being misused," as explained by Anand Venkatanarayanan, one of the report's authors.

In one instance, the customer's address in a bank's records was the same as that of the bank branch. When such mule accounts hide in plain sight, attacks become highly probable.

MY VIEW | BEHAVIOUR BY BRAIN

A status quo bias tends to keep innovative ideas hidden

BIJU DOMINIC



is chief evangelist, Fractal Analytics, and chairman, FinalMile Consulting

magine you discovered an idea that could dramatically solve one of the most significant problems of an industry. What will you do with that idea? Would you shout about it from your rooftop or will you keep quiet about it? Here is the story of how an idea that could change the fortunes of the digital-advertising industry was treated. This story is a telling example of how most o us treat paradigm-shifting ideas.

Digital advertising is today a \$600 billion industry. In 1994, when digital advertisers started using banner advertising, the clickthrough rates (CTRs) were about 40%. But in 2022, CTRs stood at a mere 0.35%, a drop of more than 100 times from the 1996 level. One could try to cover up this humongous drop in CTRs by blaming an exponential increase in digital stimuli and the evershortening attention spans of digital consumers. But the fact remains that this drastic drop in CTRs has happened in spite of new strategies like sophisticated data-mining techniques, deep personalization based on data from sophisticated online cookie trackers and the use of search-engine optimiza-

Tim Hwang, a former global policy lead on artificial intelligence at Google and author of the book Subprime Attention Crisis: Advertising and the Time Bomb at the Heart of the Internet, has warned of consequences for the global economy from the declining effectiveness of digital advertising. Once the actual inefficacy of digital advertising is more widely known, the value of online advertising will probably drop drastically. In this view, much like the subprime-loan crisis of the US mortgage industry pulled the plug on the world economy during the West's Great Recession about a decade-and-a-half ago, an implosion in what digital advertisements are seen by the market to be worth could hit the value of several technology majors that depend on digital advertising money for their revenues.

Given this precarious situation of the digital advertising world, a new idea put forward by Amazon is hugely relevant. As a leading player in the digital marketing world, trust Amazon to know a lot more than others about what works and what does not work in the digital world. Amazon claims to have found a way to improve CTRs. The Amazon Ads website says: "An advertiser may have stand-alone images of their product against a white background, like a coffee mug. When that same coffee mug is placed in a lifestyle context—on a kitchen counter, next to a croissant—in a sponsored brands mobile ad, we have seen that click-through rates are more than 40% higher

compared to ads with standard product images."

Wow! Given the precipitous fall of CTRs over the years, an idea that promises 40% improvement should be big news, even headline-worthy. But that was not what happened. Even on the Amazon Ads website, this new idea was not even a subhead. It was tucked away in a Q&A section one had to chance upon. Why was this idea underplayed and treated so badly?

First of all, to all those who have worked in the traditional advertising world, that idea is not new. In the traditional ad industry, art directors and photographers have long been aware of how an attractive product shot for

a point-of-sale poster can impact business.

They would often spend days, if not weeks, thinking through a particular product shot and its background, along with special props and models if required. But the enormous time taken to photograph a product in an appropriate context was probably not the reason that Amazon played down its idea.

Today, Generative AI, backed with creative The human prompting strategies, can churn out good-quality mind resists images in a very short time. Everyone knows that. So change but why was an idea promising innovation can a more effective digital connect, one that could be nurtured potentially alter the design of product tiles and prodonly by being uct display pages across e-commerce sites, not open to ideas given due importance?

> Many of us hold onto outdated and ineffective ideas because of an inherent behavioural

trait called the status quo bias. The human brain does not like to change. It likes to continue doing what it has been doing all along. Ever since e-commerce began, it has been a sort of dictum that a product tile or display

page should only feature a stand-alone prod-

uct shot against a white background. It soon became the norm of all e-commerce websites. Based on work that my team had done. this column was one of the few to question that status quo (bit.ly/49ZcYVP). But otherwise, it was business as usual in the e-commerce business; even Amazon's website had only drab product shots against the usual white background.

The idea that Amazon Ads has recently proposed to make product displays more appealing questions the status quo of the e-commerce business. Will e-commerce players break free of their bias? It seems unlikely. As the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn once said, faced with a paradigm-shifting idea, the more intelligent a person is, the more intelligent the reasons this person will come up with for why the status quo is better.

What is the best bet for an innovative idea of yours to overcome the *status quo* bias that seems to prevail all around? Go to a familyrun concern with your idea. From my experience, the heads of family-run businesses are far more open to accepting innovative ideas than professional managers in multinational companies. It takes a very different mindset to nurture innovative ideas that challenge the status quo.

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-PAPER WITH PASSION-

Scare visits schools

A bomb threat directed at nearly 100 schools in Delhi-NCR serves as a wake-up call for all of us

mid an unanticipated cloud of fear, nearly 100 schools in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) sent students home early Wednesday upon receiving a bomb threat via email. The police conducted thorough searches, but found nothing suspicious. The scare has sent shockwaves through the community, leaving parents, educators and students grappling with a harrowing reality: The threat of terror is no longer a distant concern but a chilling presence in our midst. The sanctity of schools, once regarded as a safe haven for learning and growth, has been compromised. As we confront this sobering reality, it is imperative that we do not succumb to despair but unite in resilience and resolve. Foremost, we must commend the swift response of school authorities and law enforcement agencies in addressing these threats. Their coordinated efforts have undoubtedly helped reassure people. More importantly, our intelligence agencies need to put their act together; they are the ones who should have seen it com-



ing. We do not have enough specific information to process at the moment and no clue about the intention or the identity of the perpetrator(s); we don't know if it was a real threat or just a mischievous element playing mind games, but such threats cannot be taken lightly, especially when human lives are at risk. The threat emails, reportedly emanating from a Russian IP address, were well-planned and coordinated. Shooting in the US schools is rather rampant; Indian schools are much safer and should stay that way. All we have to do is be vigilant.

Also, this small win should not lull us into complacency. We must remain vigilant and proactive in fortify-

ing the security infrastructure of our educational institutions. Beyond bolstering physical security, we must also invest in fostering a culture of vigilance and preparedness within our school communities. Educators play a pivotal role in equipping students with the knowledge and skills to recognise and respond to potential threats. Empowering students with safety protocols and encouraging open dialogue can go a long way in mitigating the impact of terror-induced anxiety. It is equally important that we address the root causes of such terror acts. Socio-economic disparities, marginalisation and ideological extremism often serve as fertile breeding grounds for radicalisation. By addressing these underlying issues through comprehensive social policies and inclusive education, we can strive towards building a more resilient and harmonious society. It is equally important to remain calm and not panic. In times of crisis, it is easy to succumb to fear and division. However, we must remember that our strength lies in our unity and resilience. Now more than ever, we must stand in solidarity with one another, refusing to be cowed by the forces of terror. Together, we can create a future where every child can pursue their education without fear and where schools are not battlegrounds but beacons of hope and enlightenment.



Participants during a State-level bullock cart race at Thegur, in Chikkamagaluru

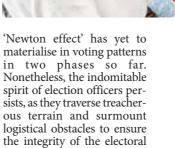
Democracy, economics and governance

The confluence of elections, electioneering and the economy demands meticulous examination and rethinking to make the system work flawlessly

s India goes ahead with its 18th General Elections, the nation finds itself at a crossroads of democracy, economics and governance. The elections, spanning 44 days from April 19 to June 1, are poised to be the lengthiest in Indian history, reflecting both the enormity of the task at hand and the significance of the decisions to be made. Against the backdrop of a burgeoning economy, evolving political landscapes and pressing social challenges, the intersection of elections, electioneering and the economy warrants scrutiny. The magnitude of election expenditures provides a glimpse into the economic dynamics surrounding the electoral process. According to the Centre for Media Studies (CMS), the anticipated expenditure for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections is staggering, surpassing Rs 1.35 lakh crore. This figure, more than double the amount spent in 2019, indicates to the monumental scale of electoral spending in the world's largest democ-

With a projected voter base of 96.6 crore, the per-voter spending is estimated at around Rs 1,400, signifying both the financial investment and the democratic imperative of ensuring widespread participation. However, it's worth noting that the Election Commission's expenditure is expected to constitute only a fraction of the total outlay, pointing towards the diverse economic activities spurred by the electoral process.

The Election Commission tirelessly strives to facilitate universal suffrage across the nation. Recognising the pivotal role of public figures in shaping civic consciousness, the Commission enlisted the famed actor Rajkumar Rao as its 'national icon' to galvanise youth engagement and voter turnout as the country approaches the general elections. Rao's portrayal of a dedicated poll officer in the acclaimed film 'Newton,' a poignant exploration oi electoral challenges in a Naxalaffected region, resonated deeply with young voters. However, despite the cinematic depiction of electoral fervour, the anticipated festos serve as blueprints for



Electioneering acts as a catalyst for various sectors of the economy, fostering growth and employment opportunities across the spectrum. From hospitality and transportation to textiles and advertising, the ripple effects of political campaigns are palpable. As political parties vie for voter attention, rallies, events and promotional activities proliferate, injecting vitality into local economies and stimulating demand for goods and services. Moreover, the advent of digital campaigning has revolutionised the electoral landscape, with professional agencies employed to enhance brand visibility and engagement. The economic dividends of such strategies are evident, as digital platforms emerge as potent tools for mobilisation.

Amidst the fervour of electoral competition, political mani-



ELECTIONEERING ACTS AS A CATALYST FOR VARIOUS SECTORS OF THE ECONOMY, FOSTERING GROWTH AND EMPLOYMENT **OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS THE SPECTRUM**

governance, delineating policy priorities and economic agendas. The contrasting visions articulated by major political parties underscore the divergent approaches to addressing pressing socio-economic challenges. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), buoyed by its track

record and incumbent status, advocates for policy continuity and fiscal consolidation. With Prime Minister Narendra Modi's emphasis on infrastructure development and economic reforms, a BJPmajority Government is poised to prioritise private investment and fiscal prudence, thereby fostering economic stability and growth. Conversely, the Indian National Congress or INDI Block champions a progressive agenda focused on job creation, social welfare and agrarian reforms. Proposals such as Government-led employment initiatives, minimum support price guarantees and education loan waivers underpin the Alliance's commitment to inclusive growth and equitable development.

While political rhetoric often dominates electoral discourse, the economic imperatives transcending partisan lines merit attention. Issues such as

and unemployment pose formidable challenges to India's socio-economic fabric, necessitating concerted action beyond the electoral cycle. The water crisis in cities like Bengaluru serves as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for sustainable resource management and climate resilience. Yet, the conspicuous absence of these issues from political manifestos is very disheartening. There is an urgent need for non-partisan dialogue and policy discourse on environmental sustainability and socio-economic resilience. As India embarks on its electoral journey, the confluence of elections, electioneering and the economy offers both

water scarcity, climate change

opportunities and challenges. While the democratic process catalyses economic activity and political discourse, the imperatives of inclusive and sustainable development transcend electoral cycles. By transcending electoral exigencies and embracing a shared vision of progress, India can realise its aspirations for a vibrant democracy and a prosperous future for all.

(The author is Delhi-based senior journalist. Views *expressed are personal*)

Post-poll path for infra financing!



VINOD BAHL

Modi 3.0 plans to bolster infrastructure creation post-election by expanding the infrastructure financing ecosystem

n the interim budget for FY25, infrastructure 🗘 outlay was increased by 11.1 per cent to 11.11 lakh crore, including Rs 2.78 lakh crore for the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) and Rs 2.55 lakh crore for the Railway Ministry. Post-poll, the plan for a full-fledged budget for FY25 will look to raise Rs 25000 crore of finance through green bonds - higher than Rs 20000 crore raised through green bonds in FY24.

That going ahead private investment will be a big driver of infrastructure development, is evident from the National Investment & Infrastructure Fund (NIIF) plan to raise USD 1 billion for its second Private Markets Fund (PMF). The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is likely to invest nearly USD 125 million. NIIF manages over USD4.9 billion of equity capital commitments across its four funds-Master Fund, PMF, Strategic Opportunities Fund and India-Japan

raise a whopping Rs 60,000 crore in FY 25 through monetisation of Toll Operate Transfer (TOT) highways and NHAI InvIT. In FY 24, Rs 38334 crore was raised from ToT, InvIT and project-based financing. It is significant to mention that under the National Monetisation Pipeline (NMP), an ambitious target of raising Rs 1.08 lakh crore has been fixed for FY25. The share of privately funded highways in the overall award of projects in FY25 is expected to meet the

MoRTH had a healthy award project pipeline of over Rs 45,000 crore as of March 2024. Following the Government's push for private participation in high-ways, IRB Infra Infra Development has committed to invest 10000-12000 crore in FY25, to add road capacity through Build Operate Transfer (BOT) mode. The recent modification in concession agreements, according to IRB, has bolstered investors' confidence by enhancing the bankability of projects. Government's target of 10 Further, the central per cent. NHAI has drawn Government is putting into place its plan to pare a large portion of NHAI's Rs up a plan to develop 53 listed highways worth Rs 1.2 The MoRTH is looking to trillion through BOT. The 3.4 trillion debt within 5

years. This will free up NHAI's resources for development in the highways

The energy sector is getting a big green private invest-ment boost. REC Limited, a leader in the power sector in India has availed a SACE-covered green loan for JPY 60.536 billion to finance eligible green projects. In the power sector, besides the airport, Adani Enterprises is firming up its plans to plough USD 1 billion into these businesses. It is in advanced talks with several investors in the US and Europe to raise USD 1 billion for its Solar Panel business and Mumbai Airport. The company, which is enhancing its focus on green energy, raised USD 750 million through bonds in 2022.

The investors and Indian corporates engaged in infrastructure development are banking on political and policy continuity for the fructification of the ambitious plan for infra financing push.

(The author is a veteran journalist; views are personal)

DOMESTIC TRAGEDY

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Man gets life imprisonment for murdering teenage Indian wife in London," published on April 30, this is my response. The news of Sahil Sharma's sentencing for the murder of his wife, Mehak Sharma, is a heartbreaking reminder of the devastating consequences of domestic violence. The brutal act not only robbed Mehak's family of a beloved daughter but also shattered their sense of security and left them

grappling with irreparable grief. The fact that the tragedy unfolded within the confines of their own home, supposedly a place of safety, adds another layer of horror to the ordeal. Mehak's mother's poignant statement encapsulates the profound anguish and emptiness left in the wake of such a senseless loss. While the legal proceedings may offer some semblance of justice, they can never fully assuage the pain inflicted upon the victim's loved ones. It serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need for greater awareness, support and intervention in cases of domestic violence to prevent similar tragedies in the future

Aadhya Chawla | Chandigarh

GLOBAL IMPACT OF BHARAT Madam — Apropos the news article, "Covid handling changed world's perception of India: EAM," published on April 30, this is my response. India's growth trajectory under the spotlight! External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar reflects on India's changing perception abroad, citing COVID management and Chandrayaan-3 as game-changers. He highlights how decisions made domestically resonate globally, showcasing India's significance on the world stage. From bringing citizens home during crises to enhancing the value of the Indian passport, India's actions garner

international attention. Jaishankar underlines India's technological prowess and socio-economic that initiates and sustains all life.

Technological deception

HE EDITO



propos the news article, "Telangana CM Asummoned in Shah fake video case," published on April 30, this is my response. In today's complex political landscape, technology's role in shaping narratives is undeniable. The recent controversy surrounding doctored videos

advancements, attracting global inter-

est in investment and exploration. The

narrative shifts from India being a

concern to being a source of support,

showcasing its resilience and diplomat-

ic agility. With a focus on domestic per-

formance, Jaishankar emphasises infra-

structure development and socio-polit-

ical systems, which captivate foreign fas-

cination. India's journey from a devel-

oping nation to a global player exem-

plifies its potential and allure on the

international stage, echoing the senti-

Madam — Apropos the news article,

"Astroturf | Mother calls for full alert

against evil forces," published on April

28, this is my response. The intricate

symbolism of the goddess's accessories

reveals profound insights into the cos-

mic order and human existence. The

conch shell, echoing the primal sound

of creation, signifies the source energy

Kabir Oberoi | Mumbai

ment that Bharat indeed matters.

DIVINE SYMBOLISM UNVEILED

of key political figures underscores the urgency of addressing misinformation. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's acknowledgement of this issue highlights the importance of responsible information sharing in the digital age. However, the entanglement of political parties in this web of deceit further exacerbates the situation.

The involvement of law enforcement, as seen with the Delhi Police's actions, signals a crucial step towards accountability. Yet, the broader implications of such manipulation on societal harmony cannot be overstated. Platforms like 'X' and social media giants must cooperate fully in identifying and curbing the spread of fake content. Ultimately, restoring trust in our democratic processes necessitates collective vigilance and decisive action against those seeking to sow discord through technological

Arya Sundaram | Chennai

Meanwhile, the lotus flower, emerging from murky waters unstained, embodies purity and detachment amid creation's diversity. The goddess's eight weapons, contrasted with her two creative symbols, underscore the perpetual struggle against malevolent forces. This juxtaposition reflects the omnipresence and potency of negativity, urging constant vigilance and defensive action.

Demons, depicted in surreal forms, serve as metaphors for internal and external threats, reminding us of the deceptive allure and insidious nature of evil. In essence, the divine imagery prompts contemplation on the balance between constructive creativity and vigilant defence in navigating life's complexities. It emphasises the importance of spiritual awareness and moral integrity in combating adversities while upholding the cosmic order.

Devansh Khatri | Jaipur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneér@gmail.com

The Statesman Incorporating and directly descended

from THE FRIEND OF INDIA - Founded 1818

Order and politics

s Uttar Pradesh braces for yet another phase in the election cycle, the dynamics of law and order loom large over the political landscape, with both the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP) vying for electoral advantage. The narratives emerging from the heartland state paint a complex picture of governance and its implications on the electoral calculus. There is a palpable sense of relief among many voters who believe that stringent law enforcement measures by the state's BJP government have ushered in an era of stability and security. For them, the crackdown on crime represents a tangible improvement in their daily lives, where they can go about their work or business without the looming spectre of lawlessness. However, it is essential to tread carefully when analysing the narrative surrounding law and order. While the purported reduction in crime is undoubtedly a welcome development, questions arise regarding the impartiality and inclusivity of these measures. The perception that certain communities are disproportionately targeted or marginalised under the guise of maintaining law and order raises concerns about the nature of governance and justice. In the realm of electoral politics, the issue of law and order becomes a double-edged sword for political parties vying for power.

On one hand, the BJP, which champions a toughon-crime stance, may attract voters who prioritise security and stability above all else. The promise of a safer society resonates strongly with segments of the electorate who have borne the brunt of rampant crime in the past. On the other hand, the SP may seek to highlight issues of justice and equity, emphasising the need for fair and impartial law enforcement measures. In a diverse and pluralistic society like Uttar Pradesh, where communal tensions often simmer beneath the surface, the need for impartial governance becomes paramount.

As the election unfolds, it is imperative for political leaders from both parties to strike a delicate balance between maintaining law and order and upholding the principles of justice and inclusivity. Parties that can navigate these complexities with nuance and sensitivity are likely to resonate more strongly with voters who value both security and equity. Ultimately, the electoral fortunes of parties will hinge not only on their ability to tout achievements in law enforcement but also on their commitment to fostering a society where every citizen feels safe, valued, and empowered. In the quest for power, let us not forget the fundamental principles of justice and fairness that underpin a thriving democracy. In this electoral context, it is crucial for voters to critically assess the rhetoric and actions of political parties regarding law and order. Beyond the surface-level promises of security, citizens must evaluate the long-term implications of policies on communal harmony and social cohesion. By engaging in informed discourse and holding leaders accountable for their governance, voters can contribute to a more robust and inclusive democratic process.

Philippine Dynasts

n the archipelago of the Philippines, where history intertwines with the present, a modern-day Shakespearean drama unfolds. The ongoing feud between the Marcos and Duterte clans, reminiscent of the Montagues and Capulets, serves as a cautionary tale of the perils of dynastic politics and personal vendettas overshadowing the greater good of the nation. At the heart of this feud lie two powerful families, each with its own legacy of controversy and corruption. On one side stands the Marcos dynasty, epitomised by the shadow of a brutal dictator whose reign was marked by oppression and plunder. Opposing them is the Duterte clan, led by a President whose tenure was characterised by a ruthless war on drugs and a penchant for inflammatory rhetoric. Their animosity is not merely a matter of personal disdain. It has real consequences for the Filipino people and their future. As the two families engage in a battle for supremacy, governance is compromised, and the nation's progress is hindered. The recent skirmishes over confidential funds and constitutional revisions highlight the extent to which personal ambitions overshadow public service. Moreover, the unpredictable nature of this feud leaves foreign policy in flux, with alliances shifting as quickly as the winds of political fortune. From cosying up to China to pivoting back towards America, the Philippines finds itself caught in a geopolitical tug-of-war, with little clarity on its longterm strategic direction. But perhaps most concerning is the impact of this feud on the democratic process itself. As the Marcos and Duterte camps gear up for the next election cycle, the spectre of dirty politics looms large. With both families facing potential legal repercussions for past misdeeds, the campaign is likely to be marred by mudslinging and character assassination, further eroding trust in the political establish-

Yet, amid this turmoil, there remains hope for a brighter future. The Filipino people have shown resilience in the face of adversity, rallying behind causes such as education reform and anti-corruption efforts. Grassroots movements and civil society organisations continue to push for accountability and transparency, challenging the entrenched power structures that perpetuate dynastic rule. Their efforts serve as a beacon of light in the darkness, reminding us that change is possible when the people unite behind a common cause

In the end, the Philippines stands at a crossroads. Will it succumb to the petty squabbles of feuding families, or will it rise above the fray and forge a path towards true democracy and prosperity? The answer lies not in the hands of politicians or dynasts, but in the collective will of the Filipino people to demand better and strive for a brighter tomorrow. For only by transcending the legacy of the past can the Philippines truly fulfil its immense potential and claim its rightful place on the global stage.

Desert Storm

Given that the ancient desert land has seen countless wars, valiant heroes, and bloody battles since antiquity, the romantic template of a 'David versus Goliath' equation has its natural resonances – Ravindra Singh Bhatti is tapping into his 'Independent' status and twisting it to his advantage. For once the hunted (common citizen) has become the hunter, and his game is the full-time politicians who are exposed and shamed for their excesses, easy promises, and divisive agenda



I ummers are particularly severe in the Thar desert with temperatures shooting up to 50 degrees Celsius. Dust raising winds can morph into full blown storms in the unforgiving swathes of the arid region with rolling sand hills. But this year, there is a different type of storm sweeping the undulating topography ~ a political one that has gripped the imagination of the simple, hardy, and deeply traditional folks of the clustered Jaisalmer-Barmer-Balotra districts.

The reverberations of this desert storm are being felt across the vast and ancient land of Rajputana or Rajasthan, and it has clear auguries for the future political possibilities of

the entire nation. As the nation finds itself mired in the regressive clutches of the past with its electoral passions veering around polarising narratives of Hindus and Muslims, caste census, mangalsutras et al, with the real issues of employment, agrarian crisis, inflation etc., taking a back seat ~ comes the refreshing campaign of a 26-year-old youth pitching on securing water for his parched constituency, job opportunities for the desperate youth, socio-economic development of his backward constituency, basically everything that ought to be consuming the politicians, but isn't.

As we remain gripped by meaningless guarantees of individual cults, dynastic appeals, partisan purity or even regional/castiest/religious promises, the fact that India faces hard issues that afflict all and not just select groups, is seemingly lost on career politicians.

But in a situation that sounds counterintuitive (given the presumed backwardness of the region), the popular appeal of a Ravindra Singh Bhatti (proudly 'Independent') from Jaisalmer-Barmer-Balotra Lok Sabha constituency talking inclusively for the 36 Biraadari cutting across all possible religious, castiest, and socio-economic divides, is a rare breath of fresh air.

Since he is 'Independent',

he does not have to sing hosannas about any party leadership and their purported infallibilities or superhuman capabilities; he only talks about his own abilities and not any single, double or triple engines.

His tone is patriotic, and not jingoistic or exclusivist. And yet, without any partisan brand to assure him of any en bloc vote, he seems to be defying logic by cavalierly attempting to defeat both the national parties i.e., the BJP and the Congress.

No amount of rallies by the biggest political names in the country can match his juggernaut. While big-talking, big-offending, and big-promising partisan politicians are doing

what they do best i.e., polarise local communities and promise the moon, Ravindra is 'their boy' who reaches out generously, humanely, and sincerely. He drew mammoth crowds that shamed the supposed starpower and organisation of cash-rich political parties. There is something raw, organic, and even hero-like about his persona

and the smart political newbie plays the son-of-the-soil card with immense pride, dignity, and decency.

Given that the ancient desert land has seen countless wars, valiant heroes, and bloody battles since antiquity, the romantic template of a 'David versus Goliath' equation has its natural resonances ~ Ravindra is tapping into his 'Independent' status and twisting it to his advantage. For once the hunted (common citizen) has become the hunter, and his game is the full-time politicians who are exposed and shamed for their excesses, easy promises, and divisive agenda.

Unbeknownst to many, this harsh desert land is typical of 'Mini India' with its myriad diversities of all possible deno-

minations who live cheek-byjowl in relative peace, harmony and convivial amity (as did other regions, till the 'politicians' of divide or appeasement arrived on the scene).

Ravindra is only revisionist in approach when it comes to invoking the civilisational social fiber of the land, otherwise he only talks of development and socio-economic issues, and so the full-time politicians are inadvertently made to look awkward, small, and outdated.

The wholesomeness of the situation is magnified when you see participants of the two major national parties not trying to out-shame each other but strive to keep pace with the

relentless 'hope' ignited by the irrepressible Ravindra Singh Bhatti.

His example is

a glorious rebuttal to those who lazily complain about TINA (There Is No Alternative) factor for the depressing state of politics in the country. Seemingly, the low turnout of national polling data indicates fatigue, frustration, and disin-

terest ~ but the crowds in Jaisalmer are on to something special, and something big that could shake the status quo of the country.

His example could seed 'Ravindra Singh Bhattis' from Manipur, Jammu and Kashmir or Andaman & Nicobar Islands, and that could change the ensuing amorality of our politics.

His success is important

from the perspective of much needed 'hope' against the prevailing 'system' (to which all national and regional parties have contributed since independence).

It will force navel-gazing for

existing politicians and set the agenda for the future. Divisive politics of hate or appeasement must stop, and real issues must take over.

Unlike the birth of an Aam

Aadmi Party (the last new 'idea' in the Indian political mainstream), there are no heavy weights of society to hold supportive dharnas, no affluent backers, and not even any nudging political rival, for he threatens the entirety of the 'system' and not just any one party (unlike the successful birth of AAP which was focused against the-then ruling party).

The template of Ravindra Singh Bhatti must also succeed for what it potentially suggests ~ the power of an average 'Independent' individual to change the much-needed conversations, debate, and narrative.

Single-minded determination, dash and pluck saw him win as the University President, then as an MLA, and now he is eyeing a MP seat (all as an Independent) ~ if this isn't an 'Indian Dream', what is?

There is also a certain welcome 'normalcy' and simplicity about a teacher and homemaker's son who studies and does his law (without posturing any 'martyr-syndrome' or pretended piety) and then proudly espouses real issues in local dialect with aplomb, stands tall and talks firm, but with a much needed measure of decency.

After a long time, a natural student leader has succeeded in capturing the political imagination after the likes of Vajpayee, Chandrashekar, Jaitley, Tharoor etc., who could conflate education, youthfulness, idealism, and nativism without resorting to bigotry or hate.

While Jaisalmer-Barmer-Balotra is just one seat out of 543 and Ravindra may or may not win, he has already done the impossible of shaking up the 'system' and offering 'hope' ~ therefore, even it is too good a dream to come true, one must pray for his success for the betterment and dignity of constituency, his state, and his country, towards which he professes equal love and reverence. India in these dark times has seen a flicker of change, hope, and now waits for 6 June to see if indeed it is a case of a major Desert Storm!

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Hope for lower food prices

s expected, President Marcos' latest decision to relax the rules on the importation of agricultural products is being opposed by traders and middlemen who have been unduly enriching themselves by buying low from farmers and fishermen and selling high to consumers. The President has directed the Department of Agriculture (DA) to simplify its policies and procedures on the importation of farm products and remove other nontariff barriers that restrict or delay their entry to the country. These include quotas, import licensing schemes and bureaucratic regulations that have the net effect of increasing the cost of imports. Their removal or easing will therefore boost supply in local markets and ultimately bring down prices of essential farm products. It should be noted that this will not come at a loss to the government in terms of foregone revenues.

Under Administrative Order No. 20, signed by Executive Secretary Lucas Bersamin on April 18, the DA was directed to coordinate with the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Finance to streamline procedures and requirements in the licensing of importers, minimize the processing time of applications for importation, and exempt licensed traders from the submission of registration requirements.

The DA was also ordered to streamline procedures and requirements for the issuance of sanitary and phytosanitary import clearance, which needs to be released within 15 days,

INQUIRER

otherwise, applications with completed documents will be deemed approved. The Sugar Regulatory Administration was also told to simplify the importation of sugar by allowing direct purchases by the agency's accredited importers and accepting more traders to participate.

The DA was tasked to similarly review and revise guidelines on the importation of frozen fish and other marine products while the Bureau of Customs, where many complaints of delayed releases are raised by the private sector, was ordered to prioritize the unloading and release of imported agricultural products.

By addressing the delays that lead to additional costs for importers, the entry and availability of imported agricultural products will hopefully be timely and cover the supply shortages of farm products. However, the success of this order will depend in large part on the surveillance team created under AO 20. Made up of representatives from several departments and law enforcement agencies, it is hoped that the body will be able to pinpoint snags and other potential roadblocks early on and immediately find solutions to them. The team can also focus on unscrupulous middlemen who have often been blamed for the high prices of farm produce ~ even during times of abundant supply.

Perhaps the President already had this in mind when he included the police and other law enforcement bodies in the surveillance team to go after these scalawags.

AO 20 is indeed a very timely measure that, if implemented correctly, could really help lower the prices of agricultural products. However, the implementation of AO 20 should go hand in hand with the timely implementation of the DA's three-year plan for the country's agricultural sector.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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BHOPINDER

SINGH

The writer is Lt Gen PVSM,

Lt Governor of

Andaman & Nicobar Islands

and Puducherry

Die with dignity

SIR, I refer to your editorial, "End of Life". There are moral, legal, ethical, religious, and scientific dimensions to end of life decisions ~ Euthanasia. There may be good clinical medicine but there is also the reality of financial costs. We cannot disregard the economic reality of modern medical care ~ whether it is in a Staterun hospital or insurance covered health care.

This practice is generally illegal, but there is a movement worldwide toward greater social and legal acceptance. Attempting or assisting death is a criminal offence in many countries. However, in India, in a pioneering judgment, the Supreme Court legalised passive euthanasia, stating that it was a matter of a 'living will'. Doubtless, death is a loss, and the notion of assisted dying is very odd. Perhaps we should speak of assisting patients on the verge of death by providing loving, compassionate care. Laws with ample safeguards should be enacted to allow certain patients who are terminally ill to die with dignity. Like the many laws we have from the time of British rule, the proposed British legislation can "lead by example and set a new standard for compassionate end-of-life care in the modern world" for other nations.

Yours, etc., H N Ramakrishna, Bengaluru, 28 April.

DISAGREE

SIR, This is apropos of M A Madhusudan's letter "Compulsory voting" published today. I write to submit a diametrically opposite view. Compulsory voting will only improve the stats on voting ~ the "pratishat" (percentage) tally that the media keeps reporting down to the last two decimal places.

Considering our demography, even if the voting in percentage terms is low, it affords a wide sample base in terms of numbers because approximately 15 lakh eligible voters belong to a single constituency. In the specific instance of low turnout (percentage wise) in the first phase of polling this year, heat wave conditions, netas switching sides/ parties at the drop of a hat, voters nonchalance and the sentiment that voting does not bring about a change in governance are factors that have been at play.

Moreover, at the ground level, compulsory voting will be dif-

ficult to achieve and may even lead to tyrannical behaviour of overzealous election officials out to achieve a 100 per cent voter turnout. A cent percent voter turnout will not by itself bring about governance that is accountable and transparent. On the contrary, the attendance of our elected representatives in parliament and state legislatures and the quality of debates ought to be of more concern than the voter turnout.

Yours, etc., Avinash Godboley,

Dewas, 30 April.

BIAS OF WESTERN MEDIA

SIR, This refers to Harsha Kakar's article, "Western perceptions and Indian realities" (30 April). General Kakar has rightly stated that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has had the best of relations with Western leaders in his twin terms so far. Not so with the Western media, who have an assortment of descriptors for him ranging from strongman to autocrat.

This was demonstrated yet again when Rahul Gandhi's Indian-American advisor, Sam Pitroda, weaponized recent Western media headlines in an attack on Modi. Excessive interest from the Western media in Indian elec-

NOTA OPTION

SIR, Voters of some areas have decided to void their votes for some reason which is not at all a good sign for democracy. Rather than deciding to nullify the vote, the last and best weapon is to opt for 'NOTA' (none of the above), which will surely have far-reaching effects. Elections are a right time for voters to test their representatives and representatives should also know the voters' choices. All political parties and representatives should be aware of it and analyze it seriously.

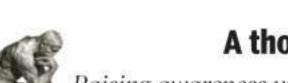
Yours, etc., Nabnit Panigrahi, Rayagada, 28 April.

tions has always been perceived as interference in domestic affairs. Even Indira Gandhi was targeted by the American media when she refused to buckle under their negative projection. When India conducted nuclear tests during Atal Bihari Vajpayee's tenure, Western news organisations painted India as the villain of the peace. It blamed India for spending on nuclear weapons rather than the far more urgent need to alleviate poverty.

Barring a few exceptions, selfproclaimed foreign clairvoyants have been predicting doom for India in spite of its record GDP growth. While they may have some justification for their critical reporting, the same Western news conglomerates have been ignoring attacks on freedom of expression in many other countries including China and Russia. Even EAM S Jaishankar, who has been cultivating American media his entire career, found faults. He has said the foreign media attacks India "not because they lack information, but because they think they are also political players in our elections". While it ignores the vicious attacks on the Jewish community in the West, it indulges in Modi-bashing while reporting from India. As PM, Mr Modi has kept both the Indian and the foreign press at an arm's length. He has become the first PM not to address a single press conference in a decade. Dissemination of irresponsible and inaccurate news makes his or her job much easier. Yours, etc., S S Paul,

Nadia, 30 April.





A thought for today

Raising awareness vs raising alarm – the public can't be better informed if the information isn't better

TK NALIAKA

Sweating The Turnout

Above-normal heatwave days were forecast in advance. Poll logistics can't escape changing climate

Tt's been a scorching summer so far in south India. April heat, as measured by average maximum temperatures, was the second highest since 1901. This seems to have had an effect on voter turnout in the ongoing LS polls.

Dip in states | In the seven-phase polls two states, TN and Kerala, finished voting for all seats in the first two phases. EC data shows that the turnout in both states has dipped in relation to 2019, with the fall in Kerala exceeding six percentage points. It's not possible to attribute turnouts to the influence of a single factor, but EC's media statements have identified heatwaves as an aspect that can influence enthusiasm.

Forewarned By March 1, IMD's forecast for the summer said that India would experience above-normal number of heatwave days and maximum temperatures in most parts. The decision to

spread polling over an unusually long duration of six weeks seems puzzling in this context, as even back in March it was almost certain that heatwaves would influence turnouts in some regions.

> Future view | Sizzling summers are here to stay on account of climate change. A GOI monograph on heatwaves published in 2023 said that mortality due to heatwaves is higher than any natural hazard in

different parts of the world. It estimated that a severe heatwave over southeastern India in May 2015 claimed over 2,500 lives.

Mitigation measures | By the second phase, EC held a meeting with IMD to gauge the likelihood of heatwaves and also set up a taskforce to deal with these. It was a proactive step. But EC's measures are constrained by the limited physical space, such as polling booths, in which it can take mitigation measures. Voters need to get there and also wait, which exposes them to harsh conditions. Moreover, none of these mitigation measures can help the mass of political party workers, who keep having to campaign in testing conditions.

India's climatic patterns are undergoing a change. Peak power demands are surging and health risks increasing. Institutions such as EC should adapt better to the new reality.

Cops Need Schooling

Bomb hoaxes are cybercrimes that need cross border police action. India needs to catch up

Testerday, schools in Delhi received emails about bombs on their premises. Delhi Police contacted all schools who were told to check emails. Close to 200 schools in Delhi-NCR reportedly received such mail. Obviously, there was prompt dismissal of class, parents told to pick up their wards. Schoolbags in some cases had to be left behind for police audits.

Parents' trauma | Schools telling parents there may be a bomb in school is heart-stopping news. Telling them not to panic is moot, till it's known for sure the mail is a hoax. Within hours, news was indeed out that it was a 'bomb hoax'. Still, parents across

Delhi raced mid-morning to ferry kids back,

as schools had dispersed.

Keeping your head Not all panicked. Some assured parents no such mail/call was received, school was safe but parents could take wards home if they so desired. Bomb hoaxes are not new - schools are routinely targeted by delinquents. But mass bomb hoaxes are a different beast and here to stay.

Third in 3 months, 3 cities | The Delhi hoax came within three weeks of a similar one in

Kolkata early April, and a Chennai hoax early Feb. Around 200 govt and private schools in Kolkata were warned about bombs on premises via email. In Chennai, 13 schools received such mails. Investigations are underway but there are issues. It is near-impossible to trace such mails to their origin, given the cascade of VPNs that jump country to country the sender(s) used.

Transborder crime? Investigations should not peter out over absence of cooperation mechanisms for cross-border probes and sharing of electronic evidence, a challenge in the best of times. India has MLATs with just about 42 countries, and not necessarily for cybercrime investigations. Tracing such offenders, in the shortest possible time is key. India is also not a signatory to the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime whereby countries can investigate jointly and share e-evidence. Mass bomb hoaxes in schools and hospitals are a new scourge, wherever the origin. GOI needs to step up on enabling transborder cybercrime investigations to nip this in the bud.

Meta-Worse

Forget fractured vote. Pity ditto voter

Bachi Karkaria



My metaverse is currently less Zuckerberg, more Iyengar. What began with Zubin Sir culminated with Birjoo Sir. In the early '90s, I signed up with Zubin Zarthoshtimanesh. The unlikely name was attached to an appropriately yogic figure complete with tilak stretching across a glowing, high brow.

Some 30 years on, the Iyengar school hasn't much succeeded in taking the 'I' out of me. But in the first fortnight itself I learnt more anatomy than asana. Metatarsals, along with deltoids, triceps, rotator cuff, even 'eye of the elbow'. It was a bit of a stretch: not only did I discover (painfully) the location of all these guys lurking within me, I discovered (embarrassingly) that they were all as uncoordinated as a hippie wardrobe. They would certainly not fit in today's fashion trend of 'coords' - which actually look like you've stepped out in your pyjama-suit.



campaigning is so sick.

When Mumbai's rapacious real estate forced Zubin Sir's classes into savasana, I'd signed up at another Iyengar centre. Last week on the way there, I rediscovered my metatarsal even more painfully - I fractured it. On a cratered road, where I usually concentrate body-mind-soul, I tripped, took a 180-degree toss, and came down in, uhmm, a thudasana.

erratica With help, I limped to my class. Fortunately, it was that of Birjoo Sir, who has taught me as much about quantum physics, knows every nerve and neuron, and has brought a truant tendon to heel with one rightly tightly tied belt. Serving me hand over foot, he figured out the problem, bandaged it and had me driven home. So it was back to old familiar ortho and

OT. Kicking myself for this expensive stupidity was highly inadvisable. Fractured metatarsal is mega-pain in gluteus maximus aka butt. That it's the extreme right one of my right foot is definitely no reflection of my political views. However, my hobble does mirror the increasingly one-legged race, where everyone has slipped into dog pose and indulged in barkasana - if not already exulting with *ujjayi pranayama*, the victorious breath. But, I can still put my foot down, flex rightful indignation over the bakwasana, even jump recklessly into controversies - meta-phorically.

Alec Smart said, "Doctoring is no surprise when the whole

Not Just Patanjali In The Dock

It has taken continual SC push for the company to apologise. But misleading ads are rampant across the pharma industry. Commercial interests widely prevail over public health interests

Kishor Patwardhan



The concept of evidence-based medicine is built upon three pillars: patient's choice, physician's experience, and available recent evidence. Misinformation undermines all three and this is what makes the Patanjali case ongoing in Supreme Court, critical.

SC impact In an affidavit filed before SC this week, the Uttarakhand state licensing authority said it has suspended the manufacturing licences of 14 products of Patanjali Ayurved Ltd and its sister concern Divya Pharmacy. What is of note is that this action was only initiated after SC criticised the state authority sharply, for its inaction against Patanjali.

Backstory In Nov 2023, Patanjali assured SC it would "henceforth" not violate any law "relating to advertising or branding of products manufactured and marketed by it and, further, that no casual statements claiming medicinal efficacy or against any system of medicine will be released to the media in any form." But the company kept publishing misleading ads – falsely promising cures for many health conditions, including hypertension and diabetes, while also criticising Western medicine for its failures.

In Feb this year, SC issued a contempt notice against Patanjali for continuing to publish ads of products in violation of the Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954 and its Rules, despite the Nov undertaking given to court. Subsequently, Patanjali was also required to

publish an unconditional apology in major newspapers. Going beyond Patanjali | Its ads also claimed to have demonstrated the efficacy of their formulations through research. The problem with many such research citations is that the studies lack the required rigour.

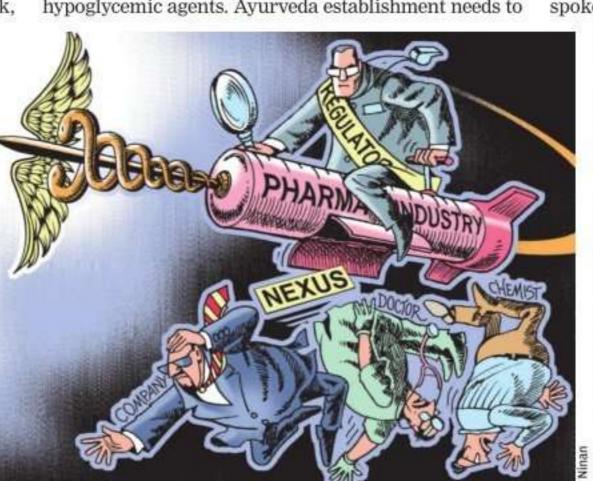
and are insufficient to substantiate their claims of

'curing' various diseases and ailments.

A specifically ayurveda challenge | This particular pharma industry has an issue related to patents and proprietary medicines. These formulations are not documented in classical ayurveda textbooks but contain ingredients mentioned therein, in varying doses and

combinations. Nor are the safety and efficacy standards set by various state authorities for granting licences to proprietary formulations very stringent.

With the safety of formulations directly documented in classical ayurveda textbooks already a subject of debate due to heavy metal and other potentially toxic ingredients, newer formulations require reliable data before they are marketed. Tellingly, when UP recently banned over 30 ayurveda products, it was after many were found to be adulterated with steroids, painkillers, and oral hypoglycemic agents. Ayurveda establishment needs to



undertake a serious relook at the issue of spurious and adulterated products, to avoid further risk to public health.

Going beyond ayurveda This problem is hardly limited to the Ayush sector. Actions that undermine public health in favour of commercial interests have been seen across the pharma industry in recent years. This is the debate that needs to be prioritised, instead of solely focusing on Patanjali.

Recent scares | Consider some recent cases that highlight the conflict between industry and public health. British-Swedish multinational pharma company AstraZeneca recently admitted in court papers that its Covid vaccine can lead to a "rare" side-effect: Thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome. TTS can form blood

clots that can lead to deep vein thrombosis, heart attacks and strokes. This side-effect is known for all adenovirus vector-based vaccines and many countries

either stopped or age-restricted these vaccines as soon as this adverse effect became known. Similarly, the Prescription Medicines Code of Practice Authority of UK recently ruled that Pfizer had promoted its unlicenced Covid vaccine on Twitter, without disclosing anything about adverse events

associated with it. The company was fined and its UK

spokesperson said, "The company is deeply sorry" and that it "fully recognises and accepts the issues highlighted by this PMCPA ruling".

In the third example that should draw our attention to public health concerns, EU food safety authorities have flagged the presence of cancer-causing ethylene oxide in more than 500 food products exported from India.

Taming the titan While industry contributes to a nation's economy, striking a balance between commercial interests and public health is crucial. Health cannot be taken for a ride at any cost by industry. Electoral bond data further points to a possible nexus between the pharma industry and political parties. And it is certainly the case that simple non-pharma interventions like lifestyle changes, physical activity, and dietary modifications often fail to capture public attention because there is no one to advertise them!

Educate, educate | Back to the concept of evidence-based medicine. In India, this is under-

mined because a patient's choice regarding healthcare is usually uninformed. It is often driven by misinformation, which is rampant over social media, or by other compulsions imposed by circumstances such as poverty and illiteracy. Ayush and modern medicine sectors operating in silos makes this 'informed choice' virtually impossible. Promoting Ayush as having 'no side effects' or offering 'absolute cure' while its practitioners deny its limitations, has misled and harmed the public. Ayush establishment must prioritise 'evidence generation' over 'popularisation' to ensure informed decision-making and improve healthcare outcomes. Making authentic info about health easily accessible to all citizens is a challenging task. However, that is the only way out.

The writer is Professor of Ayurveda, Banaras Hindu University. Views are personal

US Universities Look Like Battlezones. Here's Why

Students got mad when the first protests led to suspensions. Police action made it worse. Now, politicians have joined in, given this is a presidential election year

Ananya Khera

¬he Israel-Palestine question, charges of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, and fights over free speech are tearing US universities at the seams. The latest escalation began at Columbia University, where president Minouche Shafik called the police - rather than campus security - on students. The students had been protesting the Gaza violence, and for their universities to divest from companies that profit from Israeli occupation. The last time the university called the police on protesting students was in 1968, at the peak of protests against the Vietnam War.

How did protests spread across American campuses? This drastic action at Columbia sparked demonstrations of solidarity across the country by student groups and some faculty members, with encampments at NYU, Yale, MIT, Brown, UT Austin, Emory, USC and many others. More than 1,000 protesters have been arrested. Graduation ceremonies have been cancelled at some institutions, classes have moved online in others.

Universities have taken a dim view of the demonstrations. Powerful pro-Israel voices, right-wing politicians and media have smeared the protests as displaying violent intent towards Israel, support to Hamas, and anti-Semitism. The pro-Palestine student groups have explicitly distanced themselves from all forms of hate and bigotry; they also include many Jewish students and teachers.

What has been the reaction of authorities? | This confrontation began building right after the Oct 7 attack by Hamas. Student groups in support of Palestine were suspended at many universities, including Harvard. USC prohibited valedictorian Asna Tabassum from delivering her commencement speech because she had linked to a page criticising Zionism. Students have been arrested for staging sit-ins, for occupying campus buildings.

In Dec, members of a congressional committee grilled the presidents of Harvard, MIT and UPenn, asking them whether calling for an intifada, and using the slogan 'from the river to the sea' - which they

interpreted as a call for genocide of Jews – violated campus policies. The presidents of Harvard and Yale resigned after their cautious answers prompted condemnation. Republican member Elise Stefanik declared her intention to "expose the rot in our most prestigious higher education institutions". Even the White House weighed in, calling the protests anti-Semitic.

Is American politics involved? This is the latest flashpoint in an ongoing war over higher education. Progressive students have called for more diversity, equity and inclusion in admissions and campus policy. They are alert



to race, gender and power differentials. They call out the complicity of their own institutions. Conservatives call this woke indoctrination. They blame an increasingly diverse faculty for being overwhelmingly liberal. They say universities are diluting the prestige of degrees by trying to create equal opportunity echo-chambers.

Most leading universities in US are private, substantially run by philanthropic donations. Twenty elite institutions get nearly half of the total endowments. These endowments are invested in large companies. Protesting students are seeking transparency about their universities' portfolios, and asking them to divest from businesses aiding injustice in Israel, including weapons and tech firms.

Alumni and donors, who tend to be wealthy and

anti-Semitism. Prominent billionaires have cancelled their gifts, with one declaring the whole project of diversity and inclusion 'racist and illegal'. Some finance and law firms have blacklisted protesting students and taken back job offers. Universities are pressured to comply with their mega-donors.

conservative, are waging their own campaigns against

Democratic Party is also caught in a pincer, with Republicans using the campus unrest to polarise, and young progressives rejecting the justifications of the US military-industrial complex and its bond with Israel. Biden lamenting the violence in Gaza, even as he supplies arms to Israel, does not compute for this set of voters.

Will the protests impact American universities in the **long term?** US universities have been struggling for a while, as their credibility and worth are questioned from the left and right. Undergraduate enrolment is falling, with a 15% drop between 2010 and 2021. Americans who express confidence in higher education slid from 57% in 2015 to 36% even before this latest face-off. US Supreme Court has banned affirmative action in admissions. Tenure system for faculty is under strain, with much of the

The university's traditional commitment to free speech is cracking. Arrests, suspensions and recruitment boycotts have been wielded against the students protesting the merciless assault in Gaza, where 35,000 people have been killed, most of them women and children, where hospitals have been destroyed and aid workers attacked.

teaching load falling on poorly paid adjunct instructors.

What will these protests achieve? They have certainly wrenched attention to the violence in Gaza and its links to the US establishment. They are a cry of the conscience, much like the student protests against racial segregation or against the Vietnam War. As Berkeley student activist Mario Savio famously said in 1964: "There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart that you can't take part! You can't even passively take part! And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus – and you've got to make it stop!"

Calvin & Hobbes



YOU SURE? NO THANKS, I'VE GOT THE NOT TODAY TOOLS RIGHT HERE! LOTS OF NAIL SIZES! TO DO IT!









Your right is to work only and never to the fruit thereof. Do not be the cause of the fruit of action; nor let your attachment be to inaction

Bhagwad Gita, 2:47

Vasuki Indicus And The Divine Serpent

Narayani Ganesh

Yasuki indicus is the name given to the 47 million-year-old, 15m-long fossilised vertebrae of the now extinct longest snake that ever lived, found in a Gujarat coal mine in 2004. Study and research over the years have led scientists to conclude in 2024, that it is a new genus and species of madtsoiid snake, 'a relic lineage that originated in India'.

Vasuki is the divine serpent coiled around the neck of Shiva. Moved by his devotion, Shiva chose to wear Vasuki as an ornament. Vasuki's brother Sheshnag, coils himself into the shape of a bed on which Vishnu reclines, protected by a hood-canopy. When devas and asuras planned to churn the ocean of milk to obtain amrit, elixir, Vasuki let them use him as the rope, wound himself around the Mandara mountain, and with devas holding onto one end

and asuras the other, Samudra Manthan-churning of the oceanbecame possible.

In different contexts in varied cultures and mythologies, the serpent has been portrayed as good and at other times, as evil. In Biblical and other Abrahamic references, a serpent, believed to be Satan, lured and tempted Eve to eat the forbidden apple in the Garden of Eden, thereby unleashing suffering on Adam and Eve and their descendants, starting from their having to leave their THE SPEAKING TREE idyllic home.

The serpent is seen as protector and guardian. Many depictions of Gautam Buddha and Mahavir in meditative pose with eyes closed, show them guarded by a snake that forms a canopy with its hood to shelter them from the elements. Many temples have snake carvings as

protectors of the treasures within. As fertility symbols, snakes are invoked as gods in cultures across the world, with shrines dedicated to them. The Native American Hopi tribe performs snake dance in a fertility festival. In Kerala, Parasuram is believed to have

invoked the snake god to convert saline

soil into fertile soil. Some see the

snake as the umbilical cord that connects us to Mother Earth. World Health Organisation (WHO)'s symbol is a world map superimposed

with a staff that has one snake entwined around it. Whereas a staff with two

snakes coiled around it is the symbol for nursing. Asclepius was the ancient god of healing, belonging to a cult in which snakes figured as healing agents. He was so effective as healer that it was feared he would render humans as immortals; therefore, Zeus got him

killed. Hence the snake has been part of medical symbols, as enabler of healing and new life. This belief also stems from the snake's ritual of shedding its old skin and growing a new one, akin to a kind of rebirth.

Circles and spirals are symbols of infinity. Hence the portrayal of a snake with its tail in its mouth, the cosmic ouroboros, denotes birth, death and rebirth, in an infinite circle, a combination of protection, fertility, fear, healing, rejuvenation and new life. Curiously, the double-helix DNA, too, lends itself to this kind of snake symbolism as it coils upward in a spiral, carrying within the blueprint of life. So, too, the Kundalini, Sanskrit for coiled serpent, located at the base of the spine, seat of immense female energy that could be awakened with practices like yoga, mantra chanting and meditation, leading to spiritual awakening. ganeshnarayani@yahoo.com

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Covid vaccine row

Thorough probe a must to fix accountability

STRAZENECA (AZ), a leading pharmaceutical firm headquartered in the UK, has admitted that its Covid-19 vaccine can cause a side effect in 'very rare cases'. The disclosure came durling the hearing of a case in the High Court of Justice in London. Fifty-one claimants have alleged that they - or their loved ones - suffered from TTS (thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome) after receiving the AZ vaccine. This rare syndrome is characterised by blood clotting or abnormally low levels of platelets; its potentially life-threatening consequences include brain damage, heart attack, pulmonary embolism and amputation. The petitioners, who are seeking damages under the UK's Consumer Protection Act, reportedly possess documents substantiating their charge that the vaccine caused deaths or injuries.

The British case is of immense significance for India, where the AZ vaccine was manufactured and marketed as Covishield in partnership with the Pune-based Serum Institute of India. It was administered to almost 90 percent of the eligible people in the country during the Covid years. Even though AZ has stated that patient safety is its highest priority, a thorough probe is required to allay the doubts and apprehensions of the Indian citizens who received Covishield shots. The matter has reached the Supreme Court, where a petitioner has sought directions to form a panel of medical experts to examine the vaccine's side effects.

During the pandemic, vaccine clinical trials were fasttracked due to the urgent need to curb the virus' spread and save lives. This was driven by the overwhelming evidence that the benefits of vaccination exceeded the risks posed by the virus. However, the side effects, even if rare, have put a question mark over the safety of the AZ vaccine. The role of the regulatory authorities has also come under scrutiny. It is hoped that an in-depth inquiry will be carried out to pinpoint the lapses that imperilled the health of vaccine recipients. Fixing accountability and stressing the need for greater transparency should be the way forward.

Pro-Palestine protests

US must not silence dissent by students

HE crackdown on pro-Palestine protests at Columbia University and other campuses across the US is an assault on the fundamental principles of free speech and academic freedom. As hundreds of students face arrests, threats of expulsion and disciplinary action for voicing their solidarity with beleaguered Gazans, it is crucial to recognise that silencing dissent only deepens the wounds of injustice and undermines the values that the US claims to uphold. At the heart of these protests lies a demand for justice. Students are calling for their universities to divest from companies complicit in Israel's oppression of Palestinians — a moral stance in response to the ongoing violence and human rights violations in Gaza.

Instead of addressing the students' grievances, the authorities have resorted to heavy-handed tactics, invoking charges of anti-Semitism to justify their actions. Condemning Israel's excesses is not tantamount to anti-Semitism. It is a legitimate form of protest against injustice, rooted in the principles of human rights and international law. By conflating criticism of the Israeli government with hatred towards Jewish people, detractors are seeking to delegitimise dissent and shield Israel from accountability.

The response from universities and law agencies is worrisome. The use of force to suppress demonstrations runs counter to the democratic values that institutions of learning should safeguard. Instead of fostering an environment where diverse perspectives can be freely expressed, these actions create a chilling effect, stifling debate and dissent. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has rightly expressed concern over the disproportionate response to these protests, emphasising the importance of protecting freedom of expression. As the self-proclaimed leader of the free world, the US must not silence divergent voices; it must be a beacon of hope and ensure freedom as well as justice for all.

ON THIS DAY ... 100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, MAY 2, 1924

'Peace' in the province IN his speech delivered in reply to the farewell address presented by the District Board of Amritsar, to which we had occasion to refer in a previous issue, Sir Edward Maclagan gave expression to a feeling of satisfaction on "seeing the province now at peace" "except so far as Akali troubles are concerned." Although the exception itself covers a wide field, we wholeheartedly wish we could join in congratulating His Excellency on the "peace" of which he speaks. Unfortunately, the present state of affairs in the province does not warrant that good cheer and it has to be said that the "peace" spoken of is merely the "peace" of subdued feelings and the calm arising from despair. The Government, during the regime of Sir Maclagan, has never shown timely desire to bow to the popular will. The miseries experienced by the people in a large number of villages on account of the harsh methods of collection of the punitive police tax imposed upon them, the widespread resentment caused by various measures of repression which have been adopted in the name of law and order during the last three years, and the destructive effect of the communal policy inaugurated and obstinately adhered to during the regime of Sir Maclagan have all contributed to undermining civic harmony among people which is the foundation of real peace. This injurious policy has taken away the peace, mental as well as physical, not only of the community which complains of being the principle sufferer, but also of other communities. The bitter feelings engendered in Punjab by the communal policy of Sir Madagan's Government have to some extent left the whole of India perturbed by its evil effects.

Poor regulation plagues food safety

The rate of conviction has remained low despite an increasing number of failed samples



DINESH C SHARMA SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

HE food regulator of Hong Kong recently suspended the sale of three spice blends manufactured by an Indian company. This was followed by a similar action against another Indian spice brand in Singapore. The regulatory action came after the detection of high levels of ethylene oxide, a carcinogen, in the spices exported from India. The Maldives, too, has taken such action, while the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Australian food authority are examining the reports of contamination.

This is nothing new. Several hundred shipments of spices from India are refused entry for not meeting the quality norms in the US every year. Ayurvedic formulations are often red-flagged by the FDA and other regulators containing excessive amounts of lead and other harmful heavy metals. Sometimes, the reverse also happens, as in the recent case of food company Nestle, which was found marketing baby foods with high sugar content in India, but not in markets in developed countries.

All these episodes follow a familiar pattern. The companies involved, be they Indian or multinational, deny any wrongdoing. They claim they are following the prescribed safety standards either in the country of origin or where they are exporting to, based on what suits them. The standard response of Indian regulatory authorities is that they are 'studying the situation', besides blaming foreign regulators for not sharing test reports with them.

The export promotion agencies



UNDER SCRUTINY: Top Indian spice brands are in the crosshairs of food regulators over alleged contamination. REJIERS

and industry bodies play the victim card — they argue that Indian exports are being singled out by Western countries which want to tarnish India's image. Such statements are supported by ministries and ministers concerned, in the name of the 'Make in India' dictum. Multinationals blamed for marketing potentially harmful products in India justify themselves by saying they are only following the standards laid down in India. In all this, the consumer remains a hapless spectator. For all the rest, it is business as u sual once the din dies down.

No effort is made to address the issues at the crux of such episodes loopholes in the food regulatory system like the opaque process of developing standards and rulemaking, the near-absence of Good Manufacturing Practices, lax enforcement of standards and regulations and an inadequate analytical and testing system. The other important issues are governmental protection of the industry in the name of boosting export and discouragement of the representation of public health, consumer and civil soci-

ety experts in food regulation. Food companies involved in controversies wriggle out by say-

The FSSAI should make public the 'conflict of interest' data of members of all rule-making panels because consumers should know who is setting the standards.

ing they are following standards fixed by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), as has happened in the recent case of Nestle. Therefore, the method of fixing standards is critical. The FSSAI has a set of 26 scientific committees to provide inputs for setting standards for food products ranging from beverages to marine products. When the authority was formed in 2008, it packed these scientific panels with representatives of Indian and global food companies. Following an outcry in the media, courts and Parliament,

the panels were reconstituted. Subsequently, too, food companies continued to dominate through industry chambers and associations, which were given a seat on the scientific panels.

A few years later, this changed, and now the panels have working and retired scientists. Still, one can't say confidently that the rule-making process is free of the industry's influence. A cursory examination of the present composition of scientific panels shows that they still have members with past and present industry links. For example, the panel on beverages has a former global head of quality assurance at Coca-Cola as well as an official of the tea association among its members. Another committee has a scientist who is a member of the All-India Food Producers Association — a body of food companies.

The FSSAI should make public the 'conflict of interest' data of members of all rule-making committees because consumers should know who is setting the standards. The FSSAI's so-called partnership with the Confederation of Indian Industry and Hindustan Lever is also problematic at several levels. Instead of hobnobbing with those it is supposed

to regulate, the FSSAI should be striving to gain public recognition as an impartial and independent regulator.

For years, consumer groups and public health experts have been demanding a distinct health label for food products high in salt, sugar and fats, but the food safety authority and the industry have constantly opposed this. On the other hand, the regulator is quick to meet industry demands and even endorse their products, which is not its mandate. The label for fortified food products, as demanded by the food industry, is an example. The 'F plus' logo is awarded to products with added vitamins, nutrients, etc. It has been given to wheat flour, salt, milk, edible oil and rice products, and the FSSAI has created a separate website displaying all these branded products with photos (instead of just a list of names). This amounts to the advertising of a certain category of products by the regulator at the taxpayer's cost.

The implementation of the regulation is lax and compliance by the industry is poor, as found by audits of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of Parliament. The CAG found in 2017 that even 10 years after its formation, the FSSAI had no time-bound plan for the formulation of standards; it issued licences based on incomplete information; and 56 out of 72 food testing laboratories surveyed did not have necessary accreditation certificates. There was also an acute shortage of staff. The PAC recommended bringing about greater transparency in the formulation or revision of standards. The FSSAI is still far from reaching the level of transparency recommended. The panel also noted that the rate of conviction was very low despite an increasing number of failed samples - a clear demonstration of poor regulation.

It is time we realised that business as usual in food safety is not good for people's health.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

We may find in the long run that tinned food is a deadlier weapon than the machine-gun. —George Orwell

"

The three Rswe practised unawares

RAMA KASHYAP

55

EDUCE, reuse and recycle are buzzwords today. Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, we were unaware Lof the three Rs of environment conservation, but would still practise them earnestly. Unlike the present-day 'use and throw' approach, we would tend to use everything to the fullest. Almost nothing was discarded in our middleclass households, to the extent that when a thing lost its functional utility, it was retained in the hope that someday, somehow it would be put to some use.

In those days of scarcity and meagre resources, we were practising 'minimalism' without being aware of it. We had a humble wardrobe comprising a pair of school uniform, just a few dresses for casual wear and one or two for formal wear. We were content with having one pair each of black Bata shoes and white canvas shoes for school and rubber slippers for home wear. We would be entitled to a new pair only after we outgrew one or it was torn beyond repair. Everything, from footwear, garments and watches to sundry gadgets, was repaired, sometimes through jugaad, till it was deemed absolutely irreparable.

Most amusing was the in-house recycling of things. A party dress would, in due course, be used as casual wear, later as a night dress and end up as a duster before being thrown away. There would always be an alternative way to utilise a discarded item. My mother used to stitch cloth bags from my old school skirts. That is how most cloth bags were made at home, recycled from used material. In the absence of polythene, people carried reusable bags for shopping. Today, despite the ban on single-use plastic, poly-bags continue to be in vogue, causing huge damage to the environment. Also, the consumption of tissue paper is increasing rapidly at an enormous cost to the ecology. Trees are being cut and a huge quantity of water is being consumed in the making of tissues, which are invariably thrown away after being used once.

If we were eco-friendly earlier, it was not because we were more conscious of our environment - it was the way of life back then. However, now that we are aware of the need to 'reduce, reuse and recycle', let us not mindlessly embrace consumerism. Not only should we try to reduce unnecessary consumption, we should also help in recycling through waste segregation and management. Let's not blindly adopt the 'disposable' culture; rather, we should promote our traditional 'reuse economy' based on our capability for repair and restoration. We must enjoy the fruits of development and prosperity, but at the same time contribute to environment conservation. Let the wheels of progress roll on without ravaging or plundering Mother Earth.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Rein in separatist elements

Apropos of the editorial 'Canadian laxity'; the raising of separatist slogans at the Toronto event attended by PM Justin Trudeau is not just a diplomatic debacle; it is a threat to the India-Canada ties. New Delhi's concerns and its strong protest against the pro-Khalistan event are warranted, especially because the strained bilateral ties have been exacerbated by Trudeau's reckless remarks regarding alleged Indian involvement in the killing of a Canadian citizen. Trudeau's rhetoric about defending freedom rings hollowas he allows divisive sentiments to flourish on his watch. It is time for Canada to prioritise diplomacy over pandering to separatist elements.

SAHIBPREET SINGH, MOHALI

Diplomatic chill in India-Canada ties

Refer to 'Canadian laxity'; it was shocking to learn that pro-Khalistan slogans were raised at a public event attended by prominent Canadian leaders, including PM Justin Trudeau, in Toronto on Sunday. This comes amid a diplomatic chill between New Delhi and Ottawa. The India-Canada ties have been worsening since Trudeau brought up allegations about the involvement of Indian government agents in the murder of a Sikh separatist leader on Canadian soil. Even though New Delhi has asked Ottawa to share evidence supporting the claim, the latter has yet to produce anything. The Canadian government must not align itself with pro-Khalistan groups if it wishes to restore cordial relations with India. SUBHASH CTANEJA, GURUGRAM

FSSAI's credibility hit

Apropos of 'Food safety concerns'; adulteration is not unheard of in India. Companies like Dabur, Zandu, Baidyanath, Nestle and Patanjali have all come under the scanner due to allegations of adulteration or for reportedly failing the quality test. The recent ban imposed by Singapore and Hong Kong on spice companies suspected of supplying contaminated condiments and masalas is yet another cause for embarrassment. All these also hit the credibility of the FSSAI and call into question its functioning.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Address vaccine injuries

Refer to the news report 'Covishield can have rare side effect: Firm'; the belated admission by British firm AstraZeneca that its vaccine for Covid-19 can cause TTS (thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome in some cases has come as a bolt from the blue for those who

had received the vaccine after placing their trust in the system. They got the jab without knowing about possible adverse events and suffered vaccine-related complications. The revelation calls for greater medical scrutiny. Medical journals and institutes should publish more studies on the matter, and experts should share their views on it. Besides, the Ministry of Health and the ICMR should publicly address

SUNIL CHOPRA, LUDHIANA

Need for informed consent

these concerns.

The admission by AstraZeneca regarding a serious side effect of its Covid-19 vaccine is deeply concerning. It underscores the importance of transparency in a vaccine rollout. While doctors reassure us about the rarity of the risk, the revelation demands further scrutiny. As we navigate through the complexities of vaccination drives, transparency must remain paramount. Every individual deserves the chance to give an informed consent while making decisions about his or her health. Vigilance, coupled with swift action, is imperative to ensuring public trust in vaccination efforts. Let this serve as a reminder of the need for rigorous monitoring and accountability in every vaccination drive.

GURDEV SINGH, MOHALI

Ban Covishield vaccine

Pharmaceutical firm AstraZeneca has admitted in court that its Covid-19 vaccine, known as Covishield in India, can cause blood clotting and low platelet count. The company faces a class action lawsuit in the UK over claims that the vaccine has caused deaths and severe injuries to recipients. More than 175 crore doses of the vaccine have been administered in India. In view of the admission by the firm and the safety concerns that arose during the immunisation drive in India, the use of Covishield and other Covid vaccines should be stopped.

VUAYKUMAR HK, RAICHUR (KARNATAKA)

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

India leveraging AI technology to make gains



SUBIR ROY SENIOR ECONOMIC ANALYST

RTIFICIAL intelligence (AI) is proving to be hugely beneficial to the Indian information technology (IT) services sector. The sector is developing tools and systems that it is passing on to clients across the world to enable them to reap the benefits of the rapidly emerging and maturing technology. This is becoming a new and critical line of product offerings that will enable the sector to remain at the forefront of emerging technology, grow fast and continue to be highly profitable.

AI simulates the cognitive processes of the human brain, and generative AI (GenAI), on being fed enormous amounts of data, produces on-demand speech, text, images, audios and videos. These are critical for the country, as its technology sector earned substantial revenue of \$254 billion in 2023-24, up 3.8 per cent from the previous year. Out of this, exports accounted for \$200 billion (nearly 80 per cent); technology

per cent of the total exports. Even as the Indian tech-

nology sector is helping its global clients use the newly emerging AI and GenAI to take it forward, it is developing tools and products for its own use, enabling it to cut costs and raise its efficiencies multifold. AI, in fact, has become critical as it is enabling the software sector to remain relevant and go forward technologically.

Infosys is a leader in reimaging work, workplace and workforce by leveraging AI so that it is able to get more value out of its staff. Not just Infosys but other IT leaders, such as HCLTech and LTIMindtree, have taken on board Copilot, Microsoft's AI-based conversational chat interface.

Infosys has also incorporated the GenAI learning process into its platform, Lex, and it is being actively adopted by its employees. Additionally, an AI knowledge assistant of a higher order has been rolled out to all the company's leaders so that they can bring about improvements in the firm's sales process. As a result, processes that could take weeks can now be completed in days.

Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), IBM and Wipro are following the same route. They are adopting AI processes in areas like human resource management, automating IT infrastructure and driving sales. IBM finds that, as a exports accounted for 28 result of adopting AI in its basic AI skills.



PROGRESS: There is little doubt that the Indian IT sector has graduated to a higher skill level with its adoption of Al and GenAl, ISTOCK

own processes, it is able to raise value creation per unit of time by as much as 70 per cent. What is more, by becoming the first user of the GenAI processes developed by it, the vendor is able to debug the process and pass on a much better offering to its clients.

TCS found that the first step — getting its employees to understand GenAI — was in itself a big task. This is partly because as many as three lakh of its employees have by now been trained in

In the IT space, India has already acquired the attributes of a developed country.

Wipro is going through a process of using an AIpowered enterprise chatbot to handle business queries, automate tasks and provide information to employees to enable them to do their work better. It is being used by companies in 53 countries to improve their knowledge management and boost productivity. The chatbot typically responds to employees in five seconds and is 95 per cent accurate.

another major part of soft- tronics, are being developed 'developed' status.

ware services, business process management (BPM), which responds to customer queries to deliver better and at a lower cost. With the use of GenAI, till now the main vehicle of BPM delivery, the call centre will be required only minimally. If things keep going this way, in the not-too-distant future, only a few centres will be needed to handle incoming calls. Technology should be able to predict incoming calls and proactively address customer concerns. With the use of GenAI, many Indian BPM companies have been able to shift away from low-end voice-based services. As a result, some of this work has shifted to the Philippines. Firms in India are now using AI-driven chatbots to handle a lot of their

As Indian IT firms train their staff to handle GenAI for their work and deliver it to customers, the level of skills in the country is rising rapidly. This has caused a sharp rise in the operations of captives, or, as they are now called, global capability centres (GCCs) of international players. Many of these are now focused on areas like engineering research and development. Over time, more and more of the new models of cars of global players like Benz, which are GenAI is also helping now mostly made up of elec-

work, which earlier used to

be handled by their staff.

at their Indian GCCs. There are now around 1,600 GCCs in India, with around 50 added last year.

There is little doubt that the Indian IT scene has graduated to a higher skill level with its adoption of AI and GenAI. This has enabled it to keep pace with the global development of technology and improve its value addition. This is likely to enable Indian IT services to continue to hold the preeminent position in the global marketplace that it does today. What began as an entity that was able to get low-paid engineers to write computer code cheaply is today keeping pace with the development of the latest phenomenon in information technology, GenAI.

The impact of this on the Indian economy will be twofold. The IT services sector will continue to be a top foreign exchange earner, thus bolstering the economy as a whole and allowing it to import the machinery needed to start high-end manufacturing being encouraged by the production-linked incentive scheme. Simultaneously, the country's IT companies are themselves becoming more and more valuable and focal points for inward foreign direct investment. The powers that be have set a target of making India a developed country by 2047, but in the IT space, it has already acquired

Paradigm shift needed to improve water use efficiency



SP VASUDEVA EX-DIRECTOR, UNION MINISTRY OF WATER RESOURCES

ATEST data released by the Central Water Commission paints a grim picture of the live storage in India's reservoirs, particularly in the southern states. The reservoir levels in South India have plummeted to just 17 per cent of their capacity amid a widespread heatwave. This does not augur well for the water security of the region and the country as a whole.

India, which accounts for 4 per cent of the world's water resources, uses them for irrigation, and domestic and industrial purposes. Surface and groundwater, as per ease of availability, are put to various uses. There is, however, a shortage of water across states, leading to crop failure, deaths, closing down of healthcare facilities and industries. India has become 'water-stressed', with the per capita per year water availability being 1,545 cubic metres, less than the stipulated 1,700 cubic metres. At this rate, India is projected to become 'water-scarce' by

2050, when the availability will be less than 1,000 cubic metres. Various states have made

significant infrastructural investments in irrigation, but a lack of regular maintenance and quality service are causing bottlenecks. Water left untreated after domestic, industrial and other uses is causing surface and groundwater pollution. Groundwater is also getting polluted through an excessive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. The Centre had informed the Supreme Court in 2016 that about 33 crore people in 256 districts of 10 states were affected by drought. Appropriate practices, innovative technologies and positive participation of all stakeholders are required for moving towards sustainable and efficient water use management.

India started on a positive note after Independence by utilising surface water of rivers through multipurpose projects, hydroelectric and water harve sting dams. However, over the past four decades, about 84 per cent of the total addition to irrigation areas, 80 per cent of the drinking water needs and most of the industrial use is met from groundwater. India. consequently, is the world's largest user of groundwater. accounting for 25 per cent of the global withdrawals. As a result, the water table has been dipping at an average of



NEEDS: India, which accounts for 4 per cent of the world's water resources, uses them for irrigation and domestic and industrial purposes, ISTOCK

0.4 metre every year.

With water being a state subject, states/UTs need to do policy correction. The adoption of measures such as water congroundwater servation, recharge, conjunctive use of surface and groundwater, economic use of water through appropriate pricing and application of technologies and increasing water use efficiency through recycling can improve the situation. The implementation of measures like crop rotation and diversification, increase in drip and sprinkler irrigation and creating awareness can further bring water use efficiency.

The National Water Mission was launched in 2011 in order to conserve water, reduce was tage and ensure equitable distribution across and within states, besides introducing

DOWN

1 Feel concern (4)

4 Unconcerned (6)

7 Noisy disorderly

conduct (8)

8 Deed done and

12 Fragrant (8)

16 Hold fast (6)

19 For fear that (4)

irreversible (4,8)

15 Not easily understood (7)

18 Burn superficially (5)

6 Logically correct (5)

2 West African republic (7)

3 Lack of due restraint (12)

India is the largest nomically user of groundwater, accounting for 25 per cent of the global withdrawals. implemented earnest. The Jal Shakti

a framework for optimising water use efficiency by 20 per cent. Many interventions and schemes have been introduced under this mission. The 'Per Drop More Crop' scheme, introduced in 2015, promotes water use efficiency through micro irrigation, especially drip and sprinkler irrigation. However, only about 10 per cent of the net sown area has been covered under micro irrigation. The Sahi Fasal campaign — an awareness generation programme for educating farmers to adopt crops that are ecoremunerative, environmental friendly and improve water use efficiency has been launched. It is moving at a slow pace, but would bring dividends if in right

Abhiyan is being implemented since 2019, with multistakeholder participation, especially of women, to optimise harvesting of rainwater and integrating it with afforestation. Desilting of water bodies and revitalising of abandoned borewells have also been initiated. Progress under this initiative is dismal, with watershed development works progressing at a sluggish pace and intensive afforestation yet to begin.

Atal Bhujal Yojana was started in 2020 to deal with overexploited and waterstressed areas of seven states. The Union Ministry of Jal Shakti has circulated a Model Bill among all states/UTs to curb overexploitation and depletion of groundwater. Several states have enacted legislation, but implementation has been effected only in a few. Industries extracting groundwater in excess of 100 cubic metres/day are now required to get an annual water audit done and reduce water use by 20 per cent over the next three years. This is a

step in the right direction The Jal Jeevan Mission is on course to provide piped drinking water with a functional tap connection to each household in the country by the year-end. About 76 per cent of the rural households have been covered and those remaining and in urban areas are being targeted. Participatory irrigation management has brought efficiency and reduced the gap between the created and utilised irrigation potential. These actions are helping in moving towards demand-driven supply of drinking and irrigation water that would make consumers responsible for making timely payments that can be utilised for proper operation and maintenance of infrastructure.

The NITI Aayog has developed the Composite Water Management Index (CWMI), covering drinking water, irrigation, sanitation, source augmentation and restoration of water bodies and watershed groundwater, development, sustainable onfarm water use practices to access and further improve water management performance. These performance indicators, integrated with improved policy and governance, are providing useful information to states/UTs and ministries/depart-Union ments to formulate and implement sustainable strategies and practices for efficient and sustainable water management.

There is a need for a paradigm shift in taking forward strategies and regulations and integrating these through the CWMI. However, the absence of holistic implementation and regular and participatory monitoring at the block, district, state and national levels is hindering the pursuit of sustainable supply and improved water use efficiency.

SUNSET:

OUICK CROSSWORD

1 Persuade to believe (8)

- 5 In excess of (4)
- 9 Justification (5)
- 10 Superficial (7)
- 11 On a very short-term basis (4,3,2,3)
- 13 Overjoyed (6)
- 14 To the other side (6)
- 17 In irresponsible manner (4,3,5)
- 20 Single eyeglass (7) 21 A break in speaking (5)
- 23 Reserved (8)
- 22 Contest between two (4)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Hold water, 8 About, 9 Outcast, 10 Pardon, 11 Senior, 12 Ancestor, 15 Verbatim, 18 Manage, 20 Tongue, 21 Inhabit, 22 Delve, 23 Tall order.

Down: 2 Of use, 3 Deceit, 4 Abstract, 5 Ravage, 6 Cordite, 7 At any rate, 11 Servitude, 13 Communal, 14 Trundle, 16 Amulet, 17 Unfair, 19 Guile.

SU DO KU 6 2 4 8 4 3 9 6 8 4 6 9 1 5 6 5 3 MEDIUM

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION 6 2 8 3 1 4 9 4 3 7 8 5 8 4 3 5 7 1 9 2 6 2 8 9 7 1 4 6 5 3 7 6 4 2 3 5 8 9 1 3 1 5 8 9 6 2 4 7 5 9 2 4 6 7 1 3 8 4 3 6 1 8 2 5 7 9 1 7 8 3 5 9 4 6 2 CALENDAR MAY 2ND 2024, THURSDAY Shaka Samvat

Shukla Yoga up to 5.19 pm

Panchak start 2.33 pm

■ Dhanishtha Nakshatra up to 1.49 am

Moon enters Aquari us sign 2.33 pm

Vaishakh Shaka 12 W Vaishakh Parvishte 20 1445 Krishna Paksha Tithi 9, up to 1.54 am

SUNRISE: FRIDAY		05:38 HRS
СПҮ	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	33	20
New Delhi	37	20
Amritsar	34	17
Bathinda	36	17
Jalandhar	34	17
Ludhiana	34	20
Bhiwani	37	22
Hisar	37	20
Sirsa	36	20
Dharamsala	25	11
Manali	25	07
Shimla	23	11
Srinagar	21	07
Jammu	33	18
Kargil	16	04
Leh	12	03
Dehradun	37	16
Mussoorie	25	11

FORECAST

19:01 HRS

THURSDAY