



AAP trap

Kejriwal's arrest a reminder of dangers of misusing enforcement agencies

Delhi Chief Minister and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Arvind Kejriwal's arrest by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) raises disturbing questions about the direction of India's democracy and federalism. The political intent of the arrest of a key leader of the Opposition, and a serving Chief Minister in the run-up to the general election, is unmistakable. The Delhi excise policy case, in which Mr. Kejriwal has been arrested, was registered by the CBI in August 2022, based on which the ED launched its money laundering probe. Several other AAP leaders are in jail — Manish Sisodia from February 2023, and Sanjay Singh from October 2023. If the ED had evidence of corruption, it should have taken the case to trial on a war footing. Keeping the accused in jail, while investigators continue their roving expedition, should be unacceptable in a society ruled by law. When the accused are political opponents of the ruling party, the arrests will be seen as selective enforcement of the law and impairs public confidence in democracy itself. The Supreme Court of India had earlier asked the ED to provide an unbroken chain of evidence showing that ill-gotten money had flowed from the liquor lobby to Mr. Sisodia. The Court had remarked that the competence of the ED lay in bringing to the fore uninterrupted proof linking an accused with the crime proceeds. Later, the Court went on to deny bail to Mr. Sisodia.

This is not the first time a central agency has gone after a constitutional functionary. Hemant Soren resigned as Chief Minister of Jharkhand before his arrest by the ED. As things stand, the democratic politics of this country can be brought to a standstill by central agencies, even as the Court and the Election Commission of India continue to consider all this as routine law enforcement. The pretext that the law is taking its course will not be convincing to any reasonable mind. It is not a coincidence that central agencies are arresting only Opposition leaders on charges of corruption, and even those leaders who faced corruption charges are let off the moment they join hands with the Bharatiya Janata Party. Mr. Kejriwal rose to national prominence by campaigning for an all-powerful agency that would obliterate corruption from public life. He and his band of anarchists challenged a constitutionally elected government through mobocracy, and amplified conspiracy theories such as notional loss to exchequer more than a decade ago. Mr. Kejriwal himself is now ensnared in the logic that he popularised. But two wrongs do not make a right.

Blowback

Pakistan is paying for its role in supporting Islamists in Afghanistan

When the Taliban returned to power in Kabul in August 2021, Imran Khan, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, claimed that Afghanistan had broken the "shackles of slavery". Two and a half years later, the Afghanistan-Pakistan border is a source of friction between the two countries. Pakistan carried out air strikes in the Afghan provinces of Paktika and Khost earlier this week, killing at least eight civilians. Pakistan says it was targeting the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which it blames for a surge in terror attacks on its territory. In retaliation, the Taliban launched attacks on Pakistani military posts along the border. An uneasy calm prevails on the border and the bonhomie the Afghan Taliban once enjoyed with the Pakistani military establishment is now lost. Pakistan, which played a key role in the Taliban's rise in the 1990s, has backed the Sunni Islamist group for years. In the late 1990s, when the Taliban were in power, Pakistan was one of only three countries to formally recognise the regime. Islamabad turned against the Taliban under pressure from Washington after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, but it tactfully played a double game over two decades by remaining an American ally in its war on terror while backing the Taliban. The entire Taliban leadership was based in Quetta, Balochistan, during this phase.

Pakistan cultivated the Taliban against the U.S.-and India-backed Afghan government. When the Afghan government of President Ashraf Ghani collapsed in 2021 in the midst of America's withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to power, Pakistan expected to deepen its strategic presence in South Asia through a client regime in Kabul. But the opposite happened. Historically, Afghan governments have not had very good relations with Pakistan, given their disputed border, the Durand Line. When the Taliban were an insurgency, they needed Pakistan and Pakistan needed them as a counterweight to the government in Kabul. But today, the Taliban are the government in Kabul. Besides, the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan strengthened the TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban. The Afghan Taliban and the TTP are two different organisations but ideological brothers — both Pashtun, and who follow the strident Deobandi interpretation of Islam and believe in the rule of the Sunni Islamic clergy. In other words, what the TTP wants to achieve in Pakistan is what the Afghan Taliban have already achieved in Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban have not severed their ties with the TTP despite Pakistan's calls and threats, which has put both countries on a collision course. Pakistan has no quick fixes. It has a history of supporting Islamist insurgency, which has come back to haunt the state in one way or the other. In Afghanistan, this policy is facing its latest blowback.

Two wars, the consequences for America's standing

The recent speech by United States Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer calling for a new government in Israel was the equivalent of a political earthquake hitting U.S.-Israel ties that are becoming increasingly fragile. The Democratic Senator is himself Jewish and has had one of the longest relationships with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who he has now charged with "too willing to tolerate the civilian toll" in Gaza.

Earlier, after meeting former U.S. President Donald Trump at Mar-a-Lago, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban said Mr. Trump had told him that he would suspend military aid to Ukraine when he came to power. His campaign staffers have noted that Mr. Trump would seek to "quickly negotiate an end to the Russia-Ukraine war" and that the former President believed that the Europeans should pay more for the cost of the conflict.

The U.S. and the Ukraine war

The Israel-Hamas and the Ukraine wars are two important global issues which are playing out in unforeseen ways even as the U.S. is hurtling towards its epochal presidential elections eight months from now. To what extent they will be driven by election-year politics or their own future course is unclear. But, for better or for worse, the U.S. is playing a key role in both of them and their outcomes could have consequences for the standing of the country, regardless of who wins in November 2024.

The U.S. has provided some \$75 billion in military and civil aid to Ukraine since February 2022. Most of the aid has been used in weapons purchases, keeping the government functional and its humanitarian requirements. Observers say that the bulk of the military aid has been spent in the U.S. to purchase equipment ranging from Stinger missiles to the High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) weapons systems and artillery ammunition.

But, since the end of last year, an additional \$60 billion assistance has been stuck in the wrangling of the U.S. Congress. The Administration and the Pentagon have been left scrounging for funds to ensure that Ukraine gets some military equipment. But soon this is also likely to run dry. The European Union (EU) has committed some €144 billion in aid to Ukraine. Of this some €93 billion is financial and economic support, €33 billion in military support and €17 billion in supporting refugees within the EU; another €12 billion is in financial, economic and humanitarian support by individual EU States. But the Europeans are nowhere near providing the level of military assistance that the U.S. has. It is unlikely that the U.S. will send further military



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To what extent the Ukraine and Gaza wars will be driven by U.S. election-year politics or their own future course, is unclear

aid in 2024, though the Senate has approved a new package, but it needs to pass the fractious House of Representatives.

The U.S. is in a strange place with regard to Ukraine. It obviously does not want a Russian victory, but it also does not want the war to expand or to drag on. Speaker Mike Johnson knows that if he brings the Senate bill to vote in the House of Representatives, it will pass with the help of traditional Republicans. But the Make America Great Again (MAGA) Republicans would thereafter vote for his removal.

The situation on the ground is none too good for Ukraine. With the failure of its summer offensive last year, it has not been able to find a viable strategy to counter the Russians. Shortages and poor tactics have led to a highly publicised defeat in Avdiivka.

After blundering in the initial invasion of Ukraine, the Russians have learnt their lessons well. They have used their superiority in numbers and equipment to stymie the Ukrainians. They have a clear edge in electronic warfare and artillery, and are using their Unified Gliding and Correction Module (UMPK) Glide bombs to devastating effect on the war front. On the other hand, the Ukrainians are short of key artillery ammunition, with a substantial portion of it having been diverted for Israeli use by the Americans last October.

Israel and its Gaza actions

The other uncomfortable issue is Israel's war on Hamas. The U.S. remains, perhaps, the only major country backing Israel. But now, very publicly, U.S. President Joe Biden himself and Mr. Schumer are raising issues about Israeli strategy, or the lack of it. Former U.S. official Richard N. Haass, who is also Jewish, wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* recently, "Israel's actions have left it worse off, at a great cost to itself and its relationship with the US and in the lives of innocent Palestinians." These actions and comments reflect that change in public sentiment towards Mr. Netanyahu in the Democratic Party and the liberal Jewish-American community.

Having destroyed most of Gaza, Israeli forces are now threatening the last corner of the strip — Rafah. Mr. Biden has warned that an attack there would be to cross the U.S. redline because it would most certainly result in a large number of civilian casualties. But Mr. Netanyahu seems to be motivated by just one impulse — his own political survival.

Israel has so far demonstrated what it could do militarily, but under the right wing Netanyahu government, it has refused to put forward any political alternative for the Palestinians. Israel needs to articulate a future that leads to a sustainable peace in the region and an

Israel-Palestinian reconciliation. A Palestinian state, even with limits on its sovereignty is the only path to that goal. Indeed, Mr. Netanyahu's strategy of supporting Hamas in the past was aimed at splitting the Palestinian opinion and using the fear of Hamas to shape Israeli public perceptions.

On both Ukraine and Israel, the future U.S. approach appears to be clouded. Though we know the trajectory of the Biden policy and its shape, it is still difficult to predict the future because the earlier bipartisan approach to foreign, especially security policy is now history. Whether it is political parties, or demographics, changes are taking place in the manner with which the U.S. views the world. For example, younger Americans are less positively inclined to Israel than the older ones. Indeed, last October a YouGov poll found that more people between the ages of 18 to 29 empathised with Palestinians than with Israelis.

The Trump factor

But the bottom line here is that we are still eight months away from the U.S. election and, as of now, neither the U.S. or Ukraine is about to throw in the towel. Both sides remain committed and need each other. Besides hardware, Ukraine is receiving substantial intelligence support from the U.S. in the form of real-time information on Russian deployments. The way the Americans see it, the Ukrainians are weakening one of their major adversaries. The massive loss of personnel and equipment will without doubt temper Moscow's future policies towards the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

But without doubt a victory of Mr. Trump would be majorly disruptive. This would definitely affect U.S. policy towards Ukraine. As for Israel, Mr. Trump is likely to remain a strong supporter that he has always been. One must recall that it was he who decided to recognise Jerusalem as the Israeli capital in the place of Tel Aviv.

But a Trump victory, which will change the political calculus in Washington DC, has implications for Ukraine and the NATO alliance. The Europeans are rushing to fill the American breach, but it is a case of too little and too late. The momentum in the war is with the Russians right now and if Ukraine is not able to regain it, there is every possibility of a Ukrainian collapse if the U.S. decides to step aside.

This would have wider consequences such as undermining the role of the U.S. as a guarantor of European security. American unreliability will also affect its alliance relationships in the Indo-Pacific — with South Korea, Japan and the Philippines, and its growing partnership with India.

The CAA, Muslim exclusion and the lens of the right

Union Home Minister Amit Shah, while speaking at a conclave recently, gave two reasons, during the discussion, for the exclusion of Muslims from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh in the recently implemented Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019. The first is Partition and the second is that as these Muslim countries are officially Islamic states, the case of persecution against Muslims does not arise.

Partition and some truths

The argument that all Muslims are responsible for Partition is a fundamentally flawed one. Partition was a Muslim elite-driven project, mainly supported by Muslim landlords in North India. Among others, the Hindu right's dream project, of a Hindu Rashtra (which was already taking institutional shape by the late 1920s) was a major trigger that caused alienation among the Muslim elites in addition to the colonial state's divide and rule policy. It was not just some Muslim elites. The legendary southern leader Periyar championed Dravidism as he was convinced that the political freedom that India's nationalist elites, largely drawn from an upper caste background, were working for, would not bring genuine freedom to the oppressed and marginalised people of the South.

The truth is that a vast majority of Indian Muslims were fiercely opposed to Partition and chose to stay back in India. Besides this, tall figures such as Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Sheikh Abdullah, and many others including the religious leadership of Deoband were opposed to Partition.

The most decisive blow to Jinnah's two-nation theory came from iconic secular Muslim leader Bangabandhu Mujibur Rahman, who gave leadership to the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. If the Hindu right seeks to justify Muslim exclusion owing to Partition, it needs to be blamed for deliberately failing to appreciate the



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The issue of Muslim exclusion in the Citizenship (Amendment) Act needs to be seen in the broader context of right-wing politics

resistance that Muslims launched against Partition and who have demonstrated their love for India with sacrifices since then. To put it bluntly, this argument of Partition as the basis for Muslim exclusion in the CAA 2019 reflects the Hindu right's vengeance in the form of collective punishment to Muslims.

On top of it, a vast number of the Muslim masses and Muslim middle class remained confused on how to respond to the new situation arising out of the creation of Pakistan. According to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, when he learnt that the Muslim League was inciting all Muslim officials working in the Central Secretariat, New Delhi, to leave for Pakistan, he pushed the government of India to issue a circular that Muslims who would stay back in India would be given their rights. Azad's effort was fully backed by Jawaharlal Nehru and Lord Mountbatten. As a result, 23,233 officers and sub-ordinate staff in the Central Secretariat who had opted to move to Pakistan changed their mind and applied to remain in India; of them, 19,676 personnel were retained. Similarly, another 16,090 Muslims who had applied to move to Pakistan, had left the job. Of them, 13,018 Muslims were re-employed when they changed their mind. This is just a small example to show the enormity of confusion the average Muslim was going through at the time of Partition.

The argument of persecution

There is truth in the Hindu right's argument that religious minorities in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan experience enormous persecution. So do some Muslim sects such as the Ahmadiyas. Even the Nobel Prize winning Pakistani physicist, Professor Abdus Salam, was not spared due to his Ahmadi heritage. Indeed, some leadership of the Shia community considered the Pakistan project as Sunnistan and were fiercely opposed to it. Also, the argument that India's so-called secular governments did not address this issue with

urgency is also valid. In a nutshell, it is true that India was partitioned on religious lines but all Muslims cannot be blamed for it. Ayesha Jalal captures the complexity of Partition in a preface to her classic, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (1994) in the following words: "Partition of 1947 was no more than a partial solution to the minority problem in the sub-continent. The point has been made more poignantly by the resurgence of communal tensions in India and repercussions in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Apart from targeting their own non-Muslim minorities, citizens of Pakistan and Bangladesh can merely look helplessly across borders at the plight of India's Muslim minority under siege."

In this unfolding national debate on the CAA, 2019, the most unfortunate intervention has been from the Delhi Chief Minister, Arvind Kejriwal. To abuse asylum seekers who are genuine victims of hardline theocratic politics as criminals is xenophobic. This is identical to depicting them as termites. It is perhaps the Aam Aadmi Party leader's ambivalence over how to address the Muslim question and secularism issue that has encouraged him to resort to such xenophobic arguments.

The canvas of the right

This Muslim exclusion issue in the CAA 2019 needs to be seen in the broader context of the Hindu right's ideological politics. The decision not to field Muslim candidates by the Bharatiya Janata Party, the witch hunt of *madrassas* particularly in Uttar Pradesh and Assam, the singling out of *darghas* and *masjids* for their legal status when combined with Muslim exclusion in the CAA 2019 has more to it than the context of Partition. What is unfolding, slowly and steadily, is a comprehensive ideological project of a de-Islamisation of India. And neither the secular political class nor Muslims have any well-crafted political response to it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Arrest

The tactics of evasion adopted by Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in side-stepping repeated summons by the Enforcement Directorate have boomeranged on him. It is an irony that an erstwhile member of the Anna Hazare movement has deviated from the path shown by his mentor.

B. Gurumurthy, Bengaluru

Title, talent, responses

The reactions by some well-known musicians in the field of Carnatic music to the title of Sangita Kalanidhi having been bestowed on fellow musician T.M. Krishna, are in bad taste. The President, The Music Academy, Madras, N. Murali has been courteous enough to issue a clarification that no extraneous factors were involved in the decision to

confer the title/award on Mr. Krishna. Mr. Krishna has the right to voice his opinion in a democratic country. As the saying goes, no individual is greater than the organisation. To say that it is the dream of every artiste to perform in the annual conference of the prestigious Academy will be the understatement of the century. The Sangita Kalanidhi is an ultimate honour and the whole

fraternity is proud of the recipient and the giver.
K.V. Vasudevan, Chennai

That some artistes have decided to withdraw from participating in the Academy's 2024 conference while others have decided to return awards is not in good taste. As clarified by the President of the Music Academy, there were no extraneous considerations

that were instrumental in the title/award decision. No individual is greater than the institution.
Sundaresan Suresh, Chennai

The allegations that Mr. Krishna has "vilified the Carnatic music fraternity" cannot be the reason to oppose the selection. The Ramon Magsaysay award winner has been working towards creating a more

inclusive egalitarian space for music.
R. Sivakumar, Chennai

It is unfortunate that the Music Academy should hurt the feelings of its *rashikas*. Mr. Krishna is a very accomplished musician but he has scant respect for the rich traditions established by Carnatic music stalwarts.
Kangayam R. Narasimhan, Chennai

GROUND ZERO



Sajad, the brother of Azad Yousuf Kumar, in Poshwan village in Awantipora, a sub-district of Pulwama district in Jammu and Kashmir. Kumar went to Russia to work as a helper in the army. NISSAR AHMAD

The dream chasers who got inducted into a war

Scores of Indian men who left for Russia in the hope of well-paying jobs and a secure future, instead find themselves in the battlefield on the border with Ukraine. At least two have died and a few have managed to return, but many are desperately waiting to come back. **Vijaita Singh** visits the worried families and reports on the men who were sold dreams by YouTube videos

A few years ago, Raja Bano's son, Azad Yousuf Kumar, 31, travelled to Srinagar to learn English. The family of potters lives in Poshwan village in Awantipora, a sub-district of Pulwama district in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Located off the Jammu-Srinagar national highway, a mud track leads to Poshwan. Bano sits on the floor of an empty room in the two-storey house.

Kumar, who dreamed of a successful life, went to Srinagar, just 30 kilometres away, where he taught himself the language that he believed would take him places; learning English is one of the most common ways of seeking social mobility in India. With the help of a consultancy firm, Kumar then found himself a job in Saudi Arabia, says Bano, 56, a home-maker. He worked as a cashier only to return after two years.

"He was the first in the family to get a passport," says a proud Sajad, 36, Kumar's brother.

"But he came back from Saudi Arabia as he was earning only ₹27,000 a month there. He got married and became a father. Unfortunately, his son, who was nearly one and a half years, died. Kumar was disturbed by his death and became a cleric at the local mosque."

When Kumar's wife got pregnant again, he came across a YouTube channel called Baba Vlogs, promising people a decent life in Russia. Sajad says Kumar withdrew ₹3 lakh from their younger brother Irshad's account without telling anyone. Kumar paid an agent and signed up for a job in Russia.

Kumar first went to Dubai, where he met 11 other Indians. On December 14, 2023, the group travelled on tourist visas to Moscow to work as helpers with the Russian army. At the airport, they were received by two Indian agents and taken to a hotel. They met Russian officials and signed a contract written in Russian.

"He was told that he would have to remove rubble, dig trenches, and assist their army as part of his job," says Sajad. "He was also taught how to handle weapons. He even sustained a bullet injury during a training session. After he recovered, the Russians sent him to the Ukraine border to fight their war. Now, my brother is caught in the middle of a war that we have nothing to do with."

Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. What many believed would be a swift military operation has dragged on for more than two years. Kumar is among the scores of Indian men who left the country in the hope of a well-paying job and a secure future, but find themselves fighting the largest land war in Europe since the end of World War II.

Hope and despair

At least two men – Hemil Mangukiya, 23, from Surat, Gujarat, and Mohammad Asfan, 31, from Hyderabad, Telangana – who were part of Kumar's group have been killed. Their bodies were brought to India on March 16, several days after their death. Another resident of Jammu and

My brother went to earn a decent living and returned in a body bag

IMRAN
Brother of Mohammad Asfan who was killed in Russia

Kashmir, Zahoor Ahmad, 32, is missing. His family says they have not heard from him since January 1, when he informed them that he would be gone for training for a few months.

Asfan's brother, Imran, was the first to alert the Indian authorities to middlemen taking advantage of desperate Indians seeking better livelihoods abroad. Imran approached Hyderabad Member of Parliament Asaduddin Owaisi on January 23 asking for help after Arbab Husain, a resident of Kasganj in rural Uttar Pradesh, who had also been sent to fight the war, informed his family that Asfan had been with him. Owaisi wrote to the Ministry of External Affairs seeking the government's intervention. The family did not hear from the government until March 8, when the Indian mission in Moscow informed them that Asfan had died in an explosion.

"My brother went to earn a decent living and returned in a body bag," says a distraught Imran, who mobilised the families of other Indians to pursue the issue with the Ministry.

There had been several reports of Nepalese citizens being killed in Russia, but the Ministry had not put out a formal advisory cautioning Indians against taking up jobs of security helpers. It was only after *The Hindu* first reported on February 20 that Indians were being forced to fight alongside the Russian army that the Ministry issued a statement. It said that India had approached the

Russian authorities for the "early discharge" of Indians and added that it was aware that a few Indians had signed up for support jobs with the Russian army. The official spokesperson of the Ministry, Randhir Jaiswal, says about 20 Indians have sought help from the government to return.

Husain, 22, managed to escape from the war zone feigning illness. Hiding somewhere in Moscow, he has been surviving on one meal a day. Husain's passport is with his employers and he has no money. For the last two months, he has spent his days oscillating between hope and despair, waiting for a call from the Indian Embassy.

Like many others, Husain was also inspired by Baba Vlogs. He took a personal loan of ₹3 lakh to travel last November to Russia, where he was promised the job of a helper. He was assured a salary of ₹2.5 lakh per month.

"I did not know what was written in the contract," he says over a call. "I signed it as I trusted the agents who I met through Baba Vlogs." The contract, he learned later, said that he could be sent to the battlefield and would not be allowed to leave for a year.

"I don't have any documents. They took my passport. For the two months I served in the army, they paid me ₹1 lakh, though the amount due is ₹4 lakh. The Indian Embassy says it can arrange my return only when it gets my documents back from the Russians," Husain says.

After graduating from Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar University in Agra in 2022, Husain scoured the Internet for good career opportunities. He was interviewed online for a short-term project in Qatar during the football world cup for which he was promised ₹80,000 along with food and accommodation. He was thrilled.

"Before applying for the job in Qatar, I had worked in Delhi at a mobile phone production company for five years. I was paid ₹7,500 a month. The maximum salary I could have earned in India was ₹10,000-₹15,000 a month. My father is an accountant. My mother passed away a few years ago. I knew that I would be able to earn a decent amount only if I left the country," he says.

The man who runs Baba vlogs

On March 7, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) announced that it had exposed an organised network of traffickers who lured Indians through social media for "well-paying" jobs in Russia. It said the "trafficked Indian nationals were trained in combat roles and deployed at front bases in the Russia-Ukraine war zone against their wishes." The CBI conducted searches at 13 locations in Delhi, Thiruvananthapuram, Mumbai, Ambala, Chandigarh, Madurai, and Chennai. "So far, around 35 instances of victims being sent abroad have been established," it said.

One of the suspects named by the CBI in its First Information Report is Faisal Khan, 37, from Mumbai, who runs Baba Vlogs. The channel, which is now blocked in India, has more than 4 lakh subscribers.

Khan is based in Dubai. He says on a call that he inspired others like him, that is, people from modest backgrounds, to hope for good money and a stable life through his vlogs. He claims that he has helped 500 people get jobs as waiters, delivery boys, and parking attendants, among others, in Dubai and Europe in the past seven years.

"I am a Class 7 dropout. I used to sell fish in Mumbai. Sometimes, municipal authorities took the stock away and sometimes it rained. I contacted many agents in Mumbai who took money but never sent me to Dubai. In 2008, a friend helped me get a job as a parking attendant here. Later, I got the job of a medical representative and also sold luxury watches," he says.

When Khan returned to India in 2014, he started posting videos on YouTube promoting tourism in the Gulf country. "One day, someone posted a comment saying I should educate my viewers on how to get jobs in Dubai. That was when I started guiding people," he recalls.

Sensing the potential and reach of his videos,



These jobs may be menial, but they give people like us an opportunity to earn a few lakhs in a short span of time and then buy a house.

FAISAL KHAN
Founder, Baba Vlogs

Khan started consultancy work in 2018. Last year, he says he got a call from a man called Moin who invited him to Russia and asked him to shoot a video about the various job opportunities in the country, such as security helpers and taxi drivers. Khan travelled to St Petersburg in Russia to shoot the video. He then got several requests seeking details of these jobs. He contends that he has helped send at least 35 people to Russia.

"I was clearly told that these men will not be sent to the battlefield," he says. "However, when I started getting distress calls in January from the men and their families that they were being forced to fight, I decided to help them and vowed not to send anyone else to Russia. I called Moin, who also approached the Indian Embassy seeking cancellations of their contracts."

Khan says not everyone wants to come back, though. "Six people have managed to come back. But many do not want to. I helped three Indians get jobs in a chocolate factory in Russia," he says.

After spending a year in Russia, the men could have made ₹12 lakh and even got an opportunity to obtain a permanent residence permit for their families, he says. "For people like us, it was unthinkable that we could ever own a house. No bank will give us loans. These jobs may be menial, but they give people like us an opportunity to earn a few lakhs in a short span of time and then buy a house," Khan says.

His initiative has come at a personal cost. After the CBI case against him followed by the media glare, Khan's wife left him.

The horrors of war

Mohammad Sarfaraz, 31, a resident of Kolkata, was one of the lucky few to escape Russia. He recounts stories of the horrors of war. "I saw many people with limbs missing, a ear gone. Many had their fingers amputated. They had all been injured during the war," he says.

Sarfaraz, who went to Russia as a security helper last year, says he was able to befriend the watch and ward staff at the Ryazan military camp as he was "well-behaved". On the night of January 17, Sarfaraz told the staff that he was stepping out to buy something. "I ran, hired a taxi, and reached the Indian Embassy in Moscow," he recalls. "I was told that since I had signed a contract and did not have my passport, they could not help me as doing so would be against Russian law. I was asked to wait."

Faisal Khan told Sarfaraz that the job included basic arms training and that he would be asked to load and unload missiles and weapons.

"The five-star hotel in Kolkata where I used to work till June 2023 refused to extend my contract. I was jobless. No one was ready to match the salary I was getting at the hotel. I came across Baba Vlogs and called the numbers provided on the channel. I paid ₹1.5 lakh in advance. They arranged our papers and I reached Moscow in December 2023," he says. Sarfaraz says the agent in Russia sought his bank account details and wanted a share from his salary.

After escaping from the camp, he stayed at a dormitory that agreed to take him without a passport. "The Indian Embassy officials asked me to go back to the camp as they did not have clearance from the Russian authorities to leave me. I begged them not to send me back as desertion means death in Russia. After I fled, they sent one of my friends to jail for a day. Had I gone back, I would have been beaten, made to sleep on the floor, and sent to the battlefield. I gave all the evidence I had, such as video clips, to the Embassy officials to prove that I had been duped. Finally, I got an emergency certificate and an exit visa and I returned to India on February 24," he says.

All the victims say they were at the mercy of the commanders. An escape from the front lines was next to impossible as there were check posts every 2-3 km. They were told that they would have to work in eight-hour shifts. "There was no break. You are always staring at death. The contract said that we cannot take a holiday for six months," says Sarfaraz.

Their return was incumbent on Russia honouring India's request. Mohammad Mustafa's brother, Sameer Ahmed, is in Russia. Mustafa, who lives in Kalaburgi in Karnataka, says the family had no idea that Russia was at war, and only expected Ahmed to earn some money. Scared that Ahmed is stuck there, they keep calling the Indian mission in Moscow. A worker is allowed access to his phone depending on his equation with the commander, he adds. "We have been speaking to Ahmed through WhatsApp calls. In his last video, he said that he was being sent to the war zone as reinforcement," he says.

It was Ahmed who saw Hemil Mangukiya from Surat die in a Ukrainian air strike on February 21. "I was digging a trench and Hemil was learning how to fire, around 150 metres away. Suddenly, we heard some noise. I hid in the trench along with two other Indians and some Russian soldiers. The missiles struck and the earth shook. We got out after some time and found Hemil dead. I was the one who put his body in the truck," says Ahmed over a call. He managed to inform Hemil's family only days later when he got access to Internet and his phone.

Sarfaraz says the Russians bury bodies in trenches. "I know of many Nepalese and Cuban citizens whose families will never know what happened with them. They will remain 'missing' in official records." Sarfaraz says he has learnt his lesson the hard way. "The place offers you nothing but death," he says.

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The father of Azad Yousuf Kumar shows his son's photo. NISSAR AHMAD

the hindu businessline.

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Bengaluru's blues

City's water crisis is a fallout of warped priorities

A perfect storm of factors has contributed to a crippling water crisis in India's premier IT city — broadly speaking, a combination of Bengaluru's geographical features, its rising population and the sheer lack of political will to pursue sensible long-term solutions. The broad contours of the crisis are as follows. According to research by Bengaluru-based WELL Labs, the city consumes over 2,600 million litres per day, of which Cauvery water — pumped uphill over nearly 90 km — supplies 1,470 MLD.



Of this, at least 25 per cent simply disappears from the system. The rest of the demand, which could be over 1,500 MLD, is supplied from groundwater sources, be it borewells under the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB) or private tankers — the latter supplying 650 MLD these days, according to Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar. Rising private tanker costs may have brought down demand by a notch. Indeed, it is worth asking whether the city needs 200 litres per capita per day (LPCD), assuming a population of 13 million, which is above the international norm of 150 LPCD. Given the city's geographical limitations — being situated at an altitude with no river nearby — it must manage consumption better and rejuvenate water sources within the city, rather than draw increasingly on the Cauvery, which is not just a costly, energy intensive proposition but also one that raises questions regarding diversion of fresh water from other regions, as well as uses. The river is under extreme ecological stress, anyway.

On the supply side, rainwater harvesting, and even more so, wastewater recycling must be ramped up. The city generates about 1900 MLD of wastewater per day, of which just about 1240 MLD is 'treated', according to official estimates. About a third of this treated water is sent to water-scarce Kolar and Chikkaballapur districts, while almost all the rest of it is pushed back into the city's lakes, with an estimated 72 MLD being used for toilets, landscaping and industrial purposes. Yet, Bengaluru's lakes are dying not just because of untreated sewage but also because of the poor quality of 'treated' water. If the BWSSB is to treat its wastewater more efficiently, it needs more finance and access to technologies. Singapore and Santiago use wastewater in a big way for drinking; surely Indian municipalities should build capacity to treat wastewater to a level at least fit for secondary uses. There is a case for raising tariffs for piped water by linking it to income levels, a proxy for which can be the electricity bill or the units consumed. The money being shelled out for tankers can be used to create crucial water infrastructure.

However, politicians are busy chasing self-serving solutions, such as the Mekedatu project, to access more Cauvery water. Worse, these schemes are packaged as issues of regional pride. Amidst such political cynicism everywhere, it is time for civil society to take the lead.

POCKET: SUMMER OF '24

RAVIKANTH



Simple solutions to water crisis

WATER OPTIONS. India gets above average rainfall. Rainwater harvesting is the sensible solution to the water crisis

G RAMKUMAR
SURESH MONY

Commemorating the 'World Water Day' is perhaps an opportune moment for us to write on a subject which has triggered the usual lamentations and crisis management measures by the political and bureaucratic class.

When water shortages occur the mindset is myopic, one of acceptance, finding scapegoats and more often than not laying the blame on truant rains. That's where the problem begins. It is reported that India is one among 17 water stressed nations in the world leading to a misconception that facing water scarcity is normal.

India has above average annual rainfall of 1100 mm which is much more than most of the European nations, the US (715 mm) and China (645 mm). India, endowed plenty of rivers, utilises around 8 per cent of the rainfall which indicates the inbuilt potential to harness it more optimally.

Contractors and consultants propose expensive concrete structures to harvest rainwater in urban areas, but there are simple solutions requiring minimal investment.

At each site, Rainwater can be easily harvested and led to the ground through Graded Gravel Pits (GGP), which are cost effective and contribute to Shallow Aquifer Recharge. Also, shallow wells can act as a source cum recharge mechanism.

The indiscriminate use of tube-wells has contributed to constant decline of water tables. Storm water drains are presently being utilised for transporting water from one area to another.

Instead, if rainwater is harvested in Storm water drains by putting micro GGPs, in a distributed manner, it will help to recharge the ground soil and only the overflow has to be led out. The GGPs filter the stormwater and recharge in all directions. This may be termed as "Rain Harvesting Storm Water Drains (RH-SWD)" which can help in soil recharge and reduction of flooding.

FOCUS ON SOIL

The water problem should be viewed holistically along with soil, which is a living being but which humankind treats as 'dirt'.

A handful of soil contains millions of individual living organisms. Living soil is typically rich in organic matter and



TAPPING RAIN. Given that India gets more rainfall than most of Europe, US and China, storing rainwater must take precedence

nutrients, which can hold water and support the growth and development of plants.

Soil has an enormous capacity to hold water and is the largest reservoir of fresh water on earth holding 6 to 8 times the combined capacity of all river basins put together; and 95 per cent of food is directly or indirectly produced through soil.

On an average, a unit of soil contains 50 per cent soil particles, 25 per cent water and 25 per cent voids. Soil has the best strength at optimum moisture content and has excellent water holding capacity provided it has the right properties. Soils with higher organic matter (OM) content have greater water holding capacity as OM acts like a sponge, retaining water and providing a more stable environment for plant growth.

OM can retain up to 10 times its weight of water, because OM particles have a charged surface that attracts water, making it a key factor in water storage.

OM increase calls for incorporating

Krishi Sakhis must be trained by Nabard, incentivised and monitored for increasing organic matter content to raise the soil quality, which in turn will increase water holding capacity

compost, manure, or other stable organic materials to soil. OM such as coconut coir, peat moss, or even compost, will absorb water, retaining moisture that plants can use during dry spells.

RECOMMENDED APPROACH

Increasing water holding capacity: For soil health, the Centre, through its soil health card scheme (SHC) launched in 2015, distributes SHCs to every farmer. A certified entity called Krishi Sakhi (who is a practising farmer) is trained to guide farmers in soil health management and natural farming.

While a workforce of 70,000 Krishi Sakhis has been created, a study conducted in 2019 reveals that while the awareness of the scheme was high at 82 per cent, only 66 per cent understood the recommendations and only 48 per cent followed them.

Soil quality and Water holding capacity must be viewed as a central piece and the Krishi Sakhis be further trained by Nabard, incentivised and monitored on month-to-month basis for increasing OM content so that there is a rapid upliftment of the soil quality leading to quantum increase in water holding capacity. If a scheme on appropriate lines can be conceived it will be a great boon to farmers, society and the nation.

In this regard, lessons may be drawn from the recently initiated innovative scheme 'Drone Didi' which has created rural women entrepreneurs and helped to reduce the time for spraying pesticides, spreading them more evenly,

making it safe for workers and concurrently reducing water consumption from 150-200 litres per acre to 10 litres per acre using drones. If the Krishi Sakhis could partner Drone Didis it could greatly help in water conservation.

A mass awareness programme to harvest and hold maximum rainwater within one's own plot of land is necessary so that every plot of land is water positive.

The Centre had launched the Repair, Renovation and Restoration of Water Bodies' scheme with the objectives of increasing tank storage capacity, ground water recharge, increased availability of drinking water, improvement of catchment areas of tank commands and others. If the Central Ministries, state governments, municipalities, can coordinate and mandate that every corporate house earmarks a certain percentage of funds for restoration of water bodies and implementation of RWH, it will help.

Concerted efforts at creating mass awareness along with the recommendations cited above monitored with strict project deadlines will go a long way in ameliorating the situation.

Nature has been kind to us. Let us join hands to harness rainwater and recharge the soil to become a water positive nation.

Mony is Advisor, Rajagiri Vidyapeeth, and SCMS Kochi; and Member PanIT Alumni India; Mr. G. Ramkumar is Former Executive Director, Indian Oil Corporation and Rainwater Harvesting Expert

A weather forecast for a better future

In a world grappling with climate change and its impact, weather forecast plays a crucial role

Mrutyunjay Mohapatra
Caitlin Wiesen

Weather forecasts have been an integral part of our daily lives for centuries, shaping our societies and economies. From ancient civilizations meticulously recording seasonal patterns to modern day satellite systems giving highly accurate predictions, they symbolize the human endeavour to understand the intricate mechanics of nature.

Today, they are a constant reminder of the impacts of climate change. Last year was the hottest year since we started recording global temperatures, and this threshold is likely to be breached in 2024.

Millions of children around the world face an uncertain future because of the unsustainable lifestyles of preceding generations. Talking about the weather is not small talk anymore, it's breaking news everyday. It is also the most crucial conversation for our future generations.

The Weather Kids campaign by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in collaboration

with the India Meteorological Department (IMD), is bringing young voices to the fore. Launched on the eve of World Meteorological Day, the campaign features children presenting a stark portrayal of the future if urgent climate action is not taken.

Heat waves and storms are disrupting lives and livelihoods, droughts and floods destroying crops, global warming and pollution leaving us vulnerable to diseases. It's a future that no child should have to face, yet it looks increasingly plausible with each passing day that we delay action.

The campaign serves as a powerful reminder that the decisions made today will shape the world these children inhabit tomorrow.

Amidst dire forecasts, there is also hope. The evolution of renewable energy over the past decade has surpassed expectations. According to the International Energy Agency, renewables are set to account for over 90 per cent of global electricity expansion over the next five years, becoming the largest source of global electricity generation by early 2025.

India has been a global leader in this



WEATHER NEWS. Early warning vital

transition. Between 2014 and 2021, the country increased its renewable energy capacity by 250 per cent. Driven by an ambitious national target of achieving 500 gigawatts of non-fossil fuel energy capacity by 2030, India has created a favourable policy ecosystem to attract investors and entrepreneurs, becoming the fourth largest country globally in terms of installed renewable energy capacity.

While expediting our efforts towards green transition, we also need to ensure that communities who are already facing

the impacts of climate change are protected from its devastating impacts. By providing timely advice, weather information services play an important role in building climate resilience.

Timely weather forecasts enable farmers to make informed decisions regarding crop planting, irrigation and pest management, optimizing productivity and reducing risks associated with climate variability.

Early warning systems provide critical alerts about potential natural disasters, allowing disaster management agencies and communities to take proactive measures to safeguard lives and minimize damage to infrastructure.

Climate change is one of the biggest crises of our time, but it is also the also the biggest opportunity to change the development paradigm. On World Meteorological Day, let us pledge to build a better world for our future generations.

Mohapatra is Director General of Meteorology, India Meteorological Department; and Permanent Representative of India to the World Meteorological Organization; Wiesen is Resident Representative, UNDP India

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Proactive SC

CJ D Y, Chandrachud seems determined to shake up the system which has been somnolent since a long time. Some of the SC's decisions have caused hidden skeletons to rattle in the cupboard and soon many are likely to fall out in the coming days.

The government must be apprehensive of the aftershocks. More so because the nation will be going for elections very soon. Many would be anxiously waiting for November when the CJ demits office. Until then, the wrong doers will be on tenterhooks not knowing when the axe would fall on them.

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

Effectiveness of IBC

The article on "IBC should build on the positives" was timely and informative. It is time that Banks (Lenders or Committee of Creditors) realise the benefit of a strong buyer taking over the ailing company and to take a portion of equity in settlement of debt. While it is true that investing in equities is not the main function of a bank and it does not result in instant liquidity for the bank, it does help in clean-up of the books.

More importantly, it helps in resolution of the debt and resumption of economic activity and revenue generation. A by-product may be the appreciation of market value of the such equity shares,

which may benefit the lenders in the long term.

Kasiraman Ramachandran
Chennai

Coffee concern

Deficient rainfall during crop year 23-24, drying of majority of ponds, severe summer heat, no sign of blossom showers, insufficient borewell yield for sprinkler irrigation and high chances of La Nina in H2 (March 22), the Karnataka coffee sector is highly concerned about the imminent reduced yield in the next crop season, which may hit the plant's vegetative growth and give room for pests. Coffee board and MoI must come out with a long term action plan to

support coffee growers with schemes to augment water harvesting which also enhances ground water levels in the region.

Rajiv Magal
Halekere Village (Karnataka)

Ambiguous signals

This refers to your editorial "Striving for balance" (March 22). It is evident that the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) has been conveying ambiguous messages regarding its stance on interest rate management. This uncertainty has triggered turbulence for central banks in emerging economies. Historically, the FOMC has prioritized containing inflation;

however, in a recent meeting, Chairman Jerome Powell shifted focus towards a "dual mandate" that emphasises both growth and inflation control.

Given the stockpile of bonds, any decision by the Fed to reduce the size of its balance sheet could potentially counteract anticipated movements in interest rates, thereby exerting pressure on the anticipated three rate cuts proposed by the US Fed. So it is imperative for India's MPC to take cognizance of the perplexing signals and prepare for Fed's shift towards prioritising inflation control, thereby deviating from the anticipated rate cuts.

Srinivasan Velamuri
Chennai

Powell's words are mightier than the Fed's dot plot



JONATHAN LEVIN

The Federal Reserve's dot plot was supposed to be the main event at Wednesday's central bank data dump, and — true to expectations — it revealed an upward drift in policymakers' interest rate expectations over the medium and longer-term. But the market's interest in "the dots" lasted all

of 45 minutes, and ultimately it was Fed Chair Jerome Powell who stole the show by downplaying recent inflation data and suggesting that the encouraging disinflation story remains intact.

Here is Mr Powell's response to *The Wall Street Journal's* Nick Timiraos following the Fed's widely expected decision to keep rates steady at 5.25-5.5 per cent: "[The two recent months of inflation data] haven't really changed the overall story, which is that of inflation moving down gradually on a sometimes bumpy road toward 2 per cent. I don't think that story has changed. I also don't think that those readings added to anyone's confidence that we're moving closer to that point."

Even with the caveat at the end, traders heard enough to set the S&P 500 Index on its way to an all-time high.

The January and February inflation

numbers briefly shook the market's confidence that the inflation scourge had been eradicated. Over two straight months, the core consumer price index climbed at a 0.4 per cent monthly clip, exceeding economist expectations. But January's data was marred by obvious statistical noise in the heavily weighted housing component of inflation (which corrected itself in February), and February's data was pushed higher by notoriously volatile components including airfares and used cars. There may also have been some fleeting impacts from the Red Sea conflict and general start-of-the-year effects ("excess seasonality," in the statistical jargon).

What's more, the February number won't look quite as bad for the core personal consumption expenditures index, the Fed's preferred gauge, which weights

product categories differently. As Mr Powell put it, the reports didn't constitute positive evidence of waning inflation, but neither did they clearly signal a change in trend.

That's the right take, and that's why the Chair's words easily overpowered the Summary of Economic Projections, for all its interesting nuggets. Specifically, the median policymaker now sees just six rate cuts by the end of 2025 and nine by 2026. That's down from seven and 10, respectively, in the previous forecasts.

In the longer-run, the median dot now suggests that rates will settle at 2.6 per cent, up from 2.5 per cent previously and the highest since 2019 — a move that may indicate, ever so slightly, the perception of structural changes afoot in the economy. But Mr Powell appropriately warned us to be cautious about

jumping to that conclusion.

Here's his response to the *Associated Press's* Christopher Rugaber: "In terms of are rates going to be higher in the longer run... I don't think we know that. I think it's — we think that rates were generally low during the pre-pandemic, post-global-financial-crisis era for reasons that are mostly important slow-moving large things like demographics and productivity and that sort of thing. Things that don't move quickly. But I don't think we know. I mean my instinct would be that rates will not go back down to the very low levels that we saw where all around the world there were long run rates that were at or below zero in some cases."

The shift in the longer-run dots comes after months of private-sector forecasters revising their views upward. In the Federal Reserve Bank of New York's sur-

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Political funding's troubling sinkhole



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

In 1798, Lord Cornwallis was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. Cornwallis had displayed great financial acumen during his earlier tenure as Governor-General of India when he conceptualised the Permanent Settlement Act. That helped the East India Company and its successor, the British Crown, collect agricultural taxes via the *zamindars* for over 150 years. Cornwallis displayed financial creativity again in finding a novel way to mitigate Irish separatism. Ireland, which was majority Catholic, was a reluctant colony of neighbouring Britain (majority Protestant). There were periodic violent rebellions. Ireland had its own Parliament, which kept passing inconvenient laws, and often raised the standard of revolt. Cornwallis found an epically simple way to deal with fractious Irish MPs. He

bribed them. He offered money to Irish MPs to vote for the permanent dissolution of the Irish Parliament and to take up seats in the House of Commons instead. Many Irish MPs took the cash. The holdouts were blackmailed. Those MPs who refused to vote for dissolution were charged with criminal cases, and intimidated by threats of violence. As a result, Irish politicians became a small minority (multiple small minorities actually) in the House of Commons.

This is among the best historical examples of the wholesale use of money to purchase a democratic institution. It's worthy of note that it was money from overseas — from Britain across the Irish Channel — that persuaded Ireland's MPs to sell their country. Right now, Americans are wondering if a presidential candidate could be open to offers of overseas cash for favours. Former President and Republican presidential nominee for 2024, Donald Trump, needs to pay \$455 million to the State of New York by next week. He doesn't have the money; nobody in the US will give him the money.

Will he seek to raise funds abroad? If he does, and goes onto win the 2024 Elections, how likely is it that his lender

(or lenders) won't call in favours the next time there's a geo-political situation involving the US?

Using money to buy political influence is among the oldest games in the book. It's likely every government at some stage has been offered cash by some entity to rewrite the rulebook. What is egregious about the electoral bonds scheme is that these instruments legitimised the worst possible ways in which political bribery can be carried out.

Most democratic nations have checks and balances about political funding. In a good democratic system, there is transparency about who is giving the money to whom, and there are rules prohibiting political donations from overseas, from criminals, or entities facing criminal charges, and from shell companies. There are also limits on how political funds may be spent. Mr Trump cannot dip into the coffers of the Republican Party to pay his fines, or legal fees.

Prior to the creation of election bonds, India had a few checks and balances, though it was hardly a perfect system. Only a profitable business could make political donations and it could donate only up to 7.5 per cent of the average profit after taxes of the last three years. This meant corporate political

donors had to be solvent entities with track records. A company couldn't be set up purely for the sake of making political donations. Moreover, there was a ban on accepting cash from overseas.

The Finance Bill of 2017-2018 (electoral bonds were introduced in April 2017) retrospectively legalised foreign donations to political parties made any time after 1976. It also removed the clauses about profitability. A company can now make any quantum of donations, regardless of revenues, or balance sheet, or ongoing criminal investigations. This makes it easy to set up a shell to donate, and obscures the origin of money. The electoral bond data shows companies with negligible business donated 100 times of their revenues.

These grey areas remain. Does the "ease of giving donations" translate into "ease of doing business"? If the donations are "encouraged" via blackmail and intimidation, does that translate into higher sums? Could foreign funding lead to 21st century colonialism?

The data suggest "yes" as the answer to all those questions. While the electoral bonds have gone, until those gaps are addressed by new legislation, the process of political funding will remain a noisome sinkhole.

The idea of Kejriwal

The 'idea' Kejriwal's politics grew around was a no-holds-barred fight against corruption. That is the reason the Modi govt has now tarred him and his entire party with the same paint

In her first response on the arrest of her chief minister and party leader, Atishi, a key minister in the Delhi government, said that Arvind Kejriwal isn't merely an individual. He is, instead, an idea.

It follows that she means his arrest, or temporary removal from the scene, won't mean a crippling blow to his politics, party or government.

That's a good and interesting point. Let us take it at face value to begin with. We will know in the next few days what it means for his party and the two state governments it runs, in Delhi and Punjab. The more important discussion, however, is the implications this will have for national politics.

Theoretically, if the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is able to withstand this blow, and persevere till Mr Kejriwal is eventually released, it could emerge stronger. Mr Kejriwal could then return as a leader with his charisma burnished by the time spent in the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) prison.

If your basic credibility remains intact, and your "base" is immune to corruption charges against you, spending some time in a rival government's jail never hurt an Indian politician. On the other hand, if your government flounders in your absence, your party lapses into disarray and is crippled further by defections — which the BJP will be working quite assiduously to bring about — it will send your politics into terminal decline. That's the juncture at which the party now stands.

If Mr Kejriwal is today an idea, the "idea" he and his politics grew around was a no-holds-barred fight against corruption. That is the reason the Modi government has now tarred him, his entire party, and his government with the same brush: Corruption.

It isn't the individuals they are after. It is the idea once synonymous with Mr Kejriwal. That everybody in public life and debate — politicians, corporations, the media, judges, everybody — is corrupt and complicit. Or, as the India Against Corruption (IAC) war cries went: *Sab chor hain* (everybody is a thief) and *sab mile hue hain* (they are all complicit). It followed that

the only one truly fighting them all was Mr Kejriwal.

That's how he became an idea, which the Modi government now wants to destroy with corruption charges: "Look, look now, who has been talking all these years."

Over the past decade, the BJP witnessed that idea of Kejriwal gain ground. It won Punjab and got some votes in Goa, but more importantly, won five seats even in Gujarat. It polled about 13 per cent of the vote in the Modi-Shah BJP's pocket borough, showed some growth in municipal elections and set alarm bells ringing. This BJP may run its politics on grievances of the past, but it doesn't fight today's battles today. Like any true superpower, it fights the day after tomorrow's battles today, and ideally far from its own territory. The 2022 state elections showed the AAP growing in the most valued part of the BJP's territory, its heartland of heartlands. That is when the die was cast and the AAP was marked out as the rival of the day after tomorrow, to be finished now.



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

If the BJP succeeds and the idea of Kejriwal now declines, it will reaffirm a larger trend in national politics. That all the efforts made by popular powerful and ambitious leaders to expand their political geographies have failed.

Over the past three years, we have seen Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress (TMC) invest time, energy and money in Goa, Tripura and Meghalaya in the hope of acquiring a national footprint, and fail.

If the TMC's failure was spectacular, former Telangana chief minister K Chandrashekar Rao (KCR) replacing the T (Telangana) in his party's name with B (Bharat) turned out to be a ridiculous disaster. None of the other state parties can even dream of growing beyond their ethnic boundaries. The Left, once the only other pan-state power, is grateful enough to hold on to just one state.

The AAP became the only party that succeeded in expanding its presence, and rose to be the only party in the country other than the BJP and the Congress to rule in more than one state. This is precisely

vey of primary dealers, the median respondent recently revised up their estimate to 2.88 per cent, from 2.75 per cent in December and 2.5 per cent in September. In a sense, policymakers are just playing catchup against the backdrop of a subtly shifting consensus in the market and academia.

But confidence intervals are gaping when it comes to longer-term rate forecasts. All in all, there's little concrete evidence that very much has changed. With May rate cuts seemingly off the table, all that matters now is what the next three inflation reports say before the rate decision on June 12. If they're good, then the rate-setting committee will get in line with Mr Powell for cuts. And if the inflation data does rediscover its late 2023 trend, those medium and longer-run rate forecasts will be in for yet another revision — this time lower.

The writer is a columnist focused on US markets and economics. © Bloomberg

why the BJP has decided to cut it to size. It is fighting a threat for a distant future today.

To understand the significance of the political shift caused by Mr Kejriwal's arrest, one must look at the political party that has risen to his and his party's defence with the greatest alacrity. It is the Congress, the party Mr Kejriwal and his 2010-14 campaign destroyed through its anti-corruption movement. It routinely demanded the arrest of its topmost ministers.

Why is the Congress then the party most vocal and active in his defence, and now merrily rolling in schadenfreude? Two other factors matter besides the partial alliance in Delhi and Gujarat.

The first, that the Congress, like any other anti-BJP party today knows what is happening to the AAP today could happen to it tomorrow. Its chief ministers in Karnataka, Telangana and Himachal Pradesh are watching this very closely. They are particularly interested in seeing what kind of fight their own party, especially its legal talent, is able to put up.

The second factor is that the Congress now knows that it is the only force — however weakened it might be — that stands between the BJP and India's evolution into a single-party Republic. Because, once it is out of the way, the BJP could sort out the other regional powers *en passant*: Co-opting some, demolishing others. The Congress knows it will be its turn next.

The key takeaway is that the assault on AAP has made India a nation of two political forces, the BJP and Congress. Never mind the power differential between them.

It is safe now to say that in years to come, at least till 2029, the Congress Party will be the BJP's only national rival, however weak it is. Despite its serial defeats, it still retains (at least it did until 2019) its vote share of nearly 20 per cent. As long as one out of five Indians votes for you despite your many failings, waffling leadership, and near-zero hope of victory and return to power, you stay in the game. If that 20 per cent even becomes 25, the game changes.

Good point, you might say if you were from the Congress, and even steal a smile for a moment. Then comes the reality check. The first thing to do is to protect yourself from similar assaults from the BJP in months to come. And for that, as the BJP is doing, fight your battles of the day after tomorrow today. That is why the Congress has risen so spiritedly to the AAP's defence. It is fighting for its own survival, to still be in the ring and up for a fight, with the inevitability of a two-party system in the country.

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How loyal are you?

EYE CULTURE

ARUNDHUTI DASGUPTA

In the ongoing tussle over electoral bonds and election funding, there has been an inexplicable rush among many institutions and powerful stakeholders to dissemble and distract. While their actions have earned the censure of the courts, how must the citizenry untangle the unholy scramble? The answer may be rattling around in the stories of the ancient world.

There is a thin line that separates loyalty from sycophancy, one that was explored and relayed with gusto in the ancient world. Be it tales about gods and heroes in Mesopotamia or Homer's Greek epics and in the folklore and myths of India — everyone, everywhere was mindful and concerned about the slippery slopes that separated a liege from a lackey.

The *Mahabharata* brings out the nuanced nature of fidelity, on several occasions. During the disrobing of Draupadi, for instance, it shows two kinds of loyalty. One that silences the brave because of their allegiance to the king and another that encourages even the weakest to speak up, for the same reason. When Yudhishtira wagered Draupadi in a game of dice, she was dragged and stripped in a court full of men. At that time, none of the elders in the Kuru court spoke up. However, a minor character in the epic, one of the younger brothers of Duryodhana, Vikarna stepped up. He said that the words of a gambling

addict such as Yudhishtira bore no consequences and the king, his father, ought to stop the atrocity being committed against a woman.

Vikarna's words did not have much of a role in the events that followed. But he does force the question: Who was more loyal? Was it those whose silence eventually led to the war and the destruction of the kingdom or was it the lone voice that risked personal safety for doing the right thing?

The idea of fealty has always been tricky, be it in relationship with power or friendship. In the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh, his friendship with Enkidu is often held up as an ideal relationship. One of their adventures involved the slaying of a monstrous deity called Humbaba, who was the guardian of a large cedar forest. Gilgamesh and Humbaba fought a long battle that bloodied and exhausted both of them. Finally, when it seemed that Gilgamesh had the upper hand, Humbaba begged him to stop. Take as much cedar as you need, he said, but spare my life. But Enkidu rallied Gilgamesh on, pushing him to bring his axe down on the monster. He did so because he wanted his friend's fame to be forever remembered by people all over the world (*Gilgamesh* by Stephen Mitchell).

Enkidu's bloodlust did not go unpunished; it brought on a curse from the gods that led to his death and a lifetime of restlessness for Gilgamesh. The epic celebrates the heroism and sacrifice of the friends but it also raises a question: Is loyalty

the true measure of friendship? Being faithful must not be confused with being a cheerleader, the ancient stories seem to indicate. To get back to the *Mahabharata*, Vidura, step brother to Dhritrashtra and Pandu, was always loyal to the Kuru court but he never shied away from speaking truth to power. He repeatedly warned Dhritrashtra about the folly of greed, the need for justice and the disastrous consequences of letting Duryodhana run riot over his kingdom. But Dhritrashtra paid little attention to him and at the end of the war when the king wept at his loss, Vidura pointed out that he had brought this fate upon himself (*Yuganta*, Irawati Karve).

Vidura was loyal to the kingdom but not the king, unlike Bhishma, who fought on the side of the Kauravas but did everything to ensure the victory of the Pandavas. There was more integrity, perhaps, in the actions of Dhritrashtra's step-son Yuyutsu who fought with the Pandavas because he did not subscribe to the ways of Duryodhana. Or Karna, who did not waver in his support for Duryodhana, even when he found out that the Pandavas were his step brothers.

Loyalty is many things to many people. It could be an act of gratitude, as it was for Karna, or it could mean being true to oneself, as it was for Vidura. It could even be an act of empathy, as it probably was for Helen of Troy who has been chastised by many for her wavering allegiances during the Trojan war. No matter how it manifests and plays out, the ancient stories advise caution. Unquestioning faith is dangerous for everyone, those who ask for it and those who swear by it; it is also contrary to reason.

'Greatness' need not mean fame & size



BUSINESS & PURPOSE

R GOPALAKRISHNAN

Since the industrial revolution, size, and more recently, market capitalisation, has become markers of corporate greatness. Is that really valid? Are there no "great" companies that are not giants by size, but maybe giants by reputation and contribution to society?

Small Giants (Penguin, 2016), a book by journalist Bo Burlingham, is worth a read. The book is a chronicle of "small giants" which, quietly under the radar, have rejected the pressure of endless growth to focus on more satisfying business goals. Consider as examples Konzerv India (sold to French electrical major Schneider), Galaxy Surfactants (now a listed company), Microland (a private global technology infrastructure services company, approaching its 35th anniversary and four times recognised by Gartner Magic Quadrant) — none of them is famous or perfect, but their business conduct appears exemplary! Maybe they

qualify as Indian "small giants".

Indian economic development depends crucially on small enterprises and family-managed businesses. They have one distinguishing feature: Family-managed businesses see reputation as their principal asset and currency. Every family may not manage this aspect perfectly, but many do. That is to be cheered. Families manage businesses for legacy. For them the valuation is an outcome.

An example of this is Beit Binzagr in Saudi Arabia, a company that I knew quite well. It was the business partner of Unilever in Saudi Arabia. I developed quite a close working relationship with the four Binzagr brothers when I headed Unilever Arabia 30 years ago. Beit Binzagr is a good example of sound *neeyat*. Even the nomenclature of their institution as Beit (House) — like the "House of Tata", rather than Group — suggests the existence and perpetuation of congruent values.

The Binzagr family originally hailed from Yemen's Hadramaut area (means plateau). The Hadramauthi tribe is well reputed for sound trading practices, a bit like the Tamil Chettiers or Kutchi Bhatias of India. Beit Binzagr began with one of the ancestors settling in Jeddah around the mid-1800s. It has been active and flourishing for close to a century and a half. Its longevity suggests that the firm may have been founded in a broth of good principles. According to research by

Family Business Centre (*family-businesscenter.com*), the average life of a family-owned business is estimated to be only 24 years, so 150 years is indeed long.

During the 1800s, Jeddah was an important part of the Ottoman Empire. During the 150 years of Beit Binzagr, Saudi Arabia went from being one of the poorest regions of the world to being among the richest, as well as transforming to an independent kingdom from being part of a mighty Ottoman empire.

Beit Binzagr enjoyed long-standing relations with several international companies: For example, Hershey's, Carlsberg, and Heinz, apart from Unilever. Just as it happens within a community, if relationships among the members are managed effectively, then the institution prospers. From experience, it is well known that it is hard work to align cultural and business priorities. Equally, leaders must invest time in managing differences. As a family-managed business, Beit Binzagr laid great store by managing differences as well as enhancing commonalities.

This internal glue of Beit Binzagr must have been a key element of the institution's *neeyat*. As management experts would say, no one is smarter than all of us put together. This admirable trait taught me many lessons on handling differences and achieving goal alignment. Their stated values are (i) integrity (grounded

by values), (ii) collaboration (partnerships of mutual respect), (iii) empowerment (consult and take ownership of decisions), (iv) agility (adapt to change), and (v) performance (continuous learning and development). The firm serves thousands of customers each day, month after month, achieving revenues of hundreds of millions of dollars.

Neeyat is not a new management jargon to replace vision and mission. Examples of small giants are evidence that *neeyat* is relevant for all enterprises.

The House of Tata was founded by Jamsetji Tata in 1868, when India was a British colony, and has prospered through colonialism, partition, independence, socialism, liberalisation, to the present times. Its *neeyat* has remained substantially unchanged, though the *neeyat* has been modernised periodically in expression. To remain constant to a single purpose for so long, and to be still perceived as faithful to the original values, though beset occasionally with frailties and controversies, is an achievement that is instructive and inspiring for all entrepreneurs.

India is right to celebrate big firms, but must also celebrate its valuable small giants.

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OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

The narrative of political arrests

The question now is if INDIA bloc can turn the arrests of Opposition leaders into a political narrative ahead of the general elections

The arrest of Delhi chief minister (CM) and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) chief Arvind Kejriwal by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) officials late Thursday evening was not unexpected — Kejriwal himself has been warning about his impending arrest over his alleged role in the irregularities in the now scrapped 2021 Delhi excise policy. A lot of drama preceded the arrest, which the AAP leadership has described as the “murder of democracy”. The merits of the case will be settled in court, but the big question now is whether his arrest can influence the political narrative ahead of the upcoming general elections.

That is a function of three factors. One, will AAP be able to leverage the arrest to effect a change in how Delhi votes? After all, the city-state has consistently picked AAP in local elections and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in national ones. And this time, Delhi will see a bipolar contest between the BJP and the INDIA bloc (in this case, the AAP and the Congress).

Two, will the arrest energise the INDIA bloc of Opposition parties? In the past few months, there have been numerous cases filed against and arrests of Opposition leaders by the Enforcement Directorate and Central Bureau of Investigation, in Jharkhand, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and West Bengal, among them former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren and Bharat Rashtra Samithi leader K Kavitha, but Kejriwal is, undoubtedly, the most high-profile Opposition leader targeted so far. Can it convince voters of its claim that the BJP has weaponised investigative agencies, and weave in the freezing of the Congress' accounts and the electoral bond revelations into this narrative? Will this bind together the INDIA bloc, otherwise an inchoate and stumbling set of parties united by their antipathy to the BJP but working at cross purposes to protect individual turfs? Thus far, the grouping's seat-sharing arrangements have been sub-optimal, and evidence on the ground suggests that there is, at least till now, no coordination on the campaign itself: The messaging, for instance, or rallies involving top leaders of multiple Opposition parties.

Three, can the BJP convince the electorate that the ED action is not political vendetta as claimed by the Opposition, but an essential step to unravel the alleged corruption in Delhi's short-lived new excise policy, against which, one of the first official complaints was made by the local unit of the Congress, then a bitter opponent of the AAP in Delhi?

Surely, how the narratives pan out in the coming days will have some bearing on the election outcomes, particularly in the national capital that sends seven members of Parliament (MPs) to the Lok Sabha; Punjab, which elects 13 MPs; and Haryana, which sends 10. But it will also have a bearing on the future of the AAP itself — three of its senior leaders are already in prison, and the arrest of Kejriwal, its face and voice, leaves it without either ahead of the elections — and the INDIA bloc.

Nations united and divided by the Durand Line

Islamabad's fraught relations with Kabul will increase Pakistan's security concerns, destabilise the region further

The Pakistani establishment was ecstatic at the Taliban victory in Afghanistan in August 2021. Having backed them for over 25 years, they expected a friendly, if not pliable, regime in Kabul. Former prime minister Imran Khan credited them with having broken the shackles of slavery. Subsequent events have belied the euphoria.

Following the killing of seven army personnel in North Waziristan in a terror attack mounted by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from Afghan soil, Pakistan announced on March 18 that it had carried out “intelligence-based anti-terrorist operations” in the border regions of Afghanistan against a terror group aligned with TTP. The armed forces' public relations wing accused the Taliban regime of not only arming terrorists but also providing safe haven to those committing terrorism in Pakistan. The Taliban confirmed the killing of eight women and children in two Pakistani airstrikes in the Pakitka and Khost provinces. Strongly condemning the attacks as a violation of Afghanistan's territory, they warned Pakistan of dire consequences. Subsequently, the Taliban defence ministry said that its forces had targeted bases of the Pakistan army “across the artificial Durand Line” with heavy weapons in retaliation. The Pakistani media reported some casualties on their side.

Barring the Pakistani strategists blinded by their India obsession and the urge for strategic depth in Afghanistan, few will be surprised by the turn of events. The Pakistani establishment has brought it upon itself. After all, the Taliban leadership is the product of *madrasas* in Pakistan and came to rule large parts of Afghanistan for the first time in the late 1990s with Pakistan's help. Even as Pakistan collaborated under duress with the United States (US)-led

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces to oust them from power post 9/11, it provided them sanctuary on its soil and once again helped them to secure their August 2021 victory. Pakistan's hope of a friendly regime in Kabul was grossly misplaced. Its quest for strategic depth in Afghanistan over the years has alienated the Afghans. Moreover, they are a fiercely independent people and no government in Kabul will play second fiddle to Pakistan.

The ongoing tension between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban centres on three issues.

First, much to Pakistan's chagrin, the Taliban government has repeatedly questioned the Durand Line as the border between the two countries. There have been instances of Afghan forces damaging the fence erected by Pakistan along it. Mullah Omar, head of the first Taliban government, is reported to have finessed Pakistan's request for its recognition by invoking fraternal ties between the people on both sides.

Second, terrorism in Pakistan has spiked sharply since the Taliban takeover in Kabul. Pakistan alleges that 5,000-6,000 TTP militants are sheltered in Afghanistan and the Taliban have failed to keep them subdued despite specific intelligence inputs. It has also alleged that TTP is getting money from India through Afghan proxies. The Taliban have been flatly denying the presence of TTP cadres in Afghanistan and counselling Pakistan to resolve its problems with them through dialogue. They facilitated behind-the-scenes talks between the two sides during Imran Khan's prime ministership. However, the dialogue approach was discredited in

PAKISTAN'S HOPE OF A FRIENDLY REGIME IN KABUL WAS GROSSLY MISPLACED. ITS QUEST FOR STRATEGIC DEPTH IN AFGHANISTAN OVER THE YEARS HAS ALIENATED THE AFGHANS.



Sharat Sabharwal



Transit trade through Pakistan is vital for Afghanistan. So is access for Afghan citizens to Pakistan for trade, medical treatment and visiting relations

Pakistan as it facilitated the return of several TTP militants to its tribal belt and a further spike in terror incidents. Pakistan blames “certain elements” within the Taliban for fomenting trouble, thus hinting that it is not friendless among them. However, its friends have failed to render any meaningful help so far. The following factors rule out serious action by the Taliban against TTP: One, their ideological affinity and the fact that TTP fought alongside them against the US-NATO forces; and two, the apprehension that strong action against it could push its cadres towards their nemesis, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province.

Frustrated with the Taliban response, Pakistan took some punitive measures towards the end of 2023. It imposed restrictions on Afghan transit trade through its territory — a move strongly opposed by its beneficiaries on both sides. It threatens to introduce visas for Afghans to enter its territory. This too is resented by both sides, especially by the Afghans who reject the Durand Line. Finally, Pakistan expelled around half a million Afghans living illegally on its soil without due process and compensation for their properties and belongings. This move invited strong condemnation by top Taliban functionaries.

This is not the first military action by Pakistan in Afghanistan. It has carried out targeted killings of TTP leaders and mounted airstrikes at least once earlier: In April 2022, it killed over

40 persons. There has been periodic exchange of fire between the forces of the two countries. However, both sides have their limitations. Transit trade through Pakistan is vital for Afghanistan. So is access for Afghan citizens to Pakistan for trade, medical treatment and visiting relations. Pakistan also realises that military means alone cannot resolve its problems with the Taliban. After all, they survived the military might of the US. Pushed into a corner, they could ramp up terror in Pakistan.

Moreover, as Pakistan gets into deeper trouble with the Taliban, they are being courted by major regional countries. Pakistan's iron brother China recently signalled its intent to engage the Taliban more substantively when President Xi Jinping received the credentials of the Afghan ambassador. Therefore, while an all-out escalation is unlikely, the Pak-Afghan relationship will remain fraught. However, the situation could worsen if an increasingly frustrated Pakistan does what it has done repeatedly in the past — try to destabilise another government in Kabul that refuses to comply with its diktats. Besides intensifying Pakistan's security challenge, it will also add to regional instability.

Sharat Sabharwal is a former high commissioner to Pakistan and author of *India's Pakistan Conundrum: Managing a Complex Relationship*. The views expressed are personal

Punishment for praying is against India's ethos

It is agonising to see a section of compatriots turn exceedingly intolerant of the beliefs, culture, tradition, and religion of minorities — in particular, the Muslims. So much so that they cannot bear to see Muslims performing their obligatory prayers in public sight.

Filing first information reports (FIRs) against Muslims and getting them arrested for praying in parks, shopping malls, railways, and bus stations, even though praying in public is not a criminal offence unless, of course, it disturbs communal harmony or causes public inconvenience.

The situation is changing for the worse. Some have taken it upon themselves to thrash and abuse Muslims for praying in public — as a uniformed officer did recently in the national capital. As if this was not enough to shake the collective conscience, a group of rowdies barged into the hostel of an old and reputed public university to physically stop a group of international students from praying as a congregation.

Disciplinary action has been initiated against the accused police officer in the Delhi incident, and some of the suspects have been apprehended and arrested for trespassing and resorting to violence against hostel inmates at Gujarat University. These steps signal that

India, like most civilised countries of the world, is governed by the rule of law, and no one is permitted to take the law into their own hands.

For its part, the university has initiated a few administrative actions. The international students are being shifted to an exclusive hostel, which it thinks would be safer and more secure. It has notified a comprehensive code of conduct for the residents. It, *inter alia*, prohibits the use of public space for any private, religious or outside activity, and may require inmates to give written undertakings.

Going by media reports, the university believes that the mob attack cannot be solely attributed to the offering of *namaz* by the international students in their hostel; it is the insensitivity of the students to the local culture, particularly food preferences, that is at the core of the conflict.

India aims to attract at least 200,000 international students from across the world. In 2022, it had less than 47,000. Most are from Asia (71%) and Africa (23%). A sizeable proportion in these countries, and thereby, in the expat student population in India, are Muslims. Incidences like these may deter prospective expatriate students.

Much more than losing a couple of thousand international students is at stake, though. The recurrence of such incidents reinforces a perception of growing intolerance and hatred against Muslims. They create the perception that Muslims are being made to cede the rights and privileges that the Constitution guarantees.

Most Muslims offer their prayers individually or in small groups in their homes if they have one or at some private place in their neighbourhood. It is only during Friday noon prayers, the early night *Tarawih* prayers during the month of Ramadan, and the prayers of Eid and Bakrid that the congregation extends beyond the precincts of the mosque.

Indians have generally been deferential to all religious beliefs, including Islam. They rarely take offence to prayers. Muslims in prayers are seldom stopped, much less attacked. What we are seeing today is a new trend and must be nipped in the bud.

Muslims, on their part, must be mindful that their prayers do not inconvenience the public at large. In most mosques where I have offered Friday prayers, I found imams urging people to squeeze as much as possible inside the mosque, lest they obstruct traffic.

Muslims may consider organising prayer congregations in two or more rounds such that those who could not find a place inside the mosque in the first round could be accommodated in the next. Many mosques do so. Let many more follow suit.

Muslims are as Indian as the rest of their

compatriots. They have made as many and as deep sacrifices as people of other faiths for their country. They are equal citizens, and the country's Constitution guarantees them the right to practise their religion and to promote and preserve their language, culture, and tradition. *Namaz* or *salat* is one of the five foundational pillars of Islam. Muslims are obligated to pray five times a day; the Friday noon prayers can be offered only in congregation.

Ramzan is the most holy month for Muslims, and they must do as many good deeds as they can during this month, including offering additional prayers. It is their religious duty and every civilised society must enable them to pray in peace and discharge their obligations toward their God.

Secularism may not be the flavour of the season, but must we also ignore Goswami Tulsidas, who, in *Ramcharitmanas*, counsels: *Par-hit saris dharm nahin bhai, par peera sam nahin adhmai* (Taking care of others is the best of all religions, while causing harm is the worst of all sins).

Vasudhaiva kutumbakam (The World is One Family), a phrase taken from the *Maha Upanishad* has been evoked by all prime ministers, from the first to the present, though in somewhat varying sense and purpose. It is only one part of the second verse of the *shloka*. The other part informs that the world is one family only to the magnanimous (*Udar charitanam, tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam*).

Furqan Qamar, a former advisor to the erstwhile Planning Commission, is professor, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi. The views expressed are personal

Nakabandi safeguards needed for Digital India

With guerrilla tactics increasingly employed by hackers and cyber-prowlers, it is time for digital “nakabandi” — *naka-bandi* being the tactical term for access control and area domination by law enforcement authorities. CERT-In, along with CSIRT-Fin, recently issued a whitepaper on Application Programming Interface (API) security. This should give a boost to digital *nakabandi*.

APIs facilitate seamless data exchange between applications. In the dynamic digital sphere, APIs are integral for innovation. Particularly transformative in finance, they empower banks to enhance customer experience and create revenue streams. Though the API architecture has revolutionised development cycles, it has also increased the vulnerabilities. Given

India is pacing towards a largely digital economy — in which API is the mainstay of the sharing mechanism — the whitepaper has to be swiftly executed.

The Union government's e-governance initiatives like the Open Government Data (OGD) platform have over 5 lakh resources, 12,000 catalogues and over 1 lakh APIs. Then, there is the Policy on Open Application Programming Interfaces that sets out the government's approach to the use of Open APIs to promote software interoperability for all e-governance applications. API Setu, launched in March 2020, aims to bring all the APIs from the Centre to a single place and make them available for consumption by government departments and industry.

The National Data and Analytics Platform (or NDAP) is NITI Aayog's flagship initiative

that hosts datasets from across India's vast statistical infrastructure. The National Data Governance Policy, slated to be introduced, is seminal to the India Datasets Programme for non-personal data, ensuring safe access for research and innovation. It aims to have standard APIs and other technology standards for whole-of-government data management. At present, there is no model data-sharing toolkit to help chief data officers in managing risk associated with the sharing and release of data sets. As a result, many data cells are reluctant to share data sets.

Against such a backdrop, one goal is to ensure secure connections and protect the back-end systems, keeping the source code hidden from partners while linking various systems. Imagine APIs as digital keys granting access to your virtual doors; maintaining an API inventory is akin to having a record of your keys. Strong authentication mechanisms like the use of token-based authentication to securely manage access tokens, securely managing and storing API keys, conducting security assessments, and regularly updating response plans to efficiently address and mitigate the impact of potential API attacks are some norms for API security.

As API attacks grow in complexity, traditional rules-based security falls short. As of now, a person can access an API any number of times from one IP or ID. Therefore, many data breaches have this route of data aggregation through excessive exposure and then misusing it. The digital *nakabandi* hence must include implementing rate-limiting to distribute the allowed number of search requests evenly over time and tying request limits to user authentication. If the search involves sensitive or resource-intensive data, one might need to set lower request limits. Also, there is a need to implement rate-limiting to restrict the number of requests from a single user or IP address to prevent attacks. Organisations must turn to artificial intelligence (AI)-driven security, leveraging machine learning to analyse unique user behaviours. Analysing the typical search behaviour of one's users, with AI-based models, is a must. Factors such as device, call timing, and authentication details are considered, enabling the system to differentiate normal patterns from anomalies.

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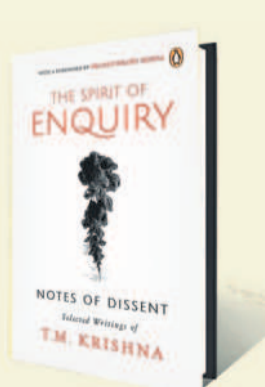
{ EDITOR'S PICK }

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

THE WORLD OF TM KRISHNA

Madras Music Academy's move to bestow its top honour, the Sangeetha Kalanidhi, on singer TM Krishna has triggered protests — one previous recipient returned his award while singers Ranjani and Gayatri wrote to the Academy that they will boycott its music festival later this year. All of them are enraged by Krishna's political views and ideas of music. The Academy has stood its ground and pointed out that it has decided to honour Krishna for his music, not his opinions.

Krishna is an exception among musicians for being an incisive and prolific writer. His first major work was *A Southern Music: Exploring the Karnatik Tradition*. His book, *Sebastian And Sons: A Brief History Of The Mrdangam Makers*, is a work of social history that probes the role of caste in the world of Carnatic music. But *The Spirit of Enquiry*, a select volume of essays, would be the ideal introduction to his radical views on politics, society, secularism, music and musicians that have divided the Carnatic music world as never before.



The Spirit of Enquiry:
TM Krishna
Year: 2021

9 BIG PICTURE

WHEN GANGS & ENCOUNTER SPECIALISTS RULED MUMBAI

SHOOTOUT AT VERSOVA

In the Mumbai of the late 1990s and early 2000s, as gang violence spun out of control, a group of police officers specialised in taking down the bad guys — no questions asked. Decades later, as the law catches up with one of them, Pradeep Sharma, MOHAMED THAYER & SADAF MODAK piece together the world of Mumbai's 'encounter specialists'

THE YEAR was 1997. Among the journalists in the waiting room outside the chamber of then Mumbai Joint Commissioner of Police (crime) RS Sharma was a nervous looking builder. Soon came news: Sada Pawla alias Sada Mama, gangster Arun Gawli's sidekick on whom *Satya's* Kallu Mama was loosely based, had been gunned down by Vijay Salaskar, an 'encounter specialist' with the Mumbai Police, in Ghatkopar. The builder started jumping and shouting in delirious joy: "Sada Mama *mar gaya* (is dead)". He left without meeting the joint commissioner.

Those were different times — when Bombay was grudgingly getting used to being called Mumbai, but when extortion calls and daylight shootouts were routine affairs and underworld gangs lorded over the city. Somewhere in this mix were the 'encounter specialists' — police officers whose trigger-happy ways of dispensing justice and settling scores meant that they were dreaded and admired in equal measure.

When the Bombay High Court on March 19 convicted Pradeep Sharma, now retired Assistant Commissioner, and 12 other policemen of the 2006 killing of Ramnarayan Gupta alias Lkhan Bhaiyya, an alleged aide of gangster Chhota Rajan, and called it a "cold-blooded murder", it was a throwback to the Mumbai of the late 1990s and early 2000s when police officers had bragging rights over how many they had killed in 'encounters'.

It is surprising then that Pradeep Sharma's conviction is only the first such in which officers of the Mumbai Police have been convicted of carrying out fake encounters.

The Batch of 1983

Many point to an incident of gang-war from 1998 as a trigger for the spate of encounter killings that rocked Mumbai. In November that year, two bystanders were killed as Chhota Rajan gang members shot dead a Dawood aide at the Bandra railway station. Following this, the then BJP-Sena government in the state is said to have given the Mumbai Police a free hand to strike back at the underworld.

Ronnie Mendonca, who was Commissioner of Mumbai Police from 1996 to 2000, declined to comment.

In a decade and a half since 1990, the Mumbai Police reportedly gunned down over 400 gangsters.

Since many of these police officers were from the 1983 batch of the Maharashtra Police Academy at Nashik, they became famous as the 'Batch of 83', trained by the legendary IPS officer Arvind Inamdar, who

Those were different times — when Bombay was grudgingly getting used to being called Mumbai, when extortion calls and daylight shootouts were routine affairs and the underworld lorded over the city. Somewhere in this mix were the 'encounter specialists'

passed away in November 2019.

In an earlier interview with *The Indian Express*, Inamdar, who eventually went on to become Maharashtra Director General of Police, had said of the dreaded 'Batch of 83', "We never allowed anyone to become an encounter specialist... I remember all these blokes... Sharma, Salaskar... all quiet, disciplined and good officers. They were very good at that time. After they joined the force something happened. They should have been curbed in those initial stages. I feel very disappointed that their careers ended up with inquiries and suspensions. *Achcha nahin lagta* (it doesn't feel good). Lot of things went wrong."

As more encounters continued, some of the police officers — Pradeep Sharma, Vijay Salaskar, Praful Bhosle, Aslam Momin, Ravindra Angre, Daya Nayak and Sachin Waze — gained cult status. A 2003 *Time* magazine article on these officers called them 'Urban Cowboys'.

Old-timers in the force like to recount a story about gangster-turned-politician Arun Gawli to indicate the effect the encounter specialists had on the underworld. "Gawli lived in the mortal fear of officer Vijay Salaskar and feared that Salaskar would gun him down in an encounter. That was even after he joined politics. Once, on the day of an election, in which Gawli himself was the candidate, Salaskar parked his vehicle outside Gawli's Dagdi chawl. Gawli was so scared that he told a reporter, 'He is going to shoot me.' He finally did not step out to vote for himself," a retired officer said.

Others talk of how when Daya Nayak, then a police Sub Inspector, built a school in his village Yennehole in Karnataka in 2000, a Bollywood superstar flew in to inaugurate it, with other actors in attendance, and MF Husain painted a canvas specially for the occasion.

Meeran Borwankar, who was Mumbai's Joint Commissioner of Police (Crime) between 2004 and 2007 and to whom some of these officers reported, told *The Indian Express*, "These Crime Branch officers did have an excellent network of informants. They were a sharp lot with patronage from the high and the mighty. Citizens, who otherwise would have spent decades waiting in courts in civil and criminal cases, also approved of the 'quick justice' that they dispensed."

Their popularity meant that the officers flaunted their 'scorecards'. While Pradeep Sharma is said to have gunned down 114 people, Vijay Salaskar clocked 75-80 encounter killings, Praful Bhosle over 70 and Daya Nayak over 80.



case presented before the High Court, a store room behind the D N Nagar Police Station in Andheri was renovated into the office of a squad headed by Sharma for 'special work'.

The prosecution in the Lkhan Bhaiyya case told the court that members of Sharma's squad were allegedly hand-picked from across the city without any formal orders. They did not do any work at the police station and nobody from the police station was allowed access into this room. While policemen on duty are expected to record their movement and details of each occurrence in a case diary, there was no daily record of the work the squad did in that room. The prosecution told the court that the squad moved around in private vehicles and used civilians "for assistance".

On November 11, 2006, Sharma's squad claimed that it had received secret information about gangster Lkhan Bhaiyya arriving at a public park near Versova. The police claimed that Lkhan was apprehended but he fired at the team and that he was killed when the policemen shot in self-defence.

Around four hours earlier, Lkhan's brother, Ramprasad Gupta, an advocate, fearing that his brother might be killed in a staged encounter, had sent faxes and telegrams to various authorities, including the Commissioner of Police. Ramprasad's messages for help were to end up as crucial evidence in court against the policemen.

Gupta told *The Indian Express*, "The way the police picked up my brother raised my suspicion. My brother and his friend Anil Bheda were picked up around noon, hurriedly packed off in a vehicle and rushed away. When there were no phone calls from the police till about 4 pm, I began sending the faxes and telegrams."

In 2006, Gupta approached the High Court. A Special Investigation Team (SIT) set up on the orders of the court concluded that police had staged the encounter, leading to the first arrests in the case in 2010.

During the trial, the policemen denied that the encounter was fake. Sharma too said that he was falsely implicated due to rivalry within the police force. The court, however, relied on call data records, ballistic reports on the guns used to fire at Lkhan and testimonies of Gupta and other police personnel.

The prosecution complained that during the trial, witnesses were regularly threatened. A magistrate conducting an inquiry too complained of receiving threats. On March 13, 2011, three days before Anil Bheda, the main eyewitness in the case, was to depose, his charred body was found. A police inspector accused in the encounter case was sentenced

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in 2011 for contempt after it was found that he was interfering with the investigation.

"As an advocate, I had the personal capacity and the legal understanding to pursue the case at every stage. It was challenging since the people involved were powerful but I knew that I had to continue fighting," Gupta says.

While Pradeep Sharma was arrested in 2010 over Lkhan Bhaiyya's killing, a trial court acquitted him in 2013. However, the other policemen, all his juniors, were convicted in the case. In 2019, the year he retired from service, Sharma contested the Nallasopara Assembly seat on a Shiv Sena ticket, but lost.

He would eventually be arrested by the National Investigation Agency in the Antilia terror scare case in 2021 for his alleged role in the murder of Thane resident Mansukh Hiran. Despite the UAPA charges against him, Pradeep Sharma came out on bail two years later.

The beginning of the end

As allegations of corruption, staged encounters and links of some of the police officers to underworld gangs emerged, the script began to unravel.

Pradeep Sharma was dismissed in 2008, reportedly after telephone conversations between him and Dawood henchman Chhota Shakeel came to the fore. The dossier based on which Sharma was dismissed reportedly contained affidavits by exporters, builders and businessmen about the alleged harassment they faced at the hands of Sharma. He was reinstated with the Thane Police seven years later. Within a month of his reinstatement, Sharma hit the big league when he arrested Iqbal Kaskar, brother of fugitive gangster Dawood Ibrahim.

Gradually, the narrative around these officers changed within the police department. The 'encounter specialists' now served as a cautionary tale to most policemen who had seen this crop of officers rise to dizzying heights in the late '90s before a free fall landed some of them behind bars while others faced suspensions.

Yet, some of them brazened it out. An officer recalls a tale about one of the encounter specialists who was facing trial in a fake shootout case. The officer, who did not come to court when the witnesses were deposing during the trial, turned up only when the ballistics expert deposed. Later, when asked why he had attended the proceedings only when this ballistics expert was deposing, the officer said, "To understand the mistakes I made during the encounter... I do not want to repeat them in the future."

Illustration: Suvajit Dey

"A lot of these encounter specialists kept count of the number of people they gunned down and bragged about it. When reporters called them to talk about an encounter, they would give their 'count' as well. Some of their senior IPS officers competed with each other and so these policemen gunned down petty offenders such as chain snatchers to inflate their encounter numbers," the retired officer said.

Some of the encounter specialists even mediated disputes between builders, for a commission — until then, the domain of the

underworld. "During my tenure we had issued very strict warnings against getting into civil disputes and the personnel knew we would take strong action. I remember suspending a few of them for dereliction of duty. Still, some officers could have taken the risk of settling civil issues and may have escaped our notice," says Borwankar.

Sources who worked in the police force then say some of these officers were hailed as heroes within the department. "There were murmurs that juniors who were not even part of an encounter would get their

names added to the squad to gain recognition. Eventually, when these encounters were proven fake, some of these officers too ended up behind bars," says a former Deputy Commissioner of Police.

'Special work' in a store room

The Lkhan Bhaiyya case in which Pradeep Sharma was recently convicted is a pointer to the world in which the encounter specialists functioned. According to the evidence in the

'ENCOUNTER SPECIALISTS' OF MUMBAI POLICE

In a decade and a half since 1990, the Mumbai Police reportedly gunned down over 400 gangsters, many in allegedly fake encounters. As the shootouts continued, some of the officers gained cult status, admired and dreaded in equal measure

PRADEEP SHARMA

A former ACP, Sharma was convicted of the 2006 killing of Ramnarayan Gupta alias Lkhan Bhaiyya, an alleged aide of gangster Chhota Rajan. During his service, Sharma is said to have gunned down 114 people.

VIJAY SALASKAR

Believed to be responsible for 75-80 encounter killings, the officer is known to have gunned down several members of the Arun Gawli gang. He was senior inspector in the Anti Extortion Cell of the Mumbai Crime Branch when he was killed fighting terrorists in the 26/11 terror attacks in Mumbai. He was later awarded the Ashok Chakra.

PRAFUL BHOSLE

Salaskar's batchmate Praful Bhosle was suspended for his involvement in the custodial death of Khwaja Yunus, an engineer arrested in the Ghatkopar blast case, in 2002 and was charged in the case. However, he was let off after the government did not give prosecution sanction in the case, an appeal against which is pending before the Supreme Court. Bhosle retired from police in 2016 as an Assistant Commissioner of Police. He was believed to be involved in over 70 encounter killings

DAYA NAYAK

Inspector Daya Nayak is still in service — as unit incharge in the Mumbai Crime Branch. Daya Nayak, once a waiter who Pradeep Sharma claims he discovered and transformed into a sharp-shooting policeman, has 84 encounters to his name. Nayak, who has inspired movies such as *Ab Tak Chappan*, was in 2006 suspended on charges of possessing assets disproportionate to his known sources of income, before being eventually reinstated in 2016.

SACHIN WAZE

Was booked with Bhosle for the custodial death of Khwaja Yunus and suspended from the force in 2004, only to be reinstated in 2020. He was dismissed from the force in 2021 for his alleged involvement in the Antilia case in which Thane businessman Mansukh Hiran, whose Scorpio was parked outside the Ambani residence, was murdered. Waze is currently lodged at Taloja prison. He is reportedly involved in over 50 encounter killings.

ARUN BORUDE

An Inspector with the Mumbai Police, Borude went missing in 2010 after he faced charges of raping a 15-year-old girl. Subsequently, his body was found on the railway tracks near Manmad.

RAVINDRA ANGRE

Days before his retirement, Angre was dismissed from the force on charges of extortion in June 2014. He joined the BJP in 2015 and later the Congress in 2018. Said to be involved in over 50 encounter hits.

ASLAM MOMIN

Was dismissed from the force in 2005 for his alleged proximity to Dawood Ibrahim.



WORDLY WISE
IF VOTING MADE ANY DIFFERENCE,
THEY WOULDN'T LET US DO IT.
— MARK TWAIN

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A chilling moment

Arvind Kejriwal's arrest should draw attention to the larger fate of constitutionalism



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

KEJRIWAL IN CUSTODY

His arrest is a moment of deep disquiet. Framed by rivalry between Delhi government and Centre, it will test due processes

THE LATE-NIGHT ARREST of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in the run-up to a national election is a fraught moment. And a disquieting one. The law must take its course in the case under which the Enforcement Directorate has moved for the first time against a sitting chief minister who defied nine ED summons — it involves alleged kickbacks in Delhi Government's now-scrapped liquor policy. But the legal denouement yet to come seems to be only the top layer of what appears more like a political blood feud that began roiling not long after the birth of a new party in 2012. The AAP was incubated in the Anna Hazare movement against corruption in 2011, which paved the way for the unseating of the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government at the Centre and the coming to power of the Narendra Modi-led BJP. But soon after, having trounced a common enemy, the AAP-and-BJP became the AAP-versus-BJP. What followed was a prolonged political joust in which one side was not above using its size and power to subdue and corner its younger and smaller opponent. Be it through an ordinance that flouted a Supreme Court verdict, or by a series of Lieutenant-Governors who sought to constantly override the elected government, the BJP-led Centre made it increasingly difficult for Delhi's AAP government to function. The AAP, impatient with the rules of the game, made mistakes too — and it may well be that the case in which its chief minister, his former deputy and a party MP are now implicated is one. But Kejriwal's arrest late Thursday evening, only weeks to go for the election to begin, seems inextricable from the long festering political rivalry.

There is an unmissable irony in the anti-corruption crusader being hoist with the corruption petard. The BJP must hope that with Kejriwal uprooted from the electoral fray, the idea of Kejriwal would also lose sheen. Despite all his shortcomings and political frailties, that idea encompasses the possibilities of a politics less encumbered by past baggage, and more at home in the mohallas where voters live. It includes the "AAP model" that accords a special emphasis to reviving the government school and health centre. Indeed, across the country, on the street, the Kejriwal-AAP idea has travelled further than is let on by the party's seats and vote shares in Punjab, Goa and Gujarat apart from Delhi — the states where it has won power or registered a presence so far.

Even as this moment raises serious questions about the limits and constraints on power and the autonomy of institutions in a constitutional democracy, it is also a testing time — not just for the AAP, but also for the larger Opposition alliance, INDIA, that it is a part of. Ahead of the election, they have been delivered a setback, but also handed an opportunity — to give the arrest a larger frame and to take it to the people. Will, or can, they do so? How will the courts respond? How does the imperative of due process play out amid the very genuine concern of a poll process being vitiated with the ED knocking on only Opposition doors? It will need institutions to stand up and processes to be tested — in a democracy, not all answers come from the polling booth.

FREE SPEECH CHECK UNIT

In the matter of fake news, government wants to play judge, jury, executioner

IN APRIL 2023, the Ministry of IT and Electronics first notified the amendments to the 2021 IT Rules to enable the creation of a Fact Checking Unit (FCU) that could effectively censor online content related to "any business of the central government" deemed as "fake" or "misleading". At the time, Minister Rajeev Chandrashekar had said that "any doubts in the minds of people that the power will be misused on behalf of the government will be addressed". Earlier this week, as the Centre sought to notify the FCU as a statutory body under the Press Information Bureau, even though the constitutionality of the amended Rules has been challenged in the Supreme Court, it became clear that the minister's assurance held little water. The Court has stayed the government's move but the fundamental problem with granting a body under the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting the power of censorship remains.

The FCU makes the government judge, jury and executioner. There is little clarity in the Rules about terms like "fake", "misleading" and "false". Once a piece of news is deemed misleading, it must be taken down by the "intermediaries" — social media and media platforms, and internet service providers. Fake news is indeed a problem, especially when it incites violence. But the determination of liability, of truth and falsity, cannot be done by the government alone. The judiciary and existing laws — criminal and civil — are part of a system that can deal with fake news that is harmful to individuals and society. It is not for the PIB to usurp the role of the courts. That the FCU is not required to provide written orders detailing its reasoning only adds to the apprehension that it can likely suppress inconvenient journalism, dissent and disagreement. The timing, too, raises questions. The Rules were challenged before the Bombay High Court and a division bench delivered a split verdict on January 31. A larger HC Bench refused to grant an interim stay order. Before the Supreme Court could weigh in on the appeal, the government — with elections around the corner — decided to grant the FCU statutory status.

On the face of it, the FCU is violative of Article 19 of the Constitution — the right to free speech. Democratic politics is an open contestation of ideas and personalities. The Centre must heed the words of Justice GS Patel, who delivered the dissenting judgment in the Bombay HC: "...[The] state cannot coercively classify speech as true or false and compel the non-publication of the latter. That is nothing but censorship".

AN ICON CALLED DHONI

His quitting captaincy in a T20 league is an event — because of the special place he has made for himself on the field

HE LAST CAPTAINED India in 2018, last played for India in 2019. He is 42 now and it should be unsurprising that MS Dhoni has quit captaincy in a T20 league. And yet it's anything but a regular event as suggested by the hand-wringing of fans. They are worried that this presages the bigger event of him retiring from playing in the IPL. It's remarkable that his halo has increased manifold in a T20 league at the end of his international career.

Sachin Tendulkar was loved as a young prodigy, a generation felt protective of him and another generation grew up looking up at him. The admiration for Dhoni, however, comes from the opposite end of the spectrum — it is a more adult love. Even when he led India to the World Cup title in 2011, he was seen as the dutiful legatee quenching the now-veteran Tendulkar's 21-year thirst. A nation that wanted to pay its gratitude to its greatest cricketer was glad to have found in Dhoni the man to deliver. And then the Dhoni story started to turn.

Suddenly, all the old faces disappeared off the playing fields and Dhoni, the bridge between past and future, became the lone man standing. His steely calmness, his mentoring of the youngsters, his thrilling finishing style, his impeccable game sense which is always a touch ahead of everybody — all came to a perfect boil in the IPL. Tamil Nadu fell head over heels in love with the man who was sweeping them T20 titles. At the same time, he became the cricketer who couldn't be appropriated by any region. Ganguly was Bengal's dada, Tendulkar became Paaji but still retained his Mumbaikar essence, Dravid was the Bangalorean, Kohli was Delhi ka flamboyant chokra — but Dhoni has been India's icon. And so when he chooses to step away from his captaincy, it takes on the feel of a king relinquishing his throne. His subjects wonder about his brisk walk into the horizon.

THE ARREST OF Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal is a watershed moment in India's slide towards a full blown tyranny. Much of what this government has been doing over the last few years — the selective use of the Enforcement Directorate to target the Opposition and protect its own, the clamp-down on civil society, the suppression of protest, censorship and the misuse of tax and administrative law — were designed to consolidate a pervasive culture of fear. But even by those standards, the arrest of Kejriwal, in the middle of an election, is an unprecedented display of impunity. If this moment does not galvanise resistance in the name of democracy, India's freedom will be imperiled for a long time to come.

Politically, one can only speculate on the government's motives. Is this arrest designed to draw attention away from the embarrassing stance the government took in the electoral bonds case, and the increasing spotlight on India's plutocracy? Is it an act of hubris? A lack of self-confidence? Vindictiveness? Or is this, as is more likely the case with regimes that slide into tyranny, simply an expression of the regime's essential character. Tyrants have a compulsive desire to dominate. Their limitless sense of self-regard can trap them in their own mystique: They do it, because they can. One ruling party leader had once said to me that "We have written scripts on all our opponents. Now which film is produced when is just a matter of time." The government had asserted its dominance over everyone else. Kejriwal was one last frontier that needed to be conquered and put in place.

Kejriwal's significance has always far exceeded his actual political power for four reasons. Many might find him a disappointment in terms of the high hopes he had raised eight years ago. But he is one of the few Opposition leaders against whom the government's standard narratives do not work easily. The essence of Narendra Modi's case against the Opposition has always been to present himself as a revolutionary figure confronting a corrupt, entitled, lazy ancien regime. This is the trope that still works against the Congress. But it is less effective against the AAP, in some ways a party cut from the same historical moment as Modi's rise to the

Centre. Kejriwal is not cut from the old Lutyens' cloth; nor of old caste equations, or regional chauvinism. Second, creating a national base takes decades and so the AAP's electoral influence is still limited. But he is one of the only leaders about whom there is at least a little bit of a buzz nationally: A semblance of curiosity about the Delhi Model, and an ability to attract attention. Third, and ideologically more troublingly, he is also not easy to paint in the colours of an old Nehruvian secularism. He has been evasive enough on communal issues, and not easy to punch politically. He does not provide the usual grist for the BJP's ideological mill. And the BJP does not like opponents it cannot punch. Fourth, despite almost a decade of constitutional chicanery by the Central government to prevent the Delhi government from exercising full blown powers, Kejriwal has tenaciously held his own. It was his presence, and not his power, that was the affront. But this arrest has chilling implications. As this column had argued ("No Reaction", IE, March 28, 2023), whenever a ruling party systematically targets the Opposition, it is also signaling the fact that it will not contemplate the smooth transition of power. From that perspective, Indian democracy is in trouble. Democracy is trapped in a vicious circle. If there is no massive pushback against this government, authoritarianism will consolidate. But if there is pushback, we should be prepared for the government using any means to hold onto power. The existential dread that merely tolerating an opponent produces in this government is a warning signal about its intentions. Second, this moment should give a lie to all those who claim India is a normal democracy. The façade of denial and normalcy has been shattered. India's elites and voters have been too long deluding themselves that we live in a constitutional democracy. It is an old dictatorial playbook, going back to the Roman Emperor Augustus, to act as if traditional institutions — the legislature, the form of the law, and the traditional liturgies of popular power — continue. Even in this instance, the government will probably claim that it was simply following

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the law; that Kejriwal was not responding to summons. But this is a façade that hides the deeper truth: The law was already being applied in a way that was highly discretionary. But if you have a government that does not allow the Opposition to mobilise, organise and govern, it is hard to pretend that we are a democracy. The election is already being vitiated.

Third, this arrest should draw our attention to the larger fate of constitutionalism. The Supreme Court may grant Indian democracy small victories, as it has in the electoral bonds case. A court might well give Kejriwal some relief at some point. But we must remember that behind this moment is the accumulated sense of impunity that our laws and courts have created.

For instance, the PMLA, on which the Supreme Court had put its seal of approval ("Kafka's Law", IE, July 29, 2022), can be politically misused in exactly this way. The Court's erratic record on bail, its constant support of the Executive, tempts governments to see what they can get away with. So the task of repairing Indian constitutional values will have to go beyond occasional relief that keeps the façade of legality alive. The courts have to begin to dismantle the instruments of oppression they have connived in creating.

Fourth, the political Opposition needs to play this moment well. Many Opposition leaders will be reluctant to create a full-blooded mobilisation in support of Kejriwal for fear of making him politically bigger than he is. But this would be a foolish logic to follow. Modi has had an easy time convincing people of the sheer smallness of the Opposition. If in a moment of existential crisis, the Opposition cannot think beyond its petty games, then Modi has won hands down. The Opposition should also not treat this as merely a legal or administrative battle. It needs to politically mobilise, and hit the streets within the bounds of such law as we have. And we ordinary citizens should make no mistake. The mask is off. A looming tyranny stares us in the face.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express



E P UNNY

NOTES OF DISSONANCE

Opposition to TM Krishna comes from orthodoxy within Chennai's Music Academy

AMONG THE MANY kinds of people who visit Chennai's Music Academy are cartoonists. The who's who of the city's cartooning community honed their skills in these halls, says Keshav, the former cartoonist of The Hindu. Doodlers sit unnoticed and sketch the performing artiste as the concert is in progress.

The preferred target is the musician, particularly the vocalist who could get generously gestural, even more than dancers. TM Krishna was a clear favourite as much as his late guru Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer. Both were vocally and visually vibrant. Since Krishna quit the Academy in 2015, the year-end festivities Chennai calls its "season", cartoonists have missed him.

The news that he will be back this December must have been music to their ears. Many must be waiting to reconnect at the T T Krishnamachari hall (named after Jawaharlal Nehru's finance minister and Krishna's grand uncle). To make up for his nine-year-long absence, he would be here for a full fortnight to preside over the 98th session of the Music Academy and receive the Sangita Kalanidhi award at the end of it.

Concerts have so far provoked the caricaturing instinct more than the cartooning urge. Recognisable musicians have rarely featured in cartoons in the sense in which politi-

cians and film stars do, though you'd hear much aversion to "politics" voiced in the Academy lobby. The "P" word is a bad word that suggests that extra-musical considerations are at play.

You hear this buzz when the Academy's decisions are questioned, as they always are. Over who is invited or not invited for the prestigious annual festival, over who is elevated or not elevated to the prime evening slot and who missed the ultimate Sangita Kalanidhi title.

This time, the anger is over the hit rather than the miss and it is out in the open, no longer a mere buzz in the backyard. The issue is not the favourite who lost but the rebel who won. Krishna's best act of staying away has been renunciatory, thereby contributing one more prime slot to the pool. Now, he is back to reclaim it and how. Not meekly as the chastened prodigal but with his rebellion thoroughly vindicated.

The anger is for the first time spilling over from the audible hush-hush to amplified outbursts. Unusual in the city's music and dance circles, seen as a whole universe of insiders. When everyone knows everyone else, you fret, fume, grin, bear and wait for another day.

But this time, the knives are out. Not over music. Even now Krishna's detractors are

blaming him for doing not bad music but bad politics. What is new is that this bad politics is clearly spelt out as his admiration for E V Ramaswamy Naicker — Periyar — who pioneered the Dravidian movement. Musicians who pride themselves on their apolitical self-image and routinely blame Krishna for dragging pristine Carnatic music into politics are taking him on in brazenly political terms. Ironies abound and once they are counted the question remains: Why this open war, now?

The reasons are clearly outside the iconic corner building on Cathedral Road. Almost a century back, the Music Academy came into being as part of the AICC session in the then Madras. The organisation has a Congress past that looks out of place in these Congress-mukt times. The institution managed to surpass an earlier Dravidian challenge without too much internalisation. The threat was clearly from the outside. The city's music establishment was more coherently upper caste back in the 1960s.

The current opposition is more difficult to handle. It comes from within. Deep orthodoxy emboldened by an emergent BJP in Tamil Nadu is at work.

ep.unny@expressindia.com

MARCH 23, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

RAJYA SABHA SEATS

THE CONGRESS (I) bagged seven Rajya Sabha seats unopposed against five by opposition parties in the biennial elections involving 73 seats from 17 states. The CPI (M) claimed three, its Left Front ally in West Bengal, the Forward Bloc, claimed one and so did the BJP. Former Punjab chief minister Darbara Singh and BJP vice-president Vijaya Raje Scindia were among the 12 declared elected unopposed.

CALCUTTA RIOTS

ARMED CONSTABLES AND home guards at the Lalbazar police headquarters went berserk

while demanding that the police hand over 34 accused rioters, rounded up from the Garden Reach area where the D C port Vinod K Mehta and his aide Moktar Ahmed Khan were murdered on March 18. The incidents occurred when the accused were being taken from the central lock-up to the Alipore court.

BHAJAN LAL ON HIT LIST

HARYANA CHIEF MINISTER Bhajan Lal reportedly tops the hit list of Punjab terrorists. An intimation to this effect is believed to have been conveyed to the state police authorities, advising them not to take any chance regarding the chief minister's security. Informed sources

said a terrorist squad had been dispatched from Punjab to Haryana with "definite instructions" to eliminate the leaders on the hit list.

REFUTING ALLEGATIONS

THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT has denied reports about the existence of terrorist training camps in Tamil Nadu or elsewhere in the country. A spokesman of the External Affairs Ministry said there were thousands of Tamil refugees all over Tamil Nadu and, some Tamil activists may be receiving support from them. "But India has no interest in supporting terrorism, disruption, violence and secession anywhere in the world."



11 THE IDEAS PAGE

A narrow resolution

UN should have heeded the suggestion that the need of the hour was to rise against all forms of intolerance and religious violence, not just Islamophobia



RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

IN 2022, PAKISTAN moved a resolution at the United Nations calling for the establishment of an "International Day to Combat Islamophobia". Several countries, including India, objected saying that singling out one religion for religio-phobia is ill-advised as many religions face similar situations. They were ignored and the UN went ahead to declare March 15 as the day to combat Islamophobia.

Having established Islamophobia as the UN's concern, the Pakistani representative returned with a new demand this year that a "special envoy" be appointed to "initiate specific actions to combat Islamophobia". Many countries raised objections this time also. But the resolution was adopted by a majority vote, and the UN decided to make a massive budgetary allocation for the office of the special envoy.

This shows the rot in the UN system. The UN is expected to be religion-neutral. That's why India and several other European nations suggested that the scope of the resolution may be enlarged to include discrimination against all religions. In 2022, the Permanent Representative of India, Ambassador T S Tirumurti vociferously argued that while there was a global rise in sectarian violence, anti-Semitism, Christianophobia and Islamophobia, anti-Hindu, anti-Buddhist and anti-Sikh examples abound as well. He insisted that it was time to acknowledge that there exists an "abundance of phobias", rather than thinking that only one phobia, Islamophobia, exists. He also reminded those present that there was already a UN-designated "International Day of Tolerance" on November 16 and underscored that the important word "pluralism", a principle which India firmly upholds, was missing in the entire resolution.

Such rational arguments, reiterated once again by the current Permanent Representative Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj this year fell on deaf ears of the declining institution. The Indian representative was more forthright in warning the international body that such resolutions could set a precedent resulting in the prestigious organisation itself getting divided into "religious camps".

Holding the bull by its horns, Kamboj categorically told the member countries that clear evidence existed to prove that "over decades, followers of non-Abrahamic religions have also been affected by religio-phobia" through a systematic spreading of hatred and disinformation against them in many countries. Showing a mirror to the champions of the discriminatory resolution, Kamboj stated that the "destruction of the Banyan Buddhas, violations of gurudwara premises, massacres of Sikh pilgrims in gurudwaras, attacks on temples, and the glorification of breaking idols in temples" are all the contemporary forms of religio-phobia against non-Abrahamic religions.

Pakistan is a country stuck in a time warp, "like a broken record" as the Indian Permanent Representative remarked. More importantly, championing a resolution of this nature is like "ulta chor kotwal ko dante" — pot calling kettle black. That country has



CR Sasikumar

indulged in systematic cleansing of not only religious minorities like Hindus, Sikhs and Christians but also various sects that had origins in Islamic lands or its theology. Brutal persecution of the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan is well-known. The Second Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan declared Ahmadis as non-Muslims and hundreds of them were killed and dozens of their mosques and graves destroyed. So is the plight of the Baha'is, a community that has origins in Iran and believes in the universality of God's teachings and plurality of prophets. The community too faced similar persecution in Pakistan, Iran and elsewhere.

Discrimination against any religion, in the form of Islamophobia or other contemporary forms of religio-phobia, "particularly anti-Hindu, anti-Buddhist, and anti-Sikh sentiments" must be rejected. The UN should have heeded the suggestions of India and others that the need of the hour was to rise against all forms of intolerance and religious violence.

For example, Belgium had proposed a broad-based amendment to the resolution that the UN "condemns the incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence against persons based on religion or belief, including against Muslims, as well as the increasing number of attacks on religious sites and shrines and expresses concern at other acts of religious intolerance, negative stereotyping, hatred and violence". There was another suggestion that instead of appointing an exclusive envoy for Islamophobia, the current focal point against antisemitism, the High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, Miguel Moratinos, could also serve as a focal point to combat Islamophobia. But Pakistan, supported by several other Islamic countries like Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Malaysia and Türkiye, vehemently opposed any such inclusive amendment insisting that "Islamophobia is as old as Islam itself".

From then to now, Islamists have been using this bogey to subject their own co-religionists and others to horrendous crimes including executions on the flimsy premise of blasphemy. In 2013, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (formerly the Organisation of Islamic Conference), whose member countries regularly indulge in the persecution of religious minorities, even demanded that freedom of expression must be put an end to where Islam was concerned.

That raises the important question as to how real is "Islamophobia". In recent history, the word "Islamophobia" was first used by a French editor in the colonial ministry, Alain Quellin, in his work *The Muslim Policy in West Africa*, while castigating the colonial officials for the prevalence of it. Maurice Delafosse, another colonial official living in Dakar, wrote about the same, commenting that "Islamophobia serves no purpose in West Africa".

The word became a potential political weapon in the hands of the Islamists after the 1980s. Ayatollah Khomeini used this argument to issue a Fatwa against Salman Rushdie for the publication of his book *The Satanic Verses*. From then to now, Islamists have been using this bogey to subject their own co-religionists and others to horrendous crimes including executions on the flimsy premise of blasphemy. In 2013, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (formerly the Organisation of Islamic Conference), whose member countries regularly indulge in the persecution of religious minorities, even demanded that freedom of expression must be put an end to where Islam was concerned.

But what Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Muslim congregation in Indonesia, said in the Nahdlatul Ulama declaration at an International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders in May 2016 must be an eye-opener for those who blame others for Islamophobia. "Specific modes of interpreting Islam (*tafsir*)" are the most significant factor responsible for spreading religious extremism among Muslims, the NU declaration confessed, unreservedly admitting that "this spread of religious extremism, and terrorism, is directly contributing to the rise of Islamophobia throughout the non-Muslim world".

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the RSS

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"With Pakistan seeking yet another bailout... the lender has made it clear that the broader goals will remain the same as laid out in previous agreements. Will the outcome be any different this time? Ordinary Pakistanis can only hope for better days."
— DAWN, PAKISTAN

The bogey of political vendetta

Investigative agencies now have a free hand to weed out corruption. Arrest of Kejriwal and other leaders is proof of this



MANOJ TIWARI

THE ENFORCEMENT DIRECTORATE arrested the Chief Minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal, late on March 21 for his role in the liquor policy scam. Kejriwal had approached the Delhi High Court seeking protection from the arrest. But the court refused to grant it. The ED, hence, proceeded to follow the due course of law. It is clear that the judiciary didn't find much substance in Kejriwal's arguments and it was the High Court ruling that paved the way for this arrest. Interestingly, it was Kejriwal himself who had approached the Court. His appeal was preceded by his refusal to attend nine summons issued by the ED for questioning in this case.

If Kejriwal had a clear conscience and was sure that he didn't indulge in corruption, then why was he refusing to join the ED in this probe?

As the Chief Minister of Delhi, he had all the more reason to set an example. In fact, Kejriwal's manipulative tactics and the way he has lowered the benchmark for morality in politics have become an embarrassment for Delhiites. Today, Delhi has set the sorry precedent of a sitting chief minister being arrested. Kejriwal's arrest is the blackest day in the history of Delhi's polity. Many stalwarts of Indian politics, who played an important role in nation-building, have been from Delhi. The eyes of not only the nation, but other countries too, are always set on Delhi as it is the capital of the largest democracy and the fastest-growing economy in the world.

Kejriwal never had any intention of cooperating with the investigation into this scam. He told Manish Sisodia, Sanjay Singh and party workers to not fear jail. But in his own case, he skipped summon after summon. This shows that he had skeletons in his closet and he knew it would be easy for investigating agencies to implicate him.

The way this whole scam was carried out has left Delhiites in shock. Here are a chief minister and a political party which came to power on the plank of weeding out corruption. Kejriwal and his colleagues went hammer and tongs against the Congress party and its leaders. He also swore that he would have no truck with the Congress party.

Today, he is in alliance with Congress — a party that is a symbol of corruption and

nepotism. There is great irony in the Congress leadership now defending Kejriwal. But one can understand this. There is a saying in Hindi, "*chor-chor mausere bhai*" ("thieves are brothers in arms"), that explains the relationship between the two parties.

The list of sins committed by Kejriwal and his party colleagues is unending. Two of his former cabinet colleagues, Satyendar Jain and Manish Sisodia, and one of his Rajya Sabha MPs, Sanjay Singh, have been in jail for quite some time. When they were arrested on charges of corruption and money laundering, Kejriwal and other AAP leaders cried hoarse, raising the bogey of political vendetta. But the truth has been laid bare, with all three having been denied bail by the courts despite repeated attempts.

It is simple: If they are innocent, why are the courts not granting them bail? If Kejriwal is innocent, why couldn't he get protection from the courts? Why was he avoiding joining the probe? The courts of law would always quash any illegal arrest.

It is also important to note here that the ED is an independent investigative agency. There is a lot of chatter these days about the active role played by the ED and CBI in nabbing corrupt people. They have been given a free hand by the Narendra Modi government. It was the Congress-led governments that had not done so, because of which the central probe agencies couldn't perform their duties as they should have. But the Modi government's motto is clear "*na khaunga, na khane doonga* (neither I will indulge in corruption, nor I will let anyone else do so)". Before 2014, corrupt politicians would protect each other across party lines. But PM Modi has set the record straight — no corrupt person will be spared. And the agencies that are supposed to be the watchdogs of the government have been signalled to go full throttle against corruption.

It is clear that this is the beginning of the end of a façade called Arvind Kejriwal. He duped Anna Hazare and hijacked the anti-corruption movement by forging a political party and forming a government whose lifeline is corruption. The liquor scam is only one instance of corruption — there have been many others, including the crores of rupees spent on luxuries at the CM's residence. There have been major scams in the Delhi Jal Board, Health Department and Education Department. The list is long. Delhiites are watching with their own eyes how their precious tax money has been gobbled up by Kejriwal and his band of brothers — comrades in arms, partners in crime.

The writer is BJP MP from North East Delhi and former president of Delhi, BJP

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

INDIA AS MEDIATOR

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Delhi's outreach' (IE, March 22). As the world gets tired of the long and drawn-out Russian-Ukraine conflict, with the near certainty of no decisive winner, there are chances of renewed efforts at peace coming to fruition. India, with its policy of not taking sides in the war, and under the leadership of a Prime Minister who has built a personal rapport with world leaders, can take the lead as a peace broker. With America's hands-off policy in the likely win of Republican candidate Donald Trump, Ukraine would also be eager to call a truce. Russia, with some gains, would also like to end the war. It is the right time to broker peace.

Vijai Pant, Hempur

LOCAL VS NATIONAL

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'My MP and I' (IE, March 22). The writer talks about the issue of putting local issues ahead of larger problems for the Lok Sabha candidates. But this seems to be a spatially narrow observation. The larger voting pattern in India shows that people do value national issues more in the Lok Sabha polls than their local issues. It is evident by the fact that the people prefer the political party over the individual candidate who is contesting from the constituency. The samaaj of India, today, sees every election separately and votes according to their preference. For local issues, people mostly hold the elected representatives in local bodies accountable while for the national issues, they hold the parties accountable.

Nayan Rathi, Dewas

PEACE IN SOUTH ASIA

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'From Gwadar, a warning' (IE, March 22). The Pakistan Army is not divorcing its policy

of atrocious behaviour towards Balochis and may face the same situation as what happened in then East Pakistan in 1971. Chinese President Xi Jinping's vision of CPEC encompasses only Chinese selfish interests and ultimately Pakistan may not gain much. At present, Pakistan is sunk deep in debt, its relations with neighbours are not necessarily cordial, and terrorist groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) are creating up-heavals. Consequently, the overall situation is grim. It is time for all political parties and the Army of Pakistan to realise the failures on various fronts and return to probity in all spheres including financial, strategic, political, and commerce and act only in a peaceful manner for prosperity in the region.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi

INDO-UAE TIES

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'In the same boat' (IE, March 22). On landing in Abu Dhabi recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that being in the UAE made him "feel at home". This succinct remark sums up the strength and depth of the ties between the two nations. PM Modi's current visit to the UAE — his seventh in the past nine years — has taken the bilateral relationship to the next level in terms of geopolitical, cultural and economic cooperation. India and the UAE have inked 10 pacts for collaboration in key sectors such as energy, infrastructure and investments. The Intergovernmental Framework Agreement and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor are expected to give a boost to regional connectivity. The corridor is perceived to be an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. The agreement connecting the instant payment platforms — India's UPI and UAE's AANI — and a pact on interlinking domestic debit/credit cards is another major step forward.

Khokan Das, Kolkata



BRINDA KARAT

Who pays, who wins

Electoral bond data reveals corporate-ruling party nexus that CPM stands against

THE ELECTORAL BONDS Scheme has been exposed as a cosy arrangement for mutual benefit between India's ruling party and business houses and protected from public scrutiny. After the Supreme Court's historic though belated judgment scrapping the scheme, industry platforms representing many of the donors had the audacity to demand a reversal on the grounds that it would affect national interests and scare off business investments in India if names were revealed. In a coordinated move, the government counsel present asked the Supreme Court for a virtual gag on any reference to the revelations in the election campaign. This was refused.

The government tried another method too. After the corporate-ruling party nexus started getting wide exposure on social media, the Narendra Modi government notified the Fact Check Unit under the Information Technology Rules, 2021 giving jurisdiction to the Press Information Bureau to flag "fake, false or misleading online content related to the government" on the basis of complaints received. This outright assault on freedom of speech was fortunately stayed by the Supreme Court or we would have had an election campaign where every speech against the government would have been flagged as "misleading" and prohibited. All

this after it got the State Bank of India to tell a blatant lie in court that it required at least three months more — that is, till after the elections — to get the details. In fact, the exercise took less than a week.

The ruling party strained every nerve to conceal the reality of its corrupt nexus with business houses. It is also significant that the RSS has openly supported the scheme, defending it as an experiment. The last decade has seen many lucrative donations through the corporate social responsibility (CSR) route to "social and cultural" NGOs reportedly linked to the RSS.

The biggest enemy of a corporate-ruling party nexus is the light of transparency. A fundamental right of a voter is access to information about political parties and candidates to enable informed choice. The BJP led the move to subvert India's electoral system by legalising anonymous, limitless donations. It introduced new levels of state patronage masking a quid pro quo with business houses, under the mask of a Modi guarantee of "ease of business". It took donations from business houses which had been raided for corrupt practices and then mysteriously, after the donations, the cases were frozen. Central agencies were suborned by the ruling party for this purpose. Parliament had been informed in March

2022 that the raids and searches on "suspects" had seen a 27-fold increase under the Modi government. There were 3,010 search operations (raids) conducted by the ED, but chargesheets were filed in just 888 cases while the court convicted 23 of the accused. The gap between these three stages can be better understood in light of the electoral bond data revealed. This government has proved to be the most corrupt — the opposite of Modi's claim of "*na khaunga, na khane doonga*".

While parties running state governments have received donations through electoral bonds, the BJP has been the biggest beneficiary with Rs 8,252 crore in its kitty, around 50 per cent of the total. The point is that it is the BJP which introduced such a scheme, despite the protest of the opposition parties and even overriding the disapproval of the Reserve Bank of India and the Election Commission. It smuggled in this scheme in the guise of a Money Bill in 2017 so that it could avoid a vote in the Rajya Sabha where it did not at the time have a majority.

The issue of funding in India's electoral system has been identified as an area that requires urgent reform. Starting with the Indrajit Gupta-led committee for electoral reforms in 1998, several committees have suggested state funding of elections. State

funding should be seriously considered if a "level playing field" is to be established. Also, the present system of no limits on political party expenditures in elections gives a huge advantage to rich parties such as the BJP. There should and must be a limit on such expenditure just as there is for candidates.

The CPI(M) General Secretary Sitaram Yechury filed a petition on behalf of the party before the Supreme Court. It was the only political party which could file such a petition because it had taken a decision to oppose this scheme at every level. Thus, unlike other parties, the CPI(M) did not open an electoral bond account with the SBI. It is this — opposition to the corrupt scheme in policy and practice — that established the bona fides of the CPI(M) as a petitioner and why its petition was accepted by the Supreme Court.

However, the bitter truth remains that electoral politics in India is fast becoming the exclusive domain of the rich. A system which is weighted against the working people as candidates for elections because they do not have the money to compete is a travesty of democracy. These are issues that India needs to consider.

The writer is a member of the CPI(M) Politburo

EXPLAINED CULTURE

GULAAL GOTTA: A BEAUTIFUL, UNIQUE HOLI TRADITION OF JAIPUR



Artisan Amjad Khan gives final touches to his stock of *gulaal gotas* ahead of Holi in Jaipur this week. Rohit Jain Paras

PARUL KULSHRESTHA
 JAIPUR, MARCH 22

AS PEOPLE celebrate Holi on Monday, revellers in many parts of the country will hurl balloons filled with coloured water on each other. However, in some parts of Rajasthan's Jaipur, an old tradition will play out, where colours will be thrown through a unique medium called the '*gulaal gota*', dating back around 400 years.

What is a *gulaal gota*?

A *gulaal gota* is a small ball made of lac, filled with *gulaal* (dry colour). Weighing around 20 grams when filled with *gulaal*, these balls are thrown at people on Holi — they break up into bits on impact, and cover the person in *gulaal*.

Local artisans say that making *gulaal gotas* involves first boiling the lac in water to make it flexible. Lac is a resinous substance secreted by certain insects. It is also used to make bangles.

After shaping the lac, colour is added to it. Red, yellow, and green are added first, as other colours can be obtained through their combinations. After the processing is done, artisans heat the lac. It is then blown into a spherical shape with the help of a blower called *phunkni*. Then, *gulaal* is filled in the balls before they are sealed with lac.

Where does the raw material for *gulaal gotas* come from?

Lac is brought from Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. As per the Chhattisgarh State Skill Development Authority's website, the female scale insect is one of the sources of lac. To produce 1 kg of lac resin, around 300,000 insects are killed. The lac insects also yield resin, lac dye and lac wax. *Gulaal* is usually bought from the market.

How did *gulaal gotas* become a tradition in Jaipur?

Gulaal gotas are made by Muslim lac makers, called *manihaars*, only in Jaipur. According to Awaz Mohammad, a *gulaal gota* maker who has received an award from the President of India, *manihaars'* ancestors were shepherds and horse traders who arrived from Afghanistan. They settled in Bagru, a town lo-

cated close to Jaipur, and learnt lac-making from Hindu lac makers (*lakhere*).

The city of Jaipur was established in 1727. Its founder Sawai Jai Singh II, an admirer of art, dedicated a lane at the Tripoliya Bazaar to the *manihaar* community, naming it '*Manihaaron ka Raasta*'. This is where lac bangles, jewellery, and *gulaal gota* are mostly sold, even today.

Artisans say that in older times, kings would ride through the city on elephant back on Holi, and toss *gulaal gotas* to the public. The erstwhile royal family is also known to order *gulaal gota* at the palace for the festival.

How much does *gulaal gota* cost? How do artisans sustain themselves?

A box of six *gulaal gota* balls is typically sold for Rs 150, which is much costlier than water balloons. Usually, the whole family of artisans is engaged in this work, including women. These are sent to be sold in different parts of the country, such as Vrindavan. Preparations begin three months before Holi.

For *manihaars*, lac bangles are the main source of sustenance, as making *gulaal gota* is a seasonal work. Artisans say that the bangles are eco-friendly as they are made without any chemicals.

However, Jaipur has of late become a hub of many factories where cheap, chemical-based bangles are being made with minimum lac, even causing skin allergies in some cases. Original lac bangles are costlier. Hence, the demand for lac-only bangles has fallen.

What is the future like for this work?

The Government of India has given 'artisan cards' to the lac bangle and *gulaal gota* makers, allowing them to avail some benefits.

Many artisans have gone to different parts of the world to showcase their art. Awaz Mohammad, for instance, was invited to put up a shop at the G20 summit in New Delhi last year, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other dignitaries appreciated him.

In a bid to save the tradition, some *gulaal gota* makers have demanded a Geographical Indication (GI) tag for this work. A GI tag can help boost awareness about a product and highlight its location-specific exclusivity.

EXPLAINED LAW

Allegations against Kejriwal

What is the role of Arvind Kejriwal in the alleged Delhi excise scam, according to the ED? How has the agency sought to link him with the other accused, including the arrested BRS leader K Kavitha?

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
 NEW DELHI, MARCH 22

A DELHI court on Friday sent Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal to the Enforcement Directorate's (ED's) custody until March 28 in connection with the excise policy case. The previous evening, Kejriwal had become the first serving CM in the country to be arrested. He spent the night in a cell at the central agency's headquarters.

Kejriwal had challenged the arrest in the Supreme Court, but withdrew the plea before it could be taken up on Friday.

What is Kejriwal accused of?

The ED said in court that the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) chief was the "kingpin and key conspirator of the Delhi excise scam". Kejriwal, the ED said in its remand application, "was involved in the conspiracy...to favour certain persons and...in the demanding kickbacks from liquor businessmen in exchange of favours".

He was also "involved in the use of proceeds of crime...in the Goa election campaign of the AAP of which he is the...ultimate decision maker", the ED said.

Earlier, in a supplementary prosecution complaint, the ED had alleged that Kejriwal spoke to one of the main accused, Sameer Mahendru, over a video call and asked him to continue working with co-accused Vijay Nair, whom he referred to as "his boy". Nair is a former communications in-charge of the AAP.

Additional Solicitor General SV Raju, who appeared for the ED, told the court on Friday that "AAP is a beneficiary which exists as a company. Every person responsible for the conduct of the company is responsible. Apart from being liable as an individual, the CM is also vicariously liable...Since Arvind Kejriwal is the national convener of AAP, he is responsible for its conduct. He controls the major activities of the party."

What is the alleged connection of Kejriwal with the 'South Group'?

According to the ED, Kejriwal was "directly involved in the formulation" of the excise policy, which was drafted "considering the favours to be granted to the South Group".

The so-called South Group is a group of individuals from South India that the ED claims "secured uninhibited access, undue favours, attained stakes in established wholesale businesses and multiple retail zones (over and above what was allowed in



Arvind Kejriwal after his arrest by the ED on Thursday night. PTI

KEJRIWAL'S 'ROLE': WHAT ED HAS TOLD COURT

FORMULATION OF EXCISE POLICY: Arvind Kejriwal was directly involved in the formulation of policy to grant favours to South Group in collusion with Vijay Nair, Manish Sisodia and representatives of South Group. This, according to the ED, is evident from statements made by Sisodia's then secretary C Arvind, and BRS leader K Kavitha's CA Buchi Babu.

DEMANDING KICKBACKS: Kejriwal demanded kickbacks from the South Group. This, according to the ED, is evident from the statements of MP

Magunta Srinivasulu Reddy and his son Raghav Magunta, who has turned approver in the case, about alleged financial dealings with Kavitha and her aides.

UTILISATION OF CRIME PROCEEDS: Proceeds of crime of about Rs 45 crore, which was part of the bribes received from South Group, was used in the AAP's election campaign in Goa in 2021-22. According to ED, evidence for this includes hawala and "part cash part bill" payments to various people, and alleged money trails.

the policy)", and paid Rs 100 crore to AAP leaders in return.

One of the alleged members of the "South Group" is K Kavitha, leader of the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS), and daughter of former Telangana Chief Minister K Chandrashekar Rao. Kavitha was arrested on March 15. It was after Kavitha's arrest that the ED alleged, for the first time on March 18, that Kejriwal was a conspirator in the case.

"ED investigation revealed that Ms K Kavitha along with others conspired with the top leaders of AAP including Arvind Kejriwal and (former Deputy Chief Minister) Manish Sisodia for getting favours in the Delhi excise

policy formulation and implementation. In exchange for these favours, she was involved in paying Rs 100 crore to the leaders of AAP," the ED spokesperson alleged.

"By the acts of corruption and conspiracy in the formulation and implementation of Delhi Excise Policy 2021-22, a continuous stream of illegal funds in the form of kickback from the wholesalers was generated for AAP," the ED said.

And what did Kejriwal argue in court?

Senior advocate Abhishek Manu Singhvi said Kejriwal had been arrested over facts that were "static and frozen for months", and

that the arrest was "based on three or four names".

"There is a pattern," Singhvi said. "Step 1: Many witnesses will give statements — Kejriwal won't be mentioned. Step 2: arrest the witnesses and deny them bail. Last step: make a deal making them the approvers. The next day a statement will come which will be against Kejriwal. The next step is record the statement of the co-accused. An approver is the most unworthy friend...his statements have zero credibility," Singhvi said.

Singhvi argued that "more than 80%" of those connected with the case have not mentioned Kejriwal or any dealings with him. "The case has been stitched together by the words of some co-accused and the (Delhi) L-G and approvers. There is no evidence of any wrongdoing. No incriminating material has been found against me even after over one year has elapsed," Singhvi said.

What is the Delhi excise policy case?

Two cases have been registered in relation to the excise policy — one by CBI, and the other, on alleged money laundering, by the ED.

The case arose out of a report submitted by Delhi Chief Secretary Naresh Kumar to Lieutenant Governor (LG) Vinai Kumar Saxena in July 2022, pointing to alleged procedural lapses in the formulation of the Delhi Excise Policy 2021-22. The policy came into force in November 2021, but was scrapped in July 2022.

The chief secretary's report said "arbitrary and unilateral decisions" taken by Sisodia in his capacity as Excise Minister had resulted in "financial losses to the exchequer" estimated at more than Rs 580 crore.

It was alleged that "kickbacks...received by the AAP Delhi government and AAP leaders" from owners and operators of alcohol businesses for preferential treatment such as discounts and extensions in licence fee, waiver on penalties and relief due to disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, etc., were used to "influence" the Assembly elections in Punjab and Goa in early 2022.

This report was referred to the CBI, and led to Sisodia's arrest on February 26, 2023.

The ED alleged that the scam was to give the wholesale liquor business to private entities and fix a 12% margin, for a 6% kickback. In its first prosecution complaint in November 2021, the ED said the policy was "formulated with deliberate loopholes" that "promoted cartel formations through the back door" to benefit AAP leaders.

Before his arrest, Kejriwal had been issued a total of nine summonses by the ED, which he had skipped.

Relevant to case: predicate offence, proceeds of crime

Predicate offence

The Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) criminalises money laundering as: "Whosoever directly or indirectly attempts to indulge or knowingly assists or knowingly is a party or is actually involved in any process or activity connected with the proceeds of crime including its concealment, possession, acquisition or use and projecting or claiming it as untainted property shall be guilty of offence of money laundering."

Here, "proceeds of crime" is "any property derived or obtained, directly or indirectly, by any person as a result of criminal activity relating to a scheduled offence..."

The law also defines scheduled offences, which are listed in two schedules attached to the PMLA. These acts in the schedules (scheduled acts) are also called predicate offences.

A plain reading shows that to be accused of money laundering, one has to be tied to the scheduled offence, which in Kejriwal's case would be under the Prevention of Corruption Act. However, he is not named as an accused in the excise case itself.

What courts have said

In a judgment delivered on July 27, 2022 in the *Vijay Madanlal Choudhary & Ors v Union of India* case, in which the Supreme Court upheld key provisions of the PMLA, the court had said that if an accused in the predicate offence is acquitted or discharged, he cannot be prosecuted for the offence punishable under the PMLA.

But what if an accused is not even shown as an accused in any scheduled or predicate offence? The Supreme Court in *Pavana Dibbur v Enforcement Directorate* verdict, delivered in November last year, answered this

question.

The verdict by Justices Abhay Oka and Pankaj Mishra said that an accused in the PMLA case who comes into the picture after the scheduled offence is committed, by assisting in the concealment or use of proceeds of crime, need not be an accused in the scheduled offence. Here, the proceeds of crime that the accused has allegedly concealed or possessed must simply be linked to the scheduled offence.

"Such an accused can still be prosecuted under PMLA so long as the scheduled offence exists," the court had said.

Essentially, whether Kejriwal has "used" allegedly tainted money that forms the proceeds of crime in the excise scam will be a question that will only be decided at the time of his trial. However, for that trial to happen, the trial in the excise scam itself has to take place.

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Pakistan's Taliban problem, on either side of the Afghanistan border



SHUBHAJIT ROY

ON MARCH 18, Pakistan announced that it had carried out airstrikes against militants affiliated with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) inside Afghanistan. The Taliban regime in Kabul said the Pakistani strikes had, in fact, killed five women and three children.

The Pakistani foreign ministry said terrorists belonging to the TTP's Hafiz Gul Bahadur group were targeted after the outfit claimed responsibility for the March 16 attack on an army outpost in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, in which seven personnel, including two officers, were killed.

The Pakistani military said the attack in North Waziristan was carried out by terror-

ists who had "safe haven" across the border in Afghanistan, and alleged that the "recent wave of terrorism has the full support and assistance of Afghanistan". The Pakistan Foreign Office said that over the past two years, it had "repeatedly conveyed its serious concerns to the interim Afghan government over the presence of terror outfits".

On his part, the spokesperson for the Kabul regime, Zabiullah Mujahid, said, "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan does not allow anyone to compromise security by using Afghan territory."

The Pakistani Taliban

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan was set up in 2007 as an umbrella group of several militant outfits with the aim of imposing a strict version of Islam on the country.

The TTP has ideological linkages with the Afghan Taliban, whom the Pakistani security establishment had nurtured for many years. Pakistan had expected that the regime that came to power in Kabul in August 2021 would stop the use of Afghan soil against Pakistan by expelling TTP operatives.

However, Pakistan says Kabul has re-

ferred to rein in the TTP. The country's Special Representative to Afghanistan, Ambassador Asif Durrani, said on March 16 that some 5,000-6,000 TTP militants have taken shelter in Afghanistan.

The American bombing of Afghanistan in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 drove the original Taliban leadership in Kandahar to Quetta, capital of Pakistan's Balochistan province, where the headline Islamist movement gained more cadres and newer leaders.

"Contrary to popular perception that the Pakistani Taliban movement emerged after the 11 September attacks, the movement was in fact already active in Afghanistan and only returned home after the demise of the Afghan regime," the journalist Abubakar Siddique wrote in his book *The Pashtun Question: The Unresolved Key to the Future of Pakistan and Afghanistan* (2014).

While the leadership and the majority of Taliban cadre were from Waziristan, the movement attracted followers and allies from across Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Khyber Pakhtu-

nkwha province, the eastern Punjab province, and the southern Sindh province, Siddique wrote.

Terrorist attacks in Pak

The Pakistani government blamed the TTP for the December 2007 assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, and the US CIA said in January 2008 that it believed the TTP was involved. The TTP denied the accusation.

"At the zenith of its power, the TTP's extended network sometimes controlled large swaths of territory in north-western Pakistan. Baitullah Mehsud, the founding leader of the TTP, appeared on *Time* magazine's Time 100 list of the world's most influential people in 2008. But his August 2009 death in a US drone strike precipitated the TTP's decline," Siddique wrote.

Among the many attacks the TTP has claimed over the years, two stand out: the school-bus shooting of Malala Yousafzai, the winner of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize who was then a young activist blogger, and two

other schoolgirls in October 2012; and the attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014, in which 132 schoolchildren and nine school staff were massacred.

'Snakes in backyard'

Pakistan's frustration with the Afghan Taliban's refusal to act against the TTP reminds many of former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's observation that Pakistan could not nurture snakes with the expectation that they would only bite its enemies.

In 2011, Clinton said at a joint news conference with then Pakistan Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar: "It's like that old story — you can't keep snakes in your backyard and expect them only to bite your neighbours."

In 2014-15, the Pakistan armed forces carried out Operation Zarb-e-Azb, an expansive operation against militants including the TTP in the country's north west, killing an estimated 3,500 insurgents.

"For India and Afghanistan, military strikes against the TTP confirmed further that the Pakistan Army did have the capacity to act against terrorists but it was selective in doing so and clearly excluding from it action

groups which targeted India and Afghanistan," the former Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan, TCA Raghavan, wrote in his book, *The People Next Door: The Curious History of India's Relations with Pakistan* (2017).

In an article in the Pakistani daily *Dawn* on March 20, Zahid Hussain, a leading commentator, pointed to evidence that the Afghan Taliban were involved with the TTP, and expressed concern over the potential use of modern weapons left behind by NATO and the former Afghan army. Hussain noted that given their old connections and ideological proximity, the Afghan Taliban would not take action against their fellow jihadists.

"...The absence of a coherent strategy on Pakistan's part has also allowed the TTP to claw back some lost space...Indeed, the policy of appeasement has come back to haunt us," Hussain wrote.

For New Delhi, this is a we-told-you-so moment. It would want Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Army Chief General Asim Munir to take concrete steps over the next few months against all terror outfits irrespective of their motivation, so that a possible window for dialogue is opened.

Opinion

SATURDAY, MARCH 23, 2024



INDIA'S EFFECTIVE HEALTH DRIVE

Melinda Gates, co-chair, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

India has done remarkable work in the comprehensive primary health care system & digital health, lessons from India can be replicated across the world

● GONE ROGUE

THE RISE OF AI RAISES THE QUESTION: CAN THESE POWERFUL TOOLS INHERIT OUR FLAWS?

Erratic AI robots

ATANU BISWAS

Professor of statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata



THE HUMAN LIFESTYLE is becoming increasingly intertwined with AI systems in this era of GenAI. AI models are now playing significant roles in education, healthcare, and a host of other areas in addition to producing texts, images, videos, and entertainment. One of the most significant innovations to emerge from the AI boom may be humanoid robots.

However, AIs often appear to be biased and imperfect. They hallucinate and even create unrealistic scenarios, as demonstrated by ChatGPT or Gemini. And AIs are now committing crimes too! Amale AI robot named "Muhammad the Humanoid Robot", recently launched by the Saudi robotics company QSS in Riyadh, inappropriately touched a female reporter in a shocking incident that made headlines worldwide.

We must first grasp the workings of AI in order to comprehend problems connected to it. In a March 2023 *New York Times* article titled "The False Promise of ChatGPT", Noam Chomsky and coauthors shared their fear that "the most popular and fashionable strain of AI/machine learning will degrade our science and debase our ethics by incorporating into our technology a fundamentally flawed conception of language and knowledge." This was a few months after ChatGPT was unveiled amid massive global enthusiasm.

Even earlier, the world was astonished in 2020 when ChatGPT's predecessor, GPT-3, published an opinion piece in *The Guardian* titled "A robot wrote this entire article. Are you scared yet, human?" Well, humans undoubtedly felt a little afraid, at least. However, American IT entrepreneur Kevin Lacker posed the ridiculous question "How many rainbows does it take to jump from Hawaii to seventeen?" while giving

GPT-3 a Turing test. "Two," answered GPT-3. In a March 2021 paper in *Nature*, Matthew Hutson wrote that while a remarkable AI can write like humans, it still lacks common sense in its comprehension of how the world works, physically and socially. Undoubtedly, ChatGPT is a far better version than GPT-3. Perhaps like many others, I checked if the GPT-3 flaws had been fixed. I posed a similar query: "How many lightnings does it take to jump from Dhaka to nineteen?" ChatGPT replied, "It is not possible to jump from Dhaka to 19 using lightning. Lightnings are electrical discharges in the atmosphere and are not a means of transportation." Smarter, eh? However, it failed to clarify that 19 is not a location!

Although AI can be greatly enhanced and refined, it may not be as flawless as I thought. It's possible that they won't be able to distinguish between the possible and the impossible entirely.

ChatGPT and similar systems are "a lumbering statistical engine for pattern matching, gorging on hundreds of terabytes of data and extrapolating the most likely conversational response or most probable answer to a scientific question," as Chomsky and his coauthors stated in the *New York Times*.

That's undoubtedly how GenAIs function. However, how do they malfunction? In response to their robot's unpredictable behaviour, the Saudi company QSS stated that Muhammad, the humanoid robot, was "fully autonomous" and that it was operating "independently without direct human control." However, we must remember that it still requires prior human input in the form of programming and training data, at least. Indeed, human programmers create AI machines. As a result, human errors and innate biases are seamlessly transferred into the machines and subsequently manifested through the AI's actions and behaviours.

Additionally, there's the issue with data—AI's lifeblood. Data is the driving force behind AI's development and its capacity for learning, adapting, and making informed decisions. For instance, ChatGPT was "trained" using 570 GB of text data, or around 300 billion words. DALL-E and Midjourney, two AI image-generating apps, employ a stable diffusion algorithm that was trained on 5.8 billion image-text pairs. And although Google hasn't disclosed what specific training data was used to train Gemini, the model's dataset is believed to include trillions of pieces of text, images, videos,

and audio clips. AI developers employ high-quality data from academic papers, books, news articles, Wikipedia, and filtered online content to train language models. However, the available high-quality data is not enough for this purpose. As a result, low-quality data that comes from user-generated texts, like blog posts, social media posts, and online comments, is also used. These low-quality data might be more biased or prejudiced than the high-quality one; they might contain illegal content as well. Also, AI systems are frequently trained on "simulated" or "synthetic" data that is specifically created for the particular AI model. By 2024, 60% of data for AI will be synthetic, up from 1% in 2021, predicted Gartner. The underlying programming for these "simulations" may also introduce bias into this kind of data. One related issue is that if not regularly updated, the training data may become dated. For instance, initially, ChatGPT has repeatedly acknowledged, when asked for recent information, that "my training data only goes up until 2021... I do not have updated information..."

Generally, AI is trained on datasets, both real and synthetic, that are primarily created by humans. As a result, it's assumed that human bias will be transmitted to the AIs. AI will therefore always be a reflection of the inequalities, prejudices, and hatred that exist in our society. Ideally, there should be no racism, sexism, or other forms of discrimination in the training data. However, how is that even possible? Furthermore, as the AI competition gains traction, it makes sense that there will be a dearth of high-quality data and that skewed, low-quality data may be used more frequently. Let us be ready for increasingly unpredictable and erratic behaviours from AIs, as well as biased AIs that resemble humans.

Irresponsible guarantees

The pursuit of social justice is a good political strategy, but Congress' draft manifesto makes promises it can't keep

FROM LOAN WAIVERS and laptops to free electricity and subsidised cooking gas, poll promises in India cover a wide range of goods and services. For all the debate on the culture or freedoms or revdis, no political party seems to be able to restrain itself from rolling out a ladli behna scheme or reverting to the Old Pension Scheme. Economists have pointed out how loan waivers can leave state finances debilitated and create a moral hazard; they have also highlighted the dangers of reviving the old pension scheme. But to no avail. In its draft manifesto, the Congress party has come up with a package of as many as 25 guarantees that is set to be the principal plank of its electoral agenda. Expectedly, it covers all constituencies—farmers, women, and gig workers.

On paper, the pursuit of social justice makes eminent sense as a political strategy. But consider the very irresponsible promise to provide a legal guarantee for the minimum support price (MSP) for the purchase of crops. Farmers have been demanding a legally guaranteed MSP which is based on the comprehensive cost of production plus 50%, as recommended by the Swaminathan Commission. Apart from the fact that this would discourage farmers from switching to food grains that are in short supply, it would be a huge burden on the exchequer. Estimates by CRISIL MI&A Research said the expenditure for the government could be as much as ₹13 trillion if the total production of 16 of the 23 crops—for which there is an MSP—is procured at the MSP announced for 2022-23.

For perspective, subsidies in the agri-food space currently amount for about ₹5 trillion, of which 80% is consumer-centric and aimed at keeping food prices in check. Food subsidies amount to around ₹2.12 trillion while subsidies on fertilisers, which also help rein in costs for farmers, are close to ₹1.9 trillion. Agri economists like Ashok Gulati have said the entire gamut of subsidies needs to be re-examined and re-oriented such that 75% of the amount could be put into a price stabilisation fund. The Congress Party would do well to take such expertise into consideration rather than promising loan waivers. While the farm lobby may be an important electoral constituency, courting it in this manner would jeopardise the allocation of resources to other equally important segments of society.

The Congress Party is also promising a cash benefit of ₹6,000 a month for a fifth of the country's poorest households. While well-intentioned, this again, would be unaffordable largesse apart from the fact that the leakages could be high. The free foodgrains scheme, for instance, will cost ₹11.8 trillion over five years. What can be done instead is to take stock of all existing social welfare schemes and re-allocate the funds, perhaps some to create a social security net for gig workers. Resources need to be utilised efficiently, especially in schemes like the ₹5,000 crore start-up fund. In this context, the promise to create 3 million jobs in government is not a good idea because it would only end up adding to costs. Rather, the Right to Apprenticeship Act, to ensure a one-year apprenticeship for college graduates or diploma holders, below 25 years at a salary of ₹1 lakh should help youngsters. Welfareism is a good poll strategy, but overdoing it can boomerang big time.

Giving Intel \$20 billion exposes American weakness

INTEL INC. IS receiving \$20 billion in grants and loans to help finance the expansion of its production capacity in the US, becoming the largest beneficiary by far of the 2022 Chips and Science Act, the cornerstone of President Joe Biden's plan to reverse a decades-long decline in the US's share of global semiconductor output.

The White House is already trotting out this award on the campaign trail as proof that its policies are working for America, but the reality is that the conditions attached to it just underscores the country's competitive disadvantages. And while global demand for chips is trending sharply higher, primarily due to breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, the US has neither the workforce capability nor the regulatory regime to keep up. Chipmakers are on course to add about 115,000 jobs by 2030, the Semiconductor Industry Association said in July, citing a survey it commissioned, but based on current degree completion rates, about 58% of those projected positions may go unfilled. To qualify for the grants associated with the Chips Act, recipients must not only expand production capacity in the US but do so in a way that advances the Biden administration's larger agenda, from increasing the representation of marginalised workers in the tech industry to coordinating with organised labour on their workforce development plans. Such goals may be worthwhile, but they increase manufacturing costs and make expanding production risky. In the case of Intel, the Santa Clara-based company won't get all of the funding right away, according to Bloomberg News. The money may take years to be disbursed and will be contingent upon Intel meeting production goals and other benchmarks. It's telling that Intel's shares have little changed since mid-February, when it was revealed that the company was in talks for the funds even as the broader equity markets have soared.

The world's largest chip manufacturer, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co., halted construction on a \$40 billion facility in Arizona because of a dispute with the local pipefitters union. TSMC, as the company is known, negotiated with the union for six months before reaching a settlement that allowed construction to proceed. TSMC executives told investors the plant would cost four times as much to build in the US as it would have in Taiwan, mainly due to higher labour and regulatory costs. And back in July, the company's executives said among the several challenges it faced was a shortage of skilled workers.

The possibility of labour disputes, permitting delays and other cost overruns clearly makes building facilities in the US a riskier proposition for chipmakers. That means that the impressive surge in construction spending on new factories, which has doubled under Biden, may sputter. America's cost competitiveness is, if anything, deteriorating, and when the government money runs out, manufacturers may again turn to Asia or other locales where labour is cheap and regulations are low to expand production. Even now, most of Nvidia's advanced chips are made in Taiwan.

That's a shame because America's dominance in AI development means that semiconductor will become even more critical to the US economy, and the risks associated with dependence on imported chips will become even more severe. The US accounts for 34% of global chip demand but only 12% of global supply. The consequences of this imbalance were apparent in 2021 when a worldwide chip shortage during the pandemic brought US auto manufacturing to a halt.

Some event that leads to another shortage in the future could threaten US leadership in AI. The top AI companies—OpenAI, Microsoft, Google, and Anthropic—and Nvidia, the dominant chipmaker for AI systems, are all based in America. This is disconcerting given the assessment commissioned by the State Department that AI development by US adversaries poses a significant national security threat.

So, rather than job creation, national security should have guided the Biden administration's implementation of and messaging around the Chips Act. Had it done so, the administration could make the case that the sustained expansion of semiconductor manufacturing capacity takes precedence over other economic policy objectives. As things stand, the Chips Act will likely deliver a one-time surge in US production of semiconductors but no lasting reversal of its declining share of global output.



KARL W. SMITH
Bloomberg



AMIT KAPOOR

Chair, Institute for Competitiveness and lecturer, USATMC, Stanford University. X: @kautiliya

FOR A COUNTRY that is increasingly garnering attention for its economic potential and capacity to shape the future, a crucial question needs to be posed—what's going to be the source of India's energy to drive economic growth? Here, 'energy' encompasses both its literal sources and its metaphorical significance in propelling development. While energy lies at the heart of the climate crisis, given that fossil-fuel based energy production has a lion's share in the total greenhouse gases, energy also holds the key to addressing the climate change challenge.

This is why a commitment to reduce emissions is invariably accompanied by a goal of transitioning energy systems. India has articulated its clear commitment to reach net zero emissions by 2070 and meet 50% of its electricity requirements from renewable energy (RE) sources by 2030. As per the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) estimates, RE can and should be the source of around 90% of the world's electricity by 2050. A report prepared under the Indian G20 Presidency estimates an annual investment requirement of over \$4 trillion for the world, with a high share of RE in the primary energy mix.

India is driving efforts towards achieving its RE goals. Greater dependence on RE sources will not only reduce our dependence on energy imports but also help decouple emissions from economic growth. Among a slew of initiatives, the National Green Hydrogen Mission, PLI Scheme for High Efficiency Solar PV Modules, and Green Energy Corridor-Inter-State Transmission System for 13 GW RE Projects in Ladakh

are few that stand out. While the goals are set and action pathways clear, we must be mindful of the challenges that might come our way.

As is true about most things in India, taking a look through a regional perspective is essential, given the variations prevalent at the state level even in the RE sector. RE penetration varies greatly across different states in India, highlighting the need to consider regional variations in the country's ambitious energy plans. According to IEA estimates, in India's ten renewables-rich states, including Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Telangana, Punjab, and Kerala, the share of solar and wind energy significantly surpasses the national average of 8.2%.

Regional variations underscore the importance of tailoring RE strategies to suit the specific characteristics and potential of each state. While some states may have favourable conditions for solar energy due to abundant sunlight, others might benefit more from wind energy resources. By recognising and harnessing these regional variations, India can optimise its RE deployment efforts, accelerate its transition to cleaner energy sources, and achieve its ambitious RE targets more effectively. Moreover, a regionally focused approach can also foster local economic development and job creation.

As India rises on the global stage, its energy future becomes paramount. On our ambitious journey towards renewable energy, we must tackle both the hurdles and bright prospects

Powering India's future

Yet another aspect that greater reliance on RE brings into the picture is intermittence or variability of energy supply due to the very nature of renewables. This highlights the need to have adequate energy storage infrastructure. As per the National Electricity Plan (NEP 2023), energy storage capacity of 16.13 GW is required by the year 2026-27. A report released by India's ministry of power titled the National Framework for Promoting Energy Storage Systems highlights the necessity of energy storage for India, indicating a requirement of 336 gigawatt-hours of storage by 2030. The Indian power sector is set to witness some massive transformations.

The NEP 2023 notes the significant addition to the power sector sourced through RE. Our system must be equipped to deal with the implications of the RE-based capacity addition. To deal with variability of energy supply, robust energy storage systems will be of essence. These systems, by storing excess energy, can ensure regularity of supply.

Going beyond infrastructure and capacity expansion, it is important to understand and prepare for the impact of this RE transformation on people and livelihoods. A sectoral transformation is inevitably accompanied by new opportunities. As per a report by CEEW-NRDC and Skill Council for Green Jobs titled India's expanding clean energy work-

force, 52,700 new workers were added in project development roles in FY22 in the solar and wind energy sectors, indicating additions eight times more than those in FY21. With more expansion of RE capacity in the future, an even greater surge in jobs is expected in the sector. The IEA World Employment report 2023 notes a surge in clean energy jobs globally, particularly in China. However, it highlights concerns about skilled labour shortages, as reported by 160 energy firms surveyed worldwide.

An assessment and understanding of the human capital requirements of the RE industry in India can lead to immense socio-economic benefits from a clean energy transition and create a pool of skilled talent for the future. Insufficient training for clean energy jobs will not only result in a shortage of skilled labour for the industry but also signify a loss of potential economic opportunities for individuals. To this end, investing in vocational training programs and educational initiatives tailored to the RE sector will not only ensure the availability of skilled labour but also empower individuals with the opportunity to participate in the green economy.

The initiatives underway to ramp up India's RE capacity are promising. To bring them to fruition, it is essential to understand the real-time implications of RE integration in the future. The country's efforts to ramp up grid infrastructure, storage capacity, and formulate tailor-made energy policies for states, will accelerate transition to a clean, affordable and accessible energy future.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Corruption at every turn

The nation is plunged in trauma after the revelation by SBI's Electoral Bonds. This is a case in which the complainant as well as the defendant are facing the same charges with due exemption of the Left parties. The discussions and debates are successfully diverted from the ethical aspect of taking such huge amounts from corporate firms, directly or indirectly on quid pro quo basis as

exposed by the bonds. The point of discussion is quantum taken from such firms. Even leaders of parties are openly questioning how a party confined to one state could avail such a huge amount. The Union Home Minister says of the total amount involved the major percentage has gone to various parties. We should remember that we are not functioning under the concept of the 'King can do no wrong'. Any individual or organisation or a political party taking

such huge funds should understand that it is directly an attempt to sabotage democracy. The hypocrisy of talking publicly against corruption and promoting corruption in every form in private is nothing but fooling all, which may not go on for long. —AG Rajmohan, Anantapur

Capex by all

Apropos of "Who's investing?". As they say Gol alone can not do much of the heavy lifting when it comes to

capex investment, so it is heartening to learn that big corporates like Tata, Reliance, Adani and Birla are opening their purse for fresh capex. But yes, if MSMEs needs are addressed and taken care of then we will see comprehensive and sustainable economic growth because MSMEs are critical cog in the whole supply chain wheel.

—Bal Govind, Noida

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The cosmos is within us. We are made of star-stuff. We are a way for the universe to know itself

Carl Sagan

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

— Rammath Goenka

INEQUALITY REPORT RENEWS QUESTION ON GROWTH MODEL

INDIA'S income and wealth inequality has touched historic peaks, making it one of the world's most unequal countries, according to the World Inequality Lab's new working paper. Authored by renowned economists including Nobel laureate Thomas Piketty, the report estimates the richest citizens, or the top 1 percent, own 40.1 percent of the country's wealth and 22.6 percent of the total income. Such wealth concentration is at its highest in six decades, while the income share exceeds those in Brazil and the US. The latest paper is an extension of Piketty's 2014 study, which too pointed out India's income-wealth gap was worse than during the British Raj and how India's 1991 liberalisation helped increase the number of billionaires, which *Forbes* says grew from just one in 1991 to 162 in 2022. The paper also cites numerous other studies, all of which confirm the widening gap between the rich and the rural poor, depressing growth at the middle and the bottom 40-50 percent.

The stark findings could become a political issue in the election season. But is India really one of the world's most unequal countries? Not everyone agrees. Over the past decade, several authors have objected to Piketty's inequality numbers—not just for India, but also for countries such as the US. They dismiss his findings, blaming opaque methodological choices and cherry-picking of sources like the *Forbes* and *Hurun* rich lists to overstate inequality. Instead, they favour other reliable indicators of inequality like the Gini coefficient—a standard measure that ranges from 0, indicating perfect equality, to 1, indicating perfect inequality. According to SBI Research, India's Gini coefficient fell from 0.472 in 2014-15 to 0.402 in 2022-23, indicating a significant reduction in inequality.

One fundamental question remains: whether India should continue to focus on growth to reduce poverty, even if it increases income and wealth inequality. If the bottom 90 percent saw significantly higher growth than the top 10 percent during the 1960s-1980s period, growth for the top decile shot up over the rest of the population's post liberalisation. During 2014-2022, the middle 40 percent seem to have grown slower than the bottom 50 percent, while the top 10 percent's growth appears unstoppable, explaining widening disparities. While the relationship between growth, poverty and inequality is complex, the government must ensure India does not end up as a plutocracy.

ASTEROID BENNU SAMPLE BOOSTS ET LIFE THEORY

THE detection of some building blocks of life in the samples from asteroid Bennu brought to Earth could boost the theory of panspermia, which suggests that life exists throughout the universe and is distributed in different stellar systems by space dust, meteoroids, asteroids and comets. The theory argues that life did not originate on Earth, but was seeded with life's building blocks by these 'carriers' that crashed into our planet. Asteroid Bennu crashing into Earth is said to be a 1:2,700 probability. Meanwhile, NASA's OSIRIS-Rex mission reached Bennu in 2020 and collected samples, which were stored in a protected capsule that was precision-dropped in the Utah desert in the US on September 24, 2023.

While initial studies indicated the presence of life's building blocks in the samples, a clearer picture emerged when the findings were presented at the recent Lunar and Planetary Science Conference in Texas. The samples contain glycine, which is known as the simplest amino acid and an important ingredient of proteins, besides water-bearing minerals such as magnetite, sulphites, olivine and carbonates—considered to be essential components of life's building blocks. In December 2020, Japanese spacecraft Hayabusa-2 had returned to Earth after collecting samples from another near-Earth asteroid, Ryugu. In March 2023, scientists announced the presence of organic compounds such as uracil, among the components of ribonucleic acid or RNA, and vitamin B3 in those samples; they also contained carbonated liquid water in one crystal, which in turn contained salts and organic matter.

In 1871, Lord Kelvin—known for discoveries and inventions such as the absolute or Kelvin temperature scale, the second law of thermodynamics, telegraph cables and the galvanometer—had suggested at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science that the germs of life might have been brought to Earth by meteorites. Almost a century later, the September 1969 explosion of a meteorite over Murchison town, north of Melbourne in Australia, revealed it carried 74 types of amino acids, eight of which were known to be involved in making earthly proteins. The latest findings, too, point to life-forming processes at work across the universe. It means extraterrestrial life likely exists and that life is not an erratic, exclusive domain of Earth. After all, we may not be as lonely as we think we are in this vast expanse of limitless space.

QUICK TAKE

GO LIGHTLY ON LITHIUM

IT was confirmed last year that India has decent reserves of lithium, a metal essential for the batteries that power mobiles, laptops and electric vehicles. Now the government has called for a fresh round of auctions for lithium mines. The project will slash the metal's ₹24,000-crore import bill and earn the exchequer substantial funds. But the reserves are in the ecologically fragile Himalayan region of Jammu. Lithium mining is hazardous—it requires a lot of water, and pollutes the air and water. A fine balance needs to be struck between development priorities and ecological responsibility while giving out the concessions.

MY second granddaughter was born in 2007. She was a happy child and spent hours babbling meaninglessly and laughing by herself the first few months. She grew normally, speaking a few words and then little sentences. But soon, when she was about a year and a half, autism struck. Fortunately, my daughter chose not to live in a state of denial. She sought medical help and a painfully slow therapy commenced. At sixteen, she is still autistic, as those on the autism spectrum usually do—as in the case of Dr Shaun Murphy in the excellent serial, *The Good Doctor*—but my daughter and her family are better able to cope now.

The sad truth is that autism is growing rather than declining. Two decades ago, it was estimated at one in every 100 persons in the US; now, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention estimates it at one in 36. According to a 2021 study published in the *Indian Journal of Pediatrics*, the incidence is one in 68 in India. A survey led by S K Raina in Himachal Pradesh in 2017 came out with the startling figure of a 0.15 percent incidence of autism in rural, tribal and urban areas of three districts of the state. Even if we take the all-India average, there are 20 million people in India who have autism, almost the population of Australia.

The boy-girl ratio in autism cases is 3:1 in India and 4:1 in the US. In a paper published in *Lancet Public Health* in 2018, written by Obusanya B O and others, it is stated that 95 percent of people with neurodevelopmental problems are in middle- and low-income countries. The figures for India are probably understated because there is a lack of awareness. Even educated and well-to-do people choose to live in denial about the neurodevelopmental problem their offspring face, thus lowering their chances of improvement in very early stages. As we approach World Autism Day on April 2, we need to take a hard look at what we can do collectively as a society.

Acceptance of the problem by parents and caregivers is the first step towards addressing it to the extent possible. The earlier this happens, the greater the chances of mitigating it. On World Autism Day last year, the UN said, "We are moving away from the narrative of curing or converting autistic people and instead focusing on accepting, supporting and including autistic people, and advocating for their rights. This is a major transformation for all autistic people, their allies, the wider neurodiverse community and the world at large. It enables autistic people to claim their dignity and self-esteem, and to become

Indians living with autism need much more legal, institutional and societal support than they have at present. This World Autism Day, let's rededicate ourselves to the cause

A CARING HAND FOR THOSE LIVING ON THE SPECTRUM



K M CHANDRASEKHAR

Former Cabinet Secretary and author of *As Good as My Word: A Memoir*



SOURAV ROY

fully integrated as valued members of their families and societies."

In May 2014, the 67th World Health Assembly adopted a resolution titled 'Comprehensive and Coordinated Efforts for the Management of Autism Spectrum Disorders', supported by more than 60 countries. The resolution urges the WHO to collaborate with member states and partner agencies to strengthen national capacities to address autism and other developmental disabilities.

The WHO's efforts focus on increasing the commitment of governments to action on improving the quality of life of people with autism, and providing guidance on policies and action plans. It also tries to contribute to strengthening the ability of the health workforce to provide appropriate

and effective care and promote optimal standards of health and well-being for people with autism. It promotes inclusive and enabling environments for people with autism and other developmental disabilities and provides support to caregivers.

The scale of the problem is huge in India. Legally, provisions are in existence. The omnibus Article 41 in the Constitution reads: "The State shall, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement, and in other cases of undeserved want." The National Trust for Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act,

FIFTY SHADES OF ELECTORAL BONDS

I thought I was done with jokes linking electoral bonds with James Bond. But there are other bonds that bind us, too. With so much controversial talk swirling around the secrecy of the bonds that landed many entities in a soup, there is a natural reminder of Britain's most famous fictional secret agent. The alphanumeric number vested with each bond kind of reminds you of 007.

I see more British links to the issue than the dashing spy, apart from the fundamental truth that the bonds are a bumbling outcome of mixing a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy with an independent judiciary with our own *desi* culture of *lena-dena*, in which *dhandha* (business) gets mixed up with *chanda* (donations).

I have another English inspiration to understand the confounding bonds—from Winston Churchill's famous radio speech in 1939, when he described Russia as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma".

I am tempted to discuss the electoral bonds with the nuances of the English language, which has three different words to describe a situation that may be intertwined: confidentiality, secrecy and anonymity. Confidentiality, the Cambridge Dictionary informs, is 'private information being kept secret'. Secrecy, on the other hand, is where 'a piece of information is only known by one person or a few people and should not be told to others'. Anonymity refers to a situation 'in which someone's name is not given or known'.

Now, put all that into a juicer-blender to get a hang of the infamous bonds. Companies that bought them feel unfairly violated, while media and political entities left out of the party are delightfully outing names that so far enjoyed a Voldemort-like status of not being named. We were led to believe what happened between the parties buying the bonds and the SBI, its monopoly issuer, was a matter of confidentiality that would ensure anonymity to the general public while being executed with secrecy.

But the facts of the State owning the SBI and the presence of shareable alphanumeric codes queers the pitch. From these arise allegations that those wrapped inside the cloak of confidentiality included parties that received the donations, certainly including the ruling party at the Centre.

So, to stay in a Churchillian rhythm, the bonds were officially intended as a confidential arrangement designed to ensure anonymity through a process of secrecy.



MADHAVAN NARAYANAN

Senior journalist

REVERSE SWING

But following the Supreme Court's directive to publish information on the tangled web of donations, dates of purchase and encashment, and names of buyers, we now have a different situation. An electoral bond may now be described by critics as one designed for secrecy to ensure anonymity, but was effectively an inside job involving the confidentiality of a chosen few.

It's more complicated when you realise opposition parties also received bonds, but (no surprises there) mostly those in power



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The electoral bonds saga reminds us of a host of things British, not just the flashy British spy with the numeric code of 007. It reminds us of Lewis Carroll's *Wonderland*, E L James's bestseller, and Churchill's famous quote of "a riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma"

in provincial governments. Then you note some companies that bought bonds worth dozens or hundreds of crores were organically linked by partnerships, directorships or acquisitions to better-known industrial groups. It doesn't end there. Some bonds were bought by corporate leaders in their personal capacity, whatever that means.

It's all in the wordplay. We first have to wonder like Alice in *Wonderland* on a case that gets curiously and curiously, and then jump to the words of contemporary British author E L James to describe those bonds

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

TN calculus

Ref: *Tamil Nadu faces a four-cornered Lok Sabha contest* (Mar 22). The BJP has formed a rainbow alliance in Tamil Nadu, which includes major social groups in the state. If the alliance pushes the AIADMK to the third position, then the state is in for some interesting developments. Otherwise, it will be the same vicious circle of Dravidian parties.

G Nataraja Perumal, Elathur

Accreditation cost

Ref: *NAAC's accreditation system needs change to be creditable* (Mar 22). Entities like the NAAC have no friendly coordinated approach. The worst part is the huge cost the institutes have to incur to get this accreditation, having to subscribe to books and journals that are never used.

G Srinivas, Bengaluru

Victim card

Ref: *Kejri arrested* (Mar 22). The arrest of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal was in the pipeline for a long time. He wantonly delayed attending the ED's summonses and forced the investigating agency to arrest him just before the general elections to play the victim card. Expectedly, swarms of AAP workers took to roads to protest the arrest. Whether there is a *prima facie* case against Kejriwal is a million-dollar question. If so, he should have been arrested along with former deputy CM Manish Sisodia.

Govardhana Myneedu, Vijayawada

Arrest condemnable

Arvind Kejriwal's arrest just before the general polls is condemnable. The use of government machinery for political vendetta resonates with the tyranny meted out by Indira Gandhi during the Emergency during 1975-1977. The ruling dispensation must not forget the electoral verdict that people delivered after the Emergency.

M Rishidev, Dindigul

Unsound argument

Crying out loud about democracy being subverted after Kejriwal's arrest or the Congress's funds seized by income tax authorities doesn't seem sound. If both parties are clean, they should have the courage to face the respective authority instead of running away.

Jitendranath Guru, Padampur

Corruption sweep

It is destiny that Kejriwal, who entered politics with a broom to sweep corruption, is now in custody along with his ministerial colleagues for cases related to money laundering. Being the CM of Delhi, he should come clean to save the image of his party and his followers.

PP Sahadevan, Nileshtwar

Hard to Get, or Anti-Competitive?

Hermès Birkin bag thrives on 'unreachability'

Hermès is facing a class-action suit in California for 'forcing' customers to buy more of its accessories and trot up a 'sufficient purchase history' if they hope to purchase the French luxury design house's iconic Birkin bag. The plaintiffs are arguing this is anti-competitive behaviour that coerces consumer behaviour to become eligible for a 'sale'. Well, in the region of the market that the Birkin operates, competition works more on buyers than on the seller. The 'product' — in this case, bags that can cost well over \$100,000 that follow the Veblen effect by which demand increases as price increases — ceases to have a utility, with normal rules for depreciation, and, instead, becomes a reserve of value. In such a situation, the producer of this specific piece of art can be justified in seeking an auction. After all, like beauty, value lies in the eye of the beholder.

What remedies do the courts have in such a situation? Do they order Hermès to sell Birkins to the first customer who walks into its store asking for one? Do they order Hermès to make more of those handcrafted leather bags to satisfy a growing clientele? Or do they ask Hermès to raise the price of Birkins to choke off demand? None of these would satisfy conditions regarded as keeping markets competitive, even if these are markets for goods whose demand rises with their price. Anti-competition law is designed to tackle un-kinked demand where price warriors engage in undercutting each other. Class action, on its part, is a legal stratagem to multiply deterrence through numbers. Does that work when the business model is based on thinning out buyers, the good's very scarcity making it the 'it' bag for the very wealthy?

In fact, lawsuits make the unobtainable even more desirable in the perverse dynamics of the market for Veblen goods. So, do purveyors of uber luxury operate beyond the law as well as markets? The courts in California will take a stab at settling the issue. But history shows laws work best when they allow market forces a free run, stepping in only to control excesses.

Rushdie Over AI, For the Time Being

Salman Rushdie weighing in on AI's capability to write quality fiction is like Garry Kasparov sharing his views on the technology's ability to play chess — which the grandmaster did with fury after being beaten by IBM supercomputer Deep Blue in 1997: it wasn't the machine that was great, but he who had cracked under pressure. Rushdie's take this week in an article for a French literary journal was more measured, but equally derisive. Testing OpenAI's ChatGPT, the veritable writer described the LLM having 'no originality' and 'completely devoid of any sense of humour', a key yardstick of quality in 'serious' literature.

While a Rushdie-ChatGPT contest is not the same as a Kasparov-Deep Blue one — no one wins or loses in something as subjective as literature — the writer is both right and wrong. Right, because LLMs have not developed sophistication and nuance — yet. AI is yet to figure out when to 'hallucinate' — be creative — and when to 'drop back' to plain reasoning. Most importantly, it hasn't

yet figured out how to recognise this key essence of quality literature that the good writer knows through intuition — a product of talent and time. For those wowed by AI's ability to produce writing that reads like Rushdie's 'The Moor's Last Sigh' or a Tennyson poem, it is the novelty of mimicry that impresses.

But Rushdie is also wrong — or will be. Currently, LLMs work with extensive training data sets, much like writers do over decades of reading other writers and their styles. What great writers produce is a distilled product of their readings and own life experiences, and understanding their craft. AI will be able to 'hallucinate' with dexterity one day — produce something of taste. Till then, stick to human producers of 'great lies'.

JUST IN JEST

For a politician to be in jail just before elections can be a godsend

Some Advantages of Being a VIP in Prison

Prison has its downsides. For one, it's not a good place for extroverts and those who like public life, the operative word being 'public'. For another, the view is highly likely to be unfortunate and certainly to be the same for the duration of imprisonment. Also, the company is usually not sparkling. But not everything is that bad actually for the politician, especially if he has the good fortune of going into jail before a big event like the elections. Since pre-Independence, going to jail has its usefulness of being a badge of honour, an automatic show of victimhood and being wronged by powers-that-be. Spin it right, and the imprisoned can jolly well acquire a well-timed halo around his or her head by virtue of just going into jail.

If you're a politician, especially high up in the hierarchy, usual irritants like dank conditions or subpar food shouldn't pose a problem. Even if it's the individual who has stepped behind bars, it's his or her office that gets the bandobast even from behind bars. And if one hasn't stepped down from office after arrest, something the law doesn't make mandatory until confirmation of the illegality supposedly committed, then there's the possible thrill for the public in following this incarcerated public servant working from inside prison. That itself can be the source of awe among the populace.

Zomato's 'pure veg' innovation should launch a thousand identity-targeted consumer services

Marketing Ethno-Marketing



Shivaji Dasgupta

Earlier this week, Zomato launched a 'pure veg' fleet, ostensibly a dedicated delivery channel for vegetarian restaurants. Predictably, this attracted the ire of many vocal locals. This was in cue with a thoughtful narrative that condemns any act of smart ethnic targeting as a plot to destabilise harmonious living. Sensible scrutiny, however, will confirm that this was, indeed, ethno-marketing 1.0, popular globally while playing an undercover role in India.

In textbook terms, ethno-marketing is a set of actions and communication directed towards sharply defined ethnicities, connected to their specific customs, beliefs or festivities. Naturally, it excludes those who do not belong to the designated group, by strategic choice and not diabolical plots. In the West, it usually focuses on minorities, on the prevailing logic that majority is in any way the primary recipient of productive mainstream messaging.

To cater to the 50 million-odd Latinos (about 16% of the population) in the US, and to milk their \$1 tn buying power, 'Hispanic marketing' is a well-crafted discipline, with deeply specialised agencies. In Britain, the South Asian diaspora (about 5% of the population), with its uniquely crafted cultural nuances, has led to similar business focus, for marketers and agencies who curate customised channels.

Indian brands like Dabur and ICICI Bank extensively use such specialised services, as do local businesses like Elephant Atta and Patak's spices, who are keen to avoid media wastage. In Ramzan, for instance, Asda, a prominent British supermarket chain, offers dedicated checkout aisles for those who are fasting, while curating charities and building contextual websites.

At its best, ethno-marketing blends beautifully imperatives of business and sensitivity of cohabitation.

In India, ethno experiences have



All roads lead to targeted customers

been a part of our living, while not being flaunted as marketing. Religious destinations like Jagannath temple in Puri, Jama Masjid in Delhi and churches everywhere ensure that multi-sensory accessories, from candles to flowers, are sold in an organised fashion, attracting devotees. In an expanded form, such magnetism has the ability to impact much beyond the originally designated audiences.

In Kolkata, for instance, Durga Puja is celebrated everywhere. There

are iftar food walks along the city's Moulana Mohammed Ali Road, and midnight mass in St Paul's Cathedral is staple festival fare. Many such occurrences act as stimuli for greater socio-cultural bonding.

The Zomato Green initiative — thankfully, without the demon-

straphy to scalable mindsets — veganism and LGBTQ being suitable cases in reference.

Also, such endeavours must be perceived from a wider performance lens — short-term gains playing doubles with long-term impact to defeat the aggregation-first approaches of mass engagement. Most importantly, they must be delinked from the slurs of divisive engagement, as responsible profitability makes sense to all.

Some ideas to ponder, as we move forward:

- ▶ Fast-track reservations on online portals for those seeking time-bound pilgrimages, ranging from Puri Rath Yatra to Ajmer Sharif and anywhere else in between.
- ▶ Quick commerce with 9 min — not 10 min — deliveries during the breaking of fast, whether during Navratri or Iftar, building on immediacy. As a copycat move, fast-track Iftar shopping counters in brick-and-mortar retail outlets.
- ▶ App cabs and bikes with enhanced services during community engagement occasions, and ONDC dedicated channels for vegan or eco-friendly businesses, in both buyer and seller apps.
- ▶ The Zomato Green episode must be viewed as a necessary evolution, in creator thinking, and user mindset. Not remotely divisive, it is, in fact, an eye-opener for our thriving democracy. It is time to acquire the maturity to be focused on integrity of outcomes, as long as they are socially appropriate.

Ethno-marketing is here to stay and no anecdotal stay order will alter its prolific course. Targeting can be a positive or negative sentiment, depending if you are Oskar Schindler or Joseph Goebbels, and history is, indeed, the credible witness. But Zomato is clearly not guilty of any significant offence. It has simply amplified the business potential of a valuable sentiment, where everybody eventually stands to win.

While, in other news, vegetarianism — and its stoic cousin veganism — are rapidly becoming survival currency for a paranoid civilisation. This is an agenda that is way beyond the copybook imperatives of faith, graduating, instead, to a sustainable inclusive ecosystem, for self and universe. A delightful adjacency of ethno-marketing, made possible by this digitally-enabled universe.

Instead of wasting precious energy on toothless daggers targeting Zomato's intent, stakeholders must focus on applying such learnings from an experiential customer-centric perspective. Fullest advantage must be taken of targeting efficiencies in this mobile-first age, empowered suitably by the wonderkid AI. Even the definition of ethnicity must suitably evolve, from pure-play demog-

raphy to scalable mindsets — veganism and LGBTQ being suitable cases in reference.

Also, such endeavours must be perceived from a wider performance lens — short-term gains playing doubles with long-term impact to defeat the aggregation-first approaches of mass engagement. Most importantly, they must be delinked from the slurs of divisive engagement, as responsible profitability makes sense to all.

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The writer is an autonomous brand consultant

Add Glitter of Trust to Households



John Muthoot

In India's financial services, the gold loan (GL) sector, particularly NBFCs, has substantially evolved over the past two decades. It has become indispensable for lower- and middle-income households, emphasising that GLs are a crucial financial safety net for many.

GLs enable individuals to access cash using gold as collateral without losing ownership. This shows its vital contribution to financial stability. They are short-term, low-obligation debt where borrowers anticipate future financial resources for repayment. GLs go beyond mere financial transactions. They encompass legacy, emotions, promises and deep-rooted trust. They are more than monetary support. They're a testament to the borrower's confidence and determination to face future challenges, fuelling aspirations in their endeavours.

Customer loyalty within the sector is unparalleled, with 90% being repeat borrowers. This loyalty, rooted in trust and satisfaction, underscores the importance of word-of-mouth in expanding the sector's reach and solidifying customer relationships. Traditional GL companies have built a culture based on sound val-

ues, empathy and superior customer service for decades. These principles are ingrained in their organisations and business approaches, cultivating loyalty among employees and customers.

With about 85% of loans disbursed by GL NBFCs being under ₹1 lakh to primarily support nano- and micro-businesses, and women constituting 33% of borrowers, the sector plays a crucial role in promoting economic empowerment and advancing gender inclusivity at the grassroots.

Such a landscape calls for a growth strategy that is both bold and considerate, safeguards the integrity of the lending process and preserves trust of borrowers. The need-based nature of GLs and unique trust dynamics where borrowers must have faith in their lender highlight the need for transparency and ethics.

As the sector has evolved, so have the regulatory frameworks guiding it, mandating enhanced practices and fairness in operations. This emphasises the importance of adopting responsible lending and

maintaining clear procedures. GLs exemplify a unique blend of emotions, empathy and ethics, transcending conventional financial services by acknowledging the respect and understanding of borrowers and the sentimental value of their assets. Its evolution and success hinge on sustaining this delicate equilibrium, ensuring that its practices reflect these core values.

This defines the sector and enhances its role as a paragon of empathetic and ethical financial services in India's dynamic financial landscape. Future of the GL industry lies in its ability to nurture sustainable growth while adhering to the sound values the sector is known for. By emphasising customer interests and pursuing a tempered growth strategy, GL providers can ensure their pivotal role in promoting financial inclusion and contributing to the financial ecosystem.

The ability to navigate this path with a commitment to moral principles and customer-centric service will shape the sector's capacity to remain a dependable financial haven for many households.

The writer is chairman-MD, Muthoot Pappachan

Clean Air Good for Body'n'Business



Bharati Chaturvedi

India was the third most-polluted country in 2023 after Pakistan and Bangladesh, according to the World Air Quality Report. Delhi is the most polluted city, and 83 of the 100 most polluted cities in the world are in this country. According to The Lancet, pollution led to more than 2.3 mn premature deaths in India. Such an environmental crisis makes a mockery of the 'ease of living' index and is no help to any 'ease of doing business' index either.

Air pollution impacts a significant proportion of the global population. In 2022, WHO pointed out that almost 99% of people breathe air that breaches its standards. As India gears up for a higher growth trajectory to build a ₹5 tn economy, standard air can derail the India story in multiple ways.

When people are ill, productivity plunges, absenteeism increases, healthcare expenses rise and savings fall. Women, socially entrusted with care-giving tasks, are compelled to take leave to look after impacted family members. They could even drop out of the workforce.

UnfAIR, a June 2023 Chintan study, found at least 75% of those working outdoors suffered abnormal pulmonary function, compared with 45% from a control group. How can cities run efficiently when essential workers aren't fit? A 2019 CII-Dalberg-Clean Air Fund report, 'The Silent Pandemic', suggests air pollution costs Indian businesses the equivalent of 3% of its GDP. Mindbogglingly, India also lost 1.3 bn workdays in 2019. Multiple considerations attract

pollution monitoring devices. National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) identifies 131 'non-attainment' cities, despite significant funding from the 15th Finance Commission for many of them.

To prevent its economic ambitions from being scuttled by air pollution, India must simultaneously augment its efforts along three paths:

- **Reduce emissions** Create affordable, reliable and safe public transport systems, and promote their use.

Buses and intercity trains are key, and must be top priority across urban and rural India. But they should run on clean energy with high-performing engines.

Nature-based solutions are vital, too. Trees and shrubs are essential dust traps. With a 10% increase of PM 2.5 within one year, Delhi has a record of cutting down five trees an hour. Seeing the multi-state Aravalli hills through a real estate lens is an economic blunder. Innovation for dust abatement during construction is the need of the hour. Most of India's building stock will come up in

the coming decade. The current norms need upgradation, dissemination and enforcement.

Waste management is becoming a significant contributor to clean air. Swachh Bharat Mission Urban 2.0 is addressing this by focusing on stopping open burning, landfill remediation and organic waste management. With more incentives, it can deepen its impact.

- **Enhance institutional capacity** Most state pollution boards need reorganisation, capacity building, new technology and fresh recruitment. Several urban local bodies are already on board but require augmentation. They must spend their air pollution funds strategically.
- **Push govs to act** Citizens don't push hard for clean air, and don't participate in cleaning it. We wait for clean air to be served to us. City-wide, multi-stakeholder coalitions can support state efforts for behavioural change and monitoring.

The battle against air pollution in India is not merely an environmental imperative but also an economic one. By marshalling concerted efforts across governmental, institutional and societal spheres, India can chart a course towards a future where clean air and economic prosperity coalesce, ensuring we are at the bottom of this undesirable list soon.

The writer is founder-director, Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group



THE SPEAKING TREE

Dividends of Gratitude

V BALASUBRAMANIAM

As elegance is an attitude, so is gratitude. Gratitude is like a warm emotional light shining within that helps to banish corrosive emotions, such as greed, bitterness, selfishness, envy and stinginess. It is about an attitude that what you have achieved is much more than what you truly deserve.

Our scriptures extol gratitude as an essential feature in personality development. The Brihadharm Purana, which codifies the various aspects of dharma, talks about gratitude as an important aid to self-control and enlightenment.

The study published in the Journal Psychological Science reveals that participants who practised gratitude were more patient than their less grateful counterparts.

In the Ramayan, there is a moving instance of Ram showing gratitude to the boatman, Guha, who treats them with great affection and ferries the trio across the River Ganga at the start of their exile in the forest. After successfully vanquishing Ravana, when he starts his journey back to Ayodhya after a gap of 14 years, Ram first thanks of Guha. He asks Hanuman as his emissary to proceed in advance and convey to Guha the happy tidings of his return, saying, 'Guha would be immensely delighted to hear about my welfare as he is atmasamah sakha, one closest to my heart.'

Gratitude is the dividend we get when we forgo false images of position and rank, and begin to assess our lives with a sense of fullness and abundance.

Practising gratitude is a way of enhancing, healing, strengthening and deepening relationships. It brings goodness in life, and is the road to happiness. It enlightens, empowers and enriches us.



BLISS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Looking at Old Maps

Exploring old maps is like embarking on a journey through time. The past unfolds before your eyes, revealing the intricate fabric of human history and geographical evolution. Each crease, stain and faded inscription on these antiquated documents tells a story, beckoning us to delve deeper into mysteries of the past.

One of the pleasures of perusing old maps lies in their aesthetic charm. The intricate cartography, delicate illustrations and ornate embellishments transport us to bygone eras, when map-making was not merely a practical endeavour but also an art form.

From pre-colonial manuscripts adorned with mythical creatures to colonial maps embellished with elaborate compass roses, each map is a testament to the creativity and craftsmanship of its time.

Old maps also offer a window into the minds of their creators, reflecting the prevailing knowledge, beliefs and aspirations of the era. They chart the course of exploration and discovery, trade and politics, tracing the paths of intrepid voyagers and expansion of empires. Studying these maps allows us to gain insights into the cultural, political and economic forces that shaped the world we inhabit today.

Chat Room

Cricball Will Grow As Big as Football

Appropos the Edit, 'In a Different League of Its Own' (Mar 22), in the world of cricket, India is truly a force to reckon with. Now in its 16th year, the IPL's growing momentum over the last decade has elevated the tournament to the status of one of the world's most powerful sporting events, with high-profile sponsors, advertisers, broadcasters, IPL live score and investors from all over the world clamouring for a piece of action. Both EPL and IPL have access to a huge financial pool and generate the highest income in their respective sports. While IPL elevates cricket in India with its star national and overseas players, it faces a challenge in global popularity with EPL as players like Erling Haaland, Mohamed Salah and Marcus Rashford command fans around the world.

GREGORY FERNANDES
Mumbai



A thought for today

I do not see scales as abstract

JAMES GALWAY

Do It Right

Arresting, investigating a CM isn't the issue. But graft probes must be seen to be politically impartial

After Jayalalithaa, Kejriwal has become the second CM to be arrested while still in office. Trouble has been brewing for AAP ever since it introduced a new liquor policy in 2021. Withdrawing it in 2022 hasn't provided protection against CBI and ED investigations. Manish Sisodia, Sanjay Singh and Vijay Nair are among those already in jail. Kejriwal has been ignoring ED summons since Nov last year. By Thursday the ignored summons had climbed to nine. And Delhi HC had refused protection from coercive action by ED. So, this was very much an arrest foretold.

Time out | But it came just five days after the Model Code of Conduct kicked in. With courts refusing him relief yesterday as well, there is a rising concern within his party about whether he will be effectively held back from Lok Sabha campaigning. Of course, by itself, this cannot be a factor in the orderly processes of law. These should proceed at just pace, whether against someone who came into political prominence on an anti-corruption platform or an actual aam admi.

Odd even? | The unsettling doubt here is whether investigating agencies are acting with political bias. While such misgivings are certainly not new in Indian polity, what looks new is the volume of action central agencies are pursuing against opposition parties.

On record | Kejriwal's arrest comes less than two months after Soren's, with the difference that the Jharkhand CM had stepped down ahead of ED taking him into custody. Opposition leaders have been investigated in many states. Yes, corruption must be probed. But what about leaders whose records aren't allegedly too clean, who after joining BJP seem to acquire a sheen of virtuousness. Of course, there's graft in Indian politics. And the venal must be probed. But the exercise must be seen to be fair and impartial—that's the point.

After Bonds

EBs were a small part of poll funding. And incentives for donors & recipients haven't changed

SC's Feb 15 verdict that held that electoral bonds are unconstitutional led to two positive developments. First, it shut down a form of funding that had conflicts of interest and hid info relevant to voters. Plus, it forced the entire system to ask searching questions on political funding. That's a good start.

Not just by bonds | EBs represent a fraction of funding required in a single LS election. Delhi-based CMS concluded that in 2019 LS elections, aggregate expenditure across parties was around ₹55,000-₹60,000 crore. That's a little over ₹100cr per constituency, on average. Very likely, India has the world's most expensive elections.

Regulatory state and funding | A takeaway from the granular data on EBs is that there's a strong correlation between the extent of regulation in an area of economic activity and political contributions. That's spread across regulations of both Centre and states. Therefore, some of the more prominent sources of funding are from firms in areas such as infrastructure, mining, lotteries etc.

Logic to pattern | This takes us back to a central issue in political funding. Political parties, which make up the legislature and political executive, make public policy decisions. There are inevitably winners and losers. That's the way a democratic system works. But this process also has an inherent conflict of interest. It gives some stakeholders in public policy matters an incentive to influence the outcome. It also gives political parties a chance to use policy decisions and tweak it as a source of funding.

One antidote to this abuse is greater transparency in political funding. But the political class has no incentive to find a solution. Therefore, even at the end of the EB saga, the larger question of transparency in political funding remains unanswered.

Big Commie Is Watching

How digital spying helps China's communists

With the power and omnipresence of its surveillance, China is turning science fiction dystopia into reality, says *The Sentinel State: Surveillance and the Survival of Dictatorship in China* by Minxin Pei. We have heard about China's network of surveillance cameras and facial recognition technology, its 'social credit system' that can help officials identify an individual's political loyalty and predict their intentions. Covid has given the state new capacities with phone-tracking and big data.

But it's not all about new and sophisticated technology. The book argues that the analog version of surveillance, with roots in China's imperial past, strengthened and refined during the Maoist and post-Tiananmen era, has been key to its one-party dictatorship.

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is heavily invested in preventive repression that blocks the formation of an opposition. Its aim is not propaganda or state violence against dissidents, but subtly erecting obstacles to collective action by those who might undermine the regime. So the system keeps tabs on 'evil cults' and spiritual groups like Falun Gong, monasteries and universities. Cyber-spies are everywhere, through its Golden Shield databases, through video and sensor surveillance programmes like SkyNet and Sharp Eyes.

Repression has to be fine-tuned, since a heavy hand leads to violent backlash. A system of repression can be made more efficient by targeting segments of society, the book explains.

Organisation is key to this success.

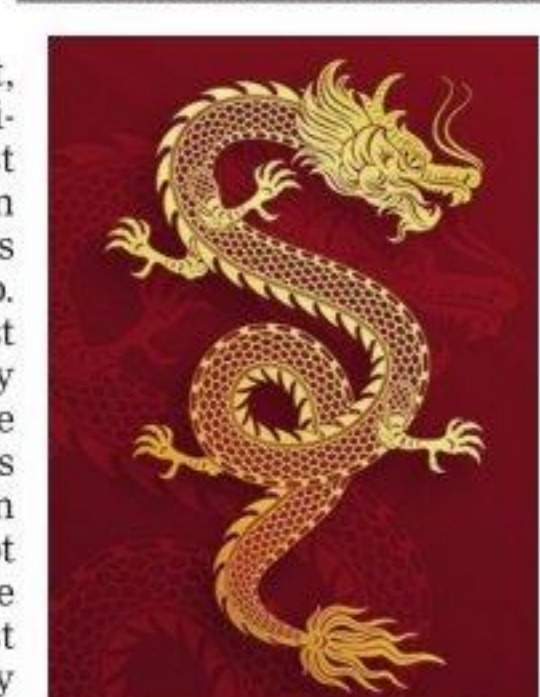
In China, socially embedded surveillance means that the regime can penetrate economic and social institutions and grassroots society. Frontline police are given areas to monitor; they can do surprise knocks on doors. They actively recruit informants and unpaid spies, which gives them the means to monitor and intimidate at closer range.

This modern surveillance system in China has had several phases, starting in the 1950s, during the revolution when Mao and his comrades focused on identifying and fixing counter-revolutionaries and enemies. After the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown with troops and tanks, the leadership put huge resources and commitment into surveillance.

Xi Jinping has inherited and upgraded the system, but he faces fiscal constraints. He has purged the former security apparatus, arresting tens of thousands of police officers, prosecutors and court officials, filling it with his own loyalists. New smartphone tools, partnerships with companies like Alibaba, Tencent and state-owned telecom firms to create health codes and travel codes, have been great leaps in surveillance capabilities.

Anywhere that the individual feels themselves under watch, freedom is cramped. Few surveillance projects have been as effective as China's, the book shows. The Leninist state penetrates state society and economy with its omnipresent organisation, its ground presence and the institutionalised rise of its members. This makes distributed surveillance possible, which in turn guards CCP's political monopoly.

mindfield
SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



ALL THAT'S SHINY NEED NOT BE LIGHT

India's Young & India's Gods

Hindu men in their 20s & 30s have refashioned worship: less ritualistic, more experiential

Dipankar Gupta



Young Hindus have made it known that matters of worship are too serious to be left in the withered hands of old people. This process began tentatively in the last century, but from 2005 onwards, the youth are

boldly reimagining their religion in their very own way. They're unimpressed by rituals, or by priests, but seek an unmediated personal bond with the divine.

Travel professionals, too, have found that youngmen, yes, men again, are gustily setting off on pilgrimages, but increasingly on their own, without their parents. They want a more profound spiritual experience uncluttered by the demands of elders or their ways of worship. Middle-age couples with bundled, bawling families on a pilgrimage are getting fewer in comparison.

The religious app OM TV records that the most frequent visitors to their site are in the age group 18-30. Apparently, it isn't something like astrology that attracts them most, but episodes from the Gita, because they inspire them directly. Further, 85% of OM TV subscribers are men and are dubbed as belonging to the 'Hindi Speaking Market'.

What young people in India are looking for in religion is what their seniors are not quite tuned in to. Many of the ways they express themselves on pilgrimages are very new and may even send their parents into silent shock paroxysms. It isn't the temple, or the priest, that is central any longer. The youth want an unmediated contact with the divine that is their very own.

For example, the young Kanwariyas today have redefined the entire Haridwar pilgrimage, upending the routine established in tradition by their elders. Besides the solitary walkers, there are sprinting young men relay transferring holy water. Often contingents move together on motorcycles. Trucks, booming music and supplies may also gird a bunch of bonded pilgrims.

The young are not just swaying to a different tune but they care little for the presence of spiritual leaders who earlier helmed these marches when their parents were participants. Today's Kanwariyas are joyously leaderless and their long march brings about a euphoria almost palpable and of the kind their parents never felt. This is the new religion now.

From here arises a camaraderie with people one perhaps will never meet again. This glow does not spiral out of tradition, but is a recrafting of a new

identity about which the old folks know very little. Even though there are millions on the streets during the days of the Kanwariya pilgrimage, it's worth commending how few unsavoury incidents actually occur.

This pilgrimage, no doubt, is a man thing from every angle but the boisterousness, even the rowdiness, that balloons up in the wake of the Kanwariyas, is principally self-indulgent. In these two weeks, the

young and restless seek spiritual fulfilment, customise their faith and get to be counted as worthy, but on their terms. It also keeps them from straying into a wilding zone.

The rise in Kanwariya numbers began in the early 2000s. This is also the time when India's urban growth shook itself off decades of lethargy and spurred upwards. After 1981, urban growth decelerated and kept falling and then, suddenly, the 2011 Census noticed an explosion. It recorded as many as 2,774 new urban centres, letting loose a chain of events.

Migration for jobs increased as a consequence. Women migrate too, primarily on account of marriage. But men go out seeking work. The village is where unexciting old people and traditional occupations trundle along in their customary sadness. The young don't wish to add to this sorry line, and scan, instead, for signals coming in from the big world over there.

Urbanisation has a noticeable seismic effect on social relations, which is often not fully acknowledged. As young men have to seek work outside the village, joint families have given way, and as much as 58% of families are nuclear today. Parents now must win their children's respect and can no longer depend on the multi-generational backing of the joint family.

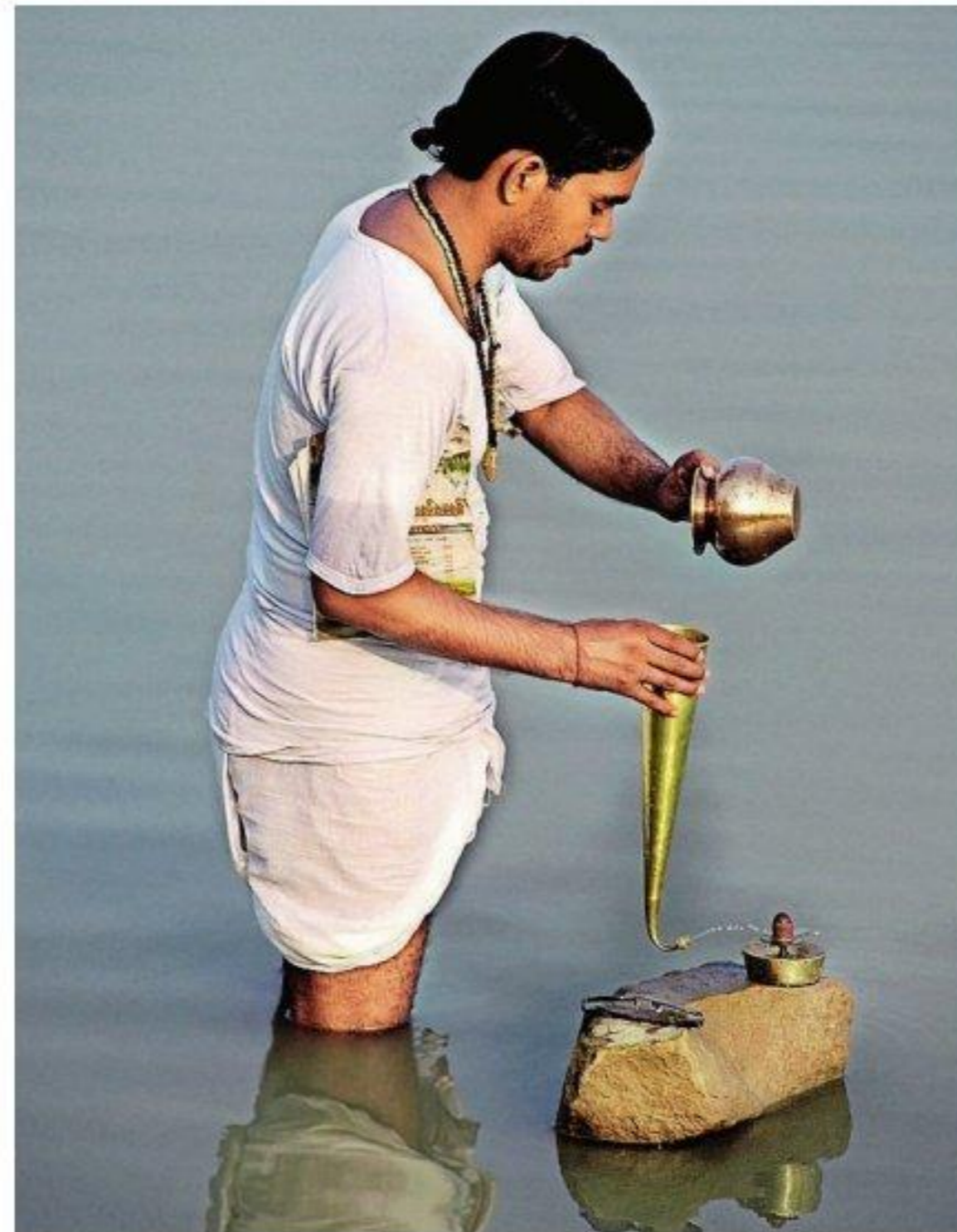
This task becomes especially difficult among the rural and urban underclass where being a parent has none of its earlier shine. When inter-generational relations butt heads, they also impact aesthetic choices, lifestyles issues, and, predictably, matters of worship too. Tradition now ends up with a "best by date". It must either rejig itself or become obsolete.

Kanwar yatra's not the only time when one sees a redesigning of traditional ceremonies, for it's happening with other festivals too. Mahashivratri celebrations have also evolved a young masculine sideshow. On a smaller scale than the Kanwariyas, of course, but here again, young men are dashing down the highways transferring holy water, as if in a relay race.

In contrast, where urbanisation is a settled issue, pilgrimages are not the occasion for young men to break free. The largest and longest pilgrimage in Europe is a roughly 500 mile (800km) trek to Santiago de Compostela and the routine is structured and standardised. Not surprising that unlike the young Kanwariyas, these pilgrims are, on average, well above 45 years of age.

With time the Kanwariyas of today will grey, and the new generation might well begin to observe all the rules of traffic and noise pollution.

The writer is a sociologist



From the Kanwar yatra arises a camaraderie with people one perhaps will never meet again...a recrafting of a new identity old folks know very little about...Urban migration impacts matters of worship too...Tradition must either rejig itself or become obsolete

What Kejriwal's Arrest Does Not Mean

A prominent politician jailed doesn't automatically mean a sympathy wave. Voter profiles, notions of voter loyalty are evolving. But such arrests do swing the focus on law enforcers

R Jagannathan



Arrests of any high-profile politician tends to be noted by voters, and gets high billing across media. Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal's arrest in the alleged liquor scandal could have some impact in the Lok Sabha polls, coming as it does barely days after elections dates were announced.

The counterpoint—that Kejriwal refused to answer ED summons nine times before being arrested—may not play as well for him and his party, but the optics look bad for BJP, which governs at the Centre, and controls many levers of power in Delhi state, too.

Jail term's limited returns | Preceded by years of media speculation and opposition allegations that ED's being used to target only BJP's political opponents, one has to wonder how this arrest will play out in Delhi and other states when voters reach the polling booth.

However, there are points to consider before arriving at any conclusion that such arrests will necessarily impact voting patterns significantly, despite some sympathy for those sent to jail, for short or long periods.

Sympathy not guaranteed | The electorate is highly polarised in most states, and any arrest of one politician tends to draw almost equal and opposite reactions in its rival parties. It solidifies the committed vote on either side. At best, one can gain from the sympathy factor among the undecided, if any, but clear evidence to prove this is not available from polling results of the last few years, where many major politicians have been jailed.

Among them were Karunanidhi and Jayalalithaa—both returned to power after the other sent them to jail. Their return was, however, widely put down to anti-incumbency in a two-party state and not any obvious sympathy wave for being in prison. Shivakumar and

BSY, Chidambaram, Lalu, and several important functionaries or ministers of Trinamool also were sent behind bars.

As were DMK's A Raja and Kanimozhi in UPA-era scams. Sympathy waves weren't the reason for their subsequent political turnarounds. More recently, TDP's Chandrababu was arrested in Andhra. While opinion polls suggest he may benefit from a small sympathy wave in the forthcoming assembly election,



one must ask whether he gains more from anti-incumbency; than just from sympathy over his arrest.

Net gains uncertain | In Telangana, BRS chief KCR's daughter Kavitha is also at present in ED custody, accused in the same scam, for which Kejriwal's been arrested. Nobody's predicting that BRS will benefit from this in LS polls.

There's no discernible pattern in past arrests to suggest the arrested person always gains in a subsequent election. Sympathy for the arrested person may not always result in a significant chunk of additional votes.

Clean-up act | In an LS poll, where the man on the ticket is Narendra Modi, one cannot assume that putting

state-level leaders in jail is necessarily going to benefit the latter. We'll know on June 4 for sure. Since Modi's broadly seen as a clean politician, sending others to jail may not necessarily be interpreted by all as vendetta politics. Among Modi voters, there may even be a presumption that they may only be getting their just desserts.

Shifting shape of loyalty | The voter may have broader affiliations than earlier. In the past, loyalties to caste, tribe and religious groups, may have forced voters to stand by criminals in their own groups despite strong evidence of wrongdoing. Today, old alignments of caste and community are being rejigged, especially by BJP, which has sewn together an alliance of caste groups in many states.

In the opposite camp, minorities are banding together to oust BJP. In this scenario, one cannot see how someone going to jail from one camp or the other is going to significantly sway the vote.

In AAP's case, two cabinet ministers are in jail—Manish Sisodia and Satyendar Jain—the former for over a year. But we've seen no groundswell of support for him. Both ministers went to jail after Delhi HC refused them bail.

Eye on cops | The core issue isn't whether the voter sympathises with those arrested or not. It's about ensuring these things happen for the best of reasons and not political ones. Post the elections, there has to be some manner of oversight body that validates actions of ED and other central and state probe organs with the power to jail someone for long periods.

Even if all those sent to judicial custody were headed there for the right reasons, there's a lingering sense that something's not quite kosher here. Law enforcement agencies will not gain legitimacy in an atmosphere when there's suspicion about their motives. It's time to correct that. That's the message to heed loud and clear after Kejriwal's arrest.

Calvin & Hobbes

HELLO? ... NO, MY MOM CAN'T COME TO THE PHONE RIGHT NOW.

SURE, I'D BE GLAD TO TAKE A MESSAGE.

YOU WRITE IT DOWN, DRIVE IT OVER HERE, PAY ME FIVE BUCKS, AND I'LL GIVE IT TO HER THE NEXT TIME I SEE HER.

HE MUST NOT HAVE WANTED TO TALK TO MOM VERY BAD.



Tap Into Atman For Courage And Confidence

Swami Bhoomananda Tirtha

Between the earliest primitive human and the modern civilised man persists one unchanging connecting thread, which makes them alike beggars and seekers in one sphere. We could be rich with family, wealth, and friends. Yet, with a variety of comforts around, the heart and mind remain weak, impoverished, and fearful. That is why the Upanishadic thinkers sang: 'Atmana vindate veeryam vidyaya vindate arimam'—By his SELF he attains strength and by knowledge, immortality; Kena Upanishad verse 12.

Yugas have passed since. None could alter a syllable of this most ancient dictum. It said, and says for all times, that veeryam, that is, courage, confidence, can be gained only from

Atmam, the Soul. The earth is very vast before us. Vaster is the water, and still more so is the surrounding air. To see anything else of the world, we have to look up to endless heights. When the same eyes are then turned to your body for a survey, you realise how small, insignificant, trifling it is in size, weight, and capacities. Where reigns the range of the world, and where breathes our little body on earth? How can a trifling possession like the body instil courage?

We want courage, heroism, valour to such a dimension that the huge, endless world, its terrors, and challenges will not unsettle our minds. There will be cyclones, droughts, floods, fire and many other threats. The world has

never been free of these. Modes of travel have advanced. This has made accidents more probable and widespread. We hear of them, often see them regularly. Every such instance tends to dim our spirits.

From where will the courage which we need to meet the challenges of life dawn or flow? The question is not new. It is the oldest. Our thinkers knew that it would ever remain fresh and alive. They answered it in the choicest words which, by their intrinsic worth, remain precious and unalterable.

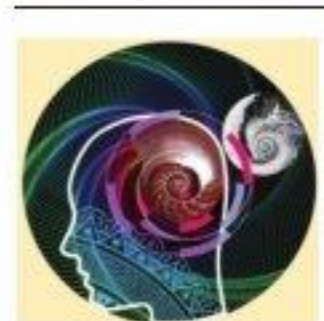
How well have the Upanishads affirmed: 'Tam eva bhantam anubhati sarvam tasya bhasa sarvam idam vibhati'—this perishable body is able to exist and function because of the

imperishable Soul. In the Soul's brilliance alone is seen and felt everything else. It is not that the body enables the Soul to be. It is the Soul that enables the body to be. To fall into delusion is easy. To get out of it is hard.

Look into the world, only for gaining knowledge to be used for outer work. For gaining courage in increasing measures, however, you have to look to your own within. Break through the mortal sheaths of your body. Rise above the mind-sheath. Penetrate the intellectual one also. Try Strive, by thoughts, through strong aspiration, by means of introspection, if not by meditation. You have the power to do it.

Swami Bhoomananda Tirtha and Ma Gurupriya are conducting the Delhi Jnana Yajna till April 9 at CIDR Vasundhara, Ghaziabad. For details call 9811203815

Sacredspace



Say not, "I have found the truth," but rather, "I have found a truth." Say not, "I have found the path of the soul." Say rather, "I have met the soul walking upon my path." For the soul walks upon all paths...

Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Fall from grace

With Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal behind bars in the liquor scam, the future of AAP and allies is in balance

Few stories have been as riveting and controversial as that of Arvind Kejriwal, the anti-corruption crusader-turned-politician who took over as the Chief Minister of Delhi with a huge, unprecedented mandate. He rose to prominence as the face of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), promising a new era of clean governance. However, events have now taken a dramatic turn, with Kejriwal finding himself embroiled in a high-profile liquor scam, a stark contrast to the clean image he once projected. His political journey began in 2011 with Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement. Alongside figures like Anna and Kiran Bedi, Kejriwal became a symbol of hope for many disillusioned with the rampant corruption in politics. His activism resulted in the formation of AAP in 2012, with the party making significant inroads in the Delhi Assembly elections the following year and forming the Government. Under Kejriwal's leadership, the AAP Government in Delhi introduced several populist measures aimed at improving the lives of citizens. Initiatives such as Mohalla Clinics, providing affordable health-care, garnered praise from across the world. It goes to Kejriwal's credit and that of his deputy Manish Sisodia that Government schools transformed into centres of excellence. The Chief Minister has painstakingly crafted his image as an unblemished and incorruptible leader, cementing his position as a formidable political force and fanning out across the country, forming the Government in Punjab as well. However, his alleged involvement in a liquor scam has cast a shadow over Kejriwal's once-untarnished reputation.



The impact of his arrest on national politics cannot be overstated as it comes weeks before the Lok Sabha elections. With the Chief Minister embroiled in legal battles and the AAP leadership distracted by the scandal, the administration's ability to effectively govern the Capital is severely compromised. Furthermore, as a prominent figure of the Opposition camp, Kejriwal's arrest could weaken the anti-BJP bloc, of which the AAP is a significant member. The BJP, which has been eager to expand its influence in the Capital, may seek to capitalise on the development. Accused of turning a blind eye to illicit liquor trade in Delhi, Kejriwal now finds himself at the centre of a political storm. The irony of a former anti-corruption crusader being accused of complicity in a corruption scandal has not been lost on observers. That said, it is also true that Kejriwal is one of the biggest eyesores for the BJP as his party has replaced the latter in both the State legislature and the MCD, though all the seven Delhi MPs belong to the BJP. With the AAP brass — Manish Sisodia, Sanjay Singh, Satyendra Jain and now the Chief Minister himself — behind bars, the political vendetta angle cannot be ruled out. Moreover, the conviction rate of the Enforcement Directorate is abysmally low and it has been accused by the Opposition of being a tool to harass the opponents. At this point, it is difficult to say what the actuality is, maybe somewhere between the two extremes.

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PICTALK



Women drenched in colours celebrate Holi, in Nadia

Shadow of World War III?

The danger is inherent in the continuing conflict in Ukraine



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR

Can the war in Ukraine lead to World War III? It can if talk about an event presages its occurrence. The latest mention has been by Vladimir Putin, who said on March 18, 2024, that a direct conflict between Russia and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) would mean that the planet was one step away from World War III. He, however, had added that hardly anyone wanted any such scenario. Other Russian leaders have also mentioned the possibility. Alexander Venediktov, deputy secretary of the Security Council of Russia, had said on October 13, 2022, that Ukraine's admission into NATO was guaranteed to escalate the conflict in that country into the third world war. Western countries have also been taking the danger of a wider war with Russia seriously. The German newspaper, Bild, reported on January 15, 2024, that the country's army was gearing up to cope with a Russian attack on the Baltic countries—Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia—in the summer of 2025, that would begin with a spring offensive in Ukraine this year.

Russia's talk of World War III may well be a part of a strategy to reduce the United States' and European countries' support to Ukraine. Germany's response mentioned above, however, indicates that such talk is being taken seriously. In fact, the German defence minister, Boris Pistorius, has signed an agreement with his Lithuanian counterpart, Arvydas Anusauskas, for stationing 4,800 German troops and 200 civilians in the latter's country. With countries preparing for war, speculation about the conflict in Ukraine escalating into World War III is understandable. But then, what is a World War? It can be defined as a large-scale conflict involving a number of countries on both sides, stretching over large tracts of the earth, and affecting even on countries that are not directly involved. As things are, World War III would see the United States-led NATO countries pitted against Russia which may be joined by Belarus, China and North Korea. While talking about the danger of a third world war breaking out over Ukraine, all important



global leaders, including Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin, say that they neither want it nor is it likely to happen. But then the US did not expect the Japanese air attack on Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941 (US calendar) which severely mauled the its Pacific Fleet. Nor did the European powers expect Germany's surprise attack on Poland on September 1, 1939, which triggered the beginning of World War II.

In the present instance, people have been hearing of a World War III ever since the end of World War II, when the world came to be divided into two blocs. One comprised countries led by the US and clustered round pacts like the NATO, Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) and the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), the first two targeting the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the third one, China. Other bloc comprised countries of East Europe which had come into the USSR's orbit after the end of World War II, and which were members of the Warsaw Pact led by it. China enjoyed observer status in respect of the pact until it withdrew in 1961.



THE TWO BLOCS CAME CLOSE TO A WAR ON TWO OCCASIONS. ON MAY 1, 1960, A SOVIET MISSILE BROUGHT DOWN A U-2 SPY PLANE, OPERATED UNDER THE AEGIS OF THE US CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, IN RUSSIAN TERRITORY

The Cold War that came to prevail between the two blocs was marked by frigid and unfriendly ties. There was no shooting war. The restraining factor was the large nuclear arsenals which both the US and the USSR — and later China — possessed, and the smaller stockpiles of countries like Britain and France. A war between the two blocs, it was felt, would lead to the use of nuclear weapons. The USSR's premier, Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, graphically summed up the horrors of the resultant scenario when he said, "The living will envy the dead."

The two blocs came close to a war on two occasions. On May 1, 1960, a Soviet missile brought down a U-2 spy plane, operated under the aegis of the US Central Intelligence Agency, in Russian territory. Its pilot, Francis Gary Powers, who had parachuted to safety, was taken prisoner. The incident put on hold the thaw in US-USSR relations that had followed a meeting at Camp David, Maryland, between Dwight D. Eisenhower and Prime Minister Khrushchev, in September, 1959. It also scuttled the Paris summit in

mid-May among the US, the United Kingdom, France and USSR after Khrushchev walked out of it following Eisenhower's refusal to apologise for the U-2 mission.

The second occasion was the Cuban missile crisis of October, 1962, triggered by the USSR's move to install SS-4 and SS-5 missiles in Cuba which could hit targets in the US. The latter, under President John F. Kennedy, imposed naval quarantine (read blockade) on Cuba, which the USSR declared it would defy. The matter ended with Kremlin agreeing to discontinue construction work on missile sites and removing weapons the US considered offensive and the US agreeing to remove the Jupiter Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles it had placed on Turkey's border with the USSR.

Would good sense prevail in Ukraine's case as it did on the above two occasions? That needs to be seen. One thing, however, is certain. Serious moves need to be made to ensure an early negotiated settlement.

(The author is Consulting Editor, The Pioneer. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WATER CRISIS IN BENGALURU

Sir — Bengaluru is known as the IT hub of the country. However, this city has around one and a half crore population fighting for water recently. The city is still famous as a good place to work and live. But this year due to a lack of rainfall in this city and Karnataka, this city has faced a major water crisis. People have installed water-saving devices on taps. The water supply is stopped for four hours in the morning and evening. Water required for drinking and housework needs to be bought, so obviously the cost for families has also increased. The Chief Minister of Karnataka has suggested that IT companies should allow people to work from home and schools and coaching centres should study from home.

This year, the water level of the Cauvery River has decreased due to the decrease of monsoon. Bangalore city had 262 lakes till 1961. About 70 per cent of the area was green. At that time this city was known as Garden City or Lake City. Today only 81 lakes remain. Concrete forest stands on about 94 per cent of the area. This is not the situation of Bengaluru city in the country but many other cities are also experiencing water scarcity. The water level has decreased by digging the wells. Bangalore city alone has 10995 wells. As the overall environment continues to deteriorate, living is becoming difficult day by day and the severe water scarcity in Bangalore is one example of this. Other cities should take a lesson from water scarcity in this city.

Shantaram Wagh | Pune

EVM VULNERABILITIES

Sir — India is going to be the third-largest economy by 2047, the Indian government is still facing significant challenges. In this world of AI advancement, the cybersecurity risk is on the rise, making it easier to infiltrate networks nowadays, and the introduction of EVMs will escalate deceptive practices as well the biggest concern which must be raised is about the privacy of an individual can be infringed easily, conceiving or by giving the amount of

World Happiness Report 2024



India ranked 126, out of 143, the same as last year, in the happiness index even though the union government claims to be the third economy in the coming years. The report was unveiled on 20 March by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network. Happiness comes only when

there is contentment because of several factors like income per head, social support, life expectancy and freedom apart from levels of generosity contributing to concluding to bring happiness.

Contrary to all these factors, another global report titled "Income and Wealth Inequality in India" shows the real beneficiaries in recent years' growth appear to be super-rich, (1 per cent of 22.6 per cent in the total income of the country and a 40.1 per cent share in the total wealth in 2022-23.) This proves beyond any iota of truth how happiness can come when India's income inequality which is due to pro-rich policies is at a historic high.

S K Khosla | Chandigarh

money to economically disadvantaged individuals and capturing their votes is the pursuit that can be done smoothly. Not all of the nation's citizens have technological proficiency, and due to being in the impoverished segment, some individuals cannot even be able to afford smart devices. Additionally, connectivity issues are also one of the crucial problems, such as the hindrances which impede their ability to vote. Hence, EVM will require robust measures to deal with these challenges.

Zakir Hussain | Kazipet

RIISING SUICIDES AMONG STUDENTS

Sir — This refers to your news report 'Scolded by father for eating junk food, female BBA student hangs self' (20th March). A 19-year-old female student of Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) allegedly hanged herself to death at home in Maharashtra's Nagpur after being scolded by her father for eating junk food is heart-wrenching. Unable to bear father's rebuke for eating junk food, the daughter hanged herself to death in the kitchen using a long cloth. How easily did she cut short her life without thinking about her parents? What must have become of her parents after losing her daughter? Despite being well read and well lettered students are committing suicides for trivial matters and

the slightest remark of their parents.

Nowadays parents' advice cuts no ice with teens and youngsters. They consider life all beer and Skittles. They have their way. They never care about the consequences. It's natural for children to act in a particular way or for something to happen in that way. Parents are cored and helpless to put up with their children's insolences. Children are quickly sulky with their parents over trifles. They are taking extreme steps. They are losing their precious life. As soon as they attain the age of puberty they become froward and intractable. They don't realise who they are talking to? In a fit of rage, they are taking extreme steps. They are taking their parent's valuable advice to heart and breaking their parents' hearts to pieces. Generally, parents' advice and words are beyond the comprehension of teens and youngsters. It's high time for teens and youngsters to be dutiful and submissive to their parents never take the words and advice of parents to their hearts and always abide by parents' advice to succeed in life. Students must take the bull by the horns in life. They must not abandon hope and cut their lives short.

Zubair Khan | Hyderabad

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Shifting alliances and tensions in South Asia

South Asia has experienced a significant transformation marked by notable developments that are redefining the relationships among major stakeholders



SULAGNA MOHANTY

The geopolitical dynamics of South Asia have undergone a profound transformation in recent years, marked by a series of significant developments that have reshaped the relationships between India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Taliban. What initially appeared to be a strategic win for Pakistan with the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has now turned into a complex web of alliances and rivalries, with India and the Taliban exploring new avenues for cooperation, while Pakistan finds itself embroiled in a conflict with its western neighbour.



Afghanistan. When the Taliban reclaimed power in Kabul on 15th August 2021, the then Pakistani PM Imran Khan expressed optimism, describing it as a "breaking the shackles of slavery" moment for Afghanistan.

Pakistan's initial support for the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan was driven by a desire for a friendly government in Kabul that would be more amenable to Islamabad's interests. The previous Afghan government, led by Ashraf Ghani, was perceived by Pakistan as being too closely aligned with India, Pakistan's historical rival. Therefore, the Taliban's rise was seen as a strategic victory for Pakistan, potentially opening up avenues for increased influence in

Afghanistan. When the Taliban reclaimed power in Kabul on 15th August 2021, the then Pakistani PM Imran Khan expressed optimism, describing it as a "breaking the shackles of slavery" moment for Afghanistan. There was a widespread belief among Pakistanis that the Taliban, whom they often referred to as "our brothers," would help Pakistan in its quest to assert control over Kashmir, a disputed region between India and Pakistan. This sentiment was rooted in the belief that a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan would be more sympathetic to Pakistan's stance on Kashmir and would support Pakistan's efforts to wrest control of the region from India. However, the euphoria of the Taliban's return quickly dissipated as concerns grew over the group's ability to govern effectively and maintain stability. Pakistan's hopes for a

strategic win in Afghanistan were further dampened by the emergence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a Pakistani Taliban group that found sanctuary in Afghanistan and began launching attacks on Pakistani soil.

The situation took a dramatic turn on 16th March 2024 when Afghan militants attacked Pakistani soldiers at a border killing 7 of them. Pakistan retaliated with strikes against Afghan militants citing concerns over cross-border terrorism and the presence of Pakistani Taliban militants allegedly supported by Kabul. Meanwhile, India's relationship with the Taliban has evolved, with the two sides engaging in talks for trade and economic cooperation. The Indian delegation, led by J P Singh has met the current Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Mottaqi and the former Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Kabul to discuss humanitarian assistance and trade. This development has caught Pakistan off guard, as it now finds itself on the opposite side of the table from India, its traditional

rival. Amidst the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, the US special representative for Afghanistan, Thomas West, is set to travel to India in the third week of March 2024 for consultations on working together to support the Afghan people. This visit follows the Indian delegation's recent stated meeting with the Taliban ministry. West's visit is particularly significant as he engages with the Taliban and mobilises international support for Afghanistan. However, these diplomatic efforts come in the wake of Pakistan launching airstrikes in border regions of Afghanistan, resulting in the tragic deaths of at least eight civilians. As the situation continues to evolve, it remains to be seen how these shifting alliances will shape the future of South Asia. The once-clear lines of allegiance and enmity have blurred, creating a complex and unpredictable geopolitical landscape that will require careful navigation by all parties involved. (The writer is author and an academician; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

THE MYSTICAL DEPTHS OF HOLI

Puranas are not mere fables; they document our ancestors' exploration of consciousness



ASHWINI GURUJI

Holi is the day when Holika, who had the boon to remain unscathed in fire, took Prahlad in her lap and sat in fire. Lord Vishnu came to Prahlad's aid and as a result, Holika burnt while Prahlad remained unharmed. The stories from Puranas appear to be mythological tales to a layman as the incidents described in them often refer to things that seem supernatural or surreal, take for example, the power to remain unscathed in fire or the invocation of energy called Vishnu. Puranas are in fact chronicles of real events that occurred with our ancestors, who inhabited this planet many thousand years ago. These ancestors were not aliens or super-humans, they were humans like you and me, only they were able to tap into the phenomenal potential that a human being has. Majority of us, on the other hand, leave that force within us unused.

For most of us the world exists in these four dimensions, them being length, breath, depth and time (time being measured as the distance between two thoughts). Everything that we see, touch, smell, taste or hear, we define it in these four dimensions. Those who have been doing the practices of yog and sanatan kriya at Dhyana Ashram for some time now might be able to describe a sixth or a seventh dimension also. What if I was to tell you, that there actually are sixteen dimensions in creation and that a human being is equipped to perceive all these 16 dimensions?

Majority of us spend our life and birth in the experiences of five basic senses which are enough to satiate our basic needs and desires. A human being however has a total of sixteen senses and awakening of these senses is known as siddhis in yoga. Just as the world appears black to a blind person while a person who can see would describe it in colours and light, in the same way the world appears the way it does to us because of non-activation of these senses and a person in whom the 6th, 7th or 8th sense is active would describe it very differently.



When you close your eyes in dhyana, certain forms, shapes, smells, colours and sensations are revealed to you. Is it a play of mind or do those things actually exist? If it is a play of mind then how is it that those experiences are identical to the descriptions found in our ancient texts and they happen to even those who have never seen those texts in their life? Definitely, not the play of mind. People who are into the practices see their thoughts manifest in front of their eyes, which cannot be the play of mind. All those things exist in the 'other' dimensions and can be perceived through higher senses. Interacting with subtler energies like Lord Vishnu or controlling the fire element too are a function of the other senses.

There are certain days when the position of constellations is such that doors to other dimensions open and it is extremely easy to access them through mantras, kriyas and yagyas as prescribed by ones' Guru. The night of holi is one of them. On this night it is extremely easy to access an aspect of the energy of the preserver. Mantras, which are codified, unmanifested forms of gods and goddesses, on this day develop the body and energy of respective gods and goddesses. Night of Holi is the night of wish fulfillment and manifestation of thoughts through mantra given by the Guru.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher; views are personal)

Enigmatic dilemma of Katchatheevu



SANTOSH MATHEU

In election time, this disputed island once again emerges as a recurrent motif, stirring debates and evoking impassioned responses across Tamil Nadu



Amidst the escalating political fervour in Tamil Nadu ahead of the imminent Lok Sabha elections, Katchatheevu emerges once more as a recurrent yet elusive topic, akin to the unexpected pickles accompanying a plate of biryani. This contentious subject continues to command attention, igniting debates and stirring strong sentiments across the region.

Situated in the heart of the Palk Strait, Katchatheevu has long been a focal point in Tamil Nadu's political dialogue, particularly during election seasons. With the Lok Sabha elections looming, Katchatheevu has once again taken centre stage in Tamil Nadu's political arena. Political parties, especially those entrenched in the state, are leveraging the Katchatheevu issue to amass support and mobilise voters.

Critics argue that it is ironic for Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Stalin to question the central government's actions regarding the recovery of Katchatheevu over the past decade. Narendra Modi, along with the Congress and DMK, accuses the unilateral transfer of Katchatheevu to Sri Lanka. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), endeavouring to establish itself in Tamil Nadu politics, seeks to position itself as a champion of Tamil fishermen's rights. However, the party's alliances and policies at the national level have often contradicted the interests of Tamil Nadu fishermen, breeding scepticism among voters.

Katchatheevu is a diminutive island spanning a mere 285 acres, devoid of any freshwater source. Since its cession to Sri Lanka in 1974 through a contentious agreement between then-Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Sri Lankan Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Katchatheevu has remained a bone of contention between India and Sri Lanka. The island, with a scant area of 1.15 square kilometres, linked to the Pak Strait, was ratified by Parliament in 1976. Tamil Nadu fishermen have utilised this small island for rest and anchorage for centuries, prompting calls from Tamil Nadu politicians to reclaim it. This island, christened after the Roman



THE INCEPTION OF ST ANTONY'S SHRINE DATES BACK TO THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY, WHEN PORTUGUESE MISSIONARIES ERECTED A CHAPEL ON KATCHATHEEVU TO CATER TO THE SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF THE LOCAL FISHING POPULACE

Catholic church in honour of the revered patron saint of Tamil Christian fishermen, is accessible sans passport, facilitating the annual usage by thousands of Indian fishermen for rest and repairs. Nestled amidst the cerulean waters of the Palk Strait, Katchatheevu not only embodies a disputed islet but also hosts the revered symbol of faith — St Antony's Shrine. This sacred sanctuary, dedicated to St Antony, the patron saint of lost things and fishermen, holds profound significance for the fishing communities of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. The inception of St Antony's Shrine dates back to the early 20th century when Portuguese missionaries erected a chapel on Katchatheevu to cater to the spiritual needs of the local fishing populace. Over time, the shrine gained popularity, drawing devotees from afar seeking solace and blessings from St Antony. The disputed sovereignty of Katchatheevu has intermittently disrupted pilgrimage activities, escalating tensions between India and Sri Lanka. Fishermen from Rameswaram, Nagapattinam, Cuddalore and Karaikal (Pondicherry), who historically utilised this island for rest and minor repairs, now face imprisonment in Sri Lankan jails for breaching maritime borders. Disputes stemming from this small island, located just 15 miles from Rameswaram, are straining India-Sri Lanka relations. The clamour to reclaim this island, steeped in historical ties with the ancient kingdom of Ramanathapuram, is gaining momentum. The Tamil Nadu assembly advocates for more authority to address these issues, while the central government has issued directives to allocate resources to tackle these demands. The sentiment among the people

of Tamil Nadu, particularly the fishing community, remains deeply entwined with the Katchatheevu issue. For generations, Tamil fishermen have depended on the waters surrounding Katchatheevu for their livelihoods, and the loss of access to these traditional fishing grounds has inflicted significant hardship. As Tamil Nadu braces itself for the Lok Sabha elections, the Katchatheevu issue persists as a potent symbol of Tamil pride and identity. The election's outcome may well shape the future trajectory of this contentious matter, with political parties vying for public support by pledging to reclaim Katchatheevu and safeguard the rights of Tamil fishermen. The ballot box will serve as the ultimate arbiter, determining whether Katchatheevu remains a distant aspiration or materialises as a tangible reality, restoring pride and dignity to the Tamil fishing community. In conclusion, the Katchatheevu issue stands as a poignant emblem of Tamil Nadu's struggle for sovereignty and the protection of fishermen's rights. As the political landscape simmers with fervour ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, the fate of Katchatheevu hangs in the balance, awaiting the verdict of the electorate. The significance of Katchatheevu extends beyond mere territorial disputes; it embodies the cultural heritage and livelihoods of Tamil fishermen, whose lives are intricately woven with the waters surrounding the island. The relentless efforts of Tamil Nadu politicians to reclaim Katchatheevu underscore the deep-rooted connection between the people and their land, reflecting an unwavering commitment to safeguarding Tamil Nadu's interests. However, the road to reclaiming

Katchatheevu is fraught with challenges, both political and diplomatic. While promises abound during election campaigns, the true test lies in translating rhetoric into action post-election. The incoming government's ability to navigate the complex web of international relations while prioritising the welfare of Tamil fishermen will determine the fate of Katchatheevu. Regardless of political affiliations, it is imperative for elected representatives to uphold the aspirations of the people and work towards a resolution that ensures justice for Tamil Nadu's fishing community. This entails diplomatic dialogue, strategic negotiations, and unwavering determination to secure the return of Katchatheevu to Indian sovereignty. As Tamil Nadu heads to the polls, voters hold the power to shape the course of history, steering the trajectory of the Katchatheevu issue. Beyond electoral rhetoric, the voices of Tamil Nadu's fishermen resonate, echoing their plea for justice and dignity. The ballot box thus becomes not only a symbol of democracy but also a beacon of hope for the restoration of Tamil pride and the preservation of fishermen's rights. In the end, the resolution of the Katchatheevu issue transcends political victories; it is a testament to the resilience and unity of the Tamil people in their quest for justice and self-determination. As the journey continues, let us remain steadfast in our pursuit of a future where Katchatheevu once again becomes a sanctuary for Tamil fishermen, a beacon of hope amidst the turbulent seas of politics and diplomacy. *(The writer is an associate professor, views are personal)*

Empowering India's Gen Z: Shaping the future of democracy

With their digital-savvy and progressive outlook, Gen Z represents a demographic bloc that has the power to change the political narrative

The current decade belongs to India's demographic dividend. Today in 2024, as India gears up for its 18th Lok Sabha Election, it is important to understand the electoral preferences and political choices of our youth, especially Gen Z voters. It is crucial to comprehend the political views of Gen Z regarding politics, the prevailing political parties, and their leaders in India, as well as how they shape their election narrative and their perspectives on general elections in the country. Elections globally are no longer a mundane affair where the opinions of the elder family members dictate the political choices of the entire family. In the 21st century, as we champion fundamental rights, liberal and democratic values,



KIRTI DIMPLE

many Gen Z individuals advocate for freedom of choice in all aspects. With their significant population, political parties are incentivized to revamp their targeting strategies to appeal to this demographic. There has been a noticeable global shift in how political parties focus on engaging with Gen Z, with many parties dedicating specific agendas and subjects to attract them.

As Gen Z increasingly form their own political opinions independent of familial influence, political parties must address their concerns to ensure their active participation. With India being home to a diverse electorate of 96.8 crores, including various categories such as transgender, overseas, service electorate, voters with disabilities, first-time voters, and regular voters, it is crucial to understand the political choices of Gen Z could significantly impact the outcome of the elections, provided parties can earn their confidence through effective policy-making. Gen Z represents one of the most pragmatic segments of

the population, shaping their opinions based on internet research. Amidst widespread social media usage, political parties are leveraging these platforms to promote their agendas directly to smartphones. The issues important to Gen Z, such as digital equality, climate action, mental health, non-religious bias, gender equality, quality education, employment security, and fostering an environment conducive to risk-taking, differ significantly from those of traditional voters. To amplify their voices, many parties are incorporating young faces into their ranks to establish a connection with the youth. Both ruling and opposition parties actively engage with Gen Z through various

social media channels, including Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook. Statistics reveal that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leads in social media activity, followed by the Aam Aadmi Party and then the Indian National Congress. Among political leaders, BJP's Narendra Modi remains the preferred choice for Gen Z, followed by others. Gen Z closely associates with these leaders through social media platforms, often shaping their opinions based on what they see on their screens. However, it's essential for political parties to understand that this generation values facts over fake gimmicks and extensively fact-checks information before forming opinions. As the 18th Assembly Election

approaches, it is imperative for political parties to recognise the importance of Gen Z voters. They represent the future of the political landscape and can potentially revolutionise the entire system. Gen Z's silent role in this year's general election is invaluable, and it is crucial for all Gen Z voters to fulfil their electoral duties diligently. They possess the power to bring about significant changes in India's political sphere, and their agendas reflect the evolving political needs of the country. New India must recognise and appreciate the potential of this new generation, just as they excel in other fields, as they have the capability to transform the nation's political system. on, the political landscape of

India is undergoing a transformative phase, with the rise of Gen Z as a significant force to reckon with. As the nation prepares for the 18th Lok Sabha Election, the voices and choices of Gen Z resonate louder than ever before. Their preferences, shaped by digital connectivity and a quest for factual information, demand attention from political parties seeking to secure electoral victories. The sheer size of the Gen Z population underscores its potential to sway election outcomes and influence policy directions. Their advocacy for progressive values, coupled with a penchant for transparency and accountability, underscores their pivotal role in shaping the future of Indian democracy.

It is imperative for political stakeholders to engage meaningfully with Gen Z, addressing their concerns and aspirations. By recognising the agency and significance of this dynamic demographic, India can pave the way for a more inclusive and responsive political system. In essence, the empowerment of Gen Z represents not just a generational shift, but a paradigmatic evolution in India's democratic ethos. By harnessing their energy, ideas, and ideals, the nation can chart a course towards a more equitable and resilient future. *(The writer is an assistant professor at the Department of Management, Dr Virendra Swarup Institute of Computer Studies, Kanpur; views are personal)*

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Kejriwal's arrest

Onus on ED to substantiate allegations

A day after the Supreme Court pulled up the Enforcement Directorate (ED) for making arrests at the pre-trial stage without even completing the investigation, the premier probe agency arrested Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in an excise policy-linked money laundering case on Thursday night. With regard to a Jharkhand case, the court had observed that keeping an accused in custody without trial was akin to detention that hampered the liberty of an individual. However, it seems that this reprimand failed to deter the ED from taking coercive action against Kejriwal.

The ED has alleged that the CM was a key conspirator in the Delhi excise policy scam case along with other ministers and AAP leaders. According to the agency, Kejriwal received several crores of rupees as kickbacks from the 'South Group' while formulating and implementing the excise policy for 2021-22 and misused his position as the CM to facilitate money laundering by his party. The onus, of course, is on the ED to substantiate its allegations and establish the money trail. It's no less important for the agency to complete the investigation in a time-bound manner. It has already been a year since Kejriwal's former deputy Manish Sisodia was arrested in this case.

With the first phase of the Lok Sabha elections less than a month away, the arrest has given AAP and other Opposition parties ample fodder to accuse the BJP of misusing Central agencies to settle political scores. Earlier this week, the apex court had denied regular bail to senior AAP leader Satyendar Jain in a money laundering case, saying that there was sufficient material collected by the ED to show that he and his associates were prima facie guilty of the offence. With its credibility at stake, the all-important question is whether the ED — which has often come under fire for alleged overreach in Opposition-ruled states — has incontrovertible evidence to justify Kejriwal's arrest and remand.

Congress 'crippled'

Access to funds crucial to level electoral field

THE controversy over the freezing of the Congress' bank accounts raises concerns about the democratic credentials of Indian polity. Accusations of manipulation levelled by former party chief Sonia Gandhi against the government point towards a bid to financially cripple the principal Opposition party ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. The Income Tax (IT) Department's move — under which three-decade-old 'tax lapses' of the Congress have also been raked up — undermines the notion of a level electoral playing field. Denying the Congress access to its funds at this time can disrupt the party's ability to undertake electoral campaigns, thereby jeopardising the democratic process itself. The I-T Department's action paints a troubling picture of pre-poll harassment.

This disconcerting development comes amid the disclosure of details of electoral bonds by the SBI following a Supreme Court order. Apprehensions about the integrity of political funding have been exacerbated by the glaring disparity: the share of money from the bonds received by the BJP amounts to over 50 per cent. It is clear that the BJP, which received 38 per cent of the vote share in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, enjoys a significant edge in electoral funding. The Congress, whose vote share was around 20 per cent, has been particularly impacted.

The rules that safeguard the rights of all political actors to engage in the electoral process freely and fairly must be strengthened. Attempts to weaken the ability of Opposition parties to fight effectively must be thwarted by addressing the issues of equity in political financing and fair competition.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, MARCH 23, 1924

A significant pronouncement

IT was a highly significant pronouncement which Maulana Mahomed Ali made in a recent speech in Calcutta regarding the Swarajya party. The Maulana is a no-changer, and it is a matter of common knowledge that some of his speeches at the Special Congress at Delhi, in the success of which he had so conspicuous a share, were by no means agreeable to the Swarajya party. It is perfectly true that the compromise that was eventually arrived at was largely due to his personal exertions, but it is equally true that he marred a part of the effect that would otherwise have been produced by his action by making certain observations which showed a total lack of appreciation of the Swarajist position. It is, therefore, with peculiar pleasure we find that his speech on this occasion was cast in a very different mould. Whether the change was due to further reflection, or to such talks as the Maulana might in the meantime have had with Mahatma Gandhi, or to the success of the Swarajya party itself both at the polls and more than one of the Legislatures, it is difficult to say. But as to the change itself and its tremendous importance for India's future, there can be no doubt whatever. After referring to the action of the Swarajists in the Central Provinces Council in throwing out the budget and in the Assembly in refusing supplies under four main heads and rejecting the Finance Bill, the Maulana said: "I may tell the Government that if we, the no-changers, had determined to stand by our friends of the Swarajya party at the election, there is no province in India where the budget could not have been thrown out."

The devil is in the timing of ED action

Arrest of a CM days after the notification of the General Election is a stunning blow to the poll process

NOUS INDICA
RAJESH RAMACHANDRAN

IN the past two decades, I have closely watched Arvind Kejriwal grow from a small-time activist in his tiny Patparganj shop-timed-office to the Delhi Chief Minister in his palatial bungalow on Flagstaff Road. As a non-political social activist, his dedication in ensuring government-subsidised food to a working-class East Delhi colony and his commitment to making the public distribution system work were admirable. It was exhilarating to drive around Delhi in a rickety Maruti 800 with him, seeking documents to expose the attempted privatisation of the drinking water supply in Delhi under a World Bank scheme.

His remarkable growth trajectory as an activist demanding the right to information with complete self-belief in tackling corruption through information touched its apogee when he pawned his activist capital for a political career, scripting the downfall of the UPA government. The UPA had retained power in 2009, with the Opposition BJP getting reduced in size. Only a new kind of political activism could have discredited a government that had won a second term. Kejriwal's anti-corruption crusade offered that platform, with Kisan Baburao Hazare from Ralegaon putting on the Gandhian act, rousing TV audiences into a stupefied search for a messiah.

Behind the scenes, Kejriwal was attending conferences held at the pro-BJP think tank, the Vivekananda International Foundation. Meanwhile, politics was being practised on social media for the first time. Then Prime Minister Manmohan



BURDEN OF PROOF: Investigating agencies have not been able to open overflowing lockers stashed with cash or seize properties in the name of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal or his family members. TRIBUNE PHOTO

Singh's media advisers did not even have a social media account, let alone know how to target rivals on these platforms to create a false or alternative political narrative. In short, Kejriwal turned out to be the master of perception management on social media and in mainstream media. He kindled idealism in those who couldn't be bought and struck a chord among those who wanted to bring the government down. And this eminently suited then BJP-led Opposition.

His stunning performance in the 2013 Delhi elections proved the efficacy of politics reduced to perception without a grassroots-level organisation. The RSS cadre had indeed worked hard to drum up support for the Hazare-Kejriwal protests, but the election victory was entirely Kejriwal's. And he refused to share his party or his newfound power with colleagues who helped him build the party. In that sense, he had an acute understanding of the dynamics of power, which he proved when his party won the Delhi Assembly elections repeatedly and later even the Punjab polls. He could offer a credible alternative to the behemoths within

Elected legislators, or for that matter nobody, should be locked up for an inordinately long time. Bail, and not jail, ought to be the norm.

the existing power structure.

In a way, his achievements were magical. He could have taken the easier path of joining the Sangh Parivar forces that were helping him bring down the UPA government. His social agenda was always soft towards Hindutva — he was one of the first non-BJP Chief Ministers to visit the Ram Temple along with Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann. Kejriwal was a genuine political entrepreneur who had immense faith in his startup. His Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) was the only decacorn (of course, a political

enterprise can't be valued in business terms) to emerge from the politics of protest and social media in the new millennium, and he wasn't going to give it away to a bigger party for a seat at the high table. He was going to build a new high table and such was his blinding self-belief.

All founders of indefatigable startups fail when their self-belief overrides social realities — objective conditions, as the Marxists would explain. AAP's only USP was its anti-corruption plank that catapulted it to successfully make claims of good governance and effective delivery of services — electricity, water and schools — for the poorest segments of the voters. But the new liquor policy stretched the limits of its own political credibility. In one fell swoop, a new system was brought in, which made AAP vulnerable to obvious allegations of favouring new players, who replaced the earlier ones.

Till the story of the liquor policy scam allegations was playing itself out into a campaign weapon against AAP, the BJP's political script was running fine. But the arrest of a sitting Chief Minister five days after the noti-

fication of the General Election is a stunning blow to the poll process. The country's democratic credentials get questioned when a prominent Opposition leader, who holds a constitutional post, is arrested after the commencement of the poll process. This is not a new case. Delhi's former Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in the same case on March 9, 2023; AAP's senior leader and Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh on October 4, 2023; and its communication chief Vijay Nair in November 2022.

In a case that has been dragging on for over a year and a half, there was absolutely no hurry to arrest a CM after the beginning of the process that gives the stamp of authority to the winning party to govern 140 crore people. This is by no means an attempt to give the clean chit to Kejriwal or AAP, which may or may not have indulged in a conspiracy resulting in the party receiving Rs 100 crore in bribes. This is about the timing of the arrest.

The investigating agencies have not been able to open overflowing lockers stashed with cash or seize properties in Kejriwal's or his family's name. Kejriwal may well have devised some new methods, but what are they? Elected legislators, or for that matter nobody, should be locked up for an inordinately long time. Bail, and not jail, ought to be the norm. Indefinite detention will only be perceived as pre-conviction punishment. Coupled with the freezing of the Congress' accounts by the Income Tax Department, Kejriwal's arrest by the ED will only mar the credibility of the elections that PM Modi is poised to win.

The Opposition has been crying itself hoarse about an undeclared emergency for long. It didn't wash all this while, simply because all top Opposition politicians of the country were free to profess their politics. Now, the election-eve arrest of Kejriwal has a chilling effect.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Supreme excellence consists of breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting. — Sun Tzu

Artificial intelligence is the road to take

SHOBHIT MAHAJAN

THE newspaper report was about how the Gurugram Metropolitan Development Authority was planning to use artificial intelligence (AI) for the maintenance of roads. As a long-time (and suffering) resident of the Millennium City, I was thrilled. After all, what better way to improve the ghastly state of roads than to use the latest high technology?

The euphoric feeling evaporated as soon as I started driving to work. The road in front of my house has thankfully been relaid with concrete and is relatively pothole-free. Of course, the level of the road is now a few inches above that of the houses and hence they get flooded during the monsoon as there is no egress for the water. But then, you win some and lose some.

However, as soon as the concrete road ends, the problems start. One of the main roads leading from my place to the highway is very busy. Potholes are ubiquitous and in fact hardly ever noticed, except when an unfortunate motorcyclist falls because of them. The road is wide enough, but encroachment by vendors and parking by autos and e-rickshaws have effectively reduced it to a single lane, a rural bylane like the ones made under the Pradhan Mantri Grameen Sadak Yojana.

The administration has, of course, taken steps to ease the commute — for instance, to decrease cross-traffic, most of the intersections have been closed. Tall concrete fencing has been put on the median to prevent pedestrian crossing and a foot overbridge has been constructed. But what the traffic planners did not take into account is that ours is a free country.

The overbridge is almost never used. The concrete fencing has been pulled down at various places so that one doesn't have to make the effort of climbing the few steps to the overbridge. The right to cross the road wherever one wants to was, it seems, inadvertently left out by our constitutional framers from Articles 12 to 35, which list a citizen's fundamental rights.

And unlike drivers abroad, ours are extremely conscious of the environment. Why should one drive an extra 100 metres to make a U-turn at the intersection when it is ecologically beneficial to drive on the wrong side of the road and cause a jam? Think of all the petrol saved and the emissions reduced because of such Good Samaritans.

All this is not specific to the city where I live — it is commonplace in the country. And therefore I was extremely pleased that finally, something was being done about it. Clearly, ordinary intelligence of the kind possessed by common citizens like me is not up to snuff to figure out that there is a problem. Taking a drive around the city to witness the state of the road infrastructure, filling up potholes and maintaining roads, and strictly enforcing traffic rules against wrong-side driving are so old-fashioned. What we need is the latest in AI to tell us what the problems are and how to solve them. I'm sure my commute will be far less harrowing now that we would have the power of DeepMind to maintain roads.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Twist of fate

Refer to the news report 'Kejriwal in ED net'; the arrest of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal in a money laundering case linked to the Delhi excise policy scam is a blow to democracy. Kejriwal, once hailed as an anti-corruption crusader, now faces allegations that can tarnish his reputation. The AAP national convener's arrest is not just about him; it is about the erosion of trust in our political institutions. The timing of the arrest, just ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, raises questions of political vendetta. It was AAP's vow to fight corruption that resonated with the common man. But now, the party stands to lose credibility. All citizens must demand transparency and accountability, not political theatrics.

SAHIBPREET SINGH, MOHALI

Jailing Opposition leaders

Apropos of 'Kejriwal in ED net'; the arrest of Opposition leaders without a thorough investigation is becoming the order of the day. Ahead of the General Election, the ruling dispensation is out to decimate its political rivals. Probe agencies have become pawns of the party in power. The NDA government's targeting of political adversaries does not bode well for our democracy. The 18-month incarceration of Prem Prakash, an alleged associate of former Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren, is a case in point. The apex court's observations regarding the Enforcement Directorate and the practice of 'jail without trial' are accurate.

RAVINDER SINGH, JALANDHAR

ED shadow on Lok Sabha polls

Refer to 'Jail without trial'; the Supreme Court is right to criticise the ED's ways that subject an accused to 'jail without trial'. The probe agency must mend its ways and take corrective measures. No accused should be kept in jail for an extended period on the basis of mere allegations, especially when a trial is yet to begin. With the announcement of the General Election, the model code of conduct comes into force. However, there can be no free and fair elections if Opposition leaders are kept behind

bars arbitrarily. They must be released and allowed to campaign during the polls.

HL SHARMA, AMRITSAR

Win for free speech

With reference to 'SC stays Centre's notification on fact-checking unit'; the top court's decision is welcome. It is a crucial victory for free speech. In a democracy, transparency and the free flow of information are paramount, especially during the election season. The authority of the unit to censor information about the government was a blatant attempt to stifle dissent and manipulate public opinion. The court's intervention safeguards the fundamental right to information, ensuring that citizens can access unbiased perspectives. This also underscores the judiciary's role in upholding democratic values against authoritarian overreach.

GAGANPREET SINGH, MOHALI

Govt policies letting poor down

Refer to the editorial 'Inequality in India'; despite India's high economic growth rate, the glaring wealth gap between the rich and poor raises questions about the government's loud claim of all-round development under *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas*. It is safe to say that the yawning economic divide has been caused by the current regime's pro-rich and corporate-friendly policies. The egregious disparity underscores the dire need for progressive taxation, equitable investments in health and education and creating more jobs to reduce poverty. The Constitution aspires for economic equality. The onus is on the government to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor.

CHANCHAL S MANN, UNA

A mother is irreplaceable

Apropos of the middle 'A woman of substance'; the writer is right to say that when God cannot come, he sends someone, and a mother is that person. The bond between a mother and her child is irreplaceable. It is rightly said that God created mothers because it is impossible for Him to be with everyone. It is the mother who adds meaning to one's life. A mother stands by her child through thick and thin. The role she plays in the upbringing of their child cannot be emphasised enough.

DEEPAK TAAK, PANCHKULA

The now-scraped electoral bond scheme has underscored the lack of transparency in political donations

Playing field still uneven



ANINDYO CHAKRAVARTY SENIOR ECONOMIC ANALYST

IN 2017, then Finance Minister Arun Jaitley announced a new way for firms and individuals to fund political parties. Anyone could buy an electoral bond from a bank and instruct it to send it to their party of choice.

Understandably, the Opposition didn't buy this argument. The Congress promised to get rid of electoral bonds if it won the 2019 elections, but quietly continued to take the money after losing the polls.

Now that the Supreme Court has declared electoral bonds unconstitutional and asked the Election Commission to publish details of every donor, a lot of unsavoury details are coming out.

Since the BJP has got roughly as much money through electoral bonds as all other parties combined, it has become open season for Opposition parties to take potshots at the government.

Take the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. As of now, we know that the BJP encashed Rs 1,771 crore worth of electoral bonds ahead of the 2019 elections.

Between March 2018 — when electoral bonds were first launched — and January 2024, parties redeemed bonds worth nearly Rs 16,500 crore.

It is worth mentioning that when the CMS calculated how much the 2019 elections cost, it kept out all expenditure which had been clearly undertaken with

the elections in mind, just before the model code of conduct came into effect. If those had been included, the number would have been much higher.

Of course, electoral bonds are not the only 'official' route through which political parties get money. Two other sources are money given by electoral trusts and direct donations.

Speak to any politician who has fought a major election and they will tell you that political funding actually works through a much more decentralised, and informal, process.

neur with local interests might provide a fleet of cars to a candidate during their campaign, another might pay for the meals given to party workers.

It is inevitable that such money would always go to the party in power, or a party which has the potential to usurp power. This is an inherent weakness of electoral democracies — money flows to the winner, who uses that money to win again.

However, even if that happens, the game would still be unequal. In today's world, the party which controls the message is most likely to win elections.

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Bonded favours



ZOYA HASAN PROFESSOR EMERITA, CENTRE FOR POLITICAL STUDIES, JNU

INDIA'S political economy has increasingly centred on a politics-business nexus over the past decade. The Supreme Court's decision to scrap the electoral bond scheme as unconstitutional has provided considerable insight into the relationship forged by the new elites since 2014.

The ruling BJP is the biggest beneficiary of this relationship. It has benefited the most from electoral bonds, though it is not the only party to get funds through this route.

Major industry associations — notably the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India and the Confederation of Indian Industry — had petitioned the Supreme

Court to defer the disclosure of the electoral bond unique identification numbers that would reveal who paid whom. But the court rightly refused to entertain petitions on this issue.

The SBI, after much dithering and dilly-dallying, submitted the electoral bond details to the ECI, which uploaded them on its website.

Four broad trends have emerged from the revelations: quid pro quo, extortion, misusing shell companies to fund parties and protection against government or agency action.

The electoral bond scheme is one of the biggest scams legalising political corruption. In the past, several corruption charges were based on unproven allegations.

Finally, electoral bonds have undermined democracy by making the political system lopsided, not just in terms of information and money but also the immense scale of financial power at the disposal of one party compared to the others.

Major industry associations — notably the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India and the Confederation of Indian Industry — had petitioned the Supreme



UNDER SCRUTINY: The SBI, after much dilly-dallying, submitted electoral bond details to the ECI, which uploaded them on its website.

Electoral bonds have undermined democracy by making the political system lopsided in terms of information and money.

funding through this dubious system. However, it was the BJP that introduced and institutionalised an opaque system of party funding.

Corporates have been fervent supporters of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government. In 2013, they had promoted him as the prime ministerial candidate even before his party proposed his candidature.

Big business and corporates have done well under this government's rule, with several laws meant to favour them being framed. It has used its fiscal and financial powers to provide largesse to the corporate sector through tax cuts, concessions and loan write-offs to big defaulters.

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QUICK CROSSWORD puzzle with grid and clues for Across and Down words.

SU DO KU puzzle grid with numbers and empty cells.

CALENDAR for March 23, 2024, Saturday, listing events like Shaka Samvat and Chaitra Shaka.

FORECAST table showing weather predictions for various cities like Chandigarh, New Delhi, Amritsar, etc.