



Sobering assessment

The richer nations must show more support for the poorest countries

The global economy has avoided the spectre of a debilitating recession, with the IMF last week raising its forecast for worldwide aggregate growth in 2024 to 3.2%, from the 2.9% it had projected in October. The IMF has underlined the fact that the global economy has, with surprising resilience, ridden out several adverse shocks as well as ‘significant central bank interest rate increases aimed at restoring price stability’ and sustained the growth momentum, largely on the back of advanced economies led by the U.S. undergirding demand. However, the Fund has also pointed to a growing gulf between the economic north and south by observing: “A troubling development is the widening divergence between many low-income developing countries and the rest of the world. For these economies, growth is revised downward, whereas inflation is revised up.” These poorest countries, in Africa and including some Latin American, Pacific island and Asian nations, had also suffered the most scarring from the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of estimated drop in output relative to pre-pandemic projections, and were struggling to recover. To compound their woes, these economies were now saddled with a mounting debt service burden that was severely impairing their ability to spend on vitally needed public goods including better education, health care and social nets to improve food security.

The IMF’s twin development lender, the World Bank, has, in a separate report, pointed out that for the first time in this century, half of the world’s 75 poorest countries were experiencing a widening income gap with the wealthiest economies, marking a “historic reversal” of development. As the World Bank Group’s Chief Economist Indermit Gill observed in a blog post on the lender’s site, “[the 75 poorest countries] are home to a quarter of humanity – 1.9 billion people... and are home to 90% of people facing hunger or malnutrition”. More distressingly, while these countries were midway through what he termed, potentially ‘a lost decade’, Mr. Gill averred that the rest of the world was “largely averting its gaze” even as the governments in at least half these nations were mostly paralysed by debt distress. Citing the examples of South Korea, China and India as countries that had transitioned from being borrowers of low-interest loans from the World Bank’s International Development Association into economic powerhouses that were today IDA donors, the Bank’s chief economist stressed it was imperative that the world’s richer countries financially support the poorest nations. Given that the world needs to tap every reserve of economic potential to achieve universal peace and prosperity, it can ill afford to turn its back on a quarter of its people.

Limited company

The Left and the Congress are doing each other no favours in Kerala

Political alliances are known to change over time: old ties break and new ones are made. But the Congress and the CPI(M) also find that their friendship changes across space. They have built up extraordinary bonhomie in States such as West Bengal, Tripura, Bihar, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh as partners in the INDIA grouping while putting on public display their manic hostility in Kerala. Top leaders of the CPI(M) West Bengal unit had taken part in Congress leader Rahul Gandhi’s Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra. Both parties have a seat-sharing arrangement in the Lok Sabha elections in States where they are on a sticky wicket. But they are at daggers drawn in Kerala, where the electoral fight is primarily between the United and Left fronts they lead. The INDIA bloc’s objective is to keep the BJP out, which is still a minion in Kerala. That, however, fails to explain the vitriol and venom spewed by Congress and CPI(M) leaders at each other, rocking their alliance elsewhere in India. The CPI(M)’s Kerala unit, which retains its organisational and political strength, has always had reservations about any understanding with the Congress anywhere in India. The party chose not to nominate a representative to INDIA’s coordination committee in September last year.

In Kerala, the Congress used the Enforcement Directorate’s inquiry against the CPI(M) in a cooperative bank case, and against the Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan’s kin, to consistently attack the party and Mr. Vijayan. The CPI(M), on its part, played the Congress for not being able to stop the defection of its leaders to the BJP. That Mr. Gandhi chose to contest again from Wayanad, against the CPI’s Annie Raja, proved thorny, with the CPI(M) maintaining that as a national leader, he should ideally have taken on the BJP and not the Left front. Things came to a head when Mr. Gandhi launched a tirade against Mr. Vijayan for evading the ED’s questioning and arrest by accusing him of having a secret pact with the BJP. The gratuitous remark opened a Pandora’s box. While Mr. Vijayan reminded Mr. Gandhi of his (Mr. Vijayan’s) arrest during the Emergency, some Left leaders recalled Mr. Vijayan’s expression of solidarity when Mr. Gandhi was grilled by the ED. With neither side showing the readiness to bury the hatchet, the exchange has exposed the widening cracks in the INDIA bloc. The situation brings up the question of whether one is to focus their attention on the biggest enemy or on the worst enemy. The BJP sees as its ideological enemy both the Congress and the Left, but it can afford to watch silently as the two tear each other apart in Kerala.

As the India Meteorological Department (IMD) predicts a hotter summer and longer heat waves from April to June, India must also prepare for water stress. The challenge is that we are programmed to consider acute stresses (heat, water, or extreme weather) as temporary, to be handled often as disaster relief. We must move from panic reactions when disaster strikes (like the water crisis in Bengaluru), to understand and respond to the chronic nature of risks we face. Moreover, climate action cannot be left to a few sectors or businesses. Nor can environmental sustainability be reduced to sapling plantation drives over a few days.

This Earth Day (April 22) should be a wake-up call. The climate is the economy now, and the economic production frontier will expand or shrink depending on how we understand the intersections between land, food, energy and water.

India houses 18% of the world’s population on 2.4% of the earth’s surface area and has just 4% of global freshwater resources. Nearly half its rivers are polluted, and 150 of its primary reservoirs are currently at just 38% of their total live storage capacity. Further, it is the largest user of groundwater in the world. And three-quarters of India’s districts are hotspots for extreme climate events.

Against this backdrop, India has invested heavily in disaster preparedness, but the nature of climatic shocks will continue to change. There will be sudden shocks (heavy rainfall, rapid declines in water availability) as well as slow onset but periodic stresses (reduced water retention in soils, changes in trend lines for rainfall). Seasonal disaster preparedness and responses are no longer sufficient to tackle climate risks.

Water flows through the economy

For long, we have not taken cognisance of the many ways by which water flows through our economy and, instead, addressed water (and other natural resources) in silos. Water connects our hydrological, food, and energy systems, impacting millions of people.

How does this connection work? Precipitation is the primary source of soil moisture and water stored in vegetation (green water) and the water available in rivers and aquifers (blue water). Both blue and green water impact the food we grow – irrigating crops, influencing harvests, and being critical to the economy. But this sector that employs the most is increasingly climate vulnerable. The India Employment Report 2024 shows that agriculture still employs around 45% of the population and absorbs most of the country’s labour force. At the same time, a Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) study showed that monsoon rainfall is



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The climate is the economy now, and understanding the crucial intersections between land, food, energy and water will influence how the economy functions

changing patterns in India, with 55% of ‘tehsils’ or sub-districts seeing a significant increase of more than 10% in southwest monsoon rainfall in the last decade, compared to the previous three. But this increased rainfall is frequently coming from short-duration, heavy rain, affecting crop sowing, irrigation and harvesting. Making the agricultural sector more resilient to climatic and water stresses matters for jobs, growth and sustainability.

Water is also a key component of the world’s clean energy transition. Green hydrogen, seen as a crucial pillar for decarbonising industry and long-distance transport sectors, is produced using water and electricity sourced from renewables. Pumped storage hydropower – which acts as a natural battery and is essential to balance the power grid load – is an important component of a clean but reliable power system.

Then there is the climate crisis and its impact on hydrometeorological disasters. According to the UN World Water Development Report 2020, almost 75% of natural disasters in the last two decades were related to water. According to CEEW analysis, between 1970 and 2019, the number of flood associated events (such as landslides, thunderstorms and cloud bursts) increased by up to 20 times in India. Freshwater, one of the nine planetary boundaries, has been transgressed (2023 study).

The ingredients of water security

What India does to ensure water for domestic supply, food security, and the clean energy transition will matter to its economy. But its experiences will hold lessons for other water-stressed developing countries and emerging economies. Attaining this water security will need a mix of the right policies, judicious use of water, including reuse of urban wastewater, and finance for adapting to a changing world.

First, effective water governance needs policies that recognise its interactions with food and energy systems. However, CEEW and International Water Management Institute (IWMI) analysis shows that although India has adopted several policies, most do not recognise this nexus while planning or at the implementation stage. For instance, while the scaling up of green hydrogen is desirable, the link with water availability is not always considered. Similarly, the impact of scaling up solar irrigation pumps on groundwater levels must be analysed to deploy the technology where there is an optimal mix of solar resource and higher groundwater levels. Policies should incorporate the food-land-water nexus through localised evidence and community engagement.

Second, India needs to focus on the judicious

use of blue and green water through water accounting and efficient reuse. The National Water Mission targets increasing water use efficiency by 20% by 2025. Similarly, the Atal Mission on Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) 2.0 calls for reducing non-revenue water, which is lost before it reaches the end user, to less than 20% in urban local

bodies. However, these are not backed by any baseline set using water accounting principles that will help quantify the, say, “20 per cent” change in freshwater use. For instance, in the absence of water use data for the reference year, it is difficult to quantify the potential water saving in one sector, such as agriculture, that can then be diverted to other sectors, such as industries or domestic purposes, which will drive India’s water demand. Water accounting is essential for promoting water use efficiency and creating incentives for investments in treated wastewater reuse.

Third, leverage financial tools to raise money for climate adaptation in the water sector. Following global trends, India’s climate action has been largely focused on mitigation in the industrial, energy, and transport sectors. Financial commitments for climate change adaptation in the water and agriculture sectors are still relatively small. In 2019-20, for which aggregate estimates are available, the per capita annual spending on climate change mitigation was about ₹2,200, whereas for adaptation, it was only ₹260. More funding is needed for adaptation-specific interventions such as strengthening wastewater management, providing incentives to promote climate-resilient agricultural practices (micro irrigation and crop diversification), and scaling up desalination plants as an alternative water source for thermal plants and green hydrogen production. Market innovations such as India’s Green Credit Programme have the potential to partially bridge the adaptation funding gap by encouraging investment in wastewater treatment, desalination plants, and agricultural extension services. Considering the investments in India under Corporate Social Responsibility (between 2014-15 and 2020-21), there is a potential to leverage about ₹12,000 crore worth of investments every year.

Expectations that systemic change will occur overnight are unrealistic. But it is possible to make a start by pursuing more coherence in water, energy and climate policies, creating data-driven baselines to increase water savings, and enabling new financial instruments and markets for adaptation investments. A water-secure economy is the first step towards a climate-resilient one.

The views expressed are personal

Empower the guardians of the earth, do not rob them

In the southern expanse of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, off the shores of Little Nicobar, lie seven tiny islands. Classified as “uninhabited” in the government’s records, these islets are nonetheless integral to the indigenous communities of the region. Two, officially called Meroë and Menchal, are known as Piruii and Pingaeyak, respectively, to the Payuh, the indigenous southern Nicobarese peoples, who hold traditional rights over these and other islets.

For millennia, these historically isolated indigenous have relied on these islands as resource reservoirs for sustenance and protected them. Menchal is revered, used, and protected under the spiritual realm called Pingaeyak (a spirit that is believed to reside on the island), prohibiting the overexploitation of resources or any undue harm to its ecosystem. Similarly, Meroë is believed to be the abode of a legendary islander community. Here, too, spiritual belief systems influence how the islanders use and protect natural resources.

Meroë and Menchal are managed by community elders as guardians and specific individual caretakers. They ensure the protection of the island’s resources and sustainability. In today’s world, this phenomenon goes by the name of “conservation” and “sustainable use”, among other terms and phrases.

Conservation colonialism

In May 2022, in complete disregard of the indigenous land ownership and management systems, the Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) administration issued three public notices, announcing its intention to create three wildlife sanctuaries: a coral sanctuary at Meroë Island, a megapode sanctuary at Menchal Island, and a leatherback turtle sanctuary on Little Nicobar Island.

In mid-July, the A&N administration issued an order asserting that it did not receive any claims or objections from any individual regarding the land and marine areas within the three proposed sanctuaries; that no individual enjoys any rights



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A unilateral decision to establish three wildlife sanctuaries in the southern Nicobar will deprive the indigenous peoples of their ancestral territories and lifeways

within the boundaries of the proposed sanctuaries. And, that there will be “restriction on the people of neighbouring area to enter into these islands... in the national interest.”

Approximately 1,200 southern Nicobarese inhabit Patai Takaru (Great Nicobar Island), and Patai t-bhi (Little Nicobar Island), holding traditional rights over both inhabited and ostensibly “uninhabited” islands. Yet, the A&N administration neither consulted nor informed the southern Nicobarese of its plans.

Despite verbal supplications and a letter in August 2022 from the Little & Great Nicobar Tribal Council that expressed the community’s concerns to the A&N administration and the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, the A&N administration proceeded to issue official notifications in October 2022, designating the whole of Meroë (2.73 square kilometres) and Menchal (1.29 sq. km), along with a 13.75 sq. km area on Little Nicobar (140 sq. km), as wildlife sanctuaries.

Masking an ecological disaster

The selection of Meroë and Menchal Islands as conservation reserves for coral reefs and Megapode birds is arbitrary. Menchal does not have more than a pair or two of the endemic Megapode birds. Similarly, questions arise regarding the actual diversity and abundance of corals on Meroë Island.

Notably, the announcement of wildlife sanctuaries coincided with growing scrutiny and criticism from experts over the denotification of the Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary for a ₹72,000-crore mega project on Great Nicobar, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

Establishing exclusionary conservation areas in a region, which is already a paradise for biodiversity, stems from the fact that the champions of the mega project are aware of the extensive environmental and social damage that

the project will entail. It will devastate about eight to 10 lakh evergreen forest trees, smother and gouge out scores of coral reefs found along Galathea Bay, destroy the nesting site for the globally endangered Leatherback sea turtle species, devastate hundreds of nesting mounds of Nicobar Megapodes, and kill as many crocodiles.

Furthermore, it will prevent the indigenous Great Nicobar islanders from returning to their pre-tsunami homeland where they husbanded pigs and chicken, cultivated coconut and betel nut trees, and lived simple and gregarious lives. Most importantly, it will uproot three or more settlements of the Shompen (a ‘Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group’) and permanently destroy their foraging and hunting grounds.

The unilateral decision to establish wildlife sanctuaries disregards the islands’ profound significance to the indigenous population. Their ancestral lands are unjustly perceived as “no-man’s-land” to appease conservationists, investors, public opinion, and more.

Support earth’s guardians

Globally, governments blatantly violate indigenous people’s rights by evicting them from their ancestral lands, often under the guise of development, national interest, conservation projects, among others. Approximately 476 million indigenous peoples, constitute about 6% of the global population. Indigenous territories cover roughly 22% of the planet and harbour 80% of its biodiversity.

Indigenous peoples are the original guardians of our earth. The world must learn from their wisdom. Reason and justice dictate that in southern Nicobar, we should support and empower the islanders to continue to steward their ancestral territories, rather than robbing them of their lands, resources, lifeways, and worldviews.



Corrections & Clarifications

In a Sunday Magazine story titled “General Elections 2024 | When campaign trails were carnivals” (April 21, 2024), under the subhead, “Larger-than-life personalities” the year must be changed from 1986 to 1989. Also, Jayalalithaa was seeking election from Bodinayakanur – not re-election as published. A sentence in “Designated successor” (“Profiles” page, April 21, 2024) that read “Three high-profile politicians resigned after a ... to sully the reputation of the party” should be amended to say: “Two high-profile politicians resigned last year after an ethics case rocked the party and a minister resigned in January this year after he was charged with corruption.”

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The challenges of renewable energy

At a recent speech, the United Nations Climate Change Executive Secretary Simon Stiell said the “next two years are essential in saving our planet.” Record-breaking heat, shortage of water, and other environmental issues are regular headlines in the context of the need to achieve development, increase employment, and reduce poverty and inequality, among others. Yet, the linkages between the pathways of development, sustainability, and climate change mitigation are far from well-understood. Our current models of development drive greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, are unsustainable, and inequitable. Although India aims to achieve Net Zero GHG emissions by 2070, mainly led by a massive transition to large-scale renewable energy, the implications of such a transition on developmental or sustainability outcomes are unclear at the local and national levels.

Examining solar parks

Let us take the example of large-scale solar parks – a key pillar of India’s mitigation strategy. We have 214 sq. km of land under solar parks, but some studies estimate that we may need 50,000-75,000 sq. km, which is about half the size of Tamil Nadu, to achieve our Net Zero targets. At the local level, farmers in villages near India’s two largest solar parks - in Bhadla in Rajasthan and Pavagada in Karnataka - report different experiences. In Bhadla, farmers have lost sacred common lands called Orans and pastoralists are faced with shrinking grazing lands, forcing some to sell their livestock at throwaway prices. Such losses have led to protests demanding recognition of common land under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006. On the other hand, many farmers in Pavagada were content with the steady annual income they received by leasing out land for solar parks. This land was drought-stricken and did not yield significant agricultural income. All the same, water security issues and economic disparity between large and small landowners are



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Large-scale renewable energy development can avoid reproducing the injustices of past large-scale infrastructure projects, while being sensitive to developmental objectives

challenges for the region.

At a more regional or national scale, solar parks may compete for essential natural resources. Solar panels require large amounts of water for their regular cleaning. Yet, our current national-level estimates for the land available for solar parks do not account for the availability of nearby water sources. Similarly, the land needed for solar parks may compete with other productive activities – agriculture and related livelihoods, with the potential for impacts on food security. Impacts on biodiversity loss with the construction of large-scale solar parks are also location-specific, and under-researched. For instance, open natural systems such as deserts provide essential ecosystem services that, if disturbed, would cause ecological damage and even contribute to climate change. Crucially, all of these resource requirements and impacts on livelihoods and biodiversity are subject to uncertainty regarding feasibility and economic viability of other emerging low carbon technologies and the changing climate itself.

Different approaches

Large-scale renewable energy development can avoid reproducing the injustices of past large-scale infrastructure projects, while being sensitive to developmental objectives. Experimenting with ownership models is one approach. The parks need not necessarily be owned by the state or private companies. Community initiatives could help generate revenues for the communities, further promoting small businesses and upskilling, improving incomes, stimulating local economies, and improving energy access. Solar and wind park development is exempted from Environmental and Social Impact Assessment. The legal and regulatory architecture must be revised and strengthened to limit adverse social and environmental consequences. In terms of impacts on small and medium landowners where private land is being used, there is no mechanism to monitor

if a fair price is paid to those leasing their land. Involving local governance units in the planning and siting processes can provide an opportunity to align local developmental objectives with solar park development.

Wasteland classification needs a significant overhaul. Recognition of commons under the FRA would help improve environmental and equity outcomes by granting land ownership to communities dependent on commons.

If such land is to be leased or acquired for solar parks, solar park development corporations will have to engage with local governance units such as the Gram Sabha to initiate the project.

Encouraging research and experimenting with ‘agrivoltaics’ is another way to think about sustainably developing renewable energy. Agrivoltaics pair solar with agriculture, creating energy and providing space for crops, grazing, and native habitats under and between panels. Thus, farmers can grow crops while also being ‘prosumers’ – producers and consumers – of energy.

Many of these challenges and opportunities relate to solar in particular, but similar issues abound with other mitigation technologies. Wind energy, for instance, has adverse consequences on bird ecosystems. Large-scale renewable energy projects could have positive employment outcomes at the district level, but they lead to massive employment shifts between sectors at the national level. Adequate skilling and training programmes targeting the unskilled and poorer populations are essential to protect them.

Seize the opportunity

We are at the cusp of a second green revolution, this time involving energy. We have an opportunity to anticipate the unintended consequences of this revolution, and align our technological, economic, and institutional structures to maximise synergies between sustainability, climate change mitigation, and development related outcomes.



Healing land, water and ourselves

It is time for local nature-based learning to become a part of school education

Yuvan Aves

At a government boys’ school in Chennai, I showed the headmaster the various resources we have made for Chennai’s biodiversity and how we intend to use them at his school. Being connected to nature is being increasingly acknowledged in the world as crucial for all forms of well-being in children. I requested him for the environmental science period to run nature-based learning sessions. He explained that that time is used for extra science and maths classes. However, he added, “This stuff is interesting. We will have to find some other time for this. I want my boys to be interested in something meaningful; normal academics feels like oppression to most of them.” I was both surprised by and grateful for his openness to such a new pedagogy of learning. A year later, he will see that his children’s language capacities, interest in science, and motivation to learn have steeply increased through nature connectedness.

Last year, for the first time, the Earth Commission quantified boundaries for all the nine processes that regulate the stability and resilience of the Earth system: climate change, biosphere integrity, land-system change, freshwater use, biogeochemical flows, ocean acidification, atmospheric aerosol pollution, stratospheric ozone depletion, and release of novel chemicals. Research showed that six of the nine planetary boundaries are being crossed. ESBs plead for a radical reallocation of attention in the spectrum of education policies. It is important to learn about climate but also about the nearby wetlands, trees, heat, food, insects and community struggles. ESBs beg to differ on the articulation of the crisis itself,



which splits climate from the rest as the most impacted. The crisis really is of diminishing life and living conditions. Climate change can be abstract, but the river, rain, butterflies, trees, and people are not.

To create learning spaces emplaced in the local living world comes with more challenges than mere text-based climate literacy. Yet India is full of

powerful practitioners. ‘Nature Classrooms’ create a host of local nature-based resources which schools across Karnataka and other States use. Each year, the Youth Conservation Action Network trains a cohort of young teachers from various States, who then go back and establish nature programmes in their regions. The Canopy Collective and Green Hub in the Northeast train teachers to set up their own local nature programmes in the forest while simultaneously collaborating with biodiversity management committees.

The distinction these practitioners make is that learning is just not about nature; it takes places through and in nature. For human beings to grow as environmental stewards lifelong, direct engagement with nature is a necessary part of education, as Professor Louise Chawla points out. This needs to span meaningfully across developmental age groups, with younger children observing, playing in, and connecting with



local nature and older ones interacting with more complex issues and learning to be active citizens of a multispecies society.

But nature education faces many hurdles such as access to nature itself; various structural barriers to practice direct engagement; and the absence of educators who can facilitate learning in nature and a pedagogy which can support such educators. A pedagogy of action and engagement can also only be place-based – unique to, say, Ladakh’s landscape in Ladakh or Mumbai’s landscape in Mumbai. “Direct engagement with nature works far better than traditional classroom instruction for the same objectives,” says Professor Ming Kuo. Connecting with local nature can boost both literacy and conservation attitudes together.

The time has come for local nature-based learning to become a crucial part of school education. This is among the urgent pleas of the collapsing Earth systems. In almost every district, there are practitioners and communities who can make such a policy and pedagogy a reality overnight, if only there is political will. Children need nature connection, and nature needs children growing up in it. If such a diversified policy entered the mainstream, within a generation we would have healed our lands, waters, and ourselves.

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Sustaining our earth and nourishing our bodies

There is a need to develop a policy framework at the intersection of gender, climate, nutrition, and food value chains

Neeraja Nitin Kudimotri

The women of a self-help group in Khamdorgi village in Kanker district, Chhattisgarh, have spared 10 decimals of land for multi-layer farming to mitigate land degradation and under-nutrition, and to secure round-the-year incomes. They created four layers: the root layer to grow radish and beetroot; the surface layer for leafy vegetables; an above-the-surface layer for brinjal; and creepers (bottle gourd and long beans). They also planted two papaya trees, which are yet to bear fruits. Apart from minimising disruptions to the soil ecosystem, the initiative started to generate an income for the group in two months with minimal input costs while promising nutritional security.

An intricate relationship

Climate change, nutrition, and food security have an intricate relationship emphasising an urgent need to address issues at this intersection at both the global and the regional levels.

The Rome Declaration on Nutrition underscores the challenges existing food systems face in providing sufficient, safe, diverse, and nutrient-rich food for everyone. Approximately 800 million people worldwide don’t have reliable access to food. Two billion people suffer from iron and zinc deficiencies. Food systems today are also responsible for a third of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions.

Climate change impacts food value chains and affects agricultural yields, nutritional quality, food access, and energy-intensive processes. While a balanced diet is recommended, populations are often unable to have one thanks to disparities in production systems as well as individual dietary choices.

India itself suffers from many forms of malnutrition: 32% of children under five are underweight and 74% of the population can’t afford a healthy diet. Unhealthy diets are leading to a surge in the prevalence of non-communicable diseases.

However, it is also true that over the years, India has made notable progress in understanding the sustainability and nutri-



Farmers in a paddy field in the Godavari delta in Andhra Pradesh. THE HINDU

tional contents of diets. It is now important for India to reflect on whether healthy diets can help mitigate climate change as well. A sustainable diet needs to serve health and nutrition demands, meet cultural expectations, submit to economic necessities, and be just.

Women are especially disproportionately affected by climate change and poor nutrition, despite being important food-system stakeholders. In Chhattisgarh, some communities have more gender-just food systems - which are systems that recognise women as equal contributors to both productive and reproductive economies - with equal rights and entitlements, less drudgery, ability to access infrastructure and technologies, and with an even distribution of responsibilities. Communities in the State with a more gender-just food system were also seen to be more resilient against shocks like droughts. When women’s collectives are involved in decision-making about their livelihoods, they get better access to financial assets, natural resources, and knowledge. Not surprisingly, then, they are more productive and have better health and nutritional outcomes.

Indigenous food systems in Chhattisgarh have sustained communities for thousands of generations. They are derived mainly from the surrounding natural environment with minimum human intervention. Many

people live in forests and consume edible greens, fleshy fruits, root vegetables, mushrooms, grains, various forest produce, and wild meat. Working with local communities on their diets based on locally available food has been able to improve their nutrition status.

Chhattisgarh’s indigenous women have also been known to establish “famine reserves” of millets - which require far fewer inputs than paddy crops - by storing grains using traditional methods. And increasing their access to millets in this way can improve their bodies’ iron content.

Reducing emissions

A diet higher in plant-based foods is also more environmentally sustainable than one with more animal foods. The latter can be substituted with plant-based meats and dairy alternatives. We also need to shift to plants that consume less energy, land, and water, resulting in lower emissions. Researchers have found that the concentrations of protein, iron, and zinc could be 3-17% lower in crops grown in environments where the atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO2) concentration is 550 ppm versus when the CO2 concentration is just above 400 ppm (Matthew R. Smith and Samuel Myers, 2018). Given this warning, we need to adopt a value-chain approach to improve the benefits that accrue to communities, such as lowering emissions to-



gether with optimising for their dietary choices/needs from the household level.

One example of such an approach is ‘Millet Mission Chhattisgarh’, which the State government launched in 2021 to establish Chhattisgarh as India’s leading producer of millets. The State identified 85 blocks in 20 districts as key cultivation areas and allocated ₹170 crore and an input grant of ₹9,000 per hectare. The initiative has the potential to address both nutritional and environmental concerns by showcasing millets’ nutritional value, low water footprint, and climate resilience, and potential to further gender equality.

The way forward must thus include scaling up (as well as decentralising) diversified food production systems, promoting underutilised indigenous foods, and developing an analytical framework at the intersection of gender, climate, nutrition, and food value chains. Focusing on nutritious food alone will not help reduce the impact of food systems on the environment. We need to continuously and extensively monitor emissions linked to the production and distribution of food, and ensure the corresponding assessment tools are also more accessible to local communities.

Diverse foods consumption

In the final analysis, there is strong evidence that diverse food consumption can have a strong impact on nutrition and on per capita emissions. Focusing on nutritious diets alone will not help assess and reduce impact on the environment; it must be supported by linking diets to emissions as well. This in turn could force production systems to become more diverse, nutrition-sensitive, and emissions-sensitive.

Apart from national and regional policies, food production and consumption are also influenced by cultural values, societal norms, public policies, and markets - signalling a need to integrate society, government, and markets (*samaaj, sarkar aur bazaar*).

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 22, 1974

Sikkim ruler for closer co-operation with India

Gangtok, April 21: The Chogyal of Sikkim said here to-day that there was no change in the Government of India’s attitude towards Sikkim since the time of late Prime Minister Nehru. “They always appreciate our problems,” he added.

Speaking to a group of Indian correspondents who came to cover the Assembly elections, the Chogyal acknowledged India’s assistance and said, “We could not advance so fast if there was any lack of assistance from India.”

He stressed the need for closer co-operation and friendship with India and said, “We have got tremendous amount of Indo-Sikkimese co-operation and sound economic relations encouraged by late Prime Minister Nehru.”

The Chogyal said Indian assistance was in two parts. The economic part of the assistance was an important if not more than the political.

He told a questioner that Sikkim had undertaken a number of revenue earning and social welfare schemes and was trying to develop a self-generating economy of its own. It was their endeavour to see that the fruits of all these schemes reached all classes of people, he added. Asked whether the recent elections were fair and free, the Chogyal said “we tried to achieve free and fair elections. I am quite confident the Election Commission has done its best.”

The newly elected Assembly would be convened as soon as possible, he added.

Answering a question about abolition of private estates, envisaged in the Sikkim Congress election manifesto, the Chogyal said “This is a personal matter affecting the family. There is no difference between a person living in a private estate or a housesite.”

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 22, 1924

The Viceroy’s tour

Associated Press of India; Simla, April 21. His Excellency the Viceroy arrived to-day. H.E. had fair sport in the Jungles near Pinjore and during the three days, his Excellency was the guest of the Maharajah or Patiala. The party bagged a panther and a number of theetal stags.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of trains cancelled on the Ambala-Amritsar route

73 Trains on the route were cancelled on Sunday as farmers continued to squat on tracks at the Shambhu railway station in Punjab for the fifth day. The protesters have been demanding the release of three farmers arrested by the Haryana Police. PTI

The amount FPIs withdrew from domestic equities

5,200 in ₹ crore. Foreign investors dumped domestic equities in April due to tweaks in India's tax treaty with Mauritius, which would impose higher scrutiny on investments made here via Mauritius. PTI

Number of people evacuated for removal of a NATO bomb

1,300 Experts on Sunday removed a bomb left over in a southern Serbian city from the 1999 NATO bombing of the country. The MK-84 bomb has an explosive charge of 430 kilograms. AFP

The share of top 100 companies disclosing carbon emissions

51 In percentage. Supplementing the efforts of the Indian government to achieve a net-zero emission target by 2070, as many as 51% of the top 100 companies have started making disclosures voluntarily about carbon emissions. PTI

The foreign aid package passed by the U.S. House

95 in \$ billion. About \$61 billion is for Ukraine including \$13 billion for replenishing U.S. weapons stockpiles and nearly \$26 billion is for supporting Israel and providing humanitarian relief for people in Gaza. AP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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On the fall in household savings

The sharp reduction in household net financial savings, which has been at the heart of recent debates, and the rise in household debt burden are a cause for concern for growth and economic stability

ECONOMIC NOTES

Zico Dasgupta
Srinivas Raghavendra

The fall in household savings has been at the heart of recent debates in India. The decline in household savings is brought about by a drastic reduction in net financial savings as the household net financial savings to GDP ratio attained a four-decade low. Figure 1 shows the broad trend in household savings, physical savings and gold, and net financial savings. The sharp reduction in household net financial savings in 2022-23 has been associated with an overall fall in household savings despite marginal recovery in physical savings.

Interpreting lower financial savings
The net financial savings of the household is the difference between its gross financial savings and borrowing. The gross financial savings of a household is the extent to which its financial assets change during a period. The financial assets of households typically comprise bank deposits, currency and financial investments in mutual funds, pension funds, etc. Though household borrowing includes credit from non-bank financial corporations and housing corporations, the bulk of the borrowing comprises credit from commercial banks. In general, there are at least three distinct factors that can potentially bring about a reduction in household net financial savings.

First, households typically finance their additional consumption expenditure by increasing their borrowing or depleting their gross financial savings. By financing higher consumption expenditure at any given level of disposable income, lower net financial savings provide stimulus for aggregate demand and output in this case.

Secondly, when households finance higher tangible (physical) investment by increasing their borrowing or depleting their gross financial savings. The reduction in net financial savings in this case stimulates aggregate demand and output through the investment channel.

Third, when interest payment of a household increases say due to higher interest rates, households can meet the increased burden through borrowing or through depleting gross financial savings thereby inducing a reduction in net financial savings.

The first factor hardly played any role in the sharp reduction in gross financial savings in 2022-23 as the consumption to GDP ratio remained largely unchanged between 2021-22 (60.95%) and 2022-23 (60.93%). The second factor played only a limited role. While the gross financial savings to GDP ratio declined by 3 percentage points (7.3% to 5.3%) in 2022-23, household physical investment to GDP ratio increased only by 0.3 percentage point (12.6% to 12.9%) during the same period. Though higher borrowing is partly financed by interest income from financial assets, it can be largely attributed to higher interest payments of the household in the recent period.

Figure 2 reflects this phenomenon by depicting the trend in household borrowing to income ratio, debt to income ratio and the ratio between household physical savings and gross financial savings. The share of household borrowing in household (disposable) income registered a sharp spike in 2022-23. Such a rise in household liabilities was associated with a decline in

The rising debt burden

The household balance sheet trends indicate a broader change in the structure of the economy. The change in composition of the asset side of the household balance sheet towards financial assets indicate some degree of financialisation of the economy

Figure 1: Household savings, physical savings and financial savings as a share of GDP

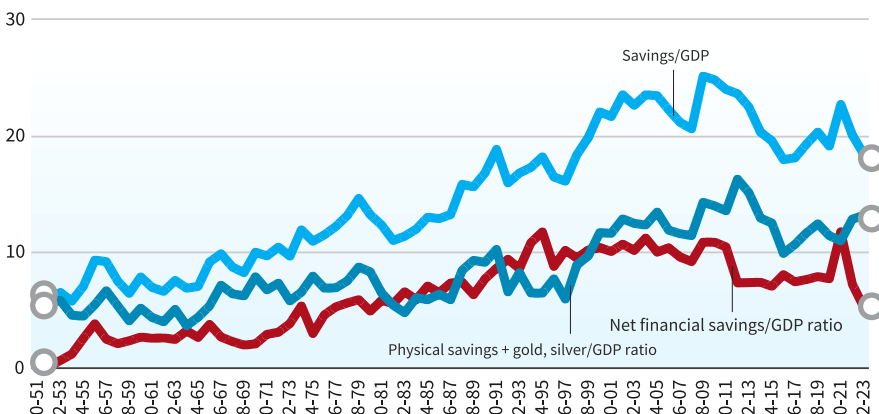


Figure 2: The household borrowing-income ratio, debt-income ratio and the ratio between household physical savings and gross financial savings

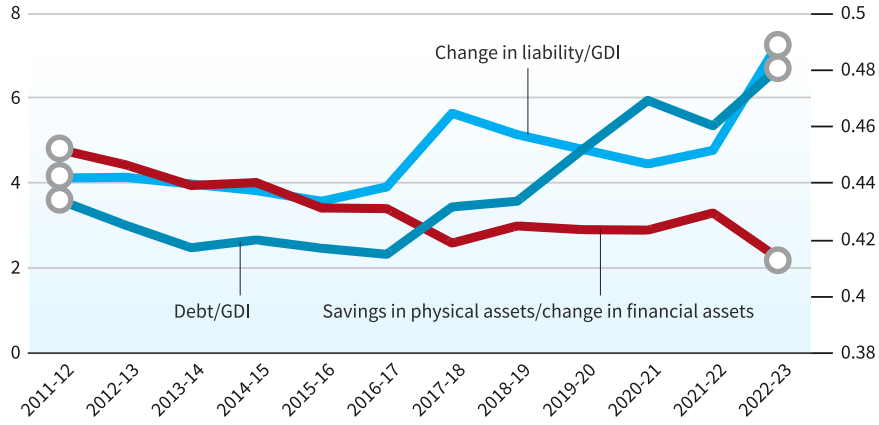


Figure 3: The gap between lending rate and interest rate-income growth

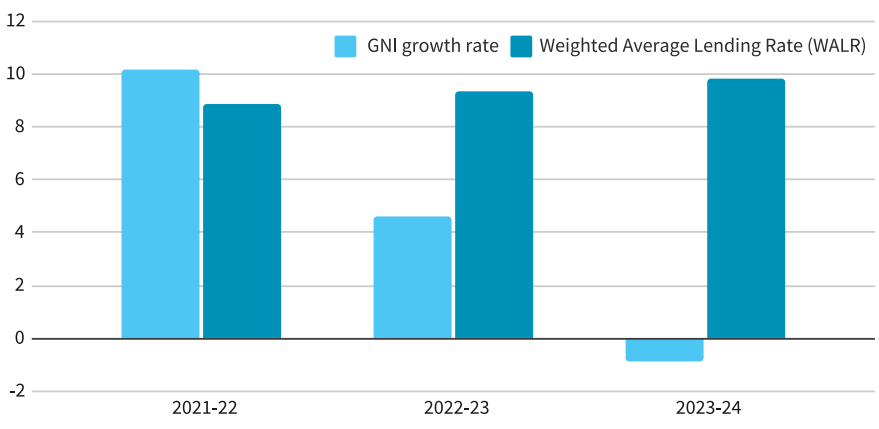
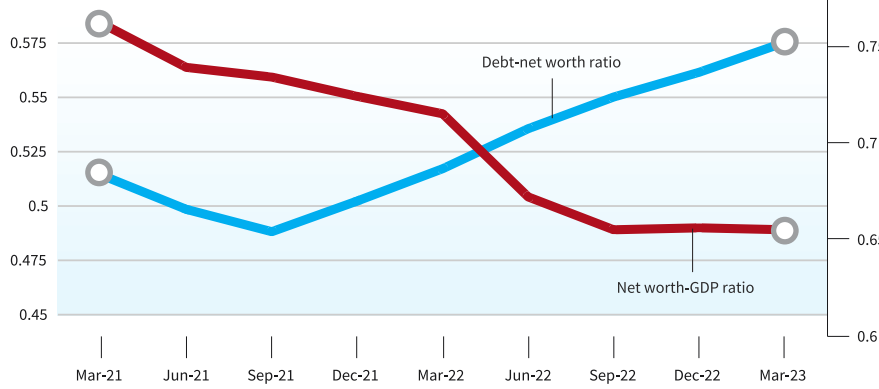


Figure 4: Household net worth GDP ratio and debt-net worth ratio



the physical savings to financial savings ratio, indicating a change in household asset composition in favour of financial assets.

Implication of higher debt burden

The rise in household debt burden has two concerns for the macroeconomy.

The first concern is about debt repayment and financial fragility. Since the repayment capacity depends on the income flow, a key criterion for evaluating a household's debt sustainability is the

difference between interest rate and the income growth rate. On the flip side, the interest payments from the households are the interest income of the financial sector. If households fail to meet their debt repayment commitments, then it reduces the income of the financial sector and deteriorates their balance sheets, which in turn can have a cascading effect on the macroeconomy if the latter responds by reducing their credit disbursement to the non-financial sector. Figure 3 shows the difference between

the weighted average lending rate of scheduled commercial banks and the growth rate of gross national income. Though the difference shows a declining trend since 2021-22, the indicator turned out to be negative in the 2023-24 period. The sharp reduction in interest rate and income growth gap is on account of lower income growth rate and higher lending rate of the commercial banks. The weighted average lending rate registered a sharp rise in the last two years, particularly due to the tight monetary policy stance of the RBI and the sharp rise in the call money rate during this period.

The second concern pertains to the implication on consumption demand. Over and above disposable income, the consumption expenditure of the household can be affected by their wealth, debt, and interest rate. Reduction in household wealth can lead to lower consumption expenditure as households may attempt to preserve their wealth position by increasing their savings.

Higher household debt can also reduce consumption expenditure in at least two ways. First, if higher household leverage is perceived as an indicator of higher default risk, then it may induce banks to indulge in credit rationing and reduce the credit disbursement. The consequent reduction in credit disbursement can adversely affect consumption. Second, higher debt can reduce consumption expenditure by increasing the interest burden, not to mention the effect of higher interest rates on consumption expenditure.

The Indian economy registered all these trends in the recent period. The financial wealth or the net worth of the household is the difference between the stock of financial assets and liabilities. As evident from figure 4, the financial wealth to GDP ratio of the household has registered a sharp decline in the recent period, along with a rise in leverage of the household as indicated by the rise in debt to net worth ratio. Not surprisingly, the growth rate in private final consumption expenditure during 2023-24 registered a sharp decline as compared to 2022-23.

Macroeconomic implication

The implications of the procyclical leverage by the households along with the compositional change in the asset side of the balance sheet, albeit with a fall in the level of savings, for the stability of economic growth is concerning.

First, given that both the flow indicator of liabilities to disposable income and the stock indicator of debt to net worth shows an increasing trend makes the households vulnerable.

Second, the policy mantra of higher interest rate to counter inflation by reducing macroeconomic output and employment can leave households with an increasing level of debt in their balance sheets and potentially push the households into a debt trap. Third, the implications of high interest rate on debt burden can have an adverse impact on the consumption of the households and consequently for aggregate demand.

The household balance sheet trends indicate a broader change in the structure of the economy. The change in composition of the asset side of the household balance sheet towards financial assets indicate some degree of financialisation of the economy which moves from a production-based economy to a monetary or financial exchange-based economy making the five-trillion-dollar economy both jobless and fragile.

Zico Dasgupta and Srinivas Raghavendra teach economics at Azim Premji University.

THE GIST

The decline in household savings is brought about by a drastic reduction in net financial savings as the household net financial savings to GDP ratio attained a four-decade low.

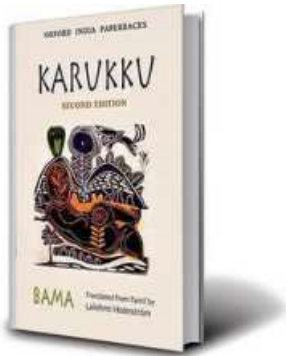
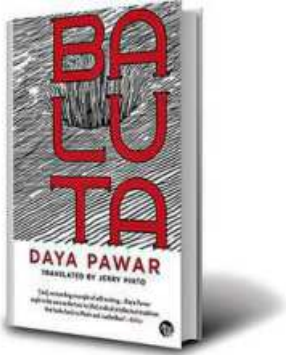
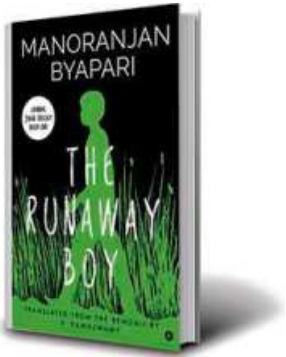
The rise in household debt burden has two concerns for the macroeconomy. The first concern is about debt repayment and financial fragility. Since the repayment capacity depends on the income flow, a key criterion for evaluating a household's debt sustainability is the difference between interest rate and the income growth rate.

The second concern pertains to the implication on consumption demand. Over and above disposable income, the consumption expenditure of the household can be affected by their wealth, debt, and interest rate.

BIBLIOGRAPHY



A brighter future: A young boy posing like Ambedkar during Ambedkar Jayanti, in Sangareddy in 2019. FILE PHOTO



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

I caught her eavesdropping on us today

She is the heir to the business and wants to be informed about all events in the office

S. Upendran

What is the meaning and origin of ‘eavesdrop’? (J. Banerjee, Kolkata)
The word consists of two syllables; the ‘eave’ in the first, sounds like the word ‘eve’, and the following ‘s’ is pronounced like the ‘z’ in ‘zip’, ‘zoo’ and ‘zen’. The second syllable is pronounced like the word ‘drop’. The word is pronounced ‘EVEZ-drop’, with the stress on the first syllable. When you eavesdrop on someone, you are secretly listening to an individual’s private conversation. It is a deliberate act, and it is for this reason that the word carries with it a sense of disapproval.

The kids were trying to eavesdrop on their parents’ conversation.

In the past, it was common practice to build a house with a sloping roof. This was done to ensure that when it rained, the water did not collect on the roof, but merely slid off and landed some distance away from the house. In order to achieve this, the roof was extended beyond the external walls of the house, and the portions which extended beyond the walls were called ‘eaves’. The word comes from the Old English ‘efes’ meaning ‘edge of a roof’. Eavesdrop was first used to refer to the place around the house where the water from the eaves dripped. So, the original ‘eavesdropper’ was someone who stood under the eaves and listened to the conversation inside the house.

What is the difference between ‘inquire’ and ‘enquire’?
The two words come from the Latin ‘quaere’ meaning ‘to ask’. Another word, which has a similar meaning, is ‘query’. The British make a distinction between the two verbs, ‘inquire’ and ‘enquire’. They use the word ‘enquire’ in mostly informal contexts; when they pose a very general question and request for information in a casual manner.

The elderly gentleman enquired when the bookstore would open.

In British English, the use of the word ‘inquire’ suggests that there is a formal investigation of some kind.

The police are inquiring into the activities of the gang members.

The Americans keep matters simple – they use only ‘inquire’ in all contexts. ‘Enquire’ is avoided.

What is the correct pronunciation of ‘heir’? (S. Lavanya, Chennai)
Native speakers of English pronounce it like the word ‘air’ – the letter ‘h’ remains silent. ‘Heir’ comes from the Old French ‘oir’ meaning ‘successor’. Nowadays, the word is mostly used to refer to a person who legally inherits money, property, etc. from a deceased individual – for example, the son or daughter inheriting the father’s or mother’s wealth.
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Soma Basu

Caste discrimination and untouchability have run unchecked in our country for decades even though constitutional law provides for the protection of the most vulnerable people. If poverty, as often quoted, has made it easy for subjugation to continue, it also gave birth to people who have given themselves to struggles against race and ethnicity and championed civil rights movements.

Though limited within the form, the protest literature that emerged from the exploitation and exclusion of Dalit communities, lent a new voice and identity to the marginalised. Over the decades, Dalit literature has become an empowering case for social equality and human dignity, and enriched and diversified Indian literature, ushering in fresh perspectives.

Towards inclusivity

Treated as a strong and separate category of literature in many Indian languages by literary associations, the documentation of Dalit history and experiences has contributed to a more inclusive understanding of the community.

The power of language of Dalit writers has challenged oppression, shaped consciousness, and sparked awareness and empathy. Small victories may have gained recognition, but it is pertinent to explore literature because it traces and enables connections with global histories of racism and social exclusion and unifies the need for advocacy for change.

The writings of one of the most iconic Dalit writers in the history of India, B.R. Ambedkar, including his *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) and *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables* (1948), are eye-openers. He explains caste is not simply a social evil, but a hierarchy, a system of persistent graded inequality, and that Dalit is not a caste but a realisation that is related to the experiences, sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest strata of society. The books provide instances of tyrannical practices against them (by upper caste Hindus) to awaken society to the caste system as Ambedkar always argued for social reforms over religion and politics.

Ambedkar: A Life (2022) by Shashi Tharoor is a deeply researched insight into Ambedkar’s birth into a family of Mahars, the humiliation and hurdles he overcame to fight the stigma against his community, his determination to make untouchability illegal and how he invested himself in an India with modern concepts of social justice.

Translated works have played a crucial role in making Dalit literature available to a wider audience. Gopinath Mohanty’s *Harijan* (1948) in Odiya is a radical novel of the 20th century featuring the life story of the Mehentars who lived in slums and were allowed to only do the job of cleaning latrines with bare hands. The hard-hitting story was translated into English by Bikram Das in 2021.

People on the margins

Baluta by Daya Pawar is said to be the first Dalit autobiography published in Marathi in 1978. It caused a sensation as it was a

rare documentation of life in rural Maharashtra and life in the slums, chawls and gambling dens of Bombay that gave shocking details of caste violence and untouchability practised in the 1940s and ’50s. A bestseller in Hindi and other major languages, it was also translated into English in 2015 by Jerry Pinto.

Three years later, he translated another revealing book, *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti* (1963), a collection of short stories by Baburao Bagul in Marathi, that revolutionised Dalit literature. The author talked about the pain, rage and horror of people on the margins as it was, refusing to understate the vicious and inhumane centuries old caste system. In the English translation, *When I Hid My Caste*, Pinto carries the irony and melancholy of the original stories.

Jina Amucha (1986), the first autobiography by a Dalit Woman, Baby Kamble, is also a powerful tale of redemption that reveals the inner world of Mahars, the oppressive caste and the prevalent patriarchal tenets. Translated into English by Maya Pandit in 2008, *The Prisons We Broke* is a feminist critique of Brahminical Hinduism and the memoir of cursed people. It unapologetically highlights the rituals and superstitions and the hard lives of women of Maharwada.

Bama’s *Karukku* (1992), chronicles her daily lived reality as a Tamil Dalit nun and is the first autobiography by a Dalit woman in Tamil. Translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom (2000), it reveals her courage to take on shame and her constant search for a sense of belonging and a connection to something

meaningful. Tamil author Perumal Murugan’s third novel *Koolamaathaari* (2000) deals with the travails of a young Dalit goatherd who is bonded to work for a family to repay his father’s debts.

Manoranjan Byapari has written *Chandal Jibon*, a trilogy in Bengali, evocatively tracing the story of a Dalit boy who arrives at a refugee camp in Bengal with his parents as a toddler and grows up to lead a life of fear, grappling with disparities and the evastating realities of hunger, caste violence and communal hatred in mid-20th century Bengal. The first two parts are translated into English by V. Ramaswamy as *The Runaway Boy* and *The Nemesis*.

Life as an untouchable

In the Hindi book *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki describes his life as an untouchable in India of the 1950s, when he was forced to eat scraps of leftover food and faced ridicule and deprivation. A major contribution to the archives of Dalit history, the book has been translated into *Seasons of the Palm* by Anu Prabha Mukherjee.

Meena Kandasamy along with M. Nisar has translated the Malayalam book *Ayyankali* (2022) into English, which talks about the life of social reformer and Dalit leader Ayyankali from Kerala in 1863-1941 when he opposed caste practices and fought for the rights of the oppressed.

There is a rich tapestry of books available respecting Dalit rights. These books roar with the message of inclusivity and are relevant in present times when there seems to be a lack of understanding for the marginalised.

THE DAILY QUIZ

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1
Mahavira is the 24th and latest Tirthankara in Jainism. Who was his spiritual predecessor?

QUESTION 2
The son of Siddhartha and Trishala, Mahavira’s birth and death place are located in which present-day Indian State?

QUESTION 3
Mahavira is said to belong to the same dynasty as Rama. Name it.

QUESTION 4
At which age is Mahavira said to have achieved the ‘Kevala Jnana’ under a Sal tree on the banks of the Rijubalika river?

QUESTION 5
What is common to Indrabhuti Gautama, Vayubhuti, Arya Vyakta, Sudharman, Manditaputra?

QUESTION 6
Which Nobel Laureate said this of Mahavira: “Mahavira proclaimed in India that religion is a reality and not a mere social convention. It is really true that salvation can not be had by merely observing external ceremonies. Religion cannot make any difference between man and man.”



Visual question:
What is this universal symbol of Jainism called?

Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz: 1. The chairman of the ISRO who was initially against the agreement for ‘Aryabhata’ with the Soviet Union. **Ans: M.G.K. Menon**
2. The USSR in 1984 issued a postage stamp featuring Aryabhata and these two Indian satellites. **Ans: Bhaskara-I and Bhaskara-II**
3. The area on the outskirts of Bengaluru selected as the location for the Indian Scientific Satellite Project. **Ans: Peenya**
4. In 1972, there was strong opposition to moving equipment from the Satellite Systems Division in this city to the new Bengaluru facility. **Ans: Thiruvananthapuram**
5. In March 1975, a panel recommended three names for the satellite. One was ‘Aryabhata’ and these were the other two. **Ans: Jawahar’ and ‘Maitri’**
Visual: Name the source. **Ans: Cygnus X-1**
Early Bird: Mohd. Amaan

Word of the day

Gingerly:
with extreme care or delicacy

Synonym: cautious

Usage: *They walked gingerly on the jagged stones.*

Pronunciation: bit.ly/gingerlypro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈdʒɪŋ(dʒ)əli/

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

Uncertain times

Global inflation fears return

To observers of global economy and finance, the air of apprehension at the recently concluded Spring meetings of the IMF and World Bank was not surprising at all. Two factors are currently playing out to unsettle world trade, public finances and capital markets: first, the spat between Israel and Iran and, second, the fiscal, and thereby inflationary impact of over 80 countries including India going to polls this calendar year.



The meetings as well the three reports released last week — the IMF’s Global Financial Stability Report, its Fiscal Monitor and the Bank’s World Economic Outlook — draw succour from the ‘resilience’ of growth amidst generally declining inflation since 2022. But there is no mistaking the elephant in the room — sticky inflation, and its fallout on financial stability and growth. The Fund-Bank reports clearly say that since the “progress towards inflation targets has somewhat stalled since the beginning of this year”, the Fed is expected to hold rates ‘higher for longer’. US consumer inflation in March at 3.5 per cent was above the target of 2 per cent. The reports recommend that “central banks should avoid premature monetary easing” — clearly an effort to check volatility in capital flows in emerging economies. While inflation was the main theme at the meetings, public debt and ‘fragmentation’ of global trade as medium term risks to inflation and growth too emerged as key takeaways.

Today’s global inflation stems from many sources: commodity shocks; disruption to trade arising out of protectionism and emergence of ‘geo-economic’ enclaves; rising cost of labour in the developed world (particularly the US) as a result of social safety nets; and a vicious cycle of public debt (led by US and China) and inflation feeding into each other. High public debt is believed to crowd out private investment, hurting growth and taxes, leading to more debt in the absence of spending cuts. A weak medium-term outlook on global growth is linked to this debt-inflation overhang. There are two notable issues here: first, US debt has become a global worry; and second, it has become difficult to roll back spending undertaken during crisis years.

The US’s fiscal deficit jumped to 8.8 per cent of GDP in 2023 from 4.1 per cent in 2022 (it was 11.1 per cent in 2021). China’s fiscal deficit was 7.1 per cent of GDP in 2023, against 7.5 per cent in 2022, while India’s (general government) was 8.6 per cent of GDP (9.2 per cent). The Fund-Bank duo is worried over whether US growth will be robust enough to offset rising debt. China’s tanking property sector could impact all asset classes, growth and trade. But the biggest challenge for multilateral bodies is to overcome fragmentation of trade. Trade blocs have been carved out along geo-political lines, with more trade taking place within blocs than between them. This could create untold inefficiencies, besides inflation.

FROM THE VIEWSROOM.

Stop food firms from catching them young

PT Jyothi Datta

Nestle’s infant food and controversy have never been too far from each other, and for several decades now.

The multinational had first earned the wrath of the global public health community over its marketing of infant formula. The health community pushed for stringent norms to ensure that infant formula was not marketed as a nutritious option over mother’s milk. And those guardrails remain till date. The latest allegations involve “added sugar” in infant food, in low- and middle-income countries including India, though the product was found to be “sugar free” back home in Switzerland, according to Public Eye, a Swiss investigative organisation. Nestle claims, it is in compliance with international and local norms. In 2003, soft drink and bottled water companies found themselves in the dock over allegations of pesticide residue in their products. Then too, the companies said, they were in compliance. Only that, standards

on pesticide residue were defined after this revelation. It is disingenuous for companies to argue that food products meet the law of the land — when the law clearly has scope for improvement. International companies sell their products on the claim that they bring in global best practices. So taking refuge behind arguments that the groundwater has pesticide (and therefore the end-product too), does not wash, especially for companies operating globally. Not long ago, Nestle’s Maggi noodles found itself in a soup over the presence of flavouring item MSG (monosodium glutamate). The explanation — it could be from naturally occurring glutamate. Nevertheless, the “No added MSG” label had misled many. Food companies need to understand that it’s not business as usual, anymore. The use of sugar and salt in foods, let alone infant food, requires serious attention from the food and health regulators. Countries already battle obesity, hypertension, diabetes and other non-communicable diseases. So anyone trying to catch them young, certainly needs to be stopped.



MUKUNDAN NARASIMHAN
SURESH MONY

Human beings are among the most fortunate of God’s creations, residing on possibly the only planet with life. Nature offers flora and fauna for food and coexistence. Earth, located in the ‘Goldilocks Zone’ around the Sun, provides the right balance of air, water, and heat. It’s the only known planet with ‘soil’. Earth’s biodiversity (today is Earth Day) implies an equilibrium among humans, animals, and plants — a mutual dependency where one species’ output benefits another. Yet, a significant portion of the global population, including the educated, disconnects from nature, recklessly destroying trees and forests meant for other living beings.

HUMAN DISRUPTION Humans have breached limits on six of the nine planetary boundaries crucial for Earth’s habitability as evidenced by: **Climate change:** A 1.5 degrees temperature rise since 1900 and significant rainfall pattern changes. **Biodiversity loss:** Extinction of 680 vertebrates and 600 plant species since the 16th century, and a 69 per cent wildlife decline since 1970. **Freshwater scarcity:** India’s per capita availability dropped 75 per cent, from 6047 cu. metres to 1486 cu. metres. **Land use:** Forests in India reduced from 33 per cent in 1952 to 21 per cent. **Nutrient pollution:** Nitrogen and phosphorus pollution causing water ‘eutrophication’ — turning the water green, malodorous, blocking sunlight, and releasing toxins. **Plastics pollution:** 19-23 million tonnes of plastic waste enter aquatic ecosystems annually; plastics manufacturing emits 3.3 per cent of global greenhouse gases. The other three boundaries, ocean acidification, air pollution, and ozone depletion remain within limits. Though crossing the six boundaries does not immediately cause disaster, it’s a high-risk warning, similar to high blood pressure. Human arrogance has upset Earth’s equilibrium, impacting animal, plant, and insect species. The Covid-19 outbreak in 2019 exposed the consequences of this imbalance. An integrated approach addressing health, socio-economic development, climate change, biodiversity, and the war against plastics, the theme for ‘Earth Day 2024’, is crucial to transform the global economy.

THE PLASTICS THREAT Plastic’s invention in 1907 by Belgian Leo Baekeland led to its widespread use due to affordability, durability, and aesthetic



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

The battle against plastics

GREEN AGENDA. Reduction and recycling of plastics must be taken up to save the planet

appeal. Major single-use plastic applications include: Food and Beverages – 31 per cent, Bottle and Container Caps – 16 per cent, Plastic bags – 11 per cent, Straws, Stirrers, Beverage Bottles, and Containers – 7 per cent. Additionally, 99 per cent of toys are plastic. Plastics take up to 1,000 years to decompose, accumulate on/under the top soil restricting the ingress of rainwater to the ground. Environmental degradation from plastics arises from: 1. Improper disposal and incineration releasing toxins into air and water. 2. Fragmentation into Microplastics contaminating soil, water, and air. 3. Harmful chemical release threatening wildlife and human health. 4. Ecosystem disruption altering habitats and reducing biodiversity. The usage of plastic products has grown in keeping with consumerist societies that symbolise human greed with constantly increasing consumption. In the Indian context of climate change, the plastics industry generates around 4 million tonnes of waste annually.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS To respect mother earth the munificent

Apart from banning non-essential plastics, manufacturers must be held accountable for the entire life-cycle of their products — collection, recycling, and disposal of plastic waste

divine provider to all living beings, some solutions include: 1. Reduce-Reuse-Recycle and adopt a circular economy In our quest for material prosperity, external possessions have become a vehicle for happiness. The true nature of happiness as per the Vedanta philosophy, lies within — *Ananda*, the bliss of the self; more material consumption and prosperity does not necessarily increase happiness. Hence, it is prudent to reflect and examine what is important and determine ‘what and how we consume’. A research study estimates the present value (PV) of the social cost of continuing a business-as-usual (BAU) structure in the plastics industry in India for the period 2025-2030 at \$541 billion and the PV of adopting a 100 per cent circular plastic value chain by 2030 at \$370 billion. Thus, the net present value of implementing 100 per cent circularity by 2030 is \$170 billion. This necessitates improved Recycling Infrastructure and novel technology adoption, for example the use of plastic waste along with bitumen and asphalt in road construction. 2. Changing mindset and adopting ‘Bio mimicry’ which is the practice of ‘learning from and mimicking the strategies found in nature to solve human designed challenges’ and recognising that economy is a subset of ecology. In this regard, waste is a human concept and does not exist in nature. 3. Some radical measures would include: a) Implement sweeping bans on non-essential plastics, such as straws, plastic utensils, and excessive packaging,

pushing for more sustainable alternatives. b) Producer Responsibility Laws to hold manufacturers accountable for the entire lifecycle of their products, including collection, recycling, and proper disposal of plastic waste. c) Heavy taxation on virgin plastics and plastic products to promote the use of recycled materials and drive consumer behaviour towards eco-friendly choices. d) Establish Plastic-Free Zones promoting a culture shift towards zero-waste living and sustainable consumption practices. e) Incentivise innovation to businesses and entrepreneurs developing solutions for plastic alternatives, recycling technologies and waste management. f) Community-led initiatives through grassroots movement for clean-up projects and educational campaigns, showcasing environmental stewardship and collective responsibility. The munificence of Mother Earth provides us the food we eat, the air we breathe, the water for drinking and irrigating crops and within the ecosystem, the forests, rivers, oceans and soils are intimately connected and thus germane to our very existence. This lone thought hopefully should be a motivation to save our Planet Earth, otherwise we are killing ourselves as well as the future generations.

Mony is Advisor, Rajagiri Vidyaapeeth, and SCMS Kochi; and Member PanIT Alumni India; Narasimhan is Founder and Director, PlaySolar Systems Pvt Ltd. Both are members of the Societal Impact Action Group of IIT Madras Alumni Association

IMF, World Bank debt revamp process needs a relook

Of particular concern is the IMF’s delay in putting together a package for financially-stressed nations

Neeraj Kumar

The recent Global Sovereign Debt Roundtable (GSDR) meeting held on the sidelines of the IMF and World Bank Spring Meetings on April 17 offered a ray of hope for low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) burdened by mounting debt. The IMF and World Bank acknowledged significant progress in tackling global debt vulnerabilities. However, a key challenge remains: expediting debt restructuring processes and ensuring fair treatment across creditors. The world faces a daunting challenge: global debt reached a staggering \$235 trillion in 2022, with low-income developing countries particularly vulnerable. According to Unctad’s Least Developed Countries Report 2023, the total external debt of Least Developed Countries hit a record \$570 billion in 2022 — more than four times higher than in 2006. As a result of this growing debt burden, they are spending five times more on debt servicing than a decade ago. In the past three years alone, the number of sovereign debt defaults in these countries has surged to 18,

outstripping the total of the previous two decades. The situation is particularly dire for Low-Income Countries, with over 60 per cent currently in debt distress or having defaulted on their obligations. This unsustainable debt situation creates a vicious cycle. LMICs often rely on borrowing to finance crucial infrastructure projects and social programmes. However, excessive debt can become a major drag on economic growth. High debt servicing costs divert resources away from productive investments, hindering long-term development prospects. The IMF and World Bank through tools like Debt Sustainability Frameworks (DSFs), assess a country’s ability to repay its loans. They also offer financial assistance and policy advice to help countries implement reforms that promote economic stability and growth.

THE TIMEFRAME One of the key issues addressed at the GSDR was the lengthy timeframe associated with debt restructuring processes. Delayed resolutions not only create uncertainty for debtor countries but also exacerbate economic hardship. The delay in finalising IMF programme and debt restructuring package for



IMF. Working on debt sustainabilityREUTERS

Ethiopia under the G20 Common Framework for debt treatments has caused particular concern. Stakeholders have specifically sought clarification over the efficacy of the IMF’s Ethiopia package and the reasons for its delay. Such transparency would not only benefit Ethiopia but also strengthen confidence in the IMF’s role as a facilitator of debt resolution. The GSDR discussions proposed a potential solution: setting a target of programme approval within 2-3 months for future debt restructuring cases, including under the G20 Common Framework for debt treatments. This would require streamlining communication and information sharing between debtor countries, official

bilateral creditors (government-to-government loans), and private creditors. Another critical aspect of debt restructuring is ensuring comparability of treatment (CoT) between different creditor groups. This principle dictates that all creditors holding similar claims should receive comparable treatment in terms of debt relief. Inconsistent CoT can create an uneven playing field, potentially undermining the overall debt restructuring effort. The GSDR discussions emphasised the need for enhanced information exchange and coordination between official bilateral creditors and private creditors. This would allow debtor countries to negotiate with full knowledge of how CoT will be assessed, facilitating a more efficient and equitable resolution. While the GSDR meeting represents a step forward, significant challenges remain. The IMF and World Bank must continue to play a proactive role in facilitating communication, promoting transparency, and advocating for faster and fairer debt restructuring processes.

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Apprenticeship guarantee In these times of divisive and confrontational politics it must go to the credit of the Congress to include, as part of its five “guarantees” for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, the Right to Apprenticeship for every diploma holder or college graduate below the age of 25. A one-year apprenticeship gives an assured first job with a private or a public sector company along with a stipend of ₹1 lakh a year to every youth. Estimates put just 1 per cent of people who enter the workforce annually are apprentices in India. In any modern economy, apprentices should

comprise 3-4 per cent of the total workforce, which would roughly translate into a total of around 20 million apprentices. India is poised to reap its demographic dividend for at least another decade, as the youth population will be 23 per cent of the population in 2036, down from the 27 per cent in 2021, but still one of the highest among nations. But lack of earnest skilling would result in poor harvest of human potential. **R Narayanan** Navl Mumbai **The new gold rush** Referring to the article on “the fuelling the new gold rush” (April 20), I sense

that gold rates have always had a sporadic rise whenever a crypto asset like bitcoin plummets. Excluding the first halving on November 28, 2012, all the subsequent halving episodes have made Bitcoin experience a short-term sell-off and also fuelled an upward-rally in gold prices there-after. Gold rates spiked from \$1477/Oz to \$2038/Oz in a matter of 88 days after the 2020 halving and a similar trend was witnessed after July 2016 too. This is evidence of transferring of value from Crypto Assets to Real gold. The capital from the crypto sell-off flows into yet another dead asset called Gold thus triggering an

unrealistic price rise. Moving forward in both short and long run, a mean reversion in gold prices is conspicuous. **Nandagopal** Chennai **Make easy health insurance** People worldwide are living longer. Today most people can expect to live into their sixties and beyond. Every country in the world is experiencing growth in both the size and the proportion of older persons in the population. While this shift in distribution of a country’s population towards older

ages — known as population ageing — started in high-income countries, it is now low- and middle-income countries that are experiencing the greatest change. By 2050, two-thirds of the world’s population over 60 years will live in low- and middle-income countries. There is a significant difference in the premium of a young person versus a senior citizen. However, this may vary from insurer to insurer. Let the seniors plan and bring out the best health care policy for the future care and health benefits. **CK Subramaniam** Mumbai

Global IT spend bottoming out

Near-term outlook muted; medium-term offers hope

Three big information-technology (IT) software companies — Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Infosys, and Wipro — have reported weak results in the fourth quarter, January-March (Q4FY24), and full year FY24. All three have also issued cautious advisories and guidance (TCS does not give revenue guidance).

However, the management of these three does think although there's no visible resurgence in demand, the second half of FY24 (October 2023-March 2024) may have seen a bottoming out. They expect a gradual recovery in earnings momentum and in demand, with late FY25 and FY26 seeing better conditions across the globe. The three have a presence across all geographies and verticals. At end-March 2024, they employed a combined workforce of nearly 1.2 million and reported aggregate FY24 revenues of over ₹4.8 trillion (around \$59 billion). Given their significant size and their presence across all segments and every geography, their projections and assessments of trends in FY25 are likely to hold good for the vast majority of other IT businesses, especially the large ones which don't operate in small, specific niches.

The big three reported muted revenues in Q4FY24. Wipro's revenues for Q4FY24 were marginally down quarter-on-quarter (Q-o-Q) and lower 6.5 per cent compared to a year ago. Infosys reported a 2.2 per cent decline in revenues Q-o-Q and flat year-on-year (Y-o-Y). TCS did report 2.2 per cent Y-o-Y revenue growth and 1.1 per cent Q-o-Q growth. All three had a declining headcount for Q4FY24 compared to Q3FY24. Compared to a year ago, they trimmed their aggregate workforce by over 63,000 employees. Workforce utilisation is also still below historic levels despite downsizing. The three have also seen attrition rates reducing, to 12 per cent or early teens, which is less than half what it was a couple of years ago. The combination of a lower headcount and lower attrition rates indicates weak demand across the industry. All three firms point to weak discretionary spending being a major area of concern. While they have all won deals, clients across most verticals have shelved, or postponed, discretionary spend. As such, the demand environment remains weak. The advisories indicate this is unlikely to change substantially until there is a global pickup in macroeconomic growth and clients restart discretionary projects. All three are looking for new opportunities in areas like generative artificial intelligence (AI), and in verticals like hyperscalers (Cloud service providers) and data centres.

Some investors and analysts say the market has bottomed out and point to the fact that all three businesses have been able to maintain margins even though revenue growth has been poor or non-existent. IT consulting firm Gartner believes global expenditures across the \$5 trillion IT market will grow by a significant 8 per cent in calendar 2024 (the first three quarters of FY25). Gartner also thinks the \$139 billion Indian market for IT services and products will grow at better than 13 per cent. If this is substantially correct, this could be a demand booster and Indian firms are likely to benefit to a greater degree. Gartner says increased spend could be focused in the IT consulting segment. Chief investment officers are looking at investment in analytics and generative AI. In India, spending on device and equipment software and on data centre systems is likely to see sharp uptrends. Gen AI could also start finding applications in optimising internal processes and delivery models. While that prognosis offers hope in the medium term, the near-term outlook continues to look muted.

Looming oil risk

Volatility in crude oil markets threatens macro stability

Volatility in global crude oil markets has always been bad news for India. On Friday, the first deputy managing director of the International Monetary Fund, Gita Gopinath, warned there was the risk of a "severe oil shock". The backdrop for her warning is heightened tensions in West Asia. Israel's war in Gaza smoulders on; the worst-case scenario, a broader conflict that renders it impossible for crude oil exports to be fulfilled, seemed more likely for part of last week as Israel and Iran exchanged missile salvos. The immediate danger seemed to be avoided when Iranian state media downplayed the effects of the Israeli response. While some in Hamas (and probably in Tel Aviv) might be willing to see the expansion of the battlefield, the United States and Arab powers seem to want to keep it contained.

However, the enhanced risks caused turmoil in the oil markets. News of the Israeli strike sent the price of a barrel of Brent crude oil, the international benchmark, over \$90; it retreated following the Iranian media response. This is considerably higher than the "expected" level — which is relatively high following production cuts agreed to by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) and its partners. Big oil producers are likely under-producing by almost two million barrels a day. Crude oil prices are more than 10 per cent higher than at the beginning of 2024.

A deeper examination provides more insights. While the headline price of a barrel of Brent crude oil is now at \$87, the second- and third-order responses are worth noting. Oil futures have not spiked upwards noticeably. In fact, they were at their highest before Iran sent its first set of missiles towards Israel. Lower futures prices suggest traders continue to be confident that a broader conflict, and thus an oil supply crisis, can be prevented. Part of this is because there is considerable spare petroleum production capacity in the system following the cuts by Opec-plus. Muted demand projections also provide some support to those who believe there is a ceiling on crude oil prices. A large buffer of crude oil has also been built up, including by large consumers such as China. But underlying this confident stability in futures prices is a scramble to insure against risk. Such risk is visible in unusually high intraday trading and volatility. The overall Vix index, which measures volatility and the cost of hedging on Wall Street, hit its highest level since the week after Hamas' attack on Israel in October last year. The volume of trading of option derivatives based on the Vix index hit a six-year high on Friday. Similar records are visible in oil options trading. The amount of options that bet on a price rise has reached the highest since the disruptions of 2020, the first pandemic year.

Indian policymakers cannot afford to be too sanguine about the future path of oil prices. The data shows India is ever more dependent on energy imports. High crude oil prices — especially if they go above \$110 a barrel — will create inflationary pressures, stress the fisc, and cause instability on the external account. The dangers of an oil price spike must be planned for now.

Lower-middle-income trap

Without structural transformation in India's workforce, growth will necessarily sputter in the future

ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY



Much has been written about a recent report issued by the International Labour Organization (ILO), together with the Institute for Human Development (IHD), about India's employment situation since 2000. The report, which uses publicly available government data but takes it a step forward by comparing the results from surveys that had been conducted with different methodologies, makes for disheartening reading. The report writers' interpretation of the data can be starkly summarised: any structural transformation of the Indian workforce has run into severe problems. Indeed, in some aspects — such as those dependent on agriculture — there are signs the country is moving backwards.

What is meant by a structural transformation? Both economic theory and economic history teach us that poorer countries have a significant amount of "reserve labour" in agriculture — individuals who are relatively unproductive because of the unmodernised nature of that sector. When employment opportunities open up in the formal sector, particularly in mass manufacturing, those soak up some of agriculture's reserve labour. This creates greater output in manufacturing while not notably reducing output in agriculture — since the excess labour there was unproductive. In the aggregate, wages and incomes increase and over time the country stops being poor and becomes rich.

The ILO-IHD report argues that "the process of structural transformation has been slow in India" and even quotes it as being "stunted". It points out two relevant facts about this process in India. First, any transfer of labour out of agriculture was primarily to construction and services. The share of manufacturing employment remained at 12 to 14 per cent. Second, even this movement "reversed after 2019, with a substantial rise in agricultural employment".



POLICY RULES

MIHIR S SHARMA

The absorption of excess agricultural labour into the "services" sector is not something we should be comfortable with. The services sector varies in nature from roadside one-man street food stalls to high-end information technology companies. But it is the former that is demonstrating absorptive capacity for labour, not the latter. Construction is another matter: it has been widely understood that it is the first port of call for migrants from rural India to the cities.

Work by the economist Amit Basole, the head of the Centre for Sustainable Employment at Azim Premji University, has compared India's performance at absorbing agricultural labour with other countries'. At least till 2019, Prof Basole concludes that "the performance in pulling workers out of agriculture is as expected given its level and growth of GDP per capita, but the same is not true for pulling workers out of the informal sector". More precisely, he finds that "the proportion of the workforce in agriculture [in 2019] is around 8.8 percentage points higher than expected [based on a cross-country comparison]," while "for construction, India is a large outlier with its employment share being nine percentage points higher than predicted". In other words, excess labour in India was shifting to informal jobs in the non-agricultural sector, particularly in construction — but not particularly fast.

The ILO-IHD report's concern that this has since reversed is based on data that "the share of employment in agriculture experienced a significant reversal, rising from 42.4 per cent in 2019 to 46.4 per cent in 2021 and then falling marginally to 45.4 per cent in 2022". Whether this is entirely due to the effects of the pandemic remains to be seen.

Where and how India's working-age population is employed is not relevant merely for sectoral shares. This lack of transformative structural shifts

Are MF stress tests of any use?

In early March this year, alarmed by the flood of money rushing into smallcap funds, after a massive one-year bull run, the market regulator asked mutual funds to consider moderating flows and rebalancing portfolios, since the flows could make the market frothier. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) also asked mutual funds to conduct a "stress test" for small and midcap schemes and publish the results. The stress test covers liquidity, volatility, valuation and portfolio turnover in such schemes, "along with guidance in simple language, assumptions and methodology, to enable the investor to understand the risk associated". The core of the stress test is this: the number of days required to liquidate 25 per cent and 50 per cent of smallcap and midcap portfolios.

Regulating the flows would indeed amount to directly controlling the frothiness of the market (it is money that mainly drives stocks; money in turn is driven by sentiment and earnings), but the stress test is another matter. There are three problems with the regulator-mandated stress test. Firstly, at the heart of stress tests is a fallacy: it is assumed that the average volume in a frothy, bullish market will continue in a sharply falling market. But the point about markets is that liquidity can expand and contract dramatically. In a rising market, there are plenty of buyers and sellers. Under extreme stress, there are no buyers, only desperate sellers. Volumes simply disappear. How many days it would take to liquidate 50 per cent or 25 per cent of the portfolio will vary enormously depending on market climate. No wonder a veteran portfolio manager has called the stress test results "useless". Stress tests do not take into account what is technically called non-linearities and fat tails, or extreme situations which cause amplification effects,

leading to chaos, confusion, contagion, and impulsive decisions, even by experienced market participants. It is similar to the scene when someone shouts "fire" in a crowded theatre.

Secondly, what is an investor going to do with a bunch of disparate metrics like the number of days to liquidate a portfolio or concentration (in largecap, midcap and smallcap), standard deviation, beta, portfolio turnover and price-to-earnings ratio? How will she decide to switch from a fund with adverse metrics to a better one? What if a fund scores high on some parameters and lower on others? For example, a fund may have low-valuation stocks (which may decline less in a falling market) but these stocks take longer to liquidate; how will an investor weigh the merit of the first with the drawback of the second? She will then have to weigh other metrics like standard deviation, portfolio beta and turnover ratio. Doesn't someone need to assign weights to all these factors and put all the funds on a common footing, calculate the total score and then create a ranking? If this sounds like too much work, is there any other logical way to use these factors? If I can indeed rank funds based on the results of a stress test, what action will I take? Will a higher-scoring fund lead to a higher risk-adjusted return? How will I know? Has anyone back-tested how useful these stress test parameters are for making better investment decisions? Assuming we focus only on one important factor — the number of days that it takes to liquidate a portfolio — what should I do, if I am a long-term investor in a systematic investment plan (SIP)? SBI Mutual Fund, which has 82 per cent in



IRRATIONAL CHOICE

DEBASHIS BASU

Restoring a broken global order



BOOK REVIEW

JUSTIN VOGT

In recent years, geopolitical upheaval and the return of great-power competition have brought a fascinating revival of first-order questions: How does deterrence work? Does economic interdependence make countries less likely to fight? Does rising prosperity force authoritarian regimes to reform?

David E Sanger's *New Cold Wars*, written with his long-time researcher Mary K Brooks, tells the story of how those abstract debates have led to real-world consequences. Sanger, a veteran reporter for *The New York Times* who is at home in the arcane world of strategic studies, has crafted a cogent, revealing account of how a generation of American officials have grappled with

dangerous developments in the post-Cold War era — the rise of an enduringly authoritarian China, the return of state-on-state conflict in Europe — that have produced a geopolitical mash-up of old and new.

Take the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. "Trench warfare!" Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said to Sanger about six months into the war. "For a while we thought this would be a cyber war. Then we thought it was looking like an old-fashioned, World War II tank war. And then, there are days when I thought they are fighting [expletive] World War I." As Sanger writes: "Milley had put his finger on one of the most unsettling features of the new geopolitical era: It is part 1914, part 1941 and part 2022. All at once."

Despite the book's title, then, what Sanger depicts is less reminiscent of the Cold War than of earlier phases of geopolitical competition, in which interests mattered far more than ideology and the players were interdependent rather than split into blocs.

Sanger begins his tale with the crumbling of the so-called Washington Consensus that took hold in the 1990s: the belief that economic globalisation and the spread of free markets would foster stability and secure American dominance of a "rules-based" international order.

Back then, Bill Clinton argued that China's entry into the World Trade Organization and the rise of the World Wide Web would spur the country's democratisation. George W Bush thought that sharing an enemy in the war on terrorism might lure Vladimir Putin closer to the West, even as Nato expanded to Russia's borders. But "just about every assumption across different administrations was wrong," an unnamed advisor to President Biden admits. "I was as guilty as anyone else."

It's a rare anonymous quote in a book built on extensive on-the-record interviews with an ensemble cast of foreign-policy professionals narrating their own efforts to adjust as reality ceased to conform to conventional expectations.

Consider Kurt Campbell, a veteran Asia hand and an early sceptic of the decades-long elite consensus that aiding China's economic growth and enmeshing it in the US-led world order was, as he puts it, "almost a mystical thing that must be sustained". Campbell served in the Clinton and Obama administrations; over time, he came to advocate a more aggressive approach to China. But his arguments went largely unheeded — until, strangely enough, the Trump era.

One theme that emerges in *New Cold Wars* is the surprising continuity between the Trump and Biden administrations when it comes to China. With Campbell as a top advisor on China, Biden has largely kept in place Donald Trump's trade-war tariffs on Chinese goods, amped up Trump-era export restrictions to slow China's technological progress and talked tough on Taiwan. Ironically, Sanger

writes, "a handful of Trump's aides laid the foundation for one of the signature efforts of the Biden administration".

Sanger also deftly illustrates the challenges of deterrence. In the fall of 2022, at the peak of American alarm about Putin's nuclear brinkmanship in Ukraine, Lloyd Austin, the US secretary of defence, warned his Russian counterpart, Sergei Shoigu, that if the Russians used a tactical nuclear weapon, the United States would directly intervene and destroy, as one official recalls to Sanger, "what is left of your military in Ukraine". Shoigu bristled, but the warning seemed to work. There has, of course, been no nuclear strike and, as a Biden aide points out to Sanger, no Russian attacks on any of the bases in Poland that the United States uses to deliver weapons to Ukraine. On the other hand, "it was impossible to know whether Putin believed the threat",

Sanger writes. And perhaps with good reason: Some Biden aides admit to Sanger that they were unsure if the US President would truly make good on it.

In this mostly laudatory account of Biden's foreign policy, the Gaza war is one area in which Sanger finds fault. Biden's hesitancy to use American leverage to restrain Israel "looked and felt like a failure of clear leadership", he writes.

As Sanger makes clear, with America no longer an unchallenged hegemon, the fate of the US-led order rests more than ever on the ideas, beliefs and emotions of people far outside the Beltway. One finishes this book wishing for equally comprehensive portraits of the view from elsewhere, especially Moscow and Beijing.

Don't hold your breath, though: The American foreign policy establishment has erred many times, but the authoritarians it confronts (and the ones it coddles) would never allow a reporter like Sanger to peer inside their systems and reveal what he finds.

The reviewer is an executive editor of Foreign Affairs
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OPINION

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{ OUR TAKE }

A push for FCI modernisation

Injection of funds can improve the efficiency of food procurement and distribution system

India’s farm output has increased from a mere 50 million tonnes in 1950-51 to over 300 million tonnes in 2022-23, helping to avoid a scary Malthusian world of food production not keeping pace with population growth. In 2009, when the country saw its worst drought in three decades, it still managed to produce a million more tonnes of food grains than it did in 2007, a normal year. In the British period, drought was synonymous with famines, which would kill hundreds of thousands. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that one of the greatest successes of food policy anywhere is India’s Green Revolution of the 1960s-70s. It not only brought together the right mix of incentives and subsidies to increase food production but also came up with ways to store grain safely in state-owned granaries and distribute them across the country. Agencies, such as the United Nations’ Food and Agricultural Organization, have hailed India’s ability to sustain its food mission even during the Covid-19 pandemic, preventing death and hunger.

The lynchpin of the country’s behemoth food distribution network, which reaches 800 million poor Indians, is the Food Corporation of India (FCI). An organisation central to India’s food security, FCI has rightly embarked upon a mission to modernise all aspects of its operations and become a corporate entity, rather than merely being another *sarkari* institution marked by large inefficiencies. Through a recent notification, the Centre has raised the authorised working capital of FCI to ₹21,000 crore from ₹10,000 crore, the biggest hike ever, which in official circles is being described as a “strategic step towards enhancing the operational capabilities of the FCI in fulfilling its mandate effectively”.

FCI, a state-owned corporation through which 70% of federal food subsidies are routed, is critical for the country’s food security as it procures millions of tonnes of farm produce at federally fixed minimum support prices (MSP). Capital injection of ₹21,000 crore will streamline its finances by reducing the need for debt and funding a digitisation drive. On the cards is an integrated countrywide digital platform that will plug gaps in inventory management. The agency is already working on harnessing artificial intelligence to detect fraud by stakeholders in grain handling. In concrete terms, FCI’s modernisation bid is a quest to bring efficiency to its operations, a goal every state-owned enterprise should chase.

Vinesh’s defiance of body, mind and time

There were some, not least in the former Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) administration, who believed Vinesh Phogat’s career as a wrestler was over. Her day out in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on Saturday showed she is far from it. If anything, her resolve is even stronger. After battling obstacles from body and mind while taking on the might of the powerful, Vinesh secured the 50-kg quota spot for India in the Paris Olympics by dominating her way into the final of the Asian Olympic Qualifiers. It’s a third straight Olympic quota for the two-time World Championships medallist — one that stands out in its volume of grit.

For one, she spent the better part of last year away from the mat, on Delhi streets in a public protest against the then WFI president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, who has been accused of sexual harassment. The off-mat battle was lengthy and ugly, taking a toll on its leading faces. Shashi Malik quit the sport while Bajrang Punia was a shadow of himself in the selection trials for these qualifiers.

Then, there was resistance from the body. In August last year, Vinesh underwent knee surgery. It delayed her return for another six months, and she finally made a comeback only at the National Championships in February. There was also the small matter of cutting weight, one of the most demanding tasks in wrestling. With an Olympic quota already secured in her usual 53-kg class, she competed in 55-kg at the Nationals and won the national trials in 50-kg. At age 29, dropping weight was fraught with risk, but Vinesh was unrelenting.

At Bishkek, in her first international competition in almost a year and a half, Vinesh ensured the job was done, defying physical and mental odds and the test of time. That’s no mean achievement. Paris awaits.

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



The missing election plank: Climate action

The elections present an opportunity for meaningful dialogue, yet our politicians and political parties seem to have overlooked the importance of this issue

Recently, I travelled to Vidarbha and Uttarakhand to cover elections there. I was expecting the typical dry and hot weather in Vidarbha. But the reality was different. As our plane circled over Nagpur, it started raining. In stark contrast, when we arrived in Uttarakhand, temperatures were soaring, with the daytime mercury frequently crossing 30 degrees Celsius.

Climate is changing and requires our attention. But who will step up to address this issue? Should the burden fall solely on ordinary citizens? What actions are our governments taking? Currently, our country is in the middle of Lok Sabha elections, but have you heard even a single word from any prominent leader on this concern? It is disheartening that real issues affecting everyday people are missing from our political discourse. Instead, we are subject to a

barrage of clichés, accusations, and insinuations that have no relevance to the daily struggles of the common man. This lack of political engagement on crucial human concerns reveals disturbing and insensitive self-harming tendencies.

Let us take the Bengaluru drinking water crisis for example.

The United Nations (UN) has listed Bengaluru among the most likely to face an acute water crisis. According to UN, if Bengaluru’s current water reserve drops by 40% by 2030, its existence will be jeopardised. The situation currently is so terrible that 6,900 of the 13,900 public borewells in the city have dried up, according to Karnataka’s deputy chief minister DK Shivakumar. Many companies have asked their staff to work from home. This city with a population of 14 million generates \$50 billion in revenue each year. A lot of effort would have gone into getting it to this point. But as a Hindi adage goes: *Bin paani sab soon* (Without water, nothing is left).

The condition of the country’s capital Delhi is no better than Bengaluru’s. People here struggle for hours each day to procure the water they need, which is delivered to their settlements by tankers. They often quarrel with each other for their fair share of water. In a recent such incident, a woman, Soni, was killed. Now

the ruling party and the lieutenant governor are in conflict over this subject. This will not bring Soni back to life or provide respite to the thirsty. Someone claimed that the next world war would be fought over water. We can see it taking shape around us.

The crises at Bengaluru and Delhi, both cities with long histories, can, to an extent, be attributed to flaws in their development planning, but the crisis in Gurugram, which developed only over the last four decades, is baffling. This little town near Delhi wasn’t expected to develop into a commercial centre so quickly. Today, the city has hundreds of domestic and foreign company offices. Some of the costliest residential properties in the National Capital Region (NCR) are located there, but it faces water scarcity. The Gurugram Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA) warned a month ago that the city’s drinking water demand was 675 MLD (million litres per day), and the supply could not surpass 570 MLD under any circumstance.

Another related concern is that of air pollution. During Diwali, people with allergies and asthma face heightened risk from their conditions. Heavy fog and air pollution cover all of North India. The situation reaches a point where schools are forced to declare holidays. Political



Lack of political engagement on crucial human concerns reveals disturbing and insensitive self-harming tendencies

AFP

cal parties have attempted to attribute the issue to stubble burning by farmers in Punjab and Haryana, but studies have disproved that stubble burning alone was not responsible for air pollution in the NCR. Farmers do need to be given the resources to avoid stubble burning, but other sources of pollution must also be addressed. We cannot expect to improve a situation by making it worse. Until recently, our governments have been used to doing just that.

This situation must change, but the question is: How? The current elections present an ideal opportunity for meaningful dialogue, yet our politicians and political parties seem to have overlooked the importance of focusing on the issue. The first phase

of the elections has already concluded without much discussion on the matter. If you are yet to cast your vote, take this chance to make a difference. As candidates make their rounds in your area, engage them with critical questions regarding their agenda on climate issues. It is essential to challenge them and understand their commitment to addressing these concerns. Remember, the actions or inactions of our leaders cannot diminish the significant role of the public voice in a democracy. We must recognise and utilise this powerful tool.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, Hindustan. The views expressed are personal

Is there such a thing as too much Hindutva?

Nestled between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea, the Dakshina Kannada parliamentary constituency is at the heart of the region that has come to be known as the laboratory of Hindutva in Karnataka. The old Dakshina Kannada district included the Udupi Sri Krishna Matha which was, in several ways, the southern base of the Ram temple movement. In this round of Lok Sabha elections, the political laboratory of Dakshina Kannada is testing a question that could have ramifications for the rest of India: Is there such a thing as too much Hindutva?

The answer to this question is deeply embedded in the political economy of the region. Dakshina Kannada and the neighbouring district of Udupi were the heartland of the communist movement in Karnataka. It was the district where the political battle was typically between the Congress and the communist parties, both the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM). Much of the political discourse was around the issue of land to the tenant, with the Bunts being the major landlords and the Billavas being the most important caste among the tenants. Everyday politics was between the cadre of the communists and the come-one-come-all approach of the Congress.

Things changed dramatically after land reforms in the 1970s. With the Billavas being given the land they were tilling, they were no longer as attracted to the communists, especially when the latter took up the cause of agricultural labour against the new landowners. The Billavas moved to the Congress under the local leadership of the then Union minister Janardhana Poojary. The Congress dominated the politics of the region, and the communists went into decline.

Meanwhile, those who had lost land did not do too badly. The region had a long tradition of banking with Canara Bank, Syndicate Bank, Vijaya Bank, and Corporation Bank coming up in the early decades of the 20th century. Each of these banks were associated with particular castes and inclined to absorb the children of their caste brethren who had lost land in land reforms. Some of the largest landowners invested in education, including TMA Pai, in what is now Manipal Academy of Higher Education. Brahmin landowners who were at the receiving end of land reforms took the feeding practices of temples into the market. Temple feeding offered meals at predetermined times without the option of a menu, and with an urgency in its service so that as soon as one batch had finished eating, they had to make room for the next. This approach suited the

fast-food generation, and Udupi restaurants took off first in the region, and then in Mumbai and other urban centres.

With the former landlords doing better than they would have had they remained in agriculture, they began to assert their political presence. They supported traditional religious practices, especially the Bhuta that was associated with their lands. As the former tenants also shared the same beliefs the old landlord-tenant division was effectively bridged, and the Bunts were now on the same cultural side as the Billavas.

The cultural affinity swept into the political domain with the Billavas becoming uncomfortable with the free-for-all politics of the Congress. Brought up in a tradition of cadre-based politics with the Left, the Billavas began to look for non-Congress alternatives. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stepped into this vacuum.

They had always been on the side of the former landowning castes. Their cadre-based politics suited the region, right down to taking over the public library culture that the Left had built. The focus of politics had shifted sharply from land relations to communal divisions, but the method remained largely the same. As a result, ever since the Dakshina Kannada parliamentary constituency was carved out in 2008, the BJP has dominated it. Indeed, the same candidate, Nalin Kumar Kateel, won the three Lok Sabha elections in 2009, 2014 and 2019 with increasing margins and became the state BJP president.

With the anti-Muslim rhetoric of Hindutva paying rich political dividends, there appeared to be nothing that could stop this juggernaut. As the aggressiveness of the rhetoric increased, so did communal tensions. The Billavas with their cadre-based approach to politics found themselves at the frontline of communal conflict. They soon developed a view that while the upper castes in the BJP raised the communal temperature with their speeches, it was the Billavas who paid the price of communal conflict. Matters came to a head when a Billava BJP worker was killed in a communal incident. His colleagues in the party reacted by attacking Kateel even as he sat in his car. Kateel is no longer the state president of the BJP and has not been given a ticket though he won in 2019 by a margin of around 2.75 lakh votes. The party has instead provided the ticket to a former army captain who is new to electoral politics and is a Bunt. The Congress has put up a Billava who has been associated with its former MP from Mangalore, Janardhana Poojary. Some of the Billava torch-bearers of aggressive Hindutva have now asked their supporters to vote for their caste irrespective of the party the candidate belongs to.

Whether the politics of Dakshina Kannada which has moved from the Left to the BJP will see another shift will only be known on June 4, more than a month after the constituency has voted on April 26. What is clear, though, is that the violence associated with aggressive Hindutva does come at a huge personal cost to those at the frontline of communal battles. When social, economic and political circumstances lead to the costs being measured in caste terms, the costs can be transferred politically to the parties of Hindutva.

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Will Dakshina Kannada, which moved from the Left to the BJP, see another shift?

{ HILLARY CLINTON } FORMER US SECRETARY OF STATE



Trump was just gaga over Putin because Putin does what Trump would like to do ... rule without any check or balance



Iran-Israel conflict no longer a shadow war

On April 13, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) launched 300 drones, cruise and ballistic missiles at Israel. Israel and its allies, including the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), France, and Jordan, intercepted the vast majority of the projectiles at a cost of more than \$1 billion. But at least nine evaded the defence, causing minor damage to Nevatim Air Base in Southern Israel, where Israel’s F-35 fighter jets are based. Iran’s Supreme National Security Council said that Iran had carried out “minimum necessary punitive action” within the framework of the “legitimate right of self-defence” as outlined in Article 51 of the UN Charter. On April 1, Israeli strikes had targeted Iran’s consulate in Damascus, killing seven IRGC officers.

In the early hours of April 18, attacks on Iran’s air defence base in the city of Isfahan were foiled, Tehran claimed. Though Israel did not claim responsibility, the US military has confirmed to major news sources that it was an Israeli response to the April 13 retaliatory action by Iran. Tehran, in the interim, has warned that if the attacks are traced to Tel Aviv then its “response will be immediate ... at the maximum level”.

Notably, Iran’s retaliatory strikes came two weeks after the Israeli attacks during which the UN Security Council was prevented by veto-wielding members the US, the UK and France in condemning the aggression against the diplomatic facility of a country. Iranian foreign minister Hossein Abdollahian also embarked on a regional tour starting with Oman, a key diplomatic intermediary between Tehran and Washington. In Muscat, Abdollahian sought to assuage neighbouring countries’ concerns about Iran’s impending retaliation, stating that Tehran was committed to seeking justice through legal and international channels and in any counter-attacks Iran’s “sole goal in legitimate defence is to punish the Israeli regime”. Muscat reportedly relayed Iran’s message to the US that Iranian attacks will be calibrated to target military facilities and will avoid civilian casualties.

Even though Israel and its allies claimed successful blocking of Iranian projectiles, the point remains that Iran has the capacity and willingness to strike conventionally superior Israel more than 1,000 km away from Iran’s borders. Hossein Salami, the commander-in-chief of the IRGC, noted that Iran’s retaliatory strikes have established a new equation with Israel that from now on, if Israel attacks Iran-

nian interests, figures and citizens anywhere, the IRGC will retaliate from Iran. Salami is credited with the revision of Iran’s defence doctrine along the lines of the “strategy of the threat against threat”. The IRGC under Salami responded to the US pressures by increasing regional insecurity through a series of deniable attacks on commercial shipping in the Strait of Hormuz in 2019.

Iran has a defensive military doctrine based on deterrence. As the strategy has evolved based on a continuous assessment of the threat environment, the primary objective remains to deter a direct war with the US. Over the last two decades, when Iran faced an enhanced US military presence near its borders with Iraq and Afghanistan and threats of US/Israeli strikes on Iran’s nuclear facilities, its counter-strategy was to unify the disparate

“resistance” forces opposed to the US military presence and Israel in the so-called “axis-of-resistance”. Through the “axis-of-resistance” including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Palestinian Jihad in Gaza, and Assad-ruled Syria, Iran was able to extend the geography of its deterrence well beyond its borders. Deterrence through proxies has afforded it the ability to strike enemies and maintain plausible deniability, crucial for reducing the risk of direct response by the other side that could lead to escalation into a full-blown conflict.

The US and Israel have sought to counter Iran’s asymmetric strategy of deterrence through stringent sanctions to limit its ability to finance allies and proxies, and by fuelling domestic dissent against Iran’s ruling elite. Israel, under its “Octopus doctrine”, has focussed on countering Iran rather than its proxies. Over the last four years, Israel has carried out several covert attacks on nuclear and military facilities and assassinated nuclear scientists and military officers inside Iran. Iran has responded by directly striking Israeli and US interests in Iraq and elsewhere but has resisted striking Israel directly. Following the October 7 attacks, Israel has intensified its campaign targeting the highest-ranking IRGC commanders in Syria and Lebanon. Iran’s direct retaliation against Israel marks the end of the shadow war and the beginning of an uncertain future for the region.

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Deepika Saraswat

OUR VIEW



May gold bonds inspire more win-win solutions

India's sovereign gold bond scheme has been of benefit to retail investors as well as our economy. What's good at the micro level need not be bad for the macroeconomic picture

It is often the case that what's good at the micro level is bad at the macro level and vice-versa. A subsidy that boosts a single sector or industry, for example, may distort broad allocations in an economy. Even inflation, which hurts household well-being, could be advocated at times as a way to reduce the burden of public debt. But there are exceptions and India's Sovereign Gold Bond (SGB) scheme is one such. The government's attempt to address a larger problem—Indian love of the yellow metal results in imports that often widen our current account deficit—has also helped address a micro problem: It has given us a relatively risk-free option to diversify our asset portfolios, while offering an attractive rate of return. It's a win-win scheme by any yardstick.

In November 2015, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched three gold-related schemes—the Gold Monetisation Scheme (GMS), Gold Coin and Bullion Scheme and the SGB one—not many were hopeful they would be an answer to our fascination with the metal. India has long and famously been the world's largest consumer of gold, followed closely by China, though the two countries' positions reversed in 2023. Earlier attempts to wean us away had largely failed and doubts were expressed about the 2015 package. "These schemes could help on the margin, but they do not address the underlying problem, which is households' need for alternative assets for their portfolio diversification," said Jahangir Aziz, then chief Asia economist, JPMorgan (and now its head of emerging market economies). These views were echoed by others as well. Fast forward to today. Sure, two of the schemes have not had much success. But SGBs

have proved a winner. That too, by a long shot. The first SGB issued on 30 November 2015 matured in November 2023, giving investors a return of about 150% after taking into account annual simple interest of 2.75% (since reduced to 2.5%). To put that in perspective, the S&P BSE Sensex gave roughly the same return over that period. But here's the icing on the cake: SGBs don't just enjoy a capital-gains tax break if held to maturity, they are relatively risk-free. Since the time they were first issued, the price of gold has virtually been a one-way street. The first SGB was issued at ₹2,684 per gram and redeemed at ₹6,132 per gram. In contrast, the Sensex has been like a roller-coaster. Over the period from November 2015 to November 2023, it touched a low of 22,950 (February 2016) and a high of 67,840 (last September). It has been much the same story with subsequent SGB issues, making these bonds a much-sought-after asset class. Their latest issue in February 2024 saw residents subscribe to a record 12.78 tonnes of bonds worth ₹8,008.4 crore, or \$966 million, the highest-ever amount since the scheme began. This is even though the issue price was a record high of ₹6,263 per gram. On 15 April, gold hit another peak of ₹7,463 per gram on the spot market.

The net result is that India's economy has benefitted, as has the individual investor. The country's import bill for gold today is lower to the extent that people are willing to hold SGBs instead of the actual metal, thereby reducing both our external sector vulnerability and our current account deficit. Meanwhile, retail investors can count on another asset class to diversify their holdings. Clearly, win-win solutions are possible. We should aim to find more of them.

MY VIEW | THE INTERSECTION

Effective missile defence shields are costly and could be risky too

As technology improves defences, countries must resist the temptation to use force over diplomacy



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The conflicts between Ukraine and Russia and between Israel and Iran over Palestine have demonstrated that missile defence has come of age. Even before Israel, with the help of the US and its allies, successfully intercepted nearly all of the 320 drones, cruise and ballistic missiles that Iran launched last week, the Ukrainians had reported that they had shot down all 80 of the drones that the Russians had dispatched against them on one New Year's weekend.

Drones are relatively easy to shoot down, given their slower speeds, but countering a swarm of them is still no mean feat. Intercepting cruise, ballistic and hypersonic missiles, on the other hand, is harder, given their respectively increasing speeds, but American-made systems have proven capable of doing so at high levels of effectiveness. This defensive capability will get even better in the future.

Missile defence has already changed the way battles are fought over land and sea. It will also influence geopolitics and strategy.

For the foreseeable future, the marginal cost of missile defence will be higher than that for offence. A single interceptor missile used by Israel or Ukraine costs between \$100,000 and \$500,000, compared to the \$20,000 per drone that Iran and Russia spent. If

more than one missile is required to take down an incoming drone, the average cost of successful interception goes up even higher. In the Red Sea, the US navy used a \$2 million missile to intercept a \$2,000 drone that Yemen's Houthi insurgents launched at one of its ships. The cost of defence, thus, is five to 1,000 times the cost of offence. This means that despite its accuracy, it only makes sense to deploy missile defence to protect high-value targets.

As Wes Rumbaugh, an analyst at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies argues, using a \$2 million missile to protect a \$2 billion warship is worth it, regardless of how cheap the Houthi drone is. It does, however, call into question the usefulness of big expensive warships, unless they are used to protect even higher value targets. Yes, it is a case of turtles all the way down.

With attackers having a massive fiscal advantage, they can prevail in a conflict by bleeding the defender. At an average cost of \$250,000 per interception, Israel and its Western allies spent a minimum of \$80 million in a few hours. Only rich and large countries can sustain this. Thus, Ukraine and Israel depend on the US for weaponry as well as for the aid money that pays for it.

Kyiv is in a tight spot today because it is running short of interceptors and the money it depends on Washington for. Similarly, for all its advanced capabilities, Israel's capacity to defend itself depends on continued weapons supplies and financial support of the US. In the events of 13 April, it appears that American forces took down over 60% of the drones and missiles that Iranian forces launched towards Israel.

Ergo, any country deploying missile defence has a critical dependence on the country supplying it. At crunch times, the supplier must be both willing and able to deliver large numbers of interceptors at short notice.

Some of India's missile defence systems are of Russian and Israeli origin,

which gives them both leverage over New Delhi's foreign policy. The impact on strategic autonomy can be mitigated by indigenous systems. But even if such systems were available, they would still be costly and run against considerable budget constraints.

My colleague Prakash Menon, who retired as lieutenant general from the Indian Army, explained to me that if interceptor stocks fall below a certain threshold, the usual military response is to counter-attack and destroy the facilities used to launch the drones and missiles. That is what Israel did on Friday. Such an escalation, however, comes with its own risks, further escalation and damage prominent among them.

That's not all. While a 99% success rate in interception appears extraordinarily good, it is no cause for comfort in a nuclearized context. If one nuclear-tipped missile gets through out of a hundred, it is still one too many. One reason Russia and China are building hypersonic missiles is to be able to have a greater chance of penetrating the US anti-ballistic missile shield. A missile defence with a 100% success rate is very ephemeral. A small improvement in the attacker's delivery capability will restore nuclear vulnerability, and worse, the path towards a nuclear exchange.

It would be a folly to believe that superior military force or amazing technology alone provides peace and security. Rather, they provide time and space for politics, diplomacy and statesmanship to negotiate a solution. Walls, border fences, missile defence shields, surveillance technologies or strategic superiority can lull a society and its leaders into believing that the underlying problem has gone away. It surprises them when they discover that it had not. The reluctance to find political compromises is the biggest risk of impermeable missile defence.

Tailpiece: Iran's massive aerial attack did not cause any physical damage in Israel. But it did shatter deterrence.



MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

Could low-stakes compassion have a dangerous side?

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoupled'

Hamas has the most sophisticated defence system. It uses Palestinian civilians as a shield. David Brooks, in his column in the *New York Times*, wrote, "Hamas's goal is to maximize the number of Palestinians who die... Hamas's survival depends on support in the court of international opinion." This was always the strategy of Hamas. If terrorists have powerful uses for our compassion, then the question arises whether it is dangerous to have the sort of compassion they want.

But then, we can argue that we are not always in control of our compassion. It may be used for tactical purposes, but human compassion itself is a natural resource of the world, like air and the oceans. And, it cannot be just turned on or off just because the wrong sort of people mine it. In that case, does a natural resource contain within it great dangers for the very people it cares for?

Fast-forming global compassion for far-away issues is new to human nature. The history of how the world has felt sorry for Pales-

tine is brief. The point I began to witness this history was in the mid-80s, as an average Indian boy. Israel appeared to be a valiant small nation surrounded by dangerous foes. And a man called Yasser Arafat was somehow one of the most recognizable men in the world. But it was hard to figure out why they were fighting. In the 80s, if you did not understand something, you had to read a whole book. Actually, even today that is the only way, but there are illusory options like "10 things you should know about Palestine" and so on. Outside the Levant, very few knew much about the Palestine conflict.

Then, with the advent of the internet, everybody skipped a step. It was not information that flowed, but a peculiar mix of information and the emotion of its source. Since then, the region has been erupting every now and then, usually because an Israeli attack has killed civilians. And the world has erupted in rage against Israel. It is every generation's introduction to proxy outrage.

Until a year ago, nobody fully accepted the view that Hamas hid behind and beneath civilians. It was dismissed as Israeli propaganda. In 2014, when Israeli bombardment in Gaza killed several children, there was massive global anger against Israel. Palestinians were always good with their propa-

ganda, as it was a part of their defence mechanism. The internet was filled with images of Israelis on comfortable sofas, watching Gaza being bombed from vantage points. People shared images with comments like "disgusting" on social media, probably sitting on comfortable sofas themselves.

People who live far away from a conflict zone develop simple views of 'victims' and 'villains'. In 2014, if you tried to point this out, or the fact that Hamas hid among the civilians not just in defence but also to get civilians killed, you were quickly disgraced as heartless.

Compassion for far-away people is a feature of modernity. Imagine a time in ancient India, in Magadha perhaps. A group of young people are having boiled asparagus and mild tea, when a messenger walks in to say that in Kosala there has been a massacre of civilians in a market. Magadhans are outraged. "Sick," someone says. And they engrave slogans on a bronze plate and march with them in protest against the massacre. I don't think this

ever happened. I cannot substantiate it, but I suspect that in antiquity, there was no long-distance compassion for people who did not belong to one's race, region or caste. Even today, the most visible outrage is in the West, which is not only a physical place, but also a way of being. I don't think most Indians, for example, are outraged by much outside what directly concerns them.

Just because a human feeling did not come from antiquity, it does not mean it is not human nature. Modernity might be the name of a time, but it is also the character of a time. And the character of our age is that the elite among us feel strongly for people far away, especially when the cost of feeling sorry is low.

Hamas always knew that. The world would have been a wonderful place if people felt this level of compassion for those much closer to them. But the way of the world is that people feel more compassion for Palestinians than for their spouses.

I know a person who has very strong views about Islam in India, but about five years ago

when he visited Palestine, he was enraged by Israel, by "what they are doing to the poor Palestinians." Time and again we see that there is no such thing as a global right-wing. People are 'logical' about the oppression of minorities at home, but compassionate about what is going on far away.

So what? What are people expected to do when they read that scores of children have died in a school or a hospital because Israel was hunting some terrorists underneath? How can we not feel the pain of those people? So this is ultimately another way of asking how must we be? How should we be?

The answer is in the people who have not easily shown their feelings for Palestinians. Not counting Jews, Muslims and others who have stakes in the conflict, I feel there are broadly three kinds of people who are not easily outraged by Israel. One, people who dislike or fear Islam. Two, people who instinctively side with the strong. The third group should interest us. They are people who are helplessly objective, who demonstrate that this is a personality type. Wary of global emotions, they know every conflict has two sides, and only one side makes for great photojournalism. They know their emotions are valuable and never give it away cheap. I think this is a good way to be.

It's a hard question to answer but Hamas's human shield tactics in Gaza force us to confront it



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Forces of caution

West, US have not supported Israel outright in clash
with Iran. Arab countries too haven't taken sides



SANJAY BHATTACHARYA

IRAN'S PROMISED RETALIATION came after a fortnight of the Israeli airstrike on the country's consulate in Damascus, in the early hours of April 14. Last week, swarms of attack drones and cruise and ballistic missiles were deployed in an unprecedented direct attack. Most of them were neutralised by Israel and its allies. However, a few ballistic missiles penetrated Israel's formidable Iron Dome and struck the Nevatim and Ramon airbases in the southern Negev desert and a radar station in the north. Damage to infrastructure was minimal and no deaths were reported.

Even then, Israel declared the attack would not go unanswered. In a swift counter retaliation on Friday, Israel targeted Isfahan, home to the Natanz nuclear facility and a major airbase of Shah-era American warplanes. The country had reportedly informed the US before its proposed strike, and Washington had sought moderation.

Iran has downplayed the impact of the Israeli direct attack, claimed it has downed drones, not mentioned the use of missiles and said its nuclear facilities are safe.

The situation in the Middle East is one of perilous escalation. The Israel-Palestine conflict has raged over six months in Gaza and the West Bank. The leadership of both Israel and Hamas, despite growing opposition from their own people, have persisted with the conflict. The efforts of the international community for de-escalation and peace have borne no fruit.

The direct strikes bring a new dimension to the conflict, although the two have for long been in confrontation and have waged attacks on each other through militia in foreign lands or covert operations. Fresh attacks could spiral to high-value targets, attacks on nuclear facilities and cyberattacks. There is an increased risk of skirmishes on Israel's periphery, which will add to regional turmoil and instability.

The deliberate airstrike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus was audacious in terms of international and diplomatic conventions. The Iranian Supreme Leader called it a direct attack on Iran and declared that Israel would be punished. The attack became a public and emotive issue, not just in Iran, but in the Arab world, and

the Iranians used it as *casus belli* for retaliation.

While the Iranians promised retaliation, they signalled to the US that American assets could be kept out of harm's way. Their direct attack tested the capability of Israel's air defence systems, but its prior announcement gave time to Israel and its allies to take countermeasures. Iran said it had achieved its objectives and the exercise had been concluded.

However, the Israeli counterattack could complicate the issue — depending on Iran's air defence capability to avoid damage. Both sides have crossed the Rubicon.

If Israel's objective on the Iran consulate in Damascus was to widen the conflict, it had partial success as it provoked Iran's direct retaliation. However, something is reassuring: While allies and neighbours supported it in neutralising the Iranian attack, they did not provide support for the subsequent Israeli response and said they would not join such a venture.

The US has said Israel could declare victory as the Iranian attack was effectively repulsed and the damage was minimal. At the same time, most Western countries condemned the Iranian attack and called for de-escalation. At the UN Security Council, where Israel and Iran sparred over the incident, there was little appetite for expanding the conflict.

The Iran-supported militia in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen had launched rocket and drone attacks on Israel, alongside the Iranian barrage. Arab countries have been cautious. They do not want Iran to become the representative of sentiments on the Arab street either.

The long history of animosity between the sides has now erupted into direct attacks. Israel is believed to be nuclear-capable and Iran's desired programmes for nuclear capability have been in the spotlight. A number of scholars believe that the success of an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities would be uncertain, but the risks would be enormous. They note that Iran may accelerate preparations for realising its nuclear ambitions. However, it has also been argued that the countervailing power that Iran may possess in anticipation of acquiring nuclear capability

may exceed what it may gain by actually attaining the status.

The focus on the Israel-Palestine conflict has not receded after Iran has become directly embroiled. But the Mossad-Hamas channel — brokered by Egypt — to negotiate a ceasefire and release of hostages has seen limited progress. Neither Israel nor Hamas seem keen to push hard enough for an end to their war. The direct Israel-Iran attacks could harden the stance on both sides.

Conflict in the region will have ripple effects, not merely in terms of increased oil prices, weakening of supply chains, transportation issues, and financial stress but also geopolitical balance and uncertainties of war. Israel, as a major economic and technological power, stands to lose much in a prolonged war. Many Arab countries have strengthened cooperation with Israel to secure a prosperous and stable future. Iran's economy has suffered due to sanctions and it can hardly afford a full-fledged war.

For India, the region constitutes its extended neighbourhood. Turmoil affects the security of the diaspora in the Gulf; there is the additional risk of piracy and hostage-taking. The momentum for reforms in global governance led by the Global South would also be impacted. It is imperative that the international community leans upon all parties and urges them to seek solutions through diplomatic negotiations.

Israel's Ambassador to India recently said they lived in a difficult neighbourhood and called on countries to oppose Iran's behaviour. His Iranian counterpart called on India to take the lead at multilateral fora to stop the war in Gaza.

The two-state solution is the only way ahead. It is not an easy goal, but both sides are familiar with the challenges and opportunities. The cycle of violence must end and the rights and aspirations of the people must be met. India's civilisational contacts make New Delhi an ideal friend to all in the region.

The writer is a former Ambassador and Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs

CHECK THE SUGAR

Controversy on Nestle should lead to tightening of rules
and plugging regulatory gaps in infant food market

A STUDY INCRIMINATING the multinational food company Nestle for adding unhealthy amounts of sugar to its baby products has generated concerns in the country. Last week, the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) and the Switzerland-based investigating agency, Public Eye, alleged that the company added 2.7 g of sugar per serving to its baby food brand, Cerelac, destined for developing countries, including India. Nestle has defended itself and said that it has reduced added sugar in its baby food products in India by over 30 per cent over the past five years. The ball is now in the court of the country's food business regulator, the FSSAI. The agency has begun investigations into the findings of the IBFAN and Public Eye study. That's a step in the right direction and Nestle must be held to account. Ensuring that the child food market doesn't compromise with nutritional standards, however, demands much more than scrutinising one company — however large. As the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights has demanded, the FSSAI probe should cover all baby food manufacturers.

The first two years are critical for the growth and development of children. It's a period when children consume a limited amount of food. The calories shouldn't, therefore, be wasted in items that have no nutritive value — added sugar, as experts rightly say, is "empty calories". Breastfed children get sugar from the lactose in their mother's milk anyway. The diet in the first 24 months is also critical in another way. Added sugar in infant food is often the cause of cravings later in childhood. Studies have also shown that children fed a sugar-heavy diet are more likely to develop obesity, cardiovascular diseases and tooth decay compared to children who eat balanced meals. The risks to Indian children are well documented. The country has the highest number of childhood diabetes cases in the world. In March, a Lancet study revealed that more than 12 million children in India between five and 19 were grossly overweight.

Indian regulations do prescribe micronutrient requirements for baby foods. However, they do not specify an upper limit for added sugars. The rules do not bar the use of corn syrup and malt in food for children and allow sucrose and fructose to be used as carbohydrate sources, provided they constitute less than 20 per cent of the total carbohydrates in the food. The controversy around Nestle should lead to debates on the quality of products in the market for children and catalyse the tightening of rules and plugging regulatory gaps.



MAITHREYI KARNOOR

"THERE ARE TWO kinds of people in the world: Those who extrapolate from insufficient data" goes the popular joke. Writers of fiction, I think, belong to that category of people. Extrapolating from insufficient data is something we are good at. In doing that, we inhabit the joke. And those of us who feel at home there live to write of our times. The joke is upon us — it has been upon us since the beginning of jokes and the beginning of writing.

The act of making stories set in this world comes from great love not just for language but for the world we seek to read closely (setting stories in other worlds is also love, as the escape velocity to launch into fantasy takes a push that matches affinity). And that love is rarely returned as the world has always been rife with tragedy and farce. We have written through war (in all its evolving forms), and famine (natural and induced), and countries colonising others (and their own). People have always been horrid to each other — even, and especially, when they have claimed to overthrow older forms of tyranny. But there has also been love and fellow-feeling and concerted efforts at healing. In these contradictions, the undying will to create and the hunger to consume stories has probably been the only constant of history.

It is, perhaps, presumptuous of me to speak for all fiction writers at one-book old (the second one is on the publisher's desk, and half the third is in the Camlin bottle on my desk). But it is the same river we have all stepped into at least once. And that is the river that makes us ask ourselves who we are in this world.

INHABITING THE JOKE

During elections, a healthy sense of self-deprecatory humour is essential for a writer

To wonder what it means to be a fiction writer in an election year reminds me of the question we dread the most: "What is your book about?" The works of fiction I admire, though hugely varied, have one thing in common: Their irreducibility to one idea or theme. And they are all political sans a message. *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass isn't about the shenanigans of a rather unlikeable dwarf. Gabriel Garcia Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* isn't about lean pickings in male baby names. Even when novels are set against the backdrop of momentous political events such as the Biafran war or Indian Independence, they are narratives of the vast complexities of life.

And complexity will continue to be a writer's fodder in an election year. I'm sure non-fiction writers have a bigger task at hand as their medium is facts and the madness despite its evident method is rather overwhelming. As writers of fiction, however, and as sensitive people, hopefully, we have a heightened sense of belonging in these times. It may not be just another cowry cast to choose between Machiavellian rocks and hard places. It may indeed be a culmination of the trajectory of a democracy that has gone from feeling let down by unkept electoral promises to dreading they will be kept. Those feelings have a way of finding their way into literature — mostly indirectly. Literary fiction takes pride in drumming the humdrum into beautiful music.

Events, subconsciously, dictate the beat we play. Fiction can be as political as it is creative. In the seemingly innocuous act of choosing a word from a pool of synonyms, we show where our hearts lie. Even being apolitical is glaringly political. It highlights one's privilege and the ability to afford detachment; and apathy is, essentially, siding with the baddies. Thus, the ink on our fingernails is forever indelible.

It also happens to be election year in another, doddering enormous democracy where the choice is between two warmongering parties: One suave and articulate, the other, proudly incoherent but single-minded in its pursuit of a megalomaniac's whims. That land has produced some of the best writers who have written through its chequered history.

Irony and satire have been my favoured elements of expression for the longest time. And election times are the veritable paydirt of irony ore. I find it easy to laugh at myself in my writing; in doing so, I am taking to task my communities and my country, which are an inalienable part of me.

Come rain or *prachand bahumat*, a healthy sense of self-deprecatory humour is important for a writer to tide her through the world as she hopes to not get too cynical or jaded to lose her capacity for wonderment. Because, as I said earlier, the joke is upon us and to keep writing through everything is our comeuppance. And giveuppance is not an option.

Karnoor is a Charles Wallace Fellow in writing and translation. Her book, *Goodday Nagar*, is forthcoming

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



APRIL 22, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

INDO-BANGLA BORDER

THE BORDER SECURITY Force and the Bangladesh Rifles exchanged fire across the borders. The clashes took place when India's Central Public Works Department officials were trying to erect a barbed wire fence at the border pillar number 1Q01 in the Golpara district of Assam. The barbed-wire fencing controversy has made diplomatic relations between the two countries rather prickly.

KILLING IN PUNJAB

ONE PERSON WAS killed, a Congress (I) leader was shot at and injured and an

abortive attempt was made on the life of a Nirankari leader during the last 24 hours in Punjab. A report from Ferozepur said that a man who was injured by some persons at Dharamkot succumbed to his injuries in the hospital.

PRIVATE SECTOR IN WB

THE WEST BENGAL government has decided to sell to the private sector some of the industrial units taken over by it "on condition that the workers' interests are protected and there is no retrenchment." The state commerce and industry minister, Nirmal Bose, said 13 industries had so far been taken over by the Left Front

Government. Presidential assent to naturalise four of these had been received and follow-up action was being taken in this direction, he said.

US PLANES FIRED AT

SOVIET-BUILT MIG FIGHTER planes of unidentified nationality fired rocket and cannon rounds at a US Cobra helicopter patrolling the border between West Germany and Czechoslovakia, a US military spokesman said. Lt Col Charles White of the US Joint European Command in Stuttgart confirmed a defence department report on the incident from Washington and added that an investigation was underway.

THE IDEAS PAGE

Cures, care, competition

Amended rules will prolong the life of drugs on account of frivolous patenting, increase their prices, and make lives difficult for patients



ANAND GROVER

A GOOD HEALTH system requires a constant supply of quality affordable medicines. Medicines constitute nearly 50 per cent of the health costs incurred by people. The high costs of medicines are primarily due to patenting. This can be overcome by allowing the competition which generic pharmaceutical companies provide. The Indian generic industry has been the provider of essential quality medicines at affordable prices all over the world. However, the newly amended patent rules could change the ecosystem. Indian patent rules were amended earlier this year, making it difficult to file opposition to patents at the pre-grant stage, thus allowing easy patenting and an increase in drug prices.

The Indian Patent Law does have provisions to oppose the patenting of medicines. A successful opposition means that generic companies can produce the same drug. This allows for competition, the key to lowering prices. The opposition can also be registered to a proposed patent, and after it has been granted.

By the turn of the century, India could provide affordable and quality drugs because of the change in the Patent Act in the early 1970s. The law allowed protection only to the process through which a medicine was made, but not the product itself. This spurred the development of the generic industry, making India a net exporter of drugs by the late 1980s and the leading generic manufacturer by the 1990s.

However, there were headwinds in the form of the TRIPS Agreement of 1995 which mandated the re-introduction of product patents. Patents are to be granted for products which are both novel and inventive. However, in 2005, when amendments to the Patent Act had to be made following the TRIPS agreement and had to be introduced into the agreement, it was noticed that nearly 76 per cent of the drugs patented in the US and Europe were in only new forms — popularly known as me-too drugs. They did not have any significant increase in the therapeutic benefit. To ensure that India does not slip back, in 2005, all political parties and civil society came together to introduce an amendment to the Patent Act — Section 3(d). This was to make sure that an old drug in a new form would not be patented unless its therapeutic efficacy was significantly greater. This was upheld by the Madras High Court in the iconic Novartis case.

India also amended its patent law to take advantage of the flexibilities of the TRIPS Agreement. One of them pertained to opposition to patent applications at all stages — pre-grant and post-grant. It also allowed the revocation of patents and the filing of counterclaims. Rules were framed to facilitate these changes. It also allowed the government to issue licenses to other companies without the consent of the patent holder. The TRIPS Agreement allows



CR Sasikumar

such flexibility in patent laws. The Indian Patent Act stipulates that whenever reasonable requirements of the public are not met or a drug is not available at a reasonably affordable price, the government, at the instance of a generic company or any interested person, can issue a license to a firm to produce the drug. This can be done without consulting the patent holder.

These rules are now being sought to be altered because of pressure from pharma majors — largely Western and Japanese companies. The repeal of Section 3(d) has been a demand in the negotiations for the Free Trade Agreements with the US, UK, and the EU.

Most pre-grant oppositions (PGOs) to patents today come from patients' groups or civil society organisations. Generic companies are hesitant to file PGOs as they will not allow them to get a license from a Western or Japanese pharma company in case they get a patent.

Until the Rules were amended earlier this year, the patent controller would send the PGO to the applicant who would file a reply. The opponent to the patent was then allowed to file a rejoinder. The patent controller would then hear the PGO and arrive at a decision on the patent.

After the amendment to the patent rules, the patent controller is first to decide if the PGO is maintainable. The official can dismiss it without even hearing the opponent to the patent. This power is not only against the provisions of the Patent Act but allows arbitrary exercise of power.

The opponent to the patent now has to pay fees which was not the case earlier. This is a financial burden for patients and civil society organisations and could discourage them from filing PGOs. The new rules also alter the relations between the patent holder and the patent controller in another way. After the amendments, information will be provided on a three-yearly basis. The non-working of the patent is one of the basis for seeking a compulsory license. The fact that data will not be available to the Patent Controller, and hence the public, will make compulsory licensing difficult.

In the past, opposition by patients or patient organisations has scuttled numerous patents which are frivolous and have no therapeutic benefit. Data shows that PGOs reduce the likelihood of frivolous patents. The amendments will only help non-serving patents, stymie competition and drive the prices of drugs up.

The opponent to the patent now has to pay fees which was not the case earlier. This is a financial burden for patients and civil society organisations and could discourage them from filing PGOs.

The new rules also alter the relations between the patent holder and the patent controller in another way. After a patent is granted, the patent holder is supposed to "work the patent" — produce the drugs in India. According to the old rules, the controller had to be given details about the production process every year. After the amendments, this information will be provided on a three-yearly basis. The non-working of the patent is one of the basis for seeking a compulsory license. The fact that data will not be available to the Patent Controller, and hence the public, will make compulsory licensing difficult.

The amended rules will prolong the life of drugs on account of frivolous patenting, increase their prices, and make lives difficult for patients.

Grover is a senior Supreme Court advocate. He was the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health from 2008-14



SHASHI SHEKHAR VEMPATI

A many splendoured field

Alarmist views of section of global media do not realise Indian democracy's resilience

VOTING IS NOW underway in the largest democratic exercise on the planet. To put the scale of the Indian electoral process into perspective it is important to recognise that the number of voters in India, at 969 million, is more than the combined voters across the United States, Indonesia, Russia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, South Africa and Mexico. The size of the Indian electorate is more than the entire population of Europe. With more than 5.5 million electronic voting machines deployed across 1.05 million polling stations, Indian democracy puts to shame even the advanced West in its embrace of technology to make democracy work at the scale of a billion. With several thousand registered political parties and many more thousand candidates, elections in India are a testament to the resilience of democracy in the face of geographical diversity and socio-economic complexities.

The scale and complexity of democracy in India is poorly understood by much of the global media and many Western observers which results in patently absurd pronouncements on the health of Indian Democracy based on flawed assessments. Two illustrative examples should make this quite apparent. In a recent comment noted geopolitical expert and the President of Eurasia Group, Ian Bremmer observed that in Mexico at least 22 mayoral candidates had been murdered since September 2023. One would think that murderous political violence of this nature that not only impacts outcomes in electoral democracy but results in a per-

vasive climate of fear, ought to have a bearing on the democratic ranking of Mexico. Incidentally, the famed V-Dem Index of Democracy ranks Mexico at 81, several notches above India which was ranked at 110. Contradictions of this nature are not limited to the Democracy Index alone. The Press Freedom Index of RSF ranks Mexico well above India when in fact according to the Reuters Institute of Journalism, Oxford University, Mexico is the most dangerous country for journalists, recording more journalistic deaths in the line of duty than the war zones of Ukraine and Syria.

A commonly used phrase in much of the global commentary spelling doom on Indian democracy is "democratic backsliding". It is puzzling how routinely and often mindlessly this phrase is applied in the context of India despite the country's electoral system being as vibrant as ever before with both the ruling BJP and the opposition Congress party winning and losing state elections every election season. Another oft-repeated claim is about the "shrinking freedom of expression", a claim that flies in the face of the diversity of opinion that is expressed every day across the spectrum of media, traditional and digital, apart from a noisy and raucous social media. India's independent institutions from the courts to the Election Commission have maintained a high degree of integrity that rises above the partisan rhetoric of everyday politics. A case in point is the recent Supreme Court ruling on electoral bonds that went

against the government weeks before the elections were due. Similarly, the Election Commission has been even handed in its enforcement of the model code of conduct ahead of the elections.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also stumped his critics and media observers more than once with his outreach across the political spectrum. Of particular note is the decision by the Modi government to confer the Bharat Ratna on former President, the late Pranab Mukherjee, who belonged to the Congress Party. Modi has set aside partisan considerations to bestow state honours on more than 15 politicians across parties and regions. This includes many current and former political rivals such as Sharad Pawar, Ghulam Nabi Azad and the late Chief Minister of West Bengal Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee apart from the late P A Sangma from Meghalaya and the iconic film personality Chiranjeevi.

Most recently PM Modi has also honoured iconic stalwarts of diverse ideological persuasions with the Bharat Ratna like the late Charan Singh, P V Narasimha Rao and Karpooori Thakur, all of who had little in common politically either with the BJP or its parent organisation the Jan Sangh. In fact, under Modi's premiership, the widest pantheon of leaders and iconic personalities across political parties and ideological persuasions from every region of India have been recognised, celebrated and even given a prominent space in the newly built Museum of Prime Ministers.

In the face of this outreach across the political spectrum, it is strange that alarmist pronouncements on the so-called stifling of political opposition have been made. While the political level playing field in India remains as competitive as ever before, what we are witnessing is specific political parties and individual political leaders being held accountable for alleged acts of corruption and tax evasion. A striking feature of most Western democracies is the unflinching manner in which the rule of law gets applied irrespective of political station or ideological persuasion. Politicians at all levels in Western democracies have been held to account for their acts of omission and commission including some serving jail time. In stark contrast, arguments advanced by global media commentators seem to call for circumventing the law in India to suit the political convenience of specific parties and individuals. These arguments, by casting doubts on the process of law, are contemptuous of the independence of the judiciary which continues to be ever vigilant in upholding the Constitution.

Indian democracy is vibrant and competitive. The Indian state has upheld the rule of law without compromising on constitutional values. By failing to make this critical distinction, those who are spelling doom on democracy in India have unwittingly reduced themselves to agents of partisan politics in India.

The writer is former CEO, Prasar Bharat

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Independent accounts by online media outlets and spot reports circulating on the alternative media channels are at variance with Modi-friendly TV anchors. Barring a game-changing event like Pulwama or the Muzaffarnagar riots, these Indian elections look poised to surprise everyone." — DAWN, PAKISTAN

The cost of voter apathy

It creates a fertile ground for injustice and inequality to take root and perpetuates a cycle of disenfranchisement



M VENKAI AH NAIDU

EVERY SINGLE VOTE is a thread that weaves together the fabric of our democratic society. However, what India faces today is voter apathy or indifference of the electorate. To strengthen the democratic process, more and more people must come forward to vote, as also encourage and motivate others to do so. As Bharat stands on the cusp of a critical inflection point, and with the commencement of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, active participation in elections, particularly from the youth, is necessary for a vibrant democracy.

Reports say approximately 297 million eligible voters did not vote in the general elections to the Lok Sabha in 2019. This staggering figure highlights the scale of the problem. Moreover, elections in various states have highlighted clear trends of urban indifference towards the electoral process. Taken together, these factors call for targeted interventions and collaborative efforts.

What is a cause for concern is that less than 40 per cent first-time voters are said to have registered for the Lok Sabha polls, with Bihar standing at the bottom rung of the ladder — only 9.3 lakh first-time voters are reported to have enrolled in the state which has a potential 54 lakh voters. Only 17 per cent of the 18–19-year-olds have registered to vote in Bihar and 23 per cent in Uttar Pradesh. Chattisgarh, on the other hand, has a more satisfying rate of registration at 54 per cent in the case of first-timers. Telangana has recorded an impressive 67 per cent while neighbouring Andhra Pradesh is slightly behind at 50 per cent, Kerala has a mere 38 per cent registration of first-timers while Delhi, the national capital and nerve-centre of politics, has a low 21 per cent rate of registration. This is a very unhealthy sign in the world's largest democracy.

When it comes to voter turnout, the voting percentage in Uttar Pradesh was a low 59.11 per cent in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Out of the total 50 rural parliamentary constituencies across 11 states identified with lower voter turnout than the national average in 2019, 40 constituencies are from both the states of UP and Bihar (22) and (18) respectively. Of the 50 Lok Sabha constituencies with the lowest voter turnout in the 2019 general elections, 17 were found to be in our metros, mirroring a growing trend of urban apathy.

Ahead of the polling in the ongoing general elections 2024, the Election Commission of India (ECI) accelerated efforts to enhance voter turnout, drawing up a roadmap aimed at enhancing voter engagement and participation in identified urban and rural constituencies. It launched a slew of initiatives which include officials reaching out to voters in a targeted manner. The ECI spelt out a three-pronged strategy of providing facilitation at polling stations like queue management, sheltered parking in congested areas; targeted out-

reach and communication; and involvement of critical stakeholders like RWAs, local icons and youth influencers to persuade people to come to polling stations, among several others. It also directed officials to prepare a booth-wise action plan for enhanced participation and attitudinal change. It has also asked the authorities to act in a manner that instils pride among the voters in participating in the democratic festivities.

Self-motivation is the key. The authorities are doing everything in their power to motivate voters and inculcate a sense of pride and responsibility in them. For instance, the Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) programme has a number of measures to bring about voter awareness. This includes rolling out public transport and sanitation vehicles carrying essential election messages, incorporating voter awareness messages into utility bills for widespread dissemination, collaborating with Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) and voter awareness forums, and hosting informative sessions at popular public spaces such as parks, markets, and malls, among others.

Leveraging the power of social media platforms for extensive voter outreach and engagement is yet another key initiative undertaken by the ECI whose theme of "chunav ka parv, desh ka parv" is expected to boost voter turnout. The ECI has undertaken a new initiative of setting up polling stations within gated communities and multi-storeyed housing societies in urban areas, where there has been low voter turnout in the past. Integrated multimedia campaigns and targeted initiatives like #MeraVoteDeshKeLiye are expected to yield positive results in the upcoming general elections.

Voter apathy, especially among the youth, is a symptom of a deeper malaise in our system. When citizens disengage themselves from the electoral process, they automatically allow others to dictate the course of their lives. The core principle of democracy is active participation and a system built on the principle of collective decision-making. Ultimately, the will of the people should guide the actions of their representatives. Yet, when large segments of the population abstain from voting, the legitimacy of the entire democratic process comes into question.

Voter apathy creates a fertile ground for injustice and inequality to take root and perpetuates a cycle of disenfranchisement. To break free from this cycle which imperils the democratic system, we must recognise the power inherent in every vote. Each vote reflects a statement of belief in the democratic ideals upon which our society is built.

I appeal to all my countrymen, particularly the youth of the nation, to participate actively in the democratic process. This is a time to come together to ensure that democracy remains vibrant and inclusive. It is a time to reaffirm our commitment to the democratic process. Let us stand united in our resolve to safeguard the principles of democracy and build a future that reflects the will of the people. We must remember that voting is not only our right, but also our responsibility.

The writer is the former Vice-President of India

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PUNJAB'S THREAD

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Punjabiyaat diplomacy' (IE, April 20). It is heartwarming to note that PML-N Supremo Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz, the chief minister of Punjab, addressed 3,000 Sikh pilgrims from India when they visited Kartarpur Sahib. Maryam Nawaz's speech was layered with emotion as she compared the striking similarities between the two Punjabs across a border. It is disheartening that people-to-people diplomacy has not yet replaced the complicated process of political diplomacy between the two countries. We would do well to remember that a similar effort was spearheaded by then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee who, in 1999, travelled to Lahore by bus to spread the message of goodwill and friendship between the two countries.

Shantanu Bhadra, Delhi

RESTRAINT IS KEY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'At the heart of Iran-Israel' (IE, April 20). Israel's counterstrike against Iran has raised the spectre of a wider West Asian conflict amid the prevailing hostilities in the region. The ripples of the conflict have already started expanding beyond the region, with the benchmark Brent crude price rising to above \$90 a barrel before falling

a bit. This is a matter of concern for India, which imports over 85 per cent of its crude oil requirements. A steep hike in global oil prices could significantly raise the country's oil import bill and make the rupee depreciate due to the larger outgo of foreign exchange. It's the purchase of cheaper oil from sanctions-hit Russia that helped India reduce its import expenditure over the past year or so. A global economic upheaval can be avoided if neutral countries like India impress upon both sides the vital importance of exercising restraint.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

A DREAM FROM 1950

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Story of one citizen one vote' (IE, April 20). Our founding fathers and mothers deserve the credit for Indians being able to exercise universal franchise. A majority of them had received their baptism in public life, in mass movement against British imperialism. They did not want the common people to feel left out in the electoral process. They did not want the nascent democracy in a newly-independent nation to be an elitist affair. The nation needs to make vigorous efforts for the economic upliftment of the marginalised. We can realise a dream 75 years old, if we just try.

SH Quadri, Bikaner



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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

How climate change is fuelling litigation in India and the world

AMITABH SINHA
NEW DELHI, APRIL 21

IN AN important ruling that could energise climate litigation in India, the Supreme Court on April 6 said people had a fundamental right to be free from adverse impacts of climate change, and that this right flowed naturally from the right to life and the right to equality guaranteed in the Constitution. The court said people's right to clean air or a clean environment was already recognised in Indian jurisprudence, and given the increasing 'havoc' being caused by climate change, it was necessary to carve out the right to be protected against its adverse effects as a distinct right in itself.

The apex court judgment came in a case in which climate change was only incidental to the arguments. The main matter pertained to the conservation of the Great Indian

Bustard (GIB), an endangered bird. The court, however, used the climate change argument to move away from the immediate issue and address the larger problem of the risks that people face from climate change.

The rise of climate litigation

The Supreme Court's articulation comes at a time when there is a global surge in the number of people seeking legal remedies for issues related to climate change. As government and corporate actions on climate remain woefully inadequate, more and more people feel the brunt of climate change impacts, and an increasing number of concerned individuals and groups have been turning to courts to set things right.

The 2023 edition of the *Global Climate Litigation Report*, a periodic publication of the UN Environment Programme, identified 2,180 climate-related cases being heard by courts, tribunals, and other adjudicatory bod-

ies in 65 countries. The 2020 edition of the same publication had identified 1,550 cases in 39 countries while the 2017 edition had found 884 cases in 24 countries.

The bulk of these cases have been filed in developed countries, mainly the United States and Europe. But increasingly, cases are being filed in developing countries as well. The report identified 11 cases in India, putting it 14th on the list of countries with the most number of cases.

A large proportion of these cases have used rights-based frameworks, similar to the one articulated by the Supreme Court. Petitioners have invoked the right to life, human rights, right to health, etc. to press for greater climate action.

In several cases, courts have concurred and given favourable verdicts. Most recently, a group of elderly Swiss women successfully argued before the European Court of Human

Rights that their rights to family life were being violated because of the adverse health effects of heatwaves. The court held that the government of Switzerland had indeed violated their human rights.

People have also sued governments for lack of enforcement of existing climate laws or policies, and corporations for liability, compensation or greenwashing — when firms or governments give a false impression that all of their products or activities are climate-friendly.

The increase in climate-related cases has also sensitised the courts which are more likely to give favourable judgments than before. But while this may bring greater accountability in government and corporate climate actions, it would be too much to expect these verdicts to make any significant dent in the overall threat from climate change.

Climate litigation in India

Indian courts have been dealing with climate-related issues for a long time now, even though they might not have been categorised as climate litigation. The National Green Tribunal, which deals exclusively with environmental matters, is the main forum for such cases but petitions routinely land in High Courts and the Supreme Court as well. However, petitions referring to, or seeking recourse from, the broader problem of climate change, are rare. The Supreme Court's order on climate change is almost certain to change that.

"What the recent Supreme Court decision has done is to reinforce the critical nature of climate change, and that would potentially pave the way for a new jurisprudence where people, socio-economic development, nature and climate are equally prioritised," Bharat Jairaj, who leads India's Energy program at the World Resources Institute, said.

However, the effectiveness of court rulings on climate change remains a big question mark, particularly in the case of enforcing a right to be free from the adverse effects of climate change. Court interventions can be useful in matters relating to air or water pollution, or forest or wildlife conservation. But climate change is a very different beast. It is a multi-dimensional problem that cannot be tackled through any single or a small set of interventions. Minimising the impacts of climate change is beyond the capability of any single local, regional or national government.

Shibani Ghosh, a Supreme Court advocate and visiting fellow at Sustainable Futures Collaborative (an independent research organisation), said that for these reasons, the courts might not be as activist on climate change as they are on some other environmental issues, and use a "hands-off approach" in climate cases in the future.

EXPLAINED ELECTIONS

THE STORY OF INDELIBLE INK, A LASTING SYMBOL OF ELECTIONS

RISHIKA SINGH
NEW DELHI, APRIL 21

AS FRIDAY marked the first phase of the Lok Sabha elections, the classic symbol of Indian polls was under the spotlight again — a left hand with its index finger extended, marked by purple-black indelible ink.

Mysore Paints & Varnish Ltd, owned by the Karnataka government, which is the sole manufacturer of the ink in India, told *DD News* that around 26.5 lakh phials or small bottles (with a capacity of 10 ml each) would be made for this election cycle.

Why is the ink required?

The indelible ink was first manufactured at the Election Commission of India's request by the Council of Scientific & Industrial Research. The MyGov website says, "It was to counter the challenge of fraudulent voting" that research work on formulating the ink began in the 1950s by scientists. Later, the National Research Development Corporation patented it.

Mysore Paints & Varnish Ltd has been licensed to manufacture the ink and has been in the business since 1962. It was established in 1937 by Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar, the Maharaja of Mysore.

How long has it been in use?

The Representation of the People Act (RoPA) of 1951 mentions the ink. Section 61 states that rules may be made under the Act "for the marking with indelible ink of the thumb or any other finger of every elector who applies for a ballot paper or ballot papers for the purpose of voting at a polling station before delivery of such paper or papers to him."

When ballot papers were the norm, voters had to mark their preference on them. Before the paper was given, a voter's



Voters after casting votes for the Lok Sabha polls, in Nagpur, on Friday. PTI

index finger would be marked with the ink.

The RoPA also speaks of rules being formulated "for prohibiting the delivery of any ballot paper" to anyone having a mark.

An ECI report on the first general elections (1951-52) said the ink was applied with a glass rod. A total, 3,89,816 phials were supplied to the states for Rs 2,27,460.

The mark was made on the back of the forefinger until the 1962 general elections, after which it was made above the root of the nail on the skin.

What makes it indelible?

Indelible ink contains silver nitrate. It is colourless and becomes visible when exposed to ultraviolet light, like sunlight.

At around 20% concentration of silver nitrate, the ink becomes difficult to remove for at least 72 hours after application.

According to MyGov, "This water-based ink also contains a solvent like alcohol to allow its faster drying."

Currently, each phial is sold for Rs 174. The ink is exported to more than 25 countries. However, the procedure of its application varies. "In Cambodia and the Maldives, voters need to dip his/her finger into the ink... in Burkina Faso the ink is applied with a brush, and nozzles are used for its use in Turkey," the website says.



KAUNAIN SHERIFF M & ANONNA DUTT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 21

RELEASING THE manifesto of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for the Lok Sabha elections on April 14, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said "everyone over the age of 70 years" would be brought under the Ayushman Bharat health insurance scheme, "whether they are poor, middle class, upper middle class".

According to the BJP's manifesto, the Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) scheme, the world's largest government-funded health insurance scheme, will be expanded to "cover Senior Citizens and provide them access to free and quality health care".

The scheme was launched in 2018 to alleviate the burden of out-of-pocket expenditure on the poor, and help them access critical medical treatments and emergency care that were previously financially unattainable.

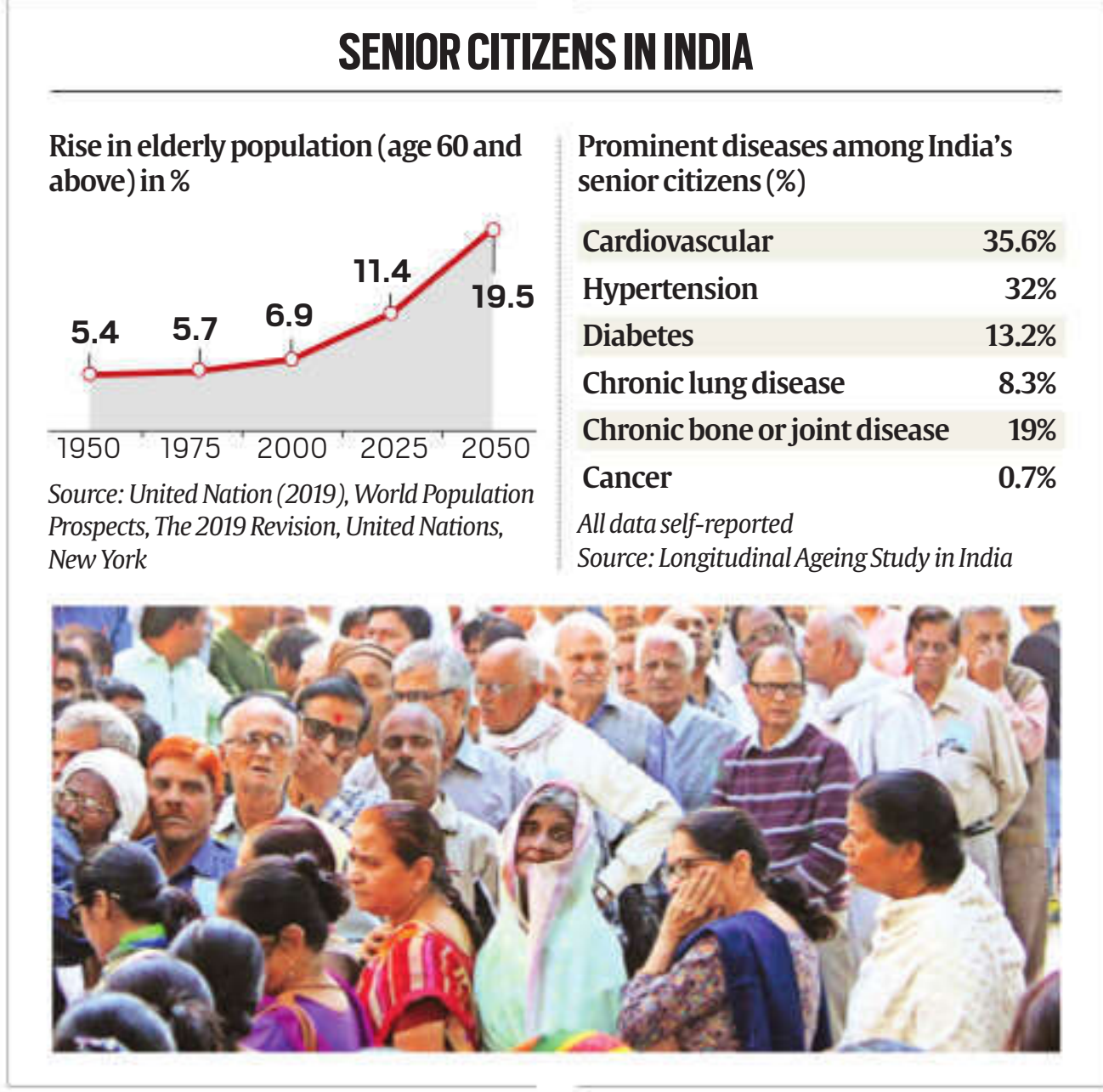
Currently, AB-PMJAY provides a coverage of Rs 5 lakh to its 65 crore beneficiaries (13.44 crore families), who are identified using specific deprivation and occupational data from the 2011 Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC). The BJP's poll promise, for the first time in India, seeks to make universal health coverage a reality for a whole cohort of senior citizens.

An ageing population

India's declining fertility rate and increasing life expectancy means that its population is growing old. At the time of the 2011 census, only 8.6% of India's population was over the age of 60 years. This proportion is, however, expected to increase to 19.5% by 2050, according to the government's Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI), published in 2020.

In terms of absolute numbers, the population over the age of 60 years will nearly triple, from 103 million in 2011 to 319 million in 2050. "The ageing population will mean increased expenditure on health and long-term care, labour force shortages, public dissaving, and old-age income insecurity," the study said.

Thus, offering coverage to senior citizens has huge public health implications, given that they live with the highest burden of chronic health conditions, which drive up their healthcare costs.



Diseases among the elderly

Self-reported data from LASI show that 35.6% of those above the age of 60 are afflicted by cardiovascular diseases such as heart attacks and strokes. In comparison, the prevalence of such disease in the 45-59 years age group was found to be 21.9%.

Similarly, the self-reported prevalence of hypertension among senior citizens was found to be 32%, compared to 21% for the 45-59 years age group. And this is likely to be an under-count, as studies have shown that nearly 40% of people are unaware of their hypertension status. Diabetes afflicted 13.2% senior citizens, LASI found.

The self-reported prevalence of diagnosed chronic lung disease among senior citizens is 8.3%, while 19% in the age group suffer from chronic bone or joint disease. The self-reported prevalence of diagnosed cancer was found to be 0.7% among those aged 60 and above. This was higher in urban areas (1.1%) than in rural areas (0.5%), the LASI report said.

Beyond chronic, non-communicable dis-

eases and their complications, the elderly are also more prone to infectious diseases due to their weakened immune systems.

Inadequate coverage at present

According to the *India Ageing Report 2023*, just over 20% of India's population above the age of 60 years is currently covered under health insurance schemes. These include Central Government Health Scheme, Employees State Insurance Scheme, Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojna, cooperative health insurance schemes, medical reimbursement from an employer, and privately purchased health insurance.

The coverage is higher among elderly men (19.7%) than women (16.9%), although there is not a big rural-urban divide in the coverage, the study reported.

LASI, on the other hand, says that about 26% of households in the country are covered under some form of health insurance, mostly under government schemes. According to the report, only 1% of house-

holds have commercial health insurance policies. "The out-of-pocket health expenditures account for more than 70% of health expenditures in India, leading to health vulnerabilities in the older population," according to LASI.

The *India Ageing Report* found that the main reasons for a lack of coverage in elderly are low awareness (52.9%) and non-affordability (21.6%).

How Ayushman Bharat helped

According to official data on AB-PMJAY, the government has incurred the highest expenditure for five key specialties covered under the scheme: cardiology, general medicine, general surgery, orthopaedics, and medical and radiation oncology. The data also show specific procedures emerging as focal points for expenditure. These include hemodialysis for advanced kidney failure, percutaneous transluminal coronary angioplasty (PTCA) with diagnostic angiogram (a minimally invasive procedure crucial for opening narrowed or blocked heart arteries), hip implants, and cataract surgeries.

This data indicate that the government is already incurring most of the expenditure in providing treatment predominantly required by the elderly population. It also shows that beneficiaries are saving a substantial amount of out-of-pocket expenditure, which they would not have been able to do without the scheme.

According to government estimates, in rural India, a patient suffering from cardiovascular disease spends Rs 6,919 in government hospitals, and Rs 42,759 in private facilities, per hospitalisation. For cancer, this expenditure was at Rs 23,905 per case in government hospitals, and a staggering Rs 85,326 per case in private ones.

In urban areas, the situation is worse. In government hospitals, the average expenses for cardiovascular disease and cancer are Rs 6,152 and Rs 19,982 respectively. However, in private hospitals, these costs surge to an alarming Rs 68,920 and Rs 1,06,548 respectively.

The scenario is no different when it comes to musculoskeletal issues. In rural government hospitals, the average expenditure per case is Rs 4,722, which rises to Rs 8,164 in private hospitals. In urban areas, government hospital costs are around Rs 6,152 per case, but private hospitals demand a hefty Rs 60,657 per case.

Fourth global mass coral bleaching event triggered : What does it mean?

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, APRIL 21

THE FOURTH global mass coral bleaching event has been triggered by extraordinary ocean temperatures, the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) said last week. This could have serious consequences for ocean life and millions of people who rely on coral reefs for food, jobs, and coastal defence.

What are corals and coral reefs?

Corals are animals, which are sessile, meaning they permanently attach themselves to the ocean floor. They use their tiny tentacle-like hands to catch food from the water and sweep it into their mouths. Each individual coral animal is known as a polyp and it lives in groups of hundreds to thousands of genetically identical polyps that form a 'colony'.

Corals are largely classified as either hard coral or soft coral. It is the hard corals that are the architects of coral reefs — complex three-dimensional structures built up over thousands of years. "Unlike soft corals,

hard corals have stony skeletons made out of limestone that are produced by coral polyps. When polyps die, their skeletons are left behind and used as foundations for new polyps," according to a report by NOAA.

What is the significance of corals?

Coral reefs are crucial ecosystems as thousands of marine species can be found living on one reef. Scientists believe there could be millions of undiscovered species of organisms living in and around reefs.

Every year, reefs provide about \$2.7 trillion in goods and services, according to a 2020 estimate by the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network, *Reuters* reported. More than 500 million people across the world depend on coral reefs for food, income, and coastal protection.

Corals can absorb up to 97% of the energy from waves, storms, and floods, which prevents loss of life and property damage. Therefore, the absence of coral reefs would result in severe ramifications for both marine life and humans.

What is coral bleaching?

Most corals contain algae called zoo-

HOW DOES CORAL BLEACHING TAKE PLACE?

1. HEALTHY CORAL

Algae called zooxanthellae live in the tissues of a coral



2. STRESSED CORAL

When a coral gets stressed, it expels zooxanthellae



3. BLEACHED CORAL

Coral turns white after zooxanthellae are expelled



anthellae — plant-like organisms — in their tissues. Corals and zooxanthellae have a symbiotic relationship. While corals provide zooxanthellae a safe place to live, zooxanthellae provide oxygen and organic products of photosynthesis that help corals to grow and thrive. Zooxanthellae also give bright and unique colours to corals.

Corals are very sensitive to light, temperature, and pollution, and even a small change in their surroundings can stress them. When stressed, they expel zooxanthellae and turn

entirely white. This is called coral bleaching.

Coral bleaching doesn't necessarily lead to the death of corals. It rather reduces the reproductive of corals and makes them more vulnerable to fatal diseases due to lack of nutrients. If the bleaching is not too severe, corals have been known to recover.

Global mass bleaching of coral reefs happens when significant coral bleaching is confirmed in the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific oceans, according to a report published by *The Conversation*. Such events are a relatively

new phenomenon. The first one took place in 1998 in which 20% of the world's reef areas suffered bleaching-level heat stress. The next two global bleaching events occurred in 2010 (35% of reefs affected), and between 2014 and 2017 (56% of reefs affected).

What is happening right now?

NOAA has confirmed that the fourth global bleaching event is currently underway. Nearly 54 countries, territories, and local economies — from the US, Saudi Arabia to Fiji — have confirmed bleaching, according to a report by *The New York Times*. The Great Barrier Reef of Australia — the largest in the world — is witnessing its most severe bleaching event. Reefs in the Western Indian Ocean, including Tanzania, Kenya, and off the western coast of Indonesia have also been affected.

In total, more than 54% of the world's coral reef areas have experienced bleaching-level heat stress in the past year, and that number is increasing by about 1% per week, Derek Manzello, the coordinator of NOAA's Coral Reef Watch program, told the NYT.

Why is it happening?

Although there can be several reasons for coral bleaching, the key driver behind

the ongoing global event is higher ocean temperatures.

Since mid-March 2023, the average sea surface temperature (SST) has been abnormally high. In March this year, it reached a record monthly high of 21.07 degree Celsius, according to the EU Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S). Temperatures are soaring mainly because of the rising emissions of heat-trapping greenhouse gases (GHGs) such as carbon dioxide and methane. Nearly 90% of the extra heat trapped by GHGs has been absorbed by the oceans — that is why they have become so warm.

Corals begin to bleach when surrounding waters become at least 1 degree Celsius warmer than the maximum average temperature and persist for four or more weeks, according to scientists.

The situation has been exacerbated by El Niño, a weather pattern which is associated with warmer oceans, which developed in June 2023. Now that it is weakening and a cooling La Niña may set in by the end of the year, the global mass coral bleaching event may not last very long.

The full impact of the event will not be known for a while but scientists have said that it is the most severe yet.

14 IDEA EXCHANGE

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

Manoj CG: For the first time, you are not contesting but leading the Congress in the Lok Sabha elections. How is the campaign shaping up for both the Congress and the INDIA bloc?

Our campaign has been going on for a long time though we may not be visible to the media because of various conditions created by the government. Our campaign is going on well and in each state, our units are working hard at the booth and block levels. At the same time, we are getting surveys and cross surveys done and we have taken all this material into consideration while selecting a candidate. We are organised and doing our best to prevent the BJP from coming to power.

Manoj CG: Prime Minister Narendra Modi says *abki baar 400 paar* (BJP will cross 400 seats). Congress leader Rahul Gandhi says the BJP won't even cross 150. What's your realistic assessment?

It's difficult to believe everything Modiji says. This is the first PM I'm seeing who exaggerates so much. But his dream won't come true. We'll show the BJP that it's not the Opposition but the people who want change. The BJP's nervousness is evident from the fact that its leaders are campaigning intensely in every *gully* compared to the past when they would hold just two or three meetings in a district. Whoever they had called corrupt and declared would be jailed have now been inducted in their fold. Modiji is nervous himself. The INDIA alliance will come back with strong numbers and defeat them.

Manoj CG: If Modiji is so nervous, why are Congress leaders joining the BJP?

This isn't new. In 1969, when the Congress split, everyone left Indira Gandhi. We lost our symbol after another split in 1978. In 1984, the late Pranab Mukherjee floated his own party (Rashtriya Samajwadi Congress) and took some leaders with him. People leave us when they find the grass greener on the other side. On the other hand, Modiji has weaponised the Enforcement Directorate (ED), Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and Income Tax, which he uses from time to time to scare people. The establishment threatens to close businesses and their owners buy electoral bonds so that they are let off the hook. Ours is not a politics of coercion.

I've been in one party for 53 years. I have been part of Congress rule for 20 years and seen its days in the Opposition for 30 years. People like me don't leave. That's because my political goal is to serve society on principles, not power. That flows from the days of Mahatma Gandhi. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) did not support Gandhiji's Quit India movement.

Only scared people run. Our grassroot worker is intact. If the leader goes, it doesn't make any difference. If the booth-level or block-level worker goes, it's very worrisome. And these workers haven't gone anywhere. So there's no reason to worry.

Liz Mathew: The Congress is the only party in the current INDIA bloc with a pan-India responsibility. While you have stronger allies in the south, you have to win the north and the Hindi heartland to make a difference. Which states are you expecting to do well in?

We are weak in some parts of northern India, like UP, parts of Bihar and Uttarakhand. But we have got strong alliance partners in the Samajwadi Party (SP) in UP and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar. We have got enough strength in Punjab, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and even Assam. We are doing better in Odisha. In Bengal, the alliance could not take off for various reasons but we still have hope given the violence there and a desire to prevent Modi. We are sacrificing some seats because the Congress will definitely try to mobilise and accommodate everybody to save the Constitution and democracy.

Liz Mathew: Both you and Rahul Gandhi keep saying that this is an ideological fight. But when it comes to certain issues like the Uniform Civil Code, the Congress has not opposed them. Your manifesto does not mention the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Do you think post the abrogation of Article 370, talking about certain issues could be tricky?

We discuss such issues and do not see them from the winning or losing perspective. There are bigger issues like unemployment and inflation which the PM never talks about. Has he fulfilled his promise of providing two crore jobs to the youth every year? Even IITians and doctors are not able to find jobs. Modi has destroyed the youth completely.

In 2014, he had promised to bring back black money and deposit Rs 15 lakh in every citizen's bank account. Has that happened? Has he doubled farmers' income? Not yet. But the UPA government, without anybody asking, has given guarantees like the Food Security Act, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), the Compulsory Education Act and the Rural Health Mission. We have given people rights and those cannot be scrapped. Not like Modiji, saying one thing and doing another. The PM always says fight for the nation.

PM says the Constitution is like the Gita for him. But for 140-crore people, the Constitution is the Gita, Bible, Quran, Guru Granth Sahib and more. Your fundamental rights are protected

We are the people who fought for independence. Where was the RSS or Jan Sangh then? He says the Constitution is like the Gita for him. But for 140-crore people, the Constitution is the Gita, Bible, Quran, Guru Granth Sahib and more. Your fundamental rights are protected, freedom of speech is protected, your education is protected, your religion is protected by the Constitution. Why should we create unnecessary controversies around what is already enshrined? Just to win an election?

Harikishan Sharma: The Congress says the BJP is weaponising investigative agencies against the Opposition. Will you reform or disband them should you come to power?

We should first do things right. The CBI is with the PM. ED should be the Finance Minister's department. Why has Home Minister Amit Shah kept the ED with him? Why is the Ministry of Cooperation with the Home Minister? Because he wants to control sugar factories and district cooperative banks. This intention is wrong. You are concentrating all power to yourself and harassing and squeezing people. I thought washing machines only wash clothes. I didn't know Shah *sahab* has one to clean people also. Nobody is above the nation. So we will do whatever is needed to save the nation.

Deeptiman Tiwary: Although you mentioned unemployment and prices as key electoral issues, the Congress and INDIA bloc narrative is about saving the Constitution and democracy. That's why the Congress is being criticised for not feeling the people's pulse. Do you agree?

This is wrong. We are agitating against rising prices across states. Every district

MALLIKARJUN KHARGE
CONGRESS PRESIDENT

‘Leaders may run scared but Congress grassroot workers have not gone anywhere’

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on real electoral issues that will have a bearing on results, keeping the INDIA alliance bloc together, real Dalit representation and taking the fight to the BJP camp. The session was moderated by Manoj CG, Chief of Political Bureau

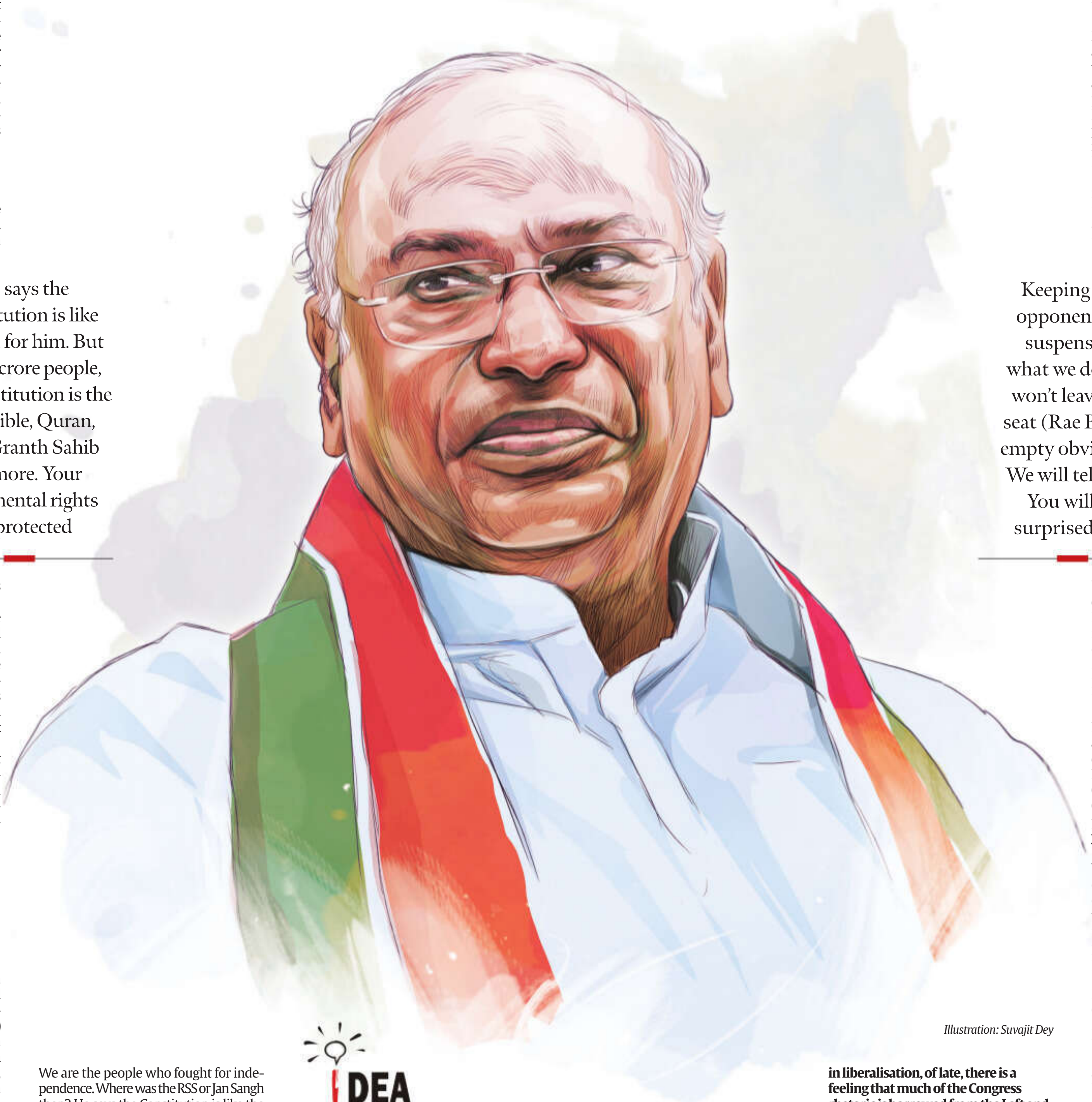


Illustration: Suvajit Dey

Keeping our opponents in suspense is what we do. We won't leave the seat (Rae Bareilly) empty obviously. We will tell you. You will be surprised, too

and have announced 280 seats. Sometimes we have to accommodate and sacrifice seats, like we did in Maharashtra recently. The aim is to keep the alliance intact, fight unitedly and defeat the Modi government.

Sandeep Singh: Since the BJP is talking about winning 400 seats, it has trained its energies on southern states and Bengal to get extra seats. The Congress is only focussing on the south when it should be focussing on big states like UP and Maharashtra. You are not doing as many rallies either.

We have strong regional alliance partners. Wherever our leaders are required, we use them and wherever heavyweight leaders like Sharad Pawar and Uddhav Thackeray exist, they helm the campaign. But more campaigning is left in states and we have a phase-wise plan. We have tried to cover seven seats in the first phase.

Manoj CG: Why is there so much suspense about Rae Bareilly?

Keeping our opponents in suspense is what we do. We won't leave it empty, obviously. We'll tell you. You'll be surprised, too. Let's see.

Lalmani Verma: In UP, you have an alliance with SP. But no SP leader came to campaign with top Congress leaders and vice-versa. Priyanka Gandhi held a press conference and roadshow on the last day of campaigning for the first phase. The opposition was again missing. How will you challenge the BJP in such places?

In this campaign, we had just one seat from the beginning. Besides SP workers let us know wherever we are needed and we attend those rallies. But if it's not needed, no point creating unnecessary conflicts with each other. Rahulji and Akhileshji (SP leader Akhilesh Yadav) held a press conference in Bengaluru. They delivered speeches in Mandya and Kolar, too. The rest, we'll go where needed. The PM has so many resources that he goes to each place 10 times. Remember, our accounts have been frozen.

Manoj CG: When Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal was arrested, and Congress accounts were frozen, there were discussions that the Opposition would boycott the elections entirely. Was this ever discussed?

I don't know. Maybe some have had that idea. It's not that if you have a cold, you cut off your nose. You should find a solution and the public finds it. So we are preparing them. Once they stand up, these people will run away.

Liz Mathew: Modiji has been talking about how Congress boycotted the consecration ceremony of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. Some Congressmen, like a leader from Gujarat, even criticised the party publicly. Looking back, do you think you should have participated?

This is a matter of personal faith. Whosoever wants to visit the temple and offer prayers can go on that day, next day or any other day. The PM is not a *pujari*, so why should he take the lead in consecrating the temple? He just did it for political purpose as not even one-third of the temple is complete yet.

He invited me, Mallikarjun Kharge, leader of the Opposition, and Sonia Gandhiji. Had he invited us as party representatives? Was it a political or a religious function? Why mix religion with politics?

Truth be told, my people (Dalits) are not allowed into temples even today. Leave the Ram Mandir aside, Dalits have to fight for entry at even the smallest of village temples. You don't allow Dalits access to drinking water or educational institutions. You don't even allow bridegrooms ride the horse in a procession. People pull them down and beat them up. If they keep a moustache, they ask them to shave it off. Did they expect me to attend? Rather, would they have tolerated my presence?

They did not allow the first citizen of this country, President Draupadi Murmu, to be present with the PM. Neither was she invited during the inauguration of the Parliament despite being the political head of the country. You did not allow former President Ramnath Kovind to lay the foundation stone of the new Parliament. So what kind of Dalit representation are they talking about? There are Scheduled Castes and Tribes. They talk about our rights and then humiliate us. And all you can say is that the Congress didn't come.

I don't have any animosity. So if they allow my people to worship, we will worship all 33 crore gods and goddesses. Till my people get real freedom, where do I go?

Shyamal Yadav: If INDIA alliance wins, and Congress gets to lead, will you convince Rahul Gandhi to step back and let someone else take the lead?

After 1989, which Gandhi family member became a PM, deputy PM, CM or a Central minister? Just abusing the Gandhi family, that's all Modiji does. The BJP targets them because they think if the family finishes, the Congress finishes and the BJP will get a free hand with RSS. This is their plan. First we're getting an alliance together. Nobody will take a decision individually. We'll decide together based on the numbers we get.

in liberalisation, of late, there is a feeling that much of the Congress rhetoric is borrowed from the Left and is not industry-friendly. Doesn't such a perception put off investors?

You said it. We liberalised the economy. We encouraged the private, public and the cooperative sectors. We are not against any corporate or industrialist provided they follow rules. There should be a level-playing field for everybody and we cannot be seen as promoting a monopoly or a few people. We support industrialists because without industry, you can't create wealth or jobs. We also have to look at labourers, their wages, skill and health, for higher productivity. We are neither left nor right, we are centrist. We are following Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's path. Look back and you will see that our five-year plans were well-balanced. We supported many industrialists and encouraged their growth.

Jatin Anand: Although the Congress is in alliance with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) for the Delhi Lok Sabha election, it has not fielded a woman candidate. Your comment.

We've got three seats — Chandni Chowk, North East Delhi and North West Delhi. The last is a reserved seat. We have tried to balance various factors with whatever we've got. Of course, our best candidates are with us. In Punjab, we are fighting separately. So there is no problem in allocating seats there according to our terms.

Aakash Joshi: The Congress is probably contesting the lowest-ever number of seats, under 300. Did your party have to give up the scale of its national footprint because your allies did not compromise enough on seats?

We are contesting more than 350 seats



WHY MALLIKARJUN KHARGE

As Congress president, Mallikarjun Kharge faces his toughest test yet in helming a party that is pivoting the Opposition challenge against the Modi-led BJP in the ongoing general elections. Within the party, his job just got tougher with senior leaders joining the BJP. Externally, he has to balance the demands of Congress allies and strike a compromise to keep the Opposition INDIA bloc together. And to convince people, he has to counter the BJP's muscular narrative with an alternative that's inclusive, aspirational and development-oriented

Congress committee worker has agitated in front of the collector's office, in public spaces and led processions. We have sat in *dharma* before the Gandhi statue and Vijay Chowk over jobs. Nobody is paying any attention to question paper leaks that ruin students' lives, the plight of gig workers or delays in filling government service vacancies. To create employment, Jawaharlal Nehru made so many industries, dams and power projects. Inflation is up.

We talk about democracy and Constitution together because good governance flows from them and if we had good governance, we wouldn't have had such issues.

Shyamal Yadav: Your manifesto talks about a socio-economic caste census.

In 2011, the UPA government had done one such census despite the resistance of senior leader P Chidambaram but its data was never made public. Your government said the data wasn't reliable though Rs 5,000 crore was spent. How will you correct the gaps?

This will be the decision of the INDIA alliance. For example, people in Bengal have reservations and want the socio-economic census done differently, not on the basis of caste. You mentioned Chidambaram *sahab*. Now he's the manifesto chairman. So there won't be any problem this time. Rahul Gandhi and us will work to implement this properly.

Harish Damodaran: Although your party introduced reforms and ushered

INDIAN PRIDE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

“The new generation believes that India's identity is its pride. India is proof that it becomes impossible to stop a nation when the feeling of self-respect awakens

Children of a lesser God

The Nestlé case needs a fast closure to figure out if some MNCs continue to practise double standards

NESTLÉ, THE WORLD'S largest consumer goods company, is once again in the dock for allegedly taking millions of its customers in developing countries for granted. Just nine years ago, its best-selling product Maggi was banned in India after revelations of the presence of high levels of MSG (monosodium glutamate) and lead, which were 17 times higher than the permissible limit. This time, campaigners from Public Eye, a Swiss investigative organisation, found that the company adds sugar and honey to infant milk and cereal products sold in many poorer countries, contrary to international guidelines aimed at preventing obesity and chronic diseases. The products involved are Nido, a follow-up milk formula brand intended for use for infants aged one and above, and Cerelac, a cereal aimed at children aged between six months and two years.

The jury is still out as the charges haven't been proved as yet and the company has dismissed them. While the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has decided to probe the issue, what is really disturbing is that the Belgian laboratory, which did the testing on behalf of Public Eye, found no added sugar in formulas for young children in Nestlé's main European markets. This, if true, reflects dangerous double standards and Nestlé must stop adding sugar in all products for infants, in every part of the world.

While not everybody should be painted with the same brush, such unfortunate episodes often lend credence to the perception that multinational companies often misbehave, deviating from the expected rules of conduct in different countries. This requires more attention and responsibility from the companies to reduce the negative consequences of their actions, especially in emerging markets. In this case, obesity is increasingly a big problem — globally more than 1 billion people are living with this — and no company, whether MNC or domestic, can afford to be irresponsible in their actions. A few years ago, a study by the Centre of Science and Environment said that global fast food companies do not have any India-specific commitments to eliminate the misuse of antibiotics in their meat supply chains. The same companies, however, made time-bound commitments in the richer countries. And it's not MNCs alone. Many food companies in India are focused on cutting corners to remain "affordable" to the mass market, and do not prioritise safety as a pillar of their business.

The onus really should be on the Indian government to have responsible agencies which set acceptable standards and ensure their compliance on an ongoing basis. Though India's food safety regulations and enforcement have come a long way from the earlier shoddy standards, a lot more needs to be done. For instance, a Comptroller and Auditor General report a few years back found that in more than 50% of cases tested and checked during the audit, licences were issued based on incomplete documentation. It was also found that out of the 72 state food laboratories to which the FSSAI and state food authorities sent food samples for testing, at least 65 of them did not possess the National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories accreditation. The FSSAI must ensure that standards are constantly updated based on scientific assessment and global health advice, and enforced. Data on foodborne illness are startling, and companies can't be allowed to get away by treating citizens in emerging nations as children of a lesser God.

China is keeping the wind power revolution blowing

FOR THE PAST few years, the global wind industry has been stuck in the doldrums. With rising interest rates and materials costs whittling away developers' profit margins, and political and economic elites cooling on the energy transition, installations of new turbines went sideways. Even as the electric vehicle and solar industries gathered speed, wind ran into turbulence. The sector was left drenched in red ink, project cancellations, and failed auctions.

That appears to be ending — but don't get your hopes up too much. If wind is recovering, credit goes to the nation that's currently the bogeyman stalking the EV and solar sectors: China.

First to the good news. A record 117 gigawatts of new wind turbines were installed around the world last year, the Global Wind Energy Council, a trade body, said in a report last week. The bad news comes if you take China out of the equation. Do that, and it looks like we've been stuck in neutral for three years. Ex-China installs last year were just 41 Gw — an increase of only 0.088 Gw relative to 2020. That's equivalent to half a dozen extra big offshore turbines, in an industry that should be connecting thousands every year.

Right now, the big headache for clean technology is mostly that much of the world is fretting about what's being deemed as Chinese overcapacity. A breakneck pace of factory-building means that we will soon be equipped with the production lines to manufacture all the solar panels, EVs and lithium-ion batteries we need.

Growth has been so headlong that US treasury secretary Janet Yellen and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have made trips to Beijing over the past fortnight, complaining that China's ambition is pushing down prices and leaving too little space for other countries to build up their own clean-tech sectors.

Thanks to the vast size of turbine blades and the high share of bespoke engineering that goes in to producing immense concrete-and-steel towers and foundations, wind is a much harder industry to trade across borders. In contrast to solar and EVs, which can be bought by individuals and non-energy businesses whenever their costs look attractive, it also depends on the behaviour of large utilities navigating the regulatory morass that plagues infrastructure in developed countries.

The picture isn't a pretty one. Last year's 117 Gw of installs is barely more than a third of the 320 Gw that the International Energy Agency reckons we'll need to be connecting each year by 2030. GWEC's current forecast is for a total turbine fleet of 2 terawatts by 2030 — just two-thirds of the 3 TW that's needed for net zero.

In the US, local supply chains are already running into bottlenecks for almost every complex component of a wind farm, with the only exceptions being basic steel plate, copper, and concrete, the report found. In Europe, the same shortages will start to spread this year and next. Only in China is the supply chain sufficient to keep wind growing without speed bumps.

That gives the lie to the paranoia about China's clean-tech ambitions seen in recent weeks. If it was exported Chinese overcapacity that was preventing the US and Europe from investing sufficiently in clean technology, you'd expect to see rich countries taking a far more aggressive approach in the one sector that's naturally protected from imports. Instead, it's trade-protected wind that's falling furthest behind where it needs to be. To the extent that there's grounds for hope around the energy transition right now, it's largely thanks to the availability of cheap, clean Chinese products that US and European governments seem so keen to exclude.

If we want to experience the fourth industrial revolution needed to rewire the world's energy systems, we have to spend the money on it. This requires an all-of-the-above strategy, welcoming government support rather than kicking off a destructive trade battle. If the tools to prevent global warming are getting built on a scale that the job requires, it's not overcapacity. It's just the basic level of capacity the world needs.

POWER POINT

HAVING A LOT OF MONEY DOESN'T GUARANTEE POLL VICTORY, BUT HAVING LITTLE IS A GREAT PREDICTOR OF A LOSS

An exclusive crorepati club

BY HER OWN admission, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman "does not have the kind of money" required to contest a Lok Sabha (LS) election. Asked if money power was such an influence that even the FM could not contest an election, she said at a media summit, "My budget, my salary, my earning, my saving is mine, and not the Consolidated Fund of India. And obviously, I can't."

She clearly can't, because according to the affidavit filed by Sitharaman as a Rajya Sabha MP in 2023, she had total assets of ₹2.56 crore, which appears to be too little for being a successful LS poll candidate. While one must appreciate the FM's forthrightness, it does raise an interesting question: Is the LS becoming a club for the richie rich only? To quote the great political philosopher Cyndi Lauper, "Money changes everything." And nowhere is that proverb more taken to heart than in an election, where crores of rupees are raised and spent on the understanding that money is a crucial determinant of whether a candidate will win.

In 2009, an average candidate who went on to win the Lok Sabha elections had spent around ₹30 lakh. The next general election's cost went up to ₹40 lakh. In 2019, the average winner's spending on elections went up further to ₹50 lakh. According to the Election Commission of India, for a Lok Sabha seat, a candidate can spend no more than ₹95 lakh for bigger constituencies with more voters, and up to ₹75 lakh for smaller constituencies.

But that's only on paper; in reality, this expenditure cap is rarely adhered to. Apart from expenses for campaigning, candidates are known to spend enormous amounts of money on freebies to

SHYAMAL MAJUMDAR

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to entice voters. It's obvious that the official expenses declared to the Election Commission by winning MPs are a mere sliver of the actual campaign costs, which include all contestants, not just those elected. The disclosed figures are the tip of the financial iceberg, hinting at a deeper, undisclosed cash flow in political funding. This is evident from the fact that enforcement agencies have already made a record seizure of more than ₹4,650 crore — touching an all-time high in the history of Lok Sabha polls in India — in the Election Commission's resolute fight against money power, even before the first phase of polling for the 18th Lok Sabha elections commenced on Friday.

The Centre for Media Studies (CMS) has predicted that political parties and candidates would spend more than ₹1.2 trillion in the 2024 elections, making it India's most expensive electoral contest. The problem is that while candidate expenditure is capped, party expenditure remains unconstrained. That remains a big loophole. For example, the Election Commission operates with a procedural distinction between

candidate and general party canvassing. Even though a candidate may feature prominently on the dais at a public rally, as long as his or her name, constituency and photograph are not mentioned or displayed, the entire cost of the event is attributed to the political party. In reality, much of it is spent by the candidate under the radar.

The lack of a cap on political party spending also fosters a murky financial environment where well-funded parties can easily sidestep candidate-level restrictions, blurring the lines of electoral integrity.

CMS studies have shown that between ₹55,000 and ₹60,000 crore were spent on the 2019 Lok Sabha and assembly elections in India. If this figure was averaged out, it would mean that approximately ₹100 crore was spent on each constituency — and ₹700 on each vote.

This suggests that elections are swinging more and more in favour of richer candidates who have the financial clout to contest and win. Results of past elections suggest that. Nearly a third of candidates with total assets of ₹5 crore and above won in 2019; the success rate of candidates with total

assets of less than ₹10 lakh was, by contrast, a mere 0.3%, according to a report by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR). The percentage of crorepati MPs rose steadily from 58% in the 15th Lok Sabha (2009) to 82% in the 16th (2014), and 88% in the 17th Lok Sabha (2019), the report said. The report analysed the assets of 539 (of the total 542) winners in 2019, of whom 475 had total assets of ₹1 crore or more. These numbers were 443/542 in 2014, and 315/543 in 2009.

This is, of course, nothing unique to India. In the US, too, full coffers are quite effective in election efforts. In the last presidential elections, top spenders won their elections 88.5% of the time in the House and 82.9% of the time in the Senate.

It's true that being rich doesn't guarantee you a victory in elections. Some of the richest candidates have lost their deposits in the past elections. For example, in 2019, six out of the top 10 wealthiest candidates were from the Congress and lost their deposits despite their substantial assets. The richest among them was independent candidate Ramesh Kumar Sharma from Patliputra, Bihar who declared assets worth over ₹1,107 crore but lost miserably.

But it's equally true that while having a lot of funding may not guarantee success, having little is a great predictor of a loss. The cost of elections for virtually every office does create a barrier to entry for many honest politicians.

An obvious consequence of the rising cost of elections has been a rise in more financially privileged people coming into Parliament. The 17th LS, elected in 2019, had 474 MPs with assets worth ₹1 crore or above, nearly 88% of the House. Over to the 18th Lok Sabha.

Are the days of dollar love ending?

JAMAL MECKLAI

CEO, Mecklai Financial
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Most global central banks, wanting to hedge against any possibility of falling afoul of the US, have been reducing their dependence on USD for their reserves

THE RUSSIAN INVASION of Ukraine (February 2022) was/is terrible in terms of the human suffering it has caused. A more mundane impact is that it has also created a wave of fundamental change in financial markets, as a result of US sanctions blocking Russia's access to SWIFT — by far the most widely used international clearing and settlement system.

Because of this, most global central banks, wanting to hedge against any possibility of falling afoul of the US, have been reducing their dependence on US dollars for their reserves. One of the most popular routes has been to buy gold, which has risen by more than 40% since October 2022 to touch and threaten almost daily the all-time high of USD 2,390 per ounce.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has been no slouch in this area, and has been buying gold steadily since April 2022. Its gold holdings have risen from 680 tonnes to 740 tonnes in March 2024, rising every month in the past two years, except for February, March, June, and October 2023. (The drops in February, March, and June were relatively modest and could be the result of data errors. However, the decline in October 2023, which was a huge 11.32 tonnes, is too large to ascribe to data errors, and it would appear that the RBI did, indeed, sell about 10 tonnes of gold, which has not been reported anywhere. We have drawn data from the RBI's website and Bloomberg and have triple checked our calculations — we could, of course, still be wrong, but we

thought it is an important enough issue to query.)

Along with buying gold, central banks have also been diversifying their foreign currency holdings, reducing dollars in favour of other G-7 currencies, the Chinese yuan (which is now a hefty 12.28% of the Special Drawing Rights or SDR) and, perhaps, currencies of trade partners.

We have been analysing the breakup of the RBI's reserve assets since 2008. A paper we prepared at that time (FX reserves management: Is RBI marching to its own drum?) indicated that just 50% of the RBI's FX reserves were in USD, as compared to an average of 66% in developed countries); EUR made up a further 35% of the RBI's reserves, taking the joint total close to the 90% that prevailed in most countries at the time. Since then, this

total has doubtless fallen, partly with the 2016 introduction of Chinese yuan into the SDR and, of course, more recently, since 2022, when many countries were trying to reduce their dependence on the still-almighty dollar.

Our analysis began with logging the month-to-month change in reserves in USD terms (as reported by the RBI); from this, we (1) deducted USD paid/received to/by the RBI to buy/sell gold each month, the monthly current account deficit and actual outward foreign direct investment flows; and (2) added monthly remittances and portfolio inflows. This gave us what we call the "change in net reserves", which includes the changes in valuation of reserves held in non-USD currencies due to changes in the value of the dollar.

Then we logged the month-to-month change in the dollar index

(DXY) taking care to capture the DXY data on the same date as the reserves were released. (We have assumed that the composition of DXY and the breakup of the RBI's non-USD reserves were identical. The dollar index comprises 57.6% EUR, 13.6% JPY, 11.9% GBP, 9.1% CAD, 4.2% SEK, and 3.6% CHF; this almost certainly does not correspond exactly to the RBI's non-USD basket. This could throw the correlations off but not in a material way.)

The chart, which plots the percentage change in net reserves and the percentage change in DXY, shows a very strong negative correlation — i.e. when DXY rose, the value of net reserves fell (as a result of the reduction in USD value of the non-USD reserves) and vice versa. The correlation was a huge -81%. If the reserves were entirely in dollars, the correlation would be 1; if they were entirely in non-dollars (in the exact DXY ratio), the correlation would be -1.

The analysis indicates that the non-USD share in the RBI's foreign currency assets today is 81%, which means that the USD share in the RBI's reserves is down substantially (from 2008) to around 19%.

While the exact number may be somewhat different (in view of the assumptions mentioned earlier), we believe the direction — that the RBI is holding an even smaller percentage of USD than the 50% it held in 2008 — is correct, reflecting global circumstances where central banks all over the world are reducing their dependence on the dollar.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Elon Musk and India

It's unfortunate for the country that the much-hyped visit of Tesla's Elon Musk will not happen, presumably because of elections in India. But more unfortunate is the politics being rigged out the by Congress in this context. Tesla is the top gun in the electric vehicle (EV) market, but Musk is looking elsewhere as competition in China intensifies. India is the third-largest automobile market in the

world today, and it's important for Tesla to be here because Musk wants to sell 20 million cars by 2030. The catch is, he is no longer ahead in the tech race. Chinese firms like BYD and CIC have done very well, creating some very innovative technologies including sodium ion batteries. India has advantages here since EV cars are not just about batteries, they also have software code driving them. Looking ahead, Indian electric two-wheeler makers are doing a fantastic

job. Electric cars in India may take more time because the preference today is for hybrids. That may change as the range of electric cars increases and the charging infra improves. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Hard questions

A large section of the media is cheering the flying start to the polls — a voter turnout of over 60% in the first phase. Clearly, the enthusiasm among voters is found missing as quite a few

districts in the North East witnessed zero voting. The regime must lend an ear and comprehend the real challenges. Why are young voters ghosting the booth? Why doesn't the manifesto talk about farmer income or increasing joblessness or soaring inflation? How does one expect the voter to repose trust and assume there will be development? —Girish Lalwani, Delhi

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

IRAN-ISRAEL FACE-OFF AND THE ECONOMIC CHALLENGE FOR INDIA

WHEN an unprecedented Iranian swarm of over 300 ballistic and cruise missiles and drones created just a crater or two in Israel, it became a compelling endorsement for Tel Aviv's Iron Dome missile shield. The US did its bit by putting down a sizable chunk of those projectiles. It also shared real-time intel with Israel on the attack, as did the UK, Jordan and some other Gulf states, indicating the changing dynamics in West Asia. Bets were also off on the Israeli counterattack but it pragmatically showed the ability to strike in Iran's Isfahan - which houses nuclear assets - without making any significant impact on the ground. Mercifully, there were relatively calmer heads on both sides who played dangerous war games on each other's territory for public consumption without letting the situation get out of hand. Both countries have since indicated their intention to dial down the tension, so it will be back to business as usual in the Gaza blood sport. At last count, over 34,000 people have been killed in Gaza, most of them women and children as collateral damage. That the US is expected to announce its first-ever sanctions against an Israeli army battalion for human rights violations in the occupied West Bank, brought a degree of sanity in the otherwise depressing outlook.

This was the first time in decades that Iran launched a direct attack on Israel instead of employing its proxies like the Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Hamas in Gaza to do the dirty job. The provocation came from a missile strike on an Iranian consulate in Syria that left a few army generals and diplomats dead earlier this month. That attack was widely attributed to Israel though it disowned it. Iran also dramatically seized a container ship bound for Israel on the high seas. Among its crew were 17 Indian sailors, one of whom, a female trainee cadet, returned home safely.

There were fears of the Iran-Israel clash further inflaming global markets. Inflation is a bad word in over 60 poll-bound nations, including India, this year, but markets have settled. The cost of freight would stay up due to the vulnerable Red Sea corridor. But with the Ukraine war also contributing to geopolitical uncertainties, global economies would continue to roil. The challenge for India is to navigate a safe passage for its economy while urging warring nations to give peace a chance.

DECLARE A WAR ON CYBERCRIMES

IN the first two months of this year, Bengalureans lost a whopping ₹240 crore to cybercrime. If projections are to be believed, residents of the 'IT Capital of India' are likely to lose at least ₹1,440 crore by the end of this year. But real loss could be much more. Officials involved in curtailing this menace admit that given the rising trends of perpetrators using newer methodologies, it is becoming increasingly difficult to detect cybercrimes, allowing the perpetrators to go scot-free. There is a marked decline in detection rate, as per the data for Bengaluru. In 2022, detection rate stood at 22.8%, but dropped to 8.1% in 2023, before further plummeting to a mere 1.36% in January-February 2024. Within the first two months of 2024, Bengaluru saw 3,151 cyber-crime cases registered, of which 828 cases involved job frauds, and only 11 were detected. According to the data, individuals have collectively lost over ₹63.8 crore to job fraud scams alone — a lure that easily attracts the unemployed who are desperately seeking lucrative jobs promised by the perpetrators, but ending up losing money, let alone not getting the promised job.

According to the India CyberCrime Coordination Centre (I4C), from April 2021 until now, ₹10,319 crore has been lost due to cyber crime attacks across India. Cybercriminals have a range of methods to target people — email and internet fraud; identity fraud (where personal information is stolen and used); theft of financial or card payment data; stealing and selling corporate data; cyber-extortion (ransom demands to prevent threatened attacks); cyber-extortion; hackers mining cryptocurrency by using resources they do not, a method called 'cryptojacking'; cyber-espionage (accessing government or company data); infringing copyright; illegal online gambling; sale of illegal items online; and soliciting, producing, or possessing child pornography for sale.

While cybercrime has been around for years, it has escalated lately with newer trends emerging to fox not just the gullible public, but also the cyber police. Awareness programmes to alert people against cyber predators seem to be not working. This calls for urgent steps on a war-footing by the Central and the state governments to set up special agencies dedicated to preventing and detecting cybercrimes. Otherwise, these criminals will continue to con innocent citizens and steal their hard-earned money.

QUICK TAKE

EYE ON THE FARM CRISIS

INDIA'S wheat production is expected to be 6 percent lower this month and government procurement of the crop is 37 percent lower than a year earlier. Paddy procurement plans have also been waylaid by market dynamics. Meanwhile, train traffic on the Ambala-Amritsar route was affected this week as farmers squatted on the tracks demanding the release of three compatriots arrested earlier by the Haryana police for protesting. These are significant issues in a country facing food inflation and running a free grains scheme for 80 crore people. Addressing the farm crisis should be the new government's first order of business.

Coalition politics has been the lifeline of Kerala since Independence as it began prior to modern Kerala, with Travancore-Cochin politics as the forerunner. Barring two governments out of 23, all the governments since 1956 were a coalition of like-minded parties. Therefore, Kerala became the cradle of coalition politics in India. Over the years, coalition politics has matured into a sharp bipolar politics providing little room for a third coalition or party to win seats or form a government in Kerala. Unlike in other states, winning party candidates need a higher share of votes in the peculiar bi-polar electoral battle. Nevertheless, ideology took a backfoot and pragmatism prevailed in the formation and running of coalition governments. Curiously, Kerala voters behaved contrastingly in assembly and Lok Sabha polls in most cases. Further, it has resisted the national trend on a number of occasions.

Three fronts and the puzzle

The 2024 general elections bring contrasting challenges to all three fronts in Kerala—the United Democratic Front (UDF), the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). This paradox is also found in building a strong narrative. In this context, the primary dilemma of the BJP, to open its account under the first past the post system of elections, is how to gain partners in its coalition structure with a substantial mass base. Otherwise, it has to emerge itself with critical mass as a strong rival to the traditional coalitions, the UDF and LDF. This is an unlikely aspect due to the social and political history, demography and unique developments in the state.

Unlike in other parts of India, the Hindutva ideology has severe limitations in the plural setting of the state. Formulating a credible narrative for the BJP is certainly problematic in this situation. It has to face two formidable rivals, viz the ideologically strong Communists, and the electorally astute Congress and its Muslim League combination. No wonder the NDA never polled more than 15 percent of votes in Kerala. At the same time, the RSS has a strong base with an organisational network functioning throughout Kerala.

With the 18th Lok Sabha elections close on its heels, Kerala is poised for a triangular fight in all 20 constituencies, although the BJP is offering stiff fights only in seven seats that confuses the traditional major rivals led by the Congress and the CPI(M). Added to this bewilderment is the fact that the UDF and LDF are also fraught with

Congress is having organisational issues, but it has national presence. The CPI(M) is a big player in Kerala; it is facing anti-incumbency. Meanwhile, the BJP is struggling to make its mark

ELECTORAL BATTLE OF THE THREE FRONTS IN KERALA



SOURAV ROY

structural and ideological challenges.

Let us enter into this interesting scenario. Firstly, the Congress is not in power either in Kerala or in India and saves itself from any anti-incumbency factor. But it is organisationally weak, with leadership struggles at the state level and suffers from a dearth of funds. However, the presence of its national leader Rahul Gandhi vying for the Wayanad seat emboldens them like in 2019. But except the Muslim League, the Congress does not have a strong partner in the coalition. Further, a few of its ranks deserted and joined the BJP recently. Consequently, it suffered from the criticism that the party is playing a 'B' Team for the BJP. Secondly, it has two rivals to beat in electoral politics, the mighty LDF that has been in power in Kerala for the last eight

years, and the emerging BJP in most of the constituencies.

It is an irony that both the Congress and the CPI(M) are part of the INDI Alliance but are traditional rivals in Kerala. Except the 'ideological' unity to fight the BJP, to save secularism in the country, there is nothing in common between the Congress and CPI(M) as evinced in the complex politics of Kerala. Given these contradictions, crafting a substantive narrative for the UDF and the Congress is a basic dilemma. Perhaps its strong point is that unlike the CPI(M), which is a weak force in national politics, the Congress continues as the major opposition party to the BJP and probably can lead the anti-BJP coalition either in power or in opposition soon after the polls.

THRILLING REMINDERS OF SACRED GEOGRAPHY



RENUKA NARAYANAN

FAITHLINE

cover the circuit in a couple of hours. There is an ongoing belief that if one performs penance for 12 years at this place, one transcends to Brahmaloaka.

I felt quite wistful after seeing that signboard that I had to carry on to the airport instead of impulsively taking the turn to Naimisharanya. For those who mistakenly say that North India and South India are unconnected, let it be known that the Naimishnath Vishnu temple there, or Ramana



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The Alvaars were 12 Vaishnava saints said to have lived between the sixth and ninth centuries in the Tamil region. The only woman among them is girl-saint Andal. They wandered from temple to temple singing hymns of adoration for Lord Vishnu

manuja Kot, is counted as one of the Divya Desha or 108 Vishnu temples across India that are revered in the *Naal Aayira Divya Prabandham* by the Aalvaar. These are 12 Vaishnava saints said to have lived between the sixth and ninth centuries in the Tamil region. The only woman among them is girl-saint Andal, pronounced 'Aandaal'.

'Aalvaar', usually spelt Alvar or Alwar, means those who are immersed in the love of Lord Vishnu. Here I feel impelled to interpolate that Sanskrit, Hindi and Indian languages in general do not have a 'w' sound. They have a simple 'v' sound. So, I don't know why 'w' was ever used to spell Indian names when, as far as I know, it is phonetically alien. I am minded to strongly urge that we update our software on this

Whereas the challenges before the LDF piloted by the CPI(M) are numerous. The CPI and the CPI(M) are contesting 90 percent of the seats in Lok Sabha, allowing limited roles for the smaller parties in the coalition (structurally, the LDF has more strength due to the presence of a number of smaller parties). But the most challenging factor before them is how to build a strong narrative that is focused on attacking both the Congress and BJP. The former is a partner of the non-BJP alliance while the latter is an ideological rival. To win more seats, it has to appeal for support not only from party ranks but also build credibility and confidence among the Muslim and Christian communities, who together constitute more than 45 percent of the state population.

Secondly, it has to overcome the anti-incumbency against its own government that has been in power since 2016. This is not an easy task because of a host of current factors—a plummeting economy, increasing unemployment, price rise, corruption charges against the chief minister and few party leaders, increasing violence in the campuses for which its student arm, the Students Federation of India, has been targeted, stand-off with the governor over the extreme politicisation of the academic sector, tacit support from an extremist Muslim organisation, the SDPI etc. Therefore, creating a credible narrative to address the Kerala electorate is more problematic for the LDF. Its attack on the BJP relating to the issues of secularism is equally competed by the UDF since the Congress is also apprehensive of the BJP on the topic of CAA, anti-minority policies, issue of Article 370, violation of the federal and secular spirit in the Constitution, etc. In its over-enthusiasm to attack the BJP, the LDF lost its sheen to project the inherent problems of the major rival, the UDF. While the Congress could easily highlight the fact that it is much stronger at the national level to take on the challenges brought by the BJP, a similar assertion cannot be made by the LDF.

Therefore, the crisis before the Left is much deeper than its rival in the national poll. Its electoral strength is limited at the national level and except in Kerala, it has not emerged as a major force to reckon with. On the whole, the LDF suffers from two counts—the anti-incumbency factor and the limited appeal restricted to the state in a hotly contested general election.

On the whole, the coalition puzzle is inescapable for all the three fronts in Kerala.

(Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Mindless promises

Congress is rolling out mindless promises, like its recent first-job guarantee to graduates, apart from baseless charges against the BJP. While Rahul is emphatic that BJP will get only 150 seats, he does not say how many seats his party will win. Job creation is not an independent activity and is a byproduct of growth and development.

Rajaroo Kumar, email

Healthy democracy

In spite of the summer heat, more than 60% turnout for voting in the first phase of polls is encouraging. However, this number is not enough for a healthy democracy. At least 80 percent of voters should express their franchise. Only then can the victor be called a real victor.

P V Srinivas Sreelekha, Secunderabad

Extreme heat

Though the first phase of the polls went well, one wonders why the EC was apathetic about the extreme heat that voters had to face. This is the main reason for laggard polling in many parts, especially in Tamil Nadu. The EC should have arranged facilities like shelters, seats, anti-dehydration measures and health drinks for voters. It has time to introspect and work out these kinks for the remaining phases.

Manoharan Muthuswamy, Ramanathapuram

Performance troubles

At a time when M S Dhoni is the driving force for Chennai Super Kings, the top order failed to inspire the team. The roles played by openers and more so by middle order and current captain Ravindra Jadeja was found wanting. If Jadeja is a good fielder, he should be kept as the 12th man instead of as a part of the playing XI.

C K Ramani, Chennai

Rain predictions


In a couple of weeks, Bengaluru and other parts of Karnataka are expected to receive heavy rainfall. Have the authorities concerned actively desilting and deepening lakes and other water bodies so as to store enough rain water? Hope they have not ignored it due to election fever.

R Kasthurirangan, Bengaluru

Produce proof

Ref: *Onus lies with EC to prove EVM reliability* (Apr 20). The opposition led by Rahul Gandhi keeps harping on their cliched assertion that it has no trust in EVMs under the BJP rule. In ample measure, the Election Commission has demonstrated on different occasions that the EVM system is foolproof. Now the allegation should end, or the Court should ask the opposition to produce evidence.

P Mangalachandran, Kannur



CONTRAPUNTO

In politics, you have to cut the cake so everybody gets a piece, but keep in mind somebody has to make the cake

MICHAEL CAINE

Why This Kolaveri D

Kerala is Congress's lifeline, but CPM desperately needs a win here. Thus the heckling between the two

Combative rhetoric and mudslinging, and so-called friendly fights, are par for the course during Lok Sabha electioneering. But the recent flare up in verbal spats, days before election on April 26, between INDIA allies CPM and Congress in Kerala is anything but garden variety. Pinarayi and Rahul's takedowns, one reminding the other of "his old name" (Amul baby by Kerala netas), the other making "not in jail" jibes, highlight how both are in dire need – CPM slightly more – of the Kerala vote.

Kerala's score | Congress-led UDF has traditionally dominated the state's presence in Parliament. In 2019, UDF swept 19 of its 20 LS seats, reducing CPM to a single MP. CPM did better in Tamil Nadu, winning two seats. Little wonder Pinarayi kicked off his LS campaign in Feb with harsh criticism of Congress, against the backdrop of the larger anti-BJP campaign – saying BJP was political heir to Congress's authoritarianism. For Congress, its 15-seat haul in Kerala and a sweet Wayanad victory for Rahul, pushed its faltering total to 52 seats. Congress aside, UDF tally was: IUML 2, RSP and Kerala Congress (Mani) 1 each.

KC factor | As things stand, KC (Mani) switched to LDF in 2020, thus any win it manages is for LDF this time. The other KC factor is Congress veteran Venugopal, who didn't contest in 2019 – it was his stronghold, Alappuzha, that CPM won. Venugopal won Alappuzha in 2009 and 2014, and is contesting this time, so it's a three-way battle: KC takes on CPM's sitting MP AM Ariff, and BJP's Sobha Surendran. Yet Alappuzha hasn't seen as much aggressive ally-bashing as between Pinarayi and Rahul. Even Wayanad, where CPI's Annie Raja takes on Rahul, hasn't been nasty.

Knockout or knocked off | In effect, it's CM training guns at Rahul, and vice versa. There's reason why. Left parties put together touched a record low in 2019. CPM won 3 of the 69 it contested all India, and a 2% vote share, its worst tally ever. In Bengal, it didn't make it to second place on any of the state's 42 seats. All India this time CPM's contesting 52 seats – 15 in Kerala and 23 in Bengal – so far. Kerala's a do-or-die battle for it. Alliance at the national level is all very well, but for electoral relevance, CPM cannot afford to not dent Congress in the only state where communists are in office. So, it's gone into the poll battle, all guns blazing.

March Of Phogat

How wrestlers who protest on the street & win on the mat are shattering the keep-quiet ceilings

Sports are not siloed away from society. Wrestling on the mat is not walled off from struggles outside it. The three swift bouts Vinesh Phogat convincingly won to head to her third Olympic Games, evoke the one she has been fighting against sexual harassment.

Reversal | Recall how their motives were questioned when Sakshi Malik, Phogat and Bajrang Punia began protesting in Jan last year. They were asking for a proper investigation into sexual harassment allegations against then WFI president Brij Bhushan. But there were attempts to cast their actions as "fading" sportspersons manipulating for a "direct entry into Olympics". These aspersions had 0% basis in fact, 100% in how shame is misdirected towards complainants to shut them up. Phogat has thrown such smearing over and out of the mat, where it belongs.

Fleeing the hold | Phogat breezed through the competitors from South Korea, Cambodia and Kazakhstan without conceding a single point. The fight to set things right in the federations has gone less smoothly. New WFI president Sanjay Singh is known as a very close associate of Brij Bhushan, who has been campaigning in his Kaiserganj turf in defiance of the poll code of conduct. There is chatter that he may yet get a BJP LS ticket and the federation put roadblocks between Phogat and Paris.

Grand throw | Historically the akhada was men's domain. Phogat belongs to only the second generation of women wrestlers in India. To keep women in second-suppressed place after they began to win glory for the country was always going to be a losing game. Remember, the protesting wrestlers spoke up for others, not themselves. They changed the public discourse. For athletes, families, bystanders. Phogat's performance says that nobody will go back to being shut up now.

Humanity overflow

What a 24-hour deluge in UAE brought to the surface

Bikram Vohra

We had 48 hours warning in UAE that come April 16 it would be an unprecedented storm that would hit us, so batten the hatches and stay home. But since no one could imagine what finally came down for 24 hours in a mind-blowing "you can't be serious" deluge, several of us ventured out and added to the chaos.

Rain in Emirates is usually a 20-minute interlude punctuated with joyous laughter and childlike glee...singing in the rain actually. Not this hail and howling wind stuff, this New Orleans chaotic frenzy of stranded people, cars floating like drowned beetles, trees felled like soldiers in a war, airports waterlogged, water on the streets rising like an evil tide even as it swirled round ankles up to knees and thighs in seconds. There has never been a recorded precedent that comes even close these past 75 years. So there is nothing to measure against this slap from Nature.

As the black clouds pelted the cities came the reckoning. The world tends to see life here as a sort of congregation of the spoilt and self-indulgent, superficial people engaged in superficial lifestyles, introverted and fuelled only by money. It's not so.


Even as rain tossed the system around like a bean bag, the 120-plus nationalities that comprise the 8 million of UAE rose to the occasion. At the metros, regardless of who it was, common people brought food and water for those who could not get home. Those stuck at airports were given lifts by volunteers. Where roads could be navigated, unknown hands ferried those who were marooned. Hundreds came on social media offering to open their doors for the night, giving addresses and phone numbers. The elderly, the frail, those in need of emergency aid found succour from people they had never seen. Car chargers were shared like toffees so loved ones could stay in touch. Theft was not even an also-ran and few dared to try and make a buck from adversity. WhatsApp was the adhesive and even as in a funny ha ha counterpoint expats kayaked and jet skied on the flooded roads and paddled past on homemade rafts, strangers turned into saviours.

Updates on radio stations, support groups for every area, it was so heartening to see how good people do good things when the chips are down. Like the cancer patient and the diabetic with no meds and the cardiac stricken who called for help, the lady with the baby and no feed, the granny isolated on the top floor waiting for help...and they all received it. And now the sun is shining again.

That Electric Attraction

Musk postponing his India trip doesn't alter two fundamentals. One, Tesla is best placed to help Indians embrace EVs. Two, India is best placed to help Tesla test & build affordable cars for emerging markets

Rajiv.Ghosh@timesgroup.com



Elon Musk has postponed his trip to India because of "very heavy Tesla obligations". But all the factors making an India-Tesla partnership a win-win for both remain firmly in place.

Wherever Tesla has started its operations, it has helped build a robust EV ecosystem. China is a classic example. India would like Tesla to repeat this here too. On the other hand, Tesla cannot miss out on the India story. This is the world's fastest-growing large car market.

Growth conditions | Just over 90,000 or only 2.2% of the cars sold in India in 2023 were electric. In contrast, worldwide battery EV (BEV) sales were 10 million or 11.1% of cars sold. So, there is a huge opportunity for Tesla, or any big EV maker, to jumpstart the electric car industry here. Musk has been consistent about where he sees the scope for him to invest in India:

- India is now the most populous country in the world, Musk tweeted in April 2024. So, Indians should have Tesla EVs, which he says are the best cars in the world.
- Solar panels combined with battery storage could power rural India more efficiently. This is Tesla's fastest-growing business segment.
- Starlink could provide mobile broadband connectivity to India's rural and remote areas.

Affordability matrix | It is well understood that an affordable car is critical to Tesla's success in India. This also syncs well with Tesla's long-term plans. It has announced a goal of further 50% reduction in the cost of building a vehicle as compared to Model 3/Y. It has already outlined a plan to build a \$25,000 car (₹21 lakh). And while this plan could be temporarily de-prioritised, it should be ready in around 3-4 years, when Tesla is expected to start building a highly localised car in India.

GOI believes Tesla would give much-needed push to EV ecosystem development in India and also boost its Make In India programme. That is why, when the e-vehicle policy was announced on the last working day before the election code of conduct came into effect, govt agreed to Musk's long-standing request to allow import of e-cars.

Meanwhile, Tesla has announced it intends to further increase cost-competitiveness in its significant markets by strategically adding local manufacturing.

Phased entry strategy | Tesla's production capacity is generally scaled up in phases and so is its localisation. This is what Musk did in China and Germany.

- He started by selling imported Tesla vehicles, seeding key markets with sales and service centres, and

critical raw materials, it strives to execute long-term supply contracts at competitive pricing. Its annual report mentions it now has adequate access to raw material supplies to meet operational needs. Its proven capability will be invaluable to India.

Charging network edge | Tesla has 55,000 superchargers installed worldwide in around 6,000 charging stations with a growth of 36% CAGR over the last five years. Charging stations have maintained an average uptime of over 99.9%, it says. Tesla tries to collocate superchargers with its solar and energy-storage systems to reduce costs and promote renewable power. Supercharger stations are typically placed along well-travelled routes and in and around dense city centres. Tesla's cars have good range of 500km and putting only a few superchargers on the highways could help dispel range anxiety among Indians.

Ecosystem transformation | Given Tesla's brand appeal, an imported Tesla Model Y SUV even priced at around ₹55 lakh is likely to be lapped up by India's affluent. The buzz around imported models will help aspirational Indian buyers embrace EVs enthusiastically when Tesla eventually launches a car in ₹25 lakh price range.

Entry of Tesla catalysed both Chinese and German automakers to get more serious about EVs and although they initially struggled and were frightened, eventually they improved, and their EV sales took off soon after Tesla started making in their home country.

What is in it for Tesla? | For Tesla, India is a "multi-billion dollar market". Musk also has a favourable view on India as a big chunk of Tesla's managerial staff in US is of Indian origin. Tesla derives 78% of its nearly \$100 billion sales outside China and Musk would like India to be a key sourcing hub for both electric cars and their parts. The recent deal to source semiconductor from Tatas is a prime example. India could be the country where Musk would test and build affordable cars for emerging markets, and a place to build some of Tesla's software.

Upcoming negotiations are just the start. After the general elections, Musk would like a longer-term road map of how India will support EVs and negotiate with state govts for a good deal on the location of Tesla's factory.

'YSR wanted to see Rahul become PM...he would've backed my political pursuit...Jagan changed after becoming CM'

As **YS Sharmila** takes forward former CM **YS Rajasekhara Reddy's** political heritage, her party, *Kongress* – virtually written off in the two Telugu states till it won *Telangana's* assembly election – seems to be on a path to revival from its 1.2% vote share (2019 LS) in Andhra. Since taking over as Congress's AP head, Sharmila, sister of YSRCP chief and present CM **YS Jagan Mohan Reddy**, has been making the right noises, particularly in *Kadapa* LS constituency, where she takes on cousin and sitting MP **YS Avinash Reddy**. Excerpts from an interview by **Sandeep Raghavan**.

- **You've laid claim to your father's political legacy.**
Why not? Jagan Mohan Reddy can stake claim to my father's legacy only if he relives YSR's ideals. He is different from my father in many ways. YSR was a man of his word, known to fulfil his promises and would even give up his life to keep his word. Jagan is all lies and deceit. What happened to his numerous promises made before 2019 elections, including completion of irrigation projects, prohibition, filling up 2.3L govt vacancies, notification for teachers' vacancies, etc? When he cannot keep his word to the people, how can he stake claim to YSR's legacy? He must first learn to live up to YSR's ideals.
- **Did your father have political aspirations for you?**
Honestly, no. He had no aspirations for me at all. I was his heart and soul. He loved and pampered me so much he was reluctant even to allow me to study medicine at one stage. He just wanted me to lead a happy life. I too had no political ambition, but situations forced me. Had my father been alive, I'm sure he would have backed me in my efforts to relive his ideals.
- **How is canvassing for Congress distinct from your YSRCP campaign?**
I campaigned for YSRCP as I believed Jagan would fulfil my father's aspirations for the people. I walked 3,200km believing Jagan will walk in my father's footsteps. I left behind home and family, all my aspirations, for a yearlong padayatra across the state. The 'Bye-Bye Babu' campaign I led for YSRCP before 2019 elections was one of India's most successful ones. But after YSRCP won, Jagan changed completely on becoming CM.
- **But has Andhra forgotten/forgiven Congress for the state's bifurcation?**
What was done cannot be undone. You cannot blame Congress alone. Even BJP pledged support to AP Reorganisation Act.
- **Jagan/YSRCP claim they've met 99% of promises made.**
How can they even make such claims? Jagan had said he would complete all irrigation projects within six months of being in office. Nothing's happened. I was very much with Jagan when he promised ₹15,000 to every mother with two children under the Amma Vodi scheme. But that budget's been halved so only one child per family gets financial help.
- **After 5 years of silence, why rake up YS Vivekananda Reddy's murder now?**
I haven't been silent. I pledged support to Vivekam chinnanna's (paternal uncle) daughter Dr Suneetha Narreddy from Day 1, though family members distanced themselves. I was the only one who stood by her in the fight for justice. I may appear more vocal now after deciding to contest from Kadapa. Which I did because YSRCP has again fielded **YS Avinash Reddy**, though CBI named him as an accused in the Viveka murder.
- **Your mother's presence at your and Jagan's events confused many...**
Vijayamma is a mother first. She is with both her kids. It wouldn't be possible to choose between the right eye and the left. It wouldn't be appropriate to even ask her to make that choice. I too haven't asked her to make that choice. I appreciate she's neutral to both.

Calvin & Hobbes

Accept & Adapt Before Changing The World

Narayani Ganesh

What if my home, family and livelihood get destroyed by rising sea levels brought on by global warming that is melting ice caps and heating the planet? Will toxic air, water and soil spell the end of life? Climate anxiety is creating insecurity and panic, spreading a sense of helplessness and dejection.

One view is that we are going to die anyway, so why not make the most of whatever we can enjoy, before everything falls apart. The other view is that we need to make drastic changes in personal, professional and public lifestyles to arrest environmental destruction and reverse the damage. Between these two views is the one that promotes acceptance and adaptation to face climate change triggered by human exploitation of the environment and unmindful, polluting activities.

Moderation is crucial in what and how we consume and also how we respond to chronic issues that won't disappear with a few stern measures.

We could get inspired by Krishna's advice to Arjun in the Bhagwad Gita, where he says you need to remain balanced both in joy and sorrow, so that one can aspire for immortality. In this verse from chapter 2, immortality is a metaphor for personal evolvement that is akin to becoming immortal, in spirit. When we remain balanced, there is less agitation and the challenges we face in the material world can be responded to calmly and logically.


In matters of climate change, global warming, species extinction and loss of green cover, no individual can hope to reverse the process or make a big difference. Even if we follow green practices in our daily lives, the large-scale destruction caused by industrial practices, businesses and government policies are beyond our control. Here, collective peoples' movements may help influence the trajectory in the very long term. In the meantime, the art of acceptance and adaptation can help us navigate the crises and survive.

Acceptance and adaptation require personal resolve, strength, patience and deep understanding. Arjun had to fight against his will for the larger good, to overcome negative forces and establish dharma. Similarly, we need to find ways to accept the fact that we have been remiss in nature conservation which is why we are experiencing its negative effects.

Acceptance does not mean we are shirking from the responsibility of speaking out or acting against eco-destruction. It means we accept the factors that led to the crises and while we find ways to adapt to the situation, we will also make efforts to create traction to change the way we have been treating our surroundings as exploitative human beings. Since not everything in life can be changed, we need to focus on those things that can be changed one step at a time, and for the rest, we need to adapt.


The story of evolution is all about adaptation, and species who learn to adapt, survive. Octopuses, for example, will use any debris they find, including glass and plastic, as items for shelter. Migratory fish move to colder and deeper waters to survive. Adaptation helps us discover new ways to survive. It inspires reflection and the gaining of inner strength to deal better with externalities.

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THE SPEAKING TREE

Sacredspace



Our lives are just one big improvisation... our conversations, thoughts, actions, and even emotions are being "made up" as we go along...life is jazz...We are all artists creating on a daily basis that art which is our lives.

George S Clinton

GOPALASWAMY J
Chennai

FIRST COLUMN

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF FOMO

In the age of social media, the Fear Of Missing Out has become rampant



SHAINY SHARMA

Ever found individuals befuddling when they see photos or updates from parties, gatherings, or events they were not invited to or witness their colleagues or peers receiving accolades, promotions or career advancements... Well such situations may evoke FOMO in individuals who feel stagnant or unproductive in comparison. "FOMO," or the Fear of Missing Out, arises from a perceived discrepancy between one's own experiences and the experiences of others. Whether online or offline, the fear of missing out can exert a powerful influence on individuals emotions, behaviours and decision-making processes, thereby highlighting the need for self-awareness and coping mechanisms to navigate the pressures of modern life. Now a days it is a prevalent phenomenon among Generation Z (Gen Z) and other demographics. It can be a double-edged sword, driving ambition while fostering anxiety. There is no denying the fact that Gen Z have grown up in a digital age which is characterized by constant connectivity and instant access to information promoting products, experiences and lifestyles that appear glamorous and desirable. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, X and Facebook have become integral part of their daily lives, shaping their perceptions, behaviours and social interactions in profound ways. Various studies and research too have consistently shown a strong association between social media usage and FOMO among this generation, the consequences of which extends beyond mere discomfort and impact mental health, self-esteem and interpersonal relationships. Individuals plagued by FOMO due to the constant exposure to curated content and the pressure to maintain a certain online image may experience increased stress, anxiety, depression and feeling of loneliness as they constantly compare their lives to others' highlight reels.



To mitigate the negative effects of FOMO on Gen Z, it becomes utmost important to promote digital literacy, encourage healthy social media habits and foster offline connections and experiences. Now this can include multiple practices such as practicing mindfulness or journaling that promote gratitude and positive thinking. Setting boundaries for screen time and cultivating meaningful relationships and activities that are not dependent on social media validation. Additionally, fostering a supportive and inclusive online community can help alleviate feelings of FOMO by emphasizing authenticity, empathy and acceptance. Not only this but practicing the art of Digital Detox will allow individuals to reconnect with themselves and prioritize meaningful offline interactions and relationships. This will result in emphasizing the importance of quality over quantity when it comes to social connections and encourage face-to-face communication, genuine conversations and shared experiences with their friends and loved ones. Also, encouraging them to engage in activities such as sports, art, music or dance will not only provide opportunities for personal growth and development but also reduces dependence on social media for validation and self-worth. Practicing such activities will encourage the Generation Z to seek support from trusted friends, family members or mental health professionals if they're struggling with feelings of FOMO or its effects on their well-being. Remember, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) raises stress hormones, inflammation and dysregulates an individual's nervous system. One needs to learn to self-love and be protective of their time and energy. In the hyper connected world, it does take courage to be with own thoughts so, try to be one...

(The write is an educator; views are personal)

With power freebies, debt comes calling



UTTAM GUPTA

The core dilemma persists: How to prevent debt while ensuring universal electricity access? This issue entails policy intricacies and power sector reforms



In an interview, Union Power Minister RK Singh revealed he has been telling States that electricity is not free. "If any State wants to give free power to any category of people, they can go ahead and do so, but you have to pay for it". Singh's exhortation to the States assumes significance in the backdrop of a spate of announcements by the latter to give free electricity to certain consumers which affect the viability of power distribution companies or discoms (they buy power from generating companies or gencos and supply to the consumers). He argues "like any other commodity, generation and distribution of electricity involves cost and if a State is to provide it for free to a section of consumers, it also needs to have finances to pay the genco. If the genco isn't paid, electricity will not be produced in the first place". But, there can't be any compromise on the generation of electricity as any shortfall could lead to a stoppage of economic activity. To meet the surge in demand (due to the impending summer), the Union Government has invoked the provisions of the Electricity Act (2003) under Section 11 asking gas-based gencos and thermal plants based on imported coal to increase generation even if it entails extra cost. That is the reaction to meeting incremental demand. How could it tolerate massive cuts in generation inevitable when gencos are not paid? So, States must ensure that they are paid. When pressurized, the concerned States borrow money to pay the gencos resulting in a debt trap. For instance, in the first two years of the AAP Government, Punjab borrowed as much as Rs 47,000 crore adding to the already high debt of the State. How can the States avoid debt trap? The Electricity Act (2003) and the Guidelines issued by the Ministry of Power require the discoms to fix the charge (or tariff) on electricity supplied to consumers in a manner such that the average revenue realization (ARR) from its sale is equal to the average cost of supply (it includes the cost of purchase, transmission and distribution), or ACS. The discoms are



CURRENTLY, ALMOST 95 PER CENT OF POWER CONSUMERS IN PUNJAB AVAIL OF SUBSIDIES, A MAJOR PORTION OF WHICH ISN'T EVEN REIMBURSED TO DISCOMS

free to decide the modalities of how this is to be ensured subject to approval by the concerned State Electricity Regulatory Commissions (SERCs). Ideally, the discoms should charge from 'all' consumers a tariff equal to the total cost of supply say Rs 'X' crore divided by the number of units. But, they don't follow this principle. They charge less from certain consumers especially households (HHs) and farmers. For instance, in Delhi, the tariff applicable to HHs consuming 200 units a month is Rs 3 per unit which is about half of the ACS. Including a plethora of levies adding to 44.6 per cent, the shortfall comes to Rs 4.3 per unit. For HHs consuming between 201 and 400 units, the tariff is Rs 4.5 per unit implying an under-recovery of Rs 1.5 per unit. Including the levies, this comes to Rs 2.2 per unit. These under-recoveries are cross-subsidized by charging more from industries and business establishments for which the tariff can go up to a high of Rs 16 per unit. The low tariff charged from the target consumers (read: HHs consuming up to 400 units a month) is nothing but a freebie given by political parties. But, it goes unnoticed as the State exchequer doesn't have to pay for these under-recoveries. The industries that are made to foot the bill can't even murmur as discom being the sole supplier of electricity, they have no other option. But, political parties don't want the target HHs to even pay this small tariff. In Delhi, the AAP Government tells discoms not to raise any bill on HHs consuming up to 200 units. Likewise, in Punjab, consumption of up to 300 units a month by an HH is free. This extra under-recovery of Rs 4.3 per unit in Delhi (applicable tariff Rs 3 per unit plus 44.6 per cent levies) has to be reimbursed by the State to the dis-

com. But, most States don't reimburse or do it partially and after considerable delay. This leads to losses of discoms. The availability of free power also drives people to manipulate their reported consumption. For instance, in Punjab, an HH consuming 900 units a month, gets three meters installed to keep consumption of each under 300 units thereby ensuring zero bills. Reportedly, more than 100,000 meters have been bifurcated or trifurcated enabling even high-end consumers to avail of the free bonanza. As for farmers who are eligible for free power in the State, they report even consumption for running multiple ACs in their homes under farming head thereby avoiding any payment. As a consequence, currently, almost over 95 per cent of power consumers in Punjab avail of subsidies, a major portion of which isn't even reimbursed to discoms. Discoms' losses also increase due to AT&C (aggregate technical and commercial) losses - a sophisticated nomenclature for power theft. According to Singh, AT&C's losses used to be high at 27 per cent. In Punjab, reportedly, an overwhelming share of electricity that leaves the generating stations/power dispatch centres remains unaccounted for. The discoms have funded these losses by borrowings from banks and other financial institutions (FIs) apart from keeping bills pending. At the end of FY 2021-22, their total debt was Rs 620,000 crore. In June 2022, they owed about Rs 1,40,000 crore to Gencos and transmission companies (transcos). The Center has taken several measures to force discoms to clear their dues. The late payment surcharge (LPS) Rules, implemented in 2022 made it mandatory for discoms to clear their legacy dues as existing on June 3, 2022, in a time-bound manner in 12 EMIs with the


benefit of non-applicability of the LPS after its implementation date. The rules are also provided for time-bound clearance of current dues failing, which will attract a power supply cut. This has resulted in legacy dues decreasing from Rs 1,40,000 crore in June 2022 to around Rs 70,000 crore in July 2023 and further down to Rs 40,000 crore currently. Under the 'Reforms-Linked, Result-Based Scheme for Distribution' (RLRBSD) launched in July 2021, the Centre has undertaken a massive investment of Rs 300,000 crore to improve the reliability and quality of the power supply and enhance the efficiency of discoms. It has compulsory pre-paid and smart metering components to be implemented across the power supply chain, including in about 250 million households. As a result, AT&C losses decreased from 22.32 per cent during 2020-21 to 13.5 per cent during 2022-23. However, according to the Minister, today power pilferage is 15 per cent. On this much electricity, discoms get 'nil' revenue. On a much larger percentage of power used by target HHs and farmers, the States promise to pay on their behalf. But, they don't pay in full and whatever payment comes, it is delayed. Even for making payments, the States borrow money. And, the vicious cycle continues. It won't end unless discoms are unshackled from State controls and given the freedom to decide their pricing and distribution policies. If, States want certain HHs and farmers to get power free, let them give the money directly to them. This reform will also pave the way for the deregulation of electricity distribution, more options for consumers to source their needs and a reduction in tariffs.

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

Govt schemes are transforming lives in rural Rajasthan

Loyara village serves as a microcosm of resilience and progress, fuelled by education and community empowerment

We typically receive our ration between the 1st and 3rd of each month. If it's ever delayed, my grandchildren inquire why we haven't received it from the ration dealer. The younger generation in my household is quite aware. They've made sure that all the necessary ration-related documents are in order, ensuring a seamless supply. Also, my pension now arrives punctually. Thanks to various Government schemes, these youngsters are reaping benefits. They educate themselves about these schemes and then proactively apply for them at the Panchayat office," shares 76-year-old Amba Bai, residing in Loyara village within




MOHAN LAL GAMETI

Udaipur district, Rajasthan. Situated just 8 km from Udaipur, this village falls within the Badgaon tehsil. With a population of approximately 2500, the majority belong to the Scheduled Tribe community. Alongside the OBC Dangi community, there are various other castes. The village reflects the influence of its proximity to Udaipur city,

evident in the transition of most houses to concrete structures. However, economically, the village still grapples with challenges. While individuals from OBC and general castes are involved in agriculture, trade, and animal husbandry, the majority of male members from the Scheduled Tribes work as labourers in marble factories surrounding Udaipur city. Some also engage in daily wage labour. Meanwhile, women in these households contribute to the family's income by working as domestic helpers in affluent homes within the city. Economically, Loyara village may face challenges, but socially and educationally, it has seen significant

development. Consequently, awareness about Government schemes has risen among the villagers, leading to increased benefits. The younger generation in the village has embraced education, with even Scheduled Tribe boys and girls pursuing studies up to the 12th grade. This educational advancement has also fostered greater awareness within the community. For instance, the Public Distribution System (PDS), part of the Food Security scheme, has been embraced in the village. Shiv Lal, aged 45, attests to this positive change. Despite working in a marble factory in Bengaluru after completing his 12th grade, he remains well-informed about



my children handle these matters diligently, ensuring the timely arrival of our ration." Taru Bai, a respected elder at 70, sheds light on the changing face of education and Government support in Loyara village. "Back in my day, girls rarely pursued education," she recalls. "But now, over half of the girls in our community are completing high school, and they're bringing back valuable information about Government programs. Their schooling has even helped smooth out the process for my pension, as they handle all the paperwork." Looking back, Taru Bai remembers, "We used to hear about Government schemes, but getting clear

information was a challenge, even after asking around at the Panchayat. But things are different now; the younger generation knows exactly how to navigate these programs and fill out the necessary forms." However, amidst these educational strides, economic challenges persist. "The majority of the Scheduled Tribe families in the village are economically very weak. Most families do not have enough money to start a business, nor do they have enough land to do farming or vegetable production. Although the new generation has started studying, only a few people from this community are in Government jobs. But I think as the trend of educa-

tion and awareness has increased among children, they will also soon start getting recruited in Government jobs." In the same village, there is also the family of Mangi Lal and Tulsiram, who are deprived of the benefits of the PDS. Last year, the ration status of Mangi Lal's family which consists of seven members, was changed from BPL to APL. As a result, they stopped receiving ration. Similarly, Tulsiram mentions that due to missing documents, their family is unable to access ration benefits. For this, they've been in constant communication with the e-Mitra.

(The author is a social worker from Rajasthan; views are personal)

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

US vetoes resolution

Palestine's full UN membership stalled

THE UN Security Council failed to recommend full UN membership for Palestine because the draft resolution was vetoed by the US last week. The resolution, introduced by Algeria, met with widespread support, with 12 of the 15 members voting in favour. The draft thus had crossed the threshold of nine votes for it to be approved. But the US used its veto power, arguing that this was a matter for direct negotiations between Israel and Palestine. If the resolution had been passed, it would have gone to the 193-member UN General Assembly, where it would have sailed through because about 140 of its members recognise the state of Palestine.

The push for Palestine's full membership came six months after Israel launched an all-out assault on Gaza, causing unspeakable misery to civilians. Peace could have got a chance with Palestine's inclusion, but the Western powers' carte blanche to Israel to inflict injustice with impunity will make it unattainable. A renewed effort to facilitate the two-state solution is the only option to end the dehumanisation of Palestinians.

The US argument that there should be direct Israeli-Palestinian talks won't work. Successive hard-line governments in Israel have steadfastly refused to negotiate. Palestine is already a non-member observer state, which enables it to participate in proceedings of UN bodies, but not cast its vote. The US unwillingness to fulfil the aspirations of the Palestinian people allows Israel to avoid a political solution and provides it with the licence to continue with its depredations. Palestine's flag does fly outside the UN headquarters, but it is slightly separated from the flags of other countries due to the state's observer status. In the interests of peace, this distance must be reduced.

Yoga fee taxable

SC decision a step towards fairness

THE Supreme Court's recent decision to uphold an appellate tribunal's ruling on taxing yoga camps organised by the Patanjali Yogpeeth Trust marks a significant stride towards equity and accountability in the realm of service taxation. The verdict underscores the principle that no entity should be exempted from contributing to the public coffers when it comes to commercial ventures. In October last year, the Customs, Excise and Service Tax Appellate Tribunal had ruled that yoga camps conducted for a fee — even if in the name of 'donation' — by the trust constituted a 'health and fitness service' and were subject to service tax. It was a reasonable interpretation of the law as the tribunal rightly observed that the services rendered were akin to those provided by health clubs and fitness centres, falling within the taxable category. The trust's argument that its services were aimed at curing ailments and, therefore, not taxable did not hold water.

The ruling follows a few similar verdicts, such as the one given by the Kerala High Court in February. The HC held that the fee for yoga and meditation was subject to taxation under the Kerala Tax on Luxuries Act. Uniformity in legal interpretation across jurisdictions reinforces the principle of equality before the law and ensures consistency in tax administration. This also highlights the broader issue of responsible advertising and consumer protection. The scrutiny faced by Patanjali Ayurved under the Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act of 1954 makes it imperative for the firm to ensure that claims made in advertisements, especially those related to health and wellness, are truthful and substantiated.

Though undoubtedly beneficial for physical and mental wellbeing, yoga is increasingly becoming commercialised. It is imperative that our legal framework adapts accordingly, striking a balance between fostering entrepreneurship and safeguarding public interest.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, APRIL 22, 1924

The first Indian Mayor

CALCUTTA has become the first city in India whose Corporation's President now bears the name of Mayor. This change in the designation of the office is due to the new Municipal Act, for the framing and successful passage of which the credit belongs in no small measure to Sir Surendranath Banerjea, and which has given the Calcutta Corporation a fairly democratic Constitution. Before this Act had been passed, the President of the Corporation had always been a nominee of the Government and until Sir Surendranath had made the bold departure of appointing Mr Surendranath Malik, first as officiating and then as permanent Chairman, the office had always been held by a European official. The large powers which this official enjoyed, no less than the glamour which naturally belonged to the highest civic office in what until a decade ago had been the metropolis of India, had the "most brilliant of Indian Viceroy's" declare publicly, though obviously half-humorously, that if he had not been Viceroy he would have liked to be the occupant of this office. There is a singular appropriateness in the fact that as soon as the Constitution of the Corporation is democratised and the office of its Chairman thrown open to election, its destinies should not only cease to be controlled by an official or European, but should be entrusted to the first non-official citizen of Calcutta, the undoubted leader and representative of the large majority of the people of Calcutta. It is their sense of his appropriateness which must have made the members of the Corporation receive the result of the voting with "a tremendous outburst of cheering".

OPINION

Elections under international glare

BJP's selective invitation to foreign observers indicates that it doesn't want to take chances



HOW much foreign presence or involvement is too much in India's elections? Answering a question from the audience following a lecture shortly after being appointed External Affairs Minister in 2019, S Jaishankar said "My reputation is not made by a newspaper in New York." The question was about criticism by *The New York Times* over 'democratic backsliding' by the Modi government, abrogation of Article 370 in J&K and India's new, muscular foreign policy. Taking a cue from the minister, Indian ambassadors have become confrontational and provocative in their dealings with host media in the countries where they are posted. Perhaps, because it is the election season, a controversy last week about the Ambassador in Dublin (Ireland) defending Modi against local newspaper criticism made front-page news and dominated television headlines. As policy, for a country which has a colonial history and has been a hapless whipping boy for the so-called free media in the West frequently, this approach has definite merits.

Contrast such headstrong public diplomacy by the Modi government to the BJP Foreign Affairs Department's decision to invite around 20 political parties from foreign countries to witness India's elections. The selective invitations reflect a craving in the ruling party for global approval, yet not knowing how to go about it. Its decision to bypass political parties from the world's oldest democracy — the US — is an acknowledgement that the hosts do not want to take chances. The



SCRUTINY: Observing elections, especially in countries perceived as only partly democratic or 'evolving' democracies, is big business in Western civil society. REUTERS

BJP is risk-averse to foreign criticism on issues such as the arrests of Opposition CMs like Arvind Kejriwal and charges that Central investigative agencies — the Enforcement Directorate, in particular — are being selectively used against Opposition leaders. The convenient excuse for not inviting Republican and Democratic party representatives is that the US is in the middle of its own elections. But that poll is only in November and Americans would not have missed an opportunity to preach democracy to Indians. That precisely was the problem. The BJP's external interlocutors welcome approval but reject censure by foreigners.

The grapevine in New Delhi is replete with tittle-tattle about European political parties having spurned the ruling party's invitations to experience and understand the biggest electoral exercise in human history. Elections at various levels in several European nations are being used as a pretext to justify the tepid or no response to the invitations. Observing elections, especially in countries perceived as only partly democratic or as 'evolving' democracies, is big business in Western civil society. But credible observers visit poll-bound coun-

It is moot if global participation without reputed civil society institutions watching the polls is worse than having no observers from abroad at all.

tries only on their terms, not at their hosts' beck and call. So, the BJP's department is left with enthusiastic acceptances — from Tanzania, Uganda, Vietnam, Nepal, Bangladesh's pro-India ruling dispensation and the ever-obliging Mauritius — to name some. Seventeen overseas political parties are expected to tour BJP-ruled states in the second week of May. Their numbers may increase to include usual suspects like Sri Lanka. It is moot if such international participation without reputed global election-watching civil society institutions is worse than having no observers

from abroad at all.

Modi was a pioneer in securing external involvement in elections in Gujarat, and in deploying technology then unavailable in India into the campaign for the 1995 Assembly polls. As state general secretary of the BJP, he asked some pro-RSS doctors from the UK — all NRIs — to fly to Ahmedabad in the campaign season and bring with them the latest video cameras. India's customs rules did not allow such luxury items into the country then, but they could be brought in under Transfer Baggage Re-export rules. That meant the details of these video cameras would be entered into the passports of the passengers, who would have to re-export them at departure. As a reporter who covered the historic BJP victory in that Assembly election, I watched how those cameras expertly wielded by the NRIs made the Congress campaign lacklustre and appear backward. The BJP has won every election in Gujarat since 1995.

In the ongoing elections, one constituency where a large number of NRIs are expected to cast their votes is Thiruvananthapuram, where India's best-known 'global citizen', Shashi Tharoor, is the Congress candidate for an

unprecedented fourth term as the MP of Kerala's capital. The NRIs who have not acquired foreign citizenship and have a permanent residence in India mentioned in their passports can now vote in Indian elections. Many Gulf Indians consider Tharoor as one of them because his presence among them is ubiquitous — launching books, speaking at conferences, even acquiring the chairmanship of a Dubai-headquartered company soon after he left the service of the United Nations. This company, Afras, set up an innovative Academy for Business Communications in Kerala's Technopark, which was to be the launch pad for Tharoor's political career in India.

Many rich Malayalis in the Gulf aspire to be politicians back home. A few have succeeded. They are attracted to the All India Professionals' Congress, which Tharoor founded in 2017 and was its chairperson until last year. When he first contested in 2009, it was not unusual to hear entire conversations on his campaign trail in French, one of the UN's six official languages. Tharoor made extempore speeches in French when he was a long-time UN civil servant. Many of his campaigners in 2009, who came from New York, Geneva and Liberia, were more comfortable speaking French than English. A fascinating account of that campaign was published on May 22, 2009, in *The Wall Street Journal*, written by Keerthik Sasidharan, an investment banker who had travelled from New York to Thiruvananthapuram to join Tharoor's campaign. He wrote about the propensity of religious and social leaders in the state to talk to outsiders about everything, from Gaza to the Black history of the US, but evade the core issue — support by their congregations for Tharoor.

His BJP challenger now, Rajeev Chandrasekhar, must tap into the Malayali fascination for *pravasi* life. Chandrasekhar does not have much time left before polling on April 26.

Popularity should be no scale for the election of politicians. — Orson Welles

A European trip that taught life lessons

RK SABOO

IN the summer of 1957, my wife Usha and I took our first trip to Europe. My sister Sneha and her husband Gajananaji, who were staying in London, came to receive us at the airport. We loaded our suitcases in a taxi, but upon arrival at their apartment, one bag was missing. Alarmed, I and Gajananaji rushed back to the airport; to our surprise, we found our bag at the BOAC (British Overseas Airways Corporation) 'lost and found' counter. An official told us that the bag, which had dropped off the taxi, had been picked up by a gentleman and delivered here. Upon opening it, we found everything intact and were amazed at the honesty of our unknown benefactor. Silently, we thanked him and returned home.

My sister had rented a one-room apartment for £15 per day. We hired a nearby bedroom for £1 a day. We spent a month in London and visited all the tourist attractions there. Madame Tussauds wax museum, the Changing of the Guard at the Buckingham Palace and the air show at Battersea Park were particularly interesting. The efficient underground Tube and escalators were new experiences.

After an enjoyable month in London, we started our journey from Dover to Ostend on a ship en route to Germany, France, Italy and Switzerland. We had visas for all four countries, but when we went from Ostend to Germany, the train conductor said a transit visa for Belgium was required. 'So, next time, you must have a Belgium visa,' he said. We took it lightly and suffered a penalty on the way back. We were off-loaded from the train in Ostend to get a transit visa — a hard lesson learnt to obey other countries' rules.

In Frankfurt, we hired a taxi for sightseeing. One day, we left our camera in the taxi. The honest driver returned it to our *gast-familie* (host family). We had another interesting experience on a tourist bus while we were making fun of a funnily dressed German in Hindi. He greeted us in chaste Hindi and said he was teaching at Banaras University. We were ashamed of our behaviour and vowed to never take a stranger at face value.

From Frankfurt, we went by train to Paris, where we visited the usual tourist attractions — the Eiffel Tower, Palace of Versailles and the famous Mona Lisa at the Louvre. Our next destination was Rome, where we did a lot of sightseeing, including the magnificent ruins of Pompeii.

Our last stop was Zurich, where we went in a mountain train and ropeways to Jungfrau Glacier and Ice Palace, but we were not well equipped for walking on snow. The sparkling lakes and meadows with cows grazing were very charming. Everything worked on time and with precision in Switzerland.

The honesty of people everywhere was noteworthy, while it was a cultural shock for us to see people kissing in public.

On a small budget of Rs 17,000, including airfare, we had two months of great fun and some good lessons learnt.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Cong needs charismatic leader

Apropos of 'Congress slow off the blocks' (*Nous Indica*); the author aptly says that ideology does not matter much to the voters. They vote on grounds such as caste, community, candidate's stature and image. Timely distribution of tickets and stitching of alliances with like-minded parties are among the factors that send out a strong message to the electorate. Any delay on these counts could cost any party dear. These winnable parameters are not conspicuously visible in the Congress, compared to its mighty rival, the BJP. The grand old party needs a charismatic leader like Indira Gandhi.

RAVI SHARMA, DHARIWAL

Focus where BJP lacks

Refer to 'Congress slow off the blocks' (*Nous Indica*); despite PM Modi's guarantees, many promises made by the BJP have remained unfulfilled. This is the time for the Congress and the INDIA bloc to lay stress on the areas in which the BJP appears to be on a sticky wicket and not let go the chance at any cost. The Congress is moving at a slow pace in every respect. Neither has it mobilised workers at the grassroots level nor is it doing enough to keep its flock together. Infighting in the Congress is affecting the announcement of candidates.

RAJ KUMAR KAPOOR, ROPAR

Too expensive proposal

With reference to a recent report, '30 IAF bases to get 5-layer security system', do we really need such an elaborate security system that includes sensors, thermal cameras, radar and underground vibration detection system? No airbase anywhere in the world has this kind of a security system. Besides, no system, however sophisticated, can be foolproof. The Pathankot airbase attack in 2016, that had triggered this proposal, was an isolated instance which doesn't call for an overreaction. The proposed five-layer security system would be too expensive. While no compromise should be made on security, the proposal should be cost-effective. After the Pathankot attack, a high-level committee was constituted to suggest remedial measures. Several recom-

mendations were implemented. Nothing more is perhaps needed.

WG CDR CL SEHGAL (RETD), JALANDHAR

Focus on health, not taste

Refers to editorial 'Cut sugar & salt'; the aim of business houses like Cadbury, Nestle and IndiGo should be to provide nutritious food to consumers so that they remain healthy and their wellbeing is not affected. The sole aim should not be to make the product tasty and attractive. All FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) companies should stress on healthy ingredients and products. They should strictly adhere to self-regulation. The government should ensure that all food processing units comply with the standards and norms laid down by experts. Occasionally, surprise checks to monitor products should be carried out to keep the manufacturers on their toes.

SUBHASH VAID, NEW DELHI

Ballot paper more reliable

Refer to the news report 'Mustn't skip voting, CJI urges electorate'; it is fine that all eligible people must vote. However, the alleged vulnerability of EVMs (electronic voting machines) remains a grey area. Before the advent of EVMs, voting by ballot paper used to be safe and secure. The ballot method is being used by many nations across the world, though it is time-consuming due to physical counting of votes. The government should either bring back ballot paper voting or make EVM functioning totally transparent.

ROOP SINGH NEGI, SOLAN

UNSC seat for India

Refer to the news report 'Support reforms: US official on Musk's remark on permanent UNSC seat for India'; Elon Musk has rightly said it is absurd that a permanent UNSC seat has eluded India so far. India, the most populous country of the world, deserves this seat. The UNSC's five members with veto power are out of touch with the present-day geopolitical realities. India's growing importance is acknowledged by international platforms such as G20, Quad, I2U2 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

LAL SINGH, AMRITSAR

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

China's Xiaokang project keeps India on its toes

MAJ GEN GG DWIVEDI (RETD)
FORMER DEFENCE
ATTACHE TO CHINA

THERE have been frequent reports about China building modern border villages and getting them inhabited. On March 28, the 65th anniversary of the Tibet takeover by China, Beijing organised several celebratory events in the new villages in proximity to the India and Bhutan borders. As per latest inputs, China is set to develop 175 more border villages in addition to 628 'Xiaokang' (well-off villages) already in place.

In the garb of border area development, the Xiaokang initiative is centred on expansion through coercion. The model was proposed by Deng Xiaoping in 1979 to ensure equitable development of the Chinese society through poverty alleviation in rural areas. President Xi Jinping has transformed it into a strategic one through the integration of border regions with the mainland, thereby enhancing security of its land boundaries, particularly in Tibet, opposite Arunachal Pradesh.

As part of the Xiaokang

scheme, 427 model villages have been constructed on the frontline, while 201 are in the second tier. These villages are spread across 21 border counties to include important towns of Xigaze, Lohka, Nyingchi and Ngari. In Lohka, which shares a border with Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh, China has developed 354 'prosperous' border settlements. Almost a third of these villages have been built in the close proximity of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). A sum of approximately \$4.6 billion was allocated for the construction of these habitats, including supporting infrastructure.

Under the outcomes of the 19th Party Congress held in October 2017, Xi had called for talented Chinese citizens to work in the remote ethnic minority areas — the underlying design being primarily to change the demographic profile. Over the past decade, Han population in Tibet has risen by about 12 per cent. The ultimate aim of the communist regime is to achieve complete Sinicisation of the Tibet Autonomous Region. All border villages have been provided with quality amenities like roads, electrification and even Internet connectivity, especially in areas bordering India, Nepal and Bhutan. Additionally, around 206 industrial projects are under construction.

By 2021, the Tibet road network covered 1,18,000 km. Preliminary work on Hotan-Xigaze, Gyirong-Xigaze and Chengdu-Wuhan-Shanghai



IMPETUS: Union Home Minister Amit Shah launched the Vibrant Villages Programme in Kibithoo, Arunachal Pradesh, in April last year. PH

high-speed railway lines has been completed. The 14th Five-Year Plan aims to build a world-class Chengdu-Chongqing airport cluster, besides upgrading 39 civilian airports. Currently, a dozen airports are operational or under construction in Tibet-South Xinjiang. The new 1,078-km 'Snow Mountain Oil Dragon Pipeline' from Golmud to Lhasa will raise the number of oil depots in Tibet to 10.

China has introduced two national laws in recent years to bolster border management. The National Defence Law, passed in 2021, provides the People's Liberation Army (PLA) a greater role in conjunction with civil agencies to further national interests. A year later, the Land Border Law was passed so as

The whole gamut of border management merits a holistic review. It ought to be the key component of the National Security Strategy, which still remains a work in progress.

to consolidate Chinese hold over encroached areas. Its Articles 10 and 43 challenge the status quo with regards to the development of border infrastructure, which has a direct bearing on India's border development programmes. China has launched a cartographic offensive against India, showing Ladakh, Barahoti and Arunachal Pradesh as its territories. Giving Mandarin names to places in these areas is part of China's 'Three Warfare' strategy, encompassing propaganda, psychological and legal dimensions.

In July 2021, Xi paid a visit to Lhasa, the first by a head of state in the past three decades; he sought to make Tibet an 'ironclad shield'. Accordingly,

border villages have been integrated into the PLA's overall defence plans to act as forward posts, especially in disputed areas like Doklam and Long Ju. Former military personnel of Han ethnicity are being settled in the border areas. China's actions are in sync with its 'Grey Zone Warfare', wherein civilians and militia forces engage in non-contact warfare. A case in point is Beijing's modus operandi in the South China Sea.

In the absence of a clear policy, India's border areas remained underdeveloped, especially opposite China. It is only after China's massive infrastructure development in Tibet and Xinjiang that India began upgrading its roads and surface communications in border regions. The Vibrant Villages Programme (VVP) was launched last year to provide requisite facilities to the people living in border villages. Accordingly, 168 villages along China's border that are lacking connectivity are set to be linked by the year-end. A budgetary allocation of Rs 4,800 crore has been made to create adequate infrastructure in 663 border villages of 19 districts.

In sharp contrast to the Chinese-controlled Xiaokang, the Indian programme envisages a 'hub and spoke' template, which is driven by the district administration and gram panchayats; the role of the Central Government is limited to funding. The main

focus of the VVP is on the promotion of socio-economic initiatives. However, there is a need to adopt a dual-use approach by incorporating security aspects as well.

India is also undertaking large infrastructure projects, including frontier highways, rail lines, airports, the Dibang hydroelectric power projects and waterways. These are funded under the 'Gross Budgetary Assistance' provision amounting to Rs 12,882.2 crore for the holistic development of the northeastern region.

Given the disputed boundary and the ongoing standoff in Ladakh, the Chinese plan has serious strategic ramifications. Beijing's intent to unilaterally alter the status of LAC will gain further impetus with the Xiaokang villages in place. China has also disregarded the 'Political parameters and Guiding Principles for the settlement of the boundary issue' agreement of 2005 (Article VII), wherein the existing arrangement of the population along the borders is not to be disturbed.

To effectively counter Chinese expansionist designs, there is a need for a de novo approach. Our current reactive approach, based on 'tit for tat', is passe. The whole gamut of border management merits a holistic review. It ought to be the key component of the National Security Strategy, which ironically still remains a work in progress.

Congress, BJP manifestos a damp squib for the health sector

SOHAM BHADURI
HEALTH POLICY EXPERT

THE BJP and the Congress have released their manifestos for the Lok Sabha polls. The just-concluded term of the 17th Lok Sabha witnessed what was arguably the worst health cataclysm of the modern era, the Covid-19 pandemic. This, by itself, should have led to greater emphasis on the health sector in the manifestos. Moreover, the term of the 18th Lok Sabha will straddle some of the most crucial years for securing a much-needed headway in achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs). The two manifestos are disappointing due to their lack of a strong and coherent focus on health. Also, they reek of acquiescence, nonchalance and even plain complacency.

A standout feature of the Congress' 2019 manifesto was its emphasis on a rights-based approach to health and strengthening public healthcare provisioning rather than taking the

health insurance route. The party's 2024 manifesto, however, adds weight to the already prevalent impression that as far as public provisioning of care is concerned, that ship has sailed. Despite Rajasthan's spirited attempt to promulgate the Right to Health, the 2024 manifesto is silent on the prospect of a Central legislation on similar lines. Instead, a half-hearted policy commitment to free and universal healthcare in the public sector has been enunciated. Increasing the budgetary allocation for health to 4 per cent over the next four years, up from around 2 per cent, is uninspiring.

This would amount to less than half of what countries like China and Brazil currently earmark for health, and less than what some highly impoverished African countries and our neighbour Nepal do. But the biggest letdown is the silent concession to the insurance route of healthcare expansion, which the ruling party has persistently espoused ever since assuming office in 2014.

The Congress manifesto proposes to pattern its universal healthcare model after Rajasthan's Chiranjeevi Yojana, which provides a health insurance cover of Rs 25 lakh per year for every eligible family. However, there is little evidence of the



QUESTION MARK: A recent editorial in *The Lancet* has called out the Indian government for the apparent lack of adequate health data. ISTOCK

scheme having significantly contributed to financial protection from healthcare expenses or altered provider choices among beneficiaries.

As for the BJP manifesto, it reads more like a self-congratulatory document that aspires to forge ahead on the path it has already followed in the health sector, with little novelty on offer. It is worth noting that the past few years have seen some promising signs for the public healthcare sector. The government's share in healthcare provision

What undergirds contemporary political consensus on public health insurance? Certainly not robust data.

has risen, and the proportion of out-of-pocket spending on health has fallen. At a time when efforts towards health-related SDGs should proceed at full pelt, the lack of substantive and concretely pronounced health sector promises and targets in the BJP manifesto is dismaying. This is particularly surprising when it comes to the Ayushman Bharat Yojana, the government's flagship public health insurance scheme.

The only expansionary promises made under the

scheme are for senior citizens and eligible transgender individuals. In recent years, the government has time and again announced plans to expand coverage under the scheme beyond the poor population to the 'missing middle'. No such commitments appear in the 2024 manifesto.

The fact that some highly aspirational promises have been made in the economic sector suggests that health could again take a back seat after a brief era of apparent promise.

Interestingly, a recent editorial in *The Lancet* has called out the government for the apparent lack of adequate health data and being "afraid of showing the real state of health".

What undergirds the contemporary political consensus on public health insurance? Certainly not robust data. Beyond a few congratulatory policy reports and secondary analyses, no concrete evidence on the effectiveness of public health insurance schemes exists.

In today's increasingly complex healthcare landscape, the approach of pure public sector provisioning seems foredoomed.

However, the truth is that political considerations rather than evidence determine policy momentum, which then yields a fertile

ground for misdirected political competition. Perhaps the most felicitous example of this can be witnessed today as states and political parties scramble to set the ceiling of public health insurance cover as high as possible, having grown from Rs 30,000 per year for the erstwhile Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana to Rs 25 lakh for Rajasthan's Chiranjeevi scheme in just over a decade. This is backed by hardly any evidence.

Another fancy surrounds the topic of digital health, which again finds its biggest supporter in the incumbent party. The 'why' of digital health in India has not been adequately attended to, and currently, considerations of convenience, efficiency and a burning desire for technological ascendancy and competitiveness drive the digital health movement. Very little attention has gone into equity and financial protection.

A realistic assessment of its scope, limitations and caveats is crucial, and the enthusiasm surrounding digitalisation must not be allowed to eclipse the more foundational issues plaguing the health sector. One can only hope that the 18th Lok Sabha ushers in an era of greater political maturity on health.

QUICK CROSSWORD

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ACROSS

1 Characteristic mark (5)

8 A tin-glazed decorative earthenware (8)

9 Exhausted (5)

10 Painting of marine scene (8)

11 Sacred song (5)

12 Touch lightly (3)

16 Over-elaborate in clothing (6)

17 Engraved (6)

18 Day before special day (3)

23 Hard variety of silica (5)

24 Reddish-brown furniture wood (8)

25 Centre of the Renaissance (5)

26 Altarpiece picture on three panels (8)

27 Painter's implement (5)

DOWN

2 Woven pictorial wall-hanging (8)

3 Portrait by Leonardo da Vinci (4,4)

4 Fox Talbot's apparatus (6)

5 Subject of many Stubbs paintings (5)

6 Full of life (5)

7 Gem carved in relief (5)

12 Impart new colour to (3)

13 Proverbially busy insect (3)

14 Rodin's profession (8)

15 18th century English portraitist (8)

19 Canaletto's native city (6)

20 Worker in metals (5)

21 University professorship (5)

22 A decorative banded chalcedony (5)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Off the cuff, 6 Prig, 10 Tenet, 11 Intrigued, 12 Sapphire, 13 Dodge, 15 Rat race, 17 Slander, 19 Tick off, 21 Solomon, 22 Sousa, 24 Charming, 27 Attraction, 28 Run up, 29 Awry, 30 In the event.

Down: 1 Oats, 2 Fantastic, 3 Hetup, 4 Cuisine, 5 Fitness, 7 Round, 8 God-fearing, 9 Windfall, 14 Beetslava, 16 Aromatic, 18 Dominance, 20 Faction, 21 Staunch, 23 Utter, 25 Merge, 26 Spat.

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HARD

SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

9	3	2	5	6	1	8	4	7
1	4	6	7	8	2	9	5	3
8	5	7	3	4	9	6	2	1
4	1	5	8	9	3	2	7	6
3	2	9	6	1	7	4	8	5
7	6	8	4	2	5	1	3	9
6	8	3	9	7	4	5	1	2
2	7	4	1	5	6	3	9	8
5	9	1	2	3	8	7	6	4

CALENDAR

APRIL 22, 2024, MONDAY

■ Shaka Samvat 1946

■ Vaishakh Shaka 2

■ Vaishakh Parvishite 10

■ Hijari 1445

■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 14, up to 3.26 am

■ Harshana Yoga up to 4.28 am

■ Hast Nakshatra up to 8.00 pm

■ Moon in Virgo sign

FORECAST

SUNSET:	SUNRISE:	MONDAY TUESDAY	18:54 HRS 05:48 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN	
Chandigarh	35	21	
New Delhi	38	24	
Amritsar	34	20	
Bathinda	36	20	
Jalandhar	34	21	
Ludhiana	35	22	
Bhiwani	36	24	
Hisar	37	22	
Sirsa	37	22	
Dharamsala	28	15	
Manali	20	04	
Shimla	22	11	
Srinagar	20	09	
Jammu	31	17	
Kargil	14	04	
Leh	14	05	
Dehradun	36	21	
Mussoorie	23	13	

TEMPERATURE IN °C