



X factor

Courts must act against blocking of social media posts

That the use of Internet shutdowns and arbitrary curbs on free speech on social media have become a rampant tool for those in power is evident in the manner in which the Bharatiya Janata Party-led State governments of Haryana and Rajasthan and the Union government have dealt with the farmer protests. These State governments have used Internet shutdowns arbitrarily, and without adequate cause, using vague reasons related to the prospective breakdown of law and order and without any actual evidence to implement such shutdowns, thus failing the proportionality tests laid out in *Anuradha Bhasin vs Union of India*. The Union government, on the other hand, has used its oft-deployed device of issuing notices to social media companies such as X to block the accounts of those leading or even supporting the protests without even issuing the reasons to those who hold these accounts. In the past, X, when it was known as Twitter, did not accede to all blocking requests unless they ran afoul of its own rules or were not sufficiently issued with recorded reasons among other considerations. Twitter/X had also approached the Karnataka High Court to challenge several of the blanket blocking orders that were issued by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology during the earlier round of farmer protests in 2020-21. The High Court had, in a problematic judgment by a single judge, dismissed X's petition, but later admitted an appeal by the firm and hearings are under way.

Unfortunately, X, ever since Elon Musk's takeover, has not been publishing its transparency reports that indicate the number of legal requests made by Indian state agencies to block, take down content or accounts. By admitting that it has decided to withhold accounts and posts flagged by the government, even if it disagreed with these actions, X was giving up any recourse for its users affected by these actions. This is not unexpected; X under Mr. Musk is no longer a thriving platform for free speech that strives to promote discussion, information-sharing and even critique of governments. It now takes its cue from the views and business interests of its owner. But it is even more worrisome that the extant judgment in the Karnataka High Court has given credence to the idea that government authorities enjoy a wide berth in issuing content blocking orders without the need to provide notices to the originators of the content or even seeking account-level blocking without valid reasoning. It is hoped that X's appeal in the High Court will definitively clarify the rights and obligations of social media companies over content on its platforms. As for the government, it does not seem to be concerned at all about what such actions mean to India's reputation as a free, open and democratic society, a key reason for social media companies to operate in the country, beyond just the presence of a large consumer base.

On the long road

Current ground realities, and not past glory, will shape seat adjustments

After doddering for the past few months, the Opposition has got a shot in the arm with Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Congress finalising their seat-sharing agreement in Uttar Pradesh. This is a milestone in the long road to opposition unity that still remains distant at a national level against the BJP. The agreement sees each side gaining something in the bargain. The Congress has got a respectable figure, though out of the 17 seats that it will contest, not many hold much electoral promise against a dominant BJP. Sonia Gandhi will not be contesting Rae Bareilly, which the Congress has won 17 times since 1952. Whether one or both of her children, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi, will contest, choosing between Rae Bareilly and neighbouring Amethi, remains an open question. Mr. Gandhi is trying to bring his battle against the BJP to the heartlands of U.P. As for the SP, the alliance is crucial in sustaining its social base of Yadavs and Muslims which resists the BJP. The Congress and the SP have found their alliance not merely mutually beneficial but also critical for their survival. It should be noted, however, that an alliance is no guarantee of victory. In 2019, the SP-BSP alliance could not aggregate its individual vote shares of 2014, and ended up a distant second to the BJP.

The SP-Congress tie-up is the rare good news that the INDIA bloc needs, hit by attrition with the exit of two of its partners, the Janata Dal (United) in Bihar and the Rashtriya Lok Dal in Uttar Pradesh, in recent days. In West Bengal, the Trinamool Congress and Congress are again in talks, though the broad contours of the conversation have not changed. The TMC remains adamant on conceding only two seats in the State and wanting a seat in Meghalaya and two in Assam. Neither have the conditions that led to the breakdown in talks improved since then. Coinciding with the revival of negotiations, Congress State President Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury visited Sandeshkhali, which is the new battleground between the TMC and the BJP. Attacking West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, he called her the "queen of cruelty". Opposition parties have not been able to announce seat sharing in Tamil Nadu and Bihar as yet. For the alliance to seamlessly work, the dominant partners in each State will have to cede ground to others, setting aside their own aspirations, while others will have to show the grace to accept the ground realities without basking in past glory.

India's economy is not healthy, the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India has said in an open letter to the Union Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman. More GDP does not improve the well-being of citizens if it does not put more income in their pockets, he says. They need decent jobs, which the Indian economy has not provided despite impressive growth of GDP.

The health of any complex system, whether the human body or a nation's economy, cannot be determined by its size. What matters is the shape it is in. GDP growth has become the dominant measure of the health of all economies. The dominant paradigm is, first, increase the size of the pie before its redistribution. It has replaced "socialist" models which were concerned with conditions at the bottom. Economists do not agree on how the well-being of citizens should be measured; and what the best measures of poverty, employment, and adequate income are. In their models, such hard-to-quantify conditions are taken care of by some invisible hand when GDP grows. India is becoming one of the most unequal countries in the world with this flawed model of economic progress.

Ms. Sitharaman is not responsible for the poor shape of the Indian economy. All Indian governments, since the liberalisation of the economy in 1991, have focused on GDP. GDP grew at 7.2% per year in the 10 years of United Progressive Alliance rule (excluding 2008-09, when the global financial crisis hit); and also at 7.2% in the National Democratic Alliance's 10 years (excluding the 2020-21 global COVID-19 pandemic shock). There was no difference in growth. But, structural conditions that cause inequitable growth have also not changed. In fact, they have worsened.

Inclusive and sustainable development
All economies in the world develop through similar stages, according to economists. First, populations move from agriculture to industry, and then to services. Simultaneously, they move from rural to urban. In this, "one path for all", model of progress, villages are bad, and cities are good; and farms are bad, and factories are good. According to this theory of progress, India has not developed sufficiently because both



Arun Maira

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India's policymakers must free themselves from western-dominated theories of economics; in this, local solutions are the way to solve global systemic problems

industrialisation and urbanisation have been too slow.

India must address the global climate crisis while growing its own economy to catch-up with developed countries. With the present model of progress, India must use more fossil fuels to propel economic growth. This has become a bone of contention in global climate negotiations, where all countries are expected to make equal sacrifices to save the global climate. Therefore, India must find a new paradigm of progress, for itself and for the world, for more inclusive and environmentally sustainable growth. What could this paradigm be?

Fossil fuels and the modern economy
The Czech-Canadian environmental scientist, Vaclav Smil, provides a blueprint in his book, *How the World Really Works: A Scientist's Guide to Our Past, Present, and Future* (2023). He analyses the use of fossil fuels in the modern economy. They are used in the production and the distribution of four foundational materials for modern civilization: steel, concrete, plastics, and food. Steel and concrete are required for buildings, roads, and bridges, which provide the basic needs of habitation and transport. Steel is also the backbone of most machinery.

Moreover, almost all mobile machinery used for transportation and farming runs on fossil fuels. Plastics in many compositions have become ubiquitous in the construction of machines, buildings, and appliances. They are light, easy to mould, and are durable. Plastics also enable hygienic storage and transportation of foods and are widely used for sanitary protection in hospitals and homes. Plastics are formed from fossil raw materials, and fossil fuels are also required in the production processes of plastics. Smil examines alternatives to steel, concrete, and plastics that are in the pipeline, and calculates the overall requirements of fossil fuels. He evaluates the "total system" requirements of fossil energy (and steel, concrete, and plastics) for technological innovations for renewable energy solutions such as electric vehicles and solar panels. It will take many decades to replace these basic materials, and fossil energy, in their production processes. Food is the most fundamental need for human survival: more

fundamental than steel, concrete, and plastics. And more fundamental than digital communication services, Smil points out.

Fossil fuel-based solutions have become integral for increasing the scale of food production and distribution systems in the last century, to meet the needs of the human population on the planet, which has increased in the last 100 years from two billion to eight billion (1.4 billion in India). Fertilizers are produced from fossil-fuel feedstock. Farm machinery is made of steel and runs on fossil fuels. Plastics are used for hygienic transportation of food in global supply chains.

Smil says, "the greater the retreat of agricultural mechanization and reduction in the use of synthetic agrochemicals, and reduction of these fossil-fueled based services (which is necessary now), the greater the need for the labor force to leave cities to produce food in the old ways. Purely organic farming would require most of us to abandon cities and resettle villages". Are we prepared to do this," he asks.

Local solutions work
Systems science reveals that local systems solutions, cooperatively developed by communities in their own villages and towns, are the way to solve global systemic problems of climate change and inequitable economic growth. This was the "Gandhian" solution for India's economic and social progress, which was set aside to adopt modern, western solutions for development since the 1950s. Sixty-four per cent of Indian citizens live in rural areas (36% in China; 17% in the United States). A majority work on farms, and in small industries in rural India – not in large factories that use automated equipment. Rather than trying to catch up with rich countries on their historical development paths, India should take advantage of its present realities.

India's policymakers must free themselves from western-dominated theories of economics. These are the cause of global problems, not their solution. The time has come to go back to old solutions to go to the future. Rural Bharat can be a university for the world, producing innovations in institutions and policies for inclusive and sustainable growth.

The NB8 visit to India focuses on cooperation and trust

Two years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, cooperation with global partners has become more important than ever before. In this year's Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi, we, the eight Nordic-Baltic countries, are participating in it together as representatives of the Nordic-Baltic cooperation, the NB8. Our message is clear: in times of turmoil and conflict, the world needs more trust, dialogue and cooperation. Let us join forces to protect and defend peace and stability, to oppose aggression, to maintain a rules-based world order, and to strengthen a world economy based on free trade, sustainability and long-term partnerships.

We represent the governments of eight countries of the north: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden. We are linked geographically, and we share deep historical, social, economic and cultural ties. Our advanced economies are outward-looking, innovation-driven, complementary and fully integrated into the world's largest single market area, the European Common Market. Taken together, the size of the Nordic-Baltic economies would qualify not only for the G-20 but also the G-10.

Our countries share a commitment to democracy and human rights. We are all champions of an international order based on multilateralism and international law. It is in this spirit that we pursue a very productive and deeply valued cooperation with India which is a key country with a long-standing democratic tradition and with which we share many core values. We also have long-term and ever-closer ties with India and the Indo-Pacific region in common.

Diverse links with India
The Nordic-Baltic cooperation with India spans fields as diverse as innovation, green transition, maritime, health, intellectual property rights, new technologies, space cooperation and artificial intelligence, student exchanges, culture

Lars Løkke Rasmussen
is Minister for Foreign Affairs, Denmark

Margus Tsahkna
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Elina Valtonen
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is Minister of Foreign Affairs, Latvia

Gabrielius Landsbergis
is Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lithuania

Espen Barth Eide
is Minister of Foreign Affairs, Norway

Tobias Billström
is Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sweden

and tourism. Trade and investment figures between our region and India are steadily increasing. Jointly, India and the Nordic-Baltic countries are coming together in pursuit of common goals.

In a time of geopolitical shifts, the security of the Nordic-Baltic region and the Indo-Pacific is interlinked. Today, it is more essential than ever to work together to uphold international law, and to build capacity to tackle both traditional and non-traditional security threats, be it in India's neighbourhood or in our own. We recognise India's increasingly important role in international politics. India has taken on important global responsibilities. Indian leadership, as illustrated not least through the successfully concluded G-20 presidency, is increasingly important for global security and prosperity.

Our objective for coming to India is clear: in a more interconnected world, challenges are shared and require us to work together. In recent years, we have all experienced global health, climate-related and geopolitical shocks that have caused significant strain to our peoples, the international system and indeed on our common planet. We see an urgent need to get back to a more positive agenda for global cooperation. This is an ambition that we share with India, and one where our enhanced cooperation can make a difference.

The impact of the war against Ukraine
Today, the global agenda for progress is seriously hampered by Russia's illegal and full-scale war against Ukraine. Russia is trying to destroy and dominate a democratic neighbouring country and alter borders using illegal force. It is an attack on international law and on the fundamental principles of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all states. Upholding these principles that are enshrined in the United Nations Charter, be it in Europe, the Indo-Pacific or elsewhere, and ensuring accountability for the crimes committed, is paramount.

The war affects global food and energy security, supply chains, macro-financial stability, inflation and growth. Indeed, the Russian blockade of Ukrainian ports is especially pernicious, given the substantial global humanitarian needs. For this reason, it is most welcome that Ukraine has pushed through the Russian blockade and resumed food exports that are so critical for the world at large – not least for the countries and people in need.

Peace formula
Two years on, it is clear that Russia has totally underestimated Ukraine as well as the support and determination of the international community. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has presented an ambitious peace formula for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace, based on international law and the UN Charter. The peace formula, which has received broad international support, includes issues of global concern such as energy and food security, environmental consequences and justice. We fully support Ukraine's diplomatic efforts for peace and welcome the increasing number of countries and international organisations taking part in the peace formula meetings – most recently in Davos, Switzerland in January, where there were 83 participants.

Our visit represents the first joint high-level NB8 delegation outside Europe. We have chosen India as our first destination, for many good reasons. Building on our strong commitment to the multilateral system, we want to increase dialogue and cooperation on the issues that dominate India's and other global partners' agendas.

We are honoured to participate as a region in this year's Raisina Dialogue and to be able to deepen our partnership and cooperation with India. Our message to the world continues to be partnership, trust and cooperation. A partnership for development and health; a partnership for green transition and digitalisation; and a partnership for peace and stability.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Political preparedness
With the Lok Sabha election dates likely to be announced soon, the still-unprepared state of the INDIA bloc is surprising. The bloc partners need to rise above their differences or else it will be too late to make a political and electoral impact.
A.Jainulabdeen,
Chennai

Ameen Sayani
In 1965, when I joined NIT Warangal (it was the REC then) to do mechanical engineering, I was excited to see students from all parts of the country, thanks to the quota system of seats for each State.

It was truly a case of national integration at work in reality. We settled down and Ameen Sayani became a part of life every Wednesday at 8 p.m. with the Binaca Geetmala programme on Radio Ceylon. In the absence of a radio facility, music enthusiasts like me would be there at the 'Bhade Miya Chai' hotel that was located behind the hostel buildings. With a *bun maska* in hand and savouring a cup of tea till the closing moments at 9 p.m., the hotel owner would give us the privilege of listening to the flowery language of Ameen Sayani. His introductory words were "*Bhano Aur Bhaiyo*",

which meant a lot. It is no exaggeration to say that millions of listeners across the country were glued to Binaca Geetmala because of his extraordinary knowledge and announcement skills.
M.V. Nagavender Rao,
Hyderabad

Ameen Sayani will remain etched in our hearts and minds. Those were the days of no recorders, TV, and computers. Life was simple and we would wait eagerly every week, for his show to start — melodious golden hits with a mesmerising commentary.
P.V. Srinivas Sreelekha,
Secunderabad

Ameen Sayani was like the favourite family member who visited your home every week, with stories and songs. Much before the television era, to have the entire family gathering around the radio, was the happiest moment in our lives and the best example of connecting people.
T.S. Karthik,
Chennai

Ameen Sayani's unique style of presentation was truly captivating. During my younger days in Bombay, I, like several others, always made it a point to return home from work on time so as not to miss Binaca

Geetmala. Those were the days.
P.G. Menon,
Chennai

There is no doubt that Ameen Sayani is the real architect of the golden age of radio. It was a voice that resonated from the two channels of the time, Radio Ceylon and Vividh Bharati.
Sudhir Kangutkar,
Vangani, Thane, Maharashtra

Ameen Sayani's ability to seamlessly weave commentary with music, interspersed with humour and insightful anecdotes, created a fascinating experience for millions tuning in every week. The

fact that the show ran for more than 40 years is a tribute to his unmatched popularity.
M. Anand Ram Seshu,
Bengaluru

For most of us, Ameen Sayani's radio journey started with Binaca Geetmala. His golden voice had a charm and a warmth that struck a chord across generations. He played an important role in revolutionising Indian broadcasting.
Jubel D'Cruz,
Mumbai

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address.

GROUND ZERO



The police in Sandeshkhali along with the woman who filed a complaint of sexual assault against two aides, Uttam Sardar and Shiboprasad Hazra, of the Trinamool leader Sheikh Shahjahan. DEBASISH BHADURI

Fire and smoke in Sandeshkhali

A Trinamool Congress leader and his two local aides have been facing accusations of sexual assault and land grab in Sandeshkhali in West Bengal. While the two aides have been arrested, the leader, Sheikh Shahjahan, is absconding. **Shiv Sahay Singh** reports on the villagers who narrate stories of a man who allegedly unleashed a reign of terror, and how an island close to the Sundarbans has become the centre of Trinamool-BJP politics

Two days before her house was attacked in the dead of night, a woman from Sandeshkhali, a village in North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, had deposed before a magistrate accusing local leaders of the ruling Trinamool Congress party of sexual assault at a nearby party office. On February 16, the woman, accompanied by four others from her village as well as police personnel, made the deposition under Section 164 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which empowers a magistrate to record a person's testimony or confession regardless of whether or not they have jurisdiction over the case. On reaching the Basirhat sub-divisional court, the woman also recorded a video saying that she had reached safely.

On the morning of February 18, however, she did not feel safe any longer. As she spoke to journalists in front of her house, she said, her voice trembling, "Look what they have done. Had I not gone into hiding last night, they would have killed me." Pointing to the holes in the walls of her house built with bamboo and cane, she alleged that the 'visitors' of the previous night had identified themselves as the police, abused her father-in-law, and tried to break into the house. When asked repeatedly about what she had endured, she threw up her hands in frustration. "How can I tell you," she said in anguish. "They did bad things."

The woman was referring to Uttam Sardar and Shiboprasad Hazra, two aides of Trinamool leader Sheikh Shahjahan, who are facing allegations of sexual harassment and land grab. While the two men have since been arrested, Shahjahan is absconding. The allegations have caused a political storm with the Trinamool and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the main Opposition party in the State, engaged in a fierce war of words.

The woman said her husband went to ask the men why they were torturing women. "They beat him up," she said. "And ever since he protested, he has not been getting any work here."

The woman alleged that she was sexually assaulted five months ago. Hazra and Sardar were present along with others at the Trinamool party office where the incident took place, she said.

Prawns and the pursuit of power

Sandeshkhali II block is a part of the Sundarbans, an area of mangroves in the delta formed by the confluence of the rivers Ganga, Brahmaputra, and Meghna. Located about 100 kilometres south of the capital Kolkata, Sandeshkhali is one of the hundreds of islands in the delta. Here, over the years, single-crop agriculture has given way to *bheries* (shallow fish ponds) for prawn cultivation. The road to the ferry ghat of the island is dotted with *bheries* and brick kilns. The dark soil from the fields, now converted into agricultural ponds, is used in brick kilns.

At the heart of the conflict that erupted in February are allegations of land grab. Today, political and economic power in Sandeshkhali stems from the control of *bheries*. Most of the villagers



Since digging the soil for *bheries* is costly, villagers leased their land out for a yearly sum. But most of them have not been paid. Whenever someone has asked for money, they have been beaten up.

JUTHIKA ROY
Villager and ICDS worker

have alleged that their fisheries have been forcibly taken away by Shahjahan, Hazra, and Sardar. Like many local strongmen in the Trinamool, Shahjahan, 42, rose to political prominence from humble beginnings. He was a driver and soon became the leader of a brick kiln union. He went on to control *bheries* and, consequently, the economy and the politics of the region.

Shahjahan owns many properties and hundreds of acres of land of which many were allegedly grabbed from the villagers. He seized a playground from a local organisation and locked the main gate, villagers allege; the place was subsequently named the 'Sheikh Shahjahan Fan Club'. A market complex near his residence is named after him. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had once described him as "popular". But Shahjahan was little known in political circles until a team of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) raided his residence in connection with a ration scam on January 5. A mob attacked the ED officers leaving three of them injured. Shahjahan ran away.

Conflict has often arisen around the power that comes from the control of land and area dominance. Movements against forcible land acquisition in Singur and Nandigram, for instance, brought an end to the 34 year-long stint of the Left Front government. Sandeshkhali was the epicentre of the Tebhaga movement, among of the largest farmers' movements, in the late 1940s.

"Since digging the soil for shallow fish ponds is costly, villagers leased their land out for a yearly sum of ₹10,000-₹12,000 per bigha. But most of the villagers have not been paid. Whenever someone has asked for money, they have been beaten up," said Juthika Roy, a worker of the Integrated Child Development Services, a government programme for early childhood

care and development. Juthika had come with a group of six women to the house of the complainant and had nudged her to report the attack on her house to the police. "If Shahjahan is not arrested, peace will not be restored here. Several of his aides are still roaming around," she said.

Ajanta Dey, joint secretary of the Nature Environment and Wildlife Society, said small land holders are not being allowed to own *bheries* and are being forced to work as labourers. "The region was not suitable for agriculture because of high salinity. That is why the fisheries sector began to thrive. In the 1980s, prawn cultivation began. The growing cost of such fisheries along with ecological changes are forcing people to give up *bheries*. And this is what powermongers are taking advantage of," Dey said.

'We have not got our dues'

Outside a school in Sandeshkhali, Krishna Bar looked for a piece of paper to lodge her complaint. "One bigha of land belonging to my father-in-law, Ishwar Chandra Bar, was taken on lease by Hazra and his men. For three years, we have not got any lease money," she explained.

Tapan Das started a cooperative of *bheries* along with other farmers. He said he had to pay ₹4,000 in 2022 for every bigha in the *bheries* where he was rearing prawn, to Hazra and Sardar. "I paid more than ₹1.20 lakh for the 28 bighas I cultivated. The Trinamool leaders told me that they would return the money through job cards (or cash transfers of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) but we have not received a single rupee," he said.

Villagers alleged that they were 'punished' in various ways for refusing to give away their land and *bheries*. Some were not paid shop dues. Some others watched helplessly as their poultry was taken away or as fish was removed from their ponds. "There was no one to speak against Shahjahan and his aides. If you said something, you were targeted," said a villager.

In an attempt to assuage the anger of the villagers, on February 18, the district administration set up grievance redressal camps in every school of Sandeshkhali. Each had separate counters to enlist complaints regarding agriculture, food supplies, and land. The district administration hired artists and drummers to encourage villagers to lodge their complaints at the booths. About 200 complaints were lodged on the first day. A majority of these were related to land grab. Many specified that they were not paid the promised lease money for the fisheries. Since agriculture is not a viable option and the *bheries* have been taken over by Trinamool leaders, the villagers claimed that more than one-fourth of the youth in Sandeshkhali had migrated to other regions for work

and to move away from the conflict.

Even after January 5, when Shahjahan went into hiding, not much has changed for the villagers, they said. However, with every passing day, their voices have grown louder. They have been unrelenting in their demand that the Trinamool leaders return their dues and justice be served.

On February 7, a group of Trinamool supporters led by Sardar organised a rally, allegedly to threaten the villagers to fall in line. However, hundreds of villagers, mostly women, ran out of their homes with sticks and batons and chased the mob away. The properties of Sardar and Hazra, the local block president of Sandeshkhali, were attacked and set on fire. A poultry farm, a school under construction, and a three-storey Trinamool office were also not spared.

The political flashpoint

While the villagers alleged that they were beaten, not allowed to vote, and forced to close shops and businesses, it was their allegations of sexual assault that created national outrage.

It was when a woman from Sandeshkhali told a Bengali TV news channel that "their men would come down to see which households have beautiful, young women" that the floodgates opened. More women came forward and said that they were asked to visit the party office on the pretext of a meeting and made to wait there until night.

The Union Minister for Women and Child Development, Smriti Irani, translated these allegations from Bengali to Hindi and conducted a press conference at the BJP headquarters in Delhi. Over the next few days, Sandeshkhali became a political flashpoint. The administration imposed prohibitory orders and prevented Opposition leaders from visiting certain areas.

The West Bengal Police said that there was no specific complaint of sexual assault until a woman made a statement before the magistrate on February 15. On February 17, while addressing a press conference, the Director General of Police, Rajeev Kumar, said that there were attempts to give a "communal colour" to the incidents. He also demanded to know why there were no complaints before February 6 (the time the protest by the villagers erupted when Sardar took out a rally).

"Even though there were attempts to paint the picture as Hindu women being targeted by Muslim leaders, such claims have not divided the people on the ground," a senior police official said.

Several Central teams, including of the National Human Rights Commission, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, the National Commission for Women, and the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes visited the village. Some of these quasi judicial bodies sought the imposition of President's rule in West Bengal.

On February 20, the Leader of the Opposition, Suwendu Adhikari, visited Sandeshkhali with permission from the Calcutta High Court. He received a rousing welcome. Now, the BJP has a new party office next to the closed and battered Trinamool office. Saffron flags fly everywhere and far outnumber the Trinamool colours of orange, white, green, and black, in Sandeshkhali.

Resentment in the air

Bhakta Das was not even 18 when he first waved the Trinamool flag. He is president of booth number 117 of Sandeshkhali for the party. "Shiboprasad and his men owe me ₹1.33 lakh," he said. "When I asked for the money, they threatened to break my leg. Why should we suffer such humiliation?" Asthami Sardar, a Trinamool Panchayat Samithi member, said that the people should not resent the party because of the "misdeeds and the torture committed by a few." But Bhakta is not convinced. "Didi (Mamata Banerjee) should come and hear us," he said.

Angry villagers did not spare Sukumar Mahato, the Sandeshkhali MLA, who visited the area 14 days after violence broke out. "Where were you all these days?" an angry farmer shouted, alleging that he had lost 6 bighas of land to Trinamool leaders. On February 22, the police and the MLA ensured that the gates of the 'Sheikh Shahjahan Fan Club' were opened to the public and the name of the absconding leader was whitewashed. Parts of Sandeshkhali remained on the boil, with hundreds of women coming out of their homes, raising allegations against Shahjahan and his men, and attacking properties and *bheries* of Trinamool leaders.

So far, more than 20 people have been arrested. They include two Trinamool leaders accused of sexual assault, more than 10 BJP workers, CPI (M) leader and former Sandeshkhali MLA Nirapada Sardar, and a television journalist who was later granted bail by the Calcutta High Court.

After Hazra's arrest, villagers began distributing sweets to shopkeepers. Many people accepted the jalebis eagerly before the cameras.

A 46-year-old shopkeeper selling metal utensils and silver jewellery was angry. "During the panchayat elections last year, we were made to close shops. We were given sticks and batons and made to wait outside polling booths," he said. The Trinamool Congress swept the panchayat polls in Sandeshkhali without any contest in 2023. The BJP workers who dared to contest were forced to flee the area and take shelter in Kolkata, said the villagers.

Customers, mostly women, were glued to the TV in the shop. "How dare he ask women alleging sexual assault to reveal their identity on live TV," a woman said referring to the comments made by a Trinamool spokesperson. Asked about the allegations made by the women of Sandeshkhali, another said, "There is no smoke without fire."

On February 21, Asthami Sardar tried to meet the complainant. She had been sent to Sandeshkhali to assuage the anger of the villagers. A police post has been set up near the woman's house where six policemen stand guard. "She will not speak to anyone," the woman's father-in-law said.

The complainant was upset that red strings had been tied around her house. "It is only when someone dies that this is done. I don't know why the police have tied them here," she said. "Despite police protection, we are still living in fear."



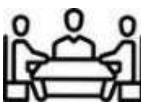
Villagers of Sandeshkhali lodge a complaint with Asthami Sardar, a Trinamool member of the Panchayat Samithi. DEBASISH BHADURI



Carrot and stick

CCI's 'leniency plus' will, hopefully, curb cartelisation

The 'leniency plus' scheme, which came into force from February 20, marks a significant step forward in competition law in India. It encourages individuals and companies involved in one cartel to disclose information on another cartel of which they are a part, by reducing the penalties with respect to both cartels. The provisions in this regard are spelt out in Section 46 of the Competition Act, and the recently notified Competition Commission of India (Lesser Penalty) Regulations.



Cartels are notoriously difficult to establish in law because of the covert nature of the understanding between competing businesses to fix prices, limit production, allocate markets or customers, or rig bids for public procurement, all of which are designed to reduce competition and increase profits for the cartel members. Thus, detection of cartels is often reliant on insider information or whistle-blowers. The basic purpose of the leniency plus rules is to encourage 'informers' or whistle-blowers in order to make the job of the regulator, CCI, easier in enforcing proper market behaviour. Leniency (or lesser penalty) and leniency plus provisions are a feature of competition laws in the UK, US, Singapore, Canada and Brazil. In India's case, the penalties involved are daunting (as a proportion of net profit or turnover for the duration of the cartel's existence), but providing material and timely information can potentially result in a 100 per cent reduction of the penalty in the case of one cartel and a 30 per cent reduction in another.

The new rules promise confidentiality to the informant. But the question, of course, is whether this carrot and stick policy will lead to the desired changes. Given the size of India's economy and anecdotal indications of the existence of cartels, CCI's track record has not been very good. It has not been able to realise even a fraction of the huge penalties which it has imposed upon the enterprises for their anti-competitive conduct. The existing leniency regime in India (for single cartel) has remained a non-starter. Enterprises are not willing to come forward and admit guilt. Not many which have come forward appear to have benefited from reduced penalty.

There is a downside to the proposed regime though. Unlike in the US, UK, Brazil and Canada, the law here does not provide any deterrence for providing wrong information. This creates apprehensions over possible misuse of the law to settle scores. The new rules would have to strike a balance between incentivising disclosures and ensuring that such incentives do not encourage malpractices. The regulator should inspire confidence with respect to maintaining confidentiality. It should be able to act decisively on the basis of information and reward whistle-blowers. A perception of being rigorous and even-handed could foster a culture of compliance. The leniency plus provisions are a step in the right direction. The ball is now in industry's court. India Inc must come forward in good faith.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



CIRCUIT BREAKER.



AARATI KRISHNAN

Of late, any discussion about retirement in India tends to get diverted into the debate on whether the New Pension System or Old Pension Scheme is better. But this question is irrelevant to 96 per cent of Indians, as only about 4 per cent of the country's workforce is employed with the Central or State governments. Over 50 crore Indians who are in non-government jobs today will need to save enough during their working lives to fend for themselves after retirement. Most of them don't realise that this could be a superhuman task, thanks to India's high inflation rates, low real returns from debt and rising longevity. Under-funded pensions are among the biggest problems confronting the current generation of Indians. Yet, the great Indian retirement challenge seems to be under-appreciated in policy circles.

UNATTAINABLE TARGETS

With the FIRE (Financial Independence, Retire Early) movement taking off in the West, many young people are eager to know the size of the corpus they will need to retire at, say, 45 in India. The numbers that financial planners throw up are so mind-boggling that they tend to give up the idea and resign themselves to a long slog.

If FIRE is beyond the reach of most folks, building a retirement corpus that can outlive them is no breeze even for folks who plan to work until 60.

Consider 25-year-old Suja who earns ₹75,000 a month. She would like to retire at 60 and live on her accumulated savings thereafter. To calculate her retirement corpus, a financial advisor would ask her to estimate the living expenses she's likely to incur after retirement. Let's say she pegs it at ₹50,000 a month or ₹6 lakh a year. Adjusting this for 6 per cent inflation over the next 35 years, Suja would need a cool ₹46.1 lakh for her living expenses in her very first year of retirement.

Retirement thumb rules from the West say that the safe withdrawal rate to fund a retired life of 30 years, is 4 per cent. This means that at 60, Suja will need a retirement fund of ₹11.57 crore (₹46.1 lakh x 25) to draw from.

Getting to that corpus with debt avenues such as the PPF with a 7 per cent return will be quite impossible, as that would require her to invest over ₹63,000 a month for the next 35 years. She has a better shot at getting to that corpus, if she targets a 12 per cent post-tax return with an equity-only portfolio. In this case, she would need to invest ₹17,900 a month for the next 35 years in equity funds. But she will need to pray to the



The great Indian retirement challenge

Indians of this generation face a superhuman task in funding retirement

GETTY IMAGES

stock market Gods to make it work.

This implies that Suja would need to set aside nearly 24 per cent of her income towards retirement alone. Her living expenses, not to mention emergencies and other goals such as home loan servicing and care of dependents, will need to squeezed into the remaining 76 per cent of her pay.

THE INDIAN PROBLEM

However, a recent research paper by Rajan Raju and Ravi Saraogi suggests that the 4 per cent withdrawal rate rule cannot be blindly applied to the Indian situation.

Using empirical data on inflation, FD rates and equity returns in India over the last 23 years, they model retirement portfolios to find that the safe withdrawal rate for an average Indian looking to fund a 30-year retired life is closer to 3 per cent. They point out that a 4 per cent withdrawal rate in India would lead to a high failure rate (where the individual outlives her retirement fund) due to volatile equity returns and a high inflation rate which significantly trims the real returns on safe options like fixed deposits. You can read their research here: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4697720.

To encourage retirement savings through a balanced portfolio, indexation benefits need to be restored on financial assets.

Lofty targets

	Annual exp at 60 (₹ lakh)	Corpus at 3% withdrawal (₹ lakh)	Investments per month at 12% ROI ₹
25	46	1,537	23,900
35	26	858	45,666
45	14	479	95,881
55	8	268	3,28,151

Estimated corpus needed at 60, to fund expenses of ₹6 lakh per annum; Assumptions: 6% pa inflation, 90-year longevity, 12% equity return

This significantly raises the bar for people like Suja. If she were to target a 3 per cent withdrawal rate to fund her retirement, she will need to plan for a corpus of ₹15.37 crore (₹46.1 lakh x 33.33) at 60. This will need monthly investments of about ₹23,900 in equities (12 per cent return) for the next 35 years. That would eat up nearly a third of her current income.

Unlike Suja though, most Indians give priority to goals such as home purchases and children's education early in their career and get to retirement planning only in their forties. The accompanying table captures the astronomical sums that folks starting late, need to invest to fund their retirement.

POLICY FIXES

If India is to ward off a crisis on under-funded pensions 15 or 20 years hence, this may need significant policy interventions.

One, given the lofty retirement targets they face, Indians cannot afford to have debt-oriented vehicles such as

Employees Provident Fund (EPF) or Public Provident Fund (PPF) as their default retirement vehicle. They should instead be leaning on equity vehicles like mutual funds or National Pension System (NPS). Tax sops and laws such as the EPF Act need to reworked to promote this.

Two, the prevailing view in a section of *babudom* seems to be that equity returns are free money and that equity investors are getting a bonanza at a 10 per cent capital gains tax rate. But the truth is that Indian investors, irrespective of their risk appetite, have no choice but to invest in equities to meet long-term goals such as retirement. Contrary to the perception that stocks are for the wealthy, it is lower and middle-income households who badly need them to get to a reasonable real return. A friendly capital gains tax regime for equities needs to continue, to ensure this.

Three, tax tweaks in recent years have removed inflation indexation benefits on most financial assets, while gold and real estate continue to enjoy them. This has dealt a body blow to real returns from financial assets. To encourage retirement savings through a balanced portfolio, indexation benefits need to be restored on financial assets. To ensure that only long-term investors benefit, indexation can be made conditional on a holding period of, say, 7 or 10 years.

Finally, income tax slabs for retirees need to rise with inflation, so that they don't have to over-invest in risky assets that can put their hard-won corpus in jeopardy.

Everyone loves the shopping experience

If women across classes are inveterate shoppers, the men too are catching up

Sathya Saran

Shopping. Girls of all ages love it! Ok, maybe some of them are middle aged, and do not qualify to be called girls. But just say the word, or let them loose in a mall or even a store, and the years fall away.

A sense of wonder takes over; they may as well be children staring at the array of glass bottles lined up in a sweet shop, trying to make up their minds about what to buy.

It really does not matter; the fact remains that whether they are 16, 30, or 55, shopping comes infused with adrenaline; the urge for it runs in every woman's blood.

Women shop for different things. Essentials like groceries, yes. That's a given. Some do it as a matter of course; the others make it an art, looking at colour, shape, size and weight before making decisions on whether they are worthy of shelling out cash for.

But even the most critical appraiser of groceries finds a strange abandon entering her psyche when she sets out to shop for herself. Clothes, jewellery, makeup, shoes and bags head the list of delectables, and good sense can be

banished to slink away quietly as fantasy makes an entrance.

A woman can be princess, corporate honcho, Barbie look-alike by turn, and shopping defers to all her moods. The child looking at glass bottles holding sweets had to choose, but today's woman, with money in her purse, often doesn't make a choice. She buys it all; one for every mood.

Not so long ago, retailers knew their target buyer well. The demographics were clear. But online shopping has turned everything on its head.

Introduce a 60-plus woman, who claims to be gadget illiterate, to the simple act of extending the use of her smartphone to click on a shopping site, and paying for it online, and lo! a lost-to-retail generation returns dizzy with happiness to the joys of shopping! Daring where they have never dared to go a few decades ago, 60-year-olds invest in frilly long dresses, seinned saris and Anarkali *kurta* sets, and plan get-togethers to show off their new buys.

Thanks to the .com, when it comes to shopping, for many 60 is the new 30.

This is not about city women of the higher echelons only. Women in two-tier and three-tier cities are as enthusiastic. In the 11 days after a state



ONLINE SHOPPING. Elderly women haven't shied away ISTOCK

government announced free-bus-rides for women, buses overflowed. Out of a total of 51 lakh passengers bussing about, 30 lakh were women...60 per cent, in other words.

Pushing the bus services to full capacity, forcing the introduction of new buses. And a hefty percentage of the majority were older women, stepping out to meet friends, and go festive season shopping.

MALE SHOPPERS

Men may be reluctant shoppers, especially when accompanying a wife on the prowl, but they are not averse to it. Not one bit. And the male shopper is

changing! The man who went out with his wife, mother or girlfriend to buy shirt/shoes/trousers is a disappearing species. Whether he depended on the woman's advice, or resisted it, this is no longer a situation that exists.

Men have found a refuge in shopping online. Safe and private, quick and easy, without worrying about parking issues and time away from other occupations. Statistics garnered across 35,000 respondents across 35 States in an online survey conducted by IIM-Ahmedabad says that men spend 36 per cent more than women on online purchases.

And they are not far behind in what they shop for either, as 47 per cent shopped for fashion wear as against 58 per cent women, while only 36 per cent shopped for electronics.

All of which boils down to this. Retail therapy is the new opiate. Online, with easy returns possible, painless, easy. Drooling over shops/websites and their booty... choosing, buying, returning... keeps the mind from angst over other issues.

Women knew it always. Now men know it too.

The writer is a Consulting Editor with Penguin India

✉ LETTERS TO EDITOR Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

Downfall of Byju's

This refers to 'ED upgrades lookout circular against Byju's promotor' (February 23). It is crucial to reflect on the significant downturn experienced by Byju's, once hailed as the darling of the edtech sector. Byju Raveendran's ambitious pursuit of rapid expansion, following initial success during the surge in demand for online learning post the Covid-19 pandemic, steered the company off course. Regrettably, in his quest for phenomenal growth, Raveendran lost sight of prudent means, opting for an aggressive capital mobilisation strategy through an inorganic growth model. Unfortunately, this approach, coupled with an overly zealous expansion, resulted in

mounting debts and subsequent defaults. These financial challenges unveiled questionable accounting practices, ultimately shaking the very foundation of the company. Byju's serves as a stark lesson on how corporate entities should not be managed, underscoring the perils of prioritising unchecked growth over financial prudence and governance.

Srinivasan Velamur
Chennai

Attracting investments

This refers to 'Implications of recession' (February 23). The political stability, inflation-controlling measures of the RBI, and the robust socio-economic reforms being enforced by the government have transformed India

into a preferred destination for investment. The RBI has estimated the Indian economy will grow at 7 per cent at a time when Japan and Britain are facing recessionary conditions. Since Japan and Britain are trading partners of India, the effects of the recession there can impact our economy, especially our exports.

VSK Pillai
Changanacherry, Kerala

Expand export markets

Recession is defined as a situation of slow fall in aggregate demand leading to a fall in employment, income and output. It can last for months. Now, Japan is in this unenviable economic situation. This naturally means, other nations including India will find it

hard to export goods and services to Japan. Hence to that extent, foreign exchange earnings of these countries will be affected. It is here, the significance of diversifying exports arises. India, in particular, should explore more markets to export its commodities and earn considerable foreign exchange, which is vital for economic growth. What India loses in Japan economically can be made good by other nations.

S Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

Conduct of elections

This refers to 'Lessons from Chandigarh' (February 23). The apex court once again had to be dragged in to save the democratic process in

the subterfuge-inflicted mayoral election, by invoking the Constitutional powers vested under Article 142. The diminishing code of conduct and ethics on the part of the persons responsible for conducting elections transparently is worrisome, and they must face deterrent punishment. Also, accountability should be fixed on the authority nominating such persons for handling such important tasks. However, the main cause of worry is that amidst mounting pressure on the judiciary in settling the humongous number of pending cases, the inefficiency of the state administration is unnecessarily adding to the burden of the courts.

Sitaram Popuri
Bengaluru

Putin has already lost



RAJAN MENON

As the second anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine approaches, it has become a commonplace that time favours President Vladimir Putin. With Ukraine running low on weaponry and ammunition, American military assistance in doubt and Russia determined to fight on, Ukrainian victory now seems out of reach. Some influential experts go further, insisting that Kyiv will suffer only more death and destruction by persisting and should seek a political settlement with Moscow — even if it requires sacrificing territory.

And yet, for all that, Mr Putin's war has failed. As Carl von Clausewitz famously stressed, war is not ultimately about killing people and destroying things: It's a means to achieve specific political ends. Those who start wars expect to be in a better strategic position once the gunfire stops. But even if this war ends with Russia retaining all the Ukrainian land it now holds, Moscow's position will be worse. No matter what, Ukraine will go its own way. For Mr Putin, more concerned by Ukraine than any other country that arose from the wreckage of the Soviet Union, that alone is tantamount to defeat.

If the fundamental purpose of Mr Putin's war was to keep Ukraine within Russia's orbit — politically, culturally and economically — it has had the opposite effect. Ukraine's leaders and citizens, particularly those from younger generations, have decided that their future lies with the West, not Russia. The prevalence of this mind-set became increasingly palpable over the course of four trips I have taken to Ukraine since the invasion; no

visitor to Ukraine will fail to be struck by its many daily manifestations. Everywhere you go, Ukrainians speak Western languages, particularly English, in seemingly ever greater numbers.

Ukraine tends to be depicted as an uneasy amalgam of two national communities: one in the country's western regions, defined by Ukrainian ethnicity and language, the other in its Russophone east and south. If this was ever wholly accurate, it is no longer. To take one example, any visitor to Ukraine's eastern and southern front lines will encounter soldiers who speak to one another in Russian and may not even know Ukrainian. But they see themselves as citizens of Ukraine committed to preventing Russia from subordinating their homeland — a cause for which they are prepared to die.

More than any other event, Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 has contributed to this sentiment. Ukrainian nationalism today, transcending region and language, reflects a deep determination to forge an identity defined by separation

from, even antipathy toward, Russia. Indeed, Mr Putin may go down in history as one of its main, if unwitting, catalysts. Given his conviction that Russians and Ukrainians are really one people, such a result is especially ironic.

His war has backfired not only in Ukraine but also in Europe. The European Union, jolted into action by the invasion, summoned a common spirit in its support for Ukraine. Previously somewhat divided in its approach to Russia, the bloc has acted in near unanimity — Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary being the only exception — to oppose Mr Putin's act of aggression. Equally important, Ukraine's journey toward EU membership, for years fiercely opposed in Moscow, is now very much in train, even if it won't be a short ride. One sign of progress: Along with Moldova, Ukraine officially began negotiations to join the bloc late last year.

Then there's Nato. Russia's invasion was undeniably an attempt to forestall the alliance's eastern encroachment, which Mr Putin has long regarded as a threat. In the event, Russia's assault on Ukraine impelled two more countries, Finland and Sweden, to seek Nato membership. Neither had shown the slightest inclination to sign up

before the invasion and both have first-rate armies. With their addition, Russia will be even more hemmed in, not least in the Baltic Sea and by the 830-mile land border it shares with Finland.

What's more, Russia's attack jolted non-US Nato countries into rethinking their longstanding aversion to boosting military expenditure. According to Nato estimates, the combined annual military spending of Canada and the European members of the alliance increased to 8.3 per cent in 2023, from 2 per cent in 2022. This year, 18 member states are reportedly set to meet the goal of spending 2 per cent of their gross domestic product on their militaries — a sixfold increase in a decade. Even in Germany, historically sensitive to Russia's security interests and an advocate of engagement with Moscow, the mood has shifted. Its defence minister now warns that Russia has become a serious, growing threat.

Ukraine, of course, is keen to join the alliance; A nightmare scenario for the Kremlin. But even if that desire remains unfulfilled — as seems likely, at least in the near term — Ukraine will continue looking to Nato countries for help in training its soldiers, equipping its armed forces

and building modern defence industries by signing agreements for technology transfers and joint production. Even a non-Nato Ukraine will not quite be non-aligned because of its substantial and increasing defence ties with the West.

The pessimists may be right: If American military assistance were to cease, Ukraine would find it far harder, perhaps even impossible, to reclaim more of its land and may even lose additional territory. Yet even a smaller Ukraine will remain strategically important. When it became independent in 1991 it ranked — Russia aside — first in Europe in size and fifth in population. Even a truncated Ukraine would be among Europe's biggest countries, its heft added to by a battle-tested army of 500,000 that is already far larger than that of any European Nato country and that will only become stronger and more modern.

Mr Putin sees Ukraine as a peerless prize, even a Russian entitlement. But the war he started to possess it has guaranteed that it will never be his.

The writer is the director of the grand strategy programme at Defence Priorities. ©The New York Times News Service



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Byju's spectacular meltdown



VIEWPOINT

DEVANGSHU DATTA

The latest shenanigan at edtech giant Byju's is an extraordinary general meeting (EGM) where sundry shareholders try to oust founder chief executive officer Byju Raveendran and his family. That power struggle is hardly the only issue with the company.

Byju's faces an Enforcement Directorate probe for alleged forex violations. It filed FY22 (year ended March 2022) financials late, in November 2023, reporting losses of ₹8,245 crore on revenues of ₹5,298 crore. This follows losses of ₹4,558 crore on revenues of ₹2,298 crore in FY21.

It faces litigation in the US from lenders suing to recover \$1.2 billion, and its US subsidiary has declared bankruptcy. It has reportedly sacked over half its employees — at its peak, it had 60,000. It has problems paying those who remain.

In January 2024, it floated a rights issue to raise

\$200 million. That rights issue was at an implied valuation of between \$225 and 250 million.

This is a far cry from Byju's peak valuation of \$22 billion in March 2022. Byju's has spent at least \$2.5 billion in an acquisition and expansion spree, and now it's finding it difficult to pay salaries!

The marque investors who had pumped in cash earlier have pulled their representatives from the board. The auditor, Deloitte, has also quit. There are allegations the Raveendran family sold large stakes, in off-market deals, while the going was good.

That's quite a train wreck — from being the world's most highly valued edtech unicorn to losing 99 per cent of that value in less than two years.

These things happen in the tech and startup ecosystem, though they are rarely as spectacular. But Byju's spent enormous sums to build a brand — including sponsoring the Indian Premier League and the football World Cup. It's no exaggeration to say it's a household name. So the collapse is equally high-profile.

The tech ecosystem has had its share of scams and scandals — think Satyam, or Theranos — so that too is not unusual. We've seen a less spectacular version of this sort of collapse ear-

lier, when Educomp, a listed edtech company, soared to heights before going bankrupt.

What is unusual is the industry that Byju's (and Educomp) occupied. Education is not an industry in the normal sense — indeed schools and colleges are non-profits. Edtech delivers education using digital technology, so while edtech is for profit, it services a non-profit sector.

Byju's was, by far, the largest and best funded edtech in India, maybe the world. The implosion will bury edtech, so far as investor funding is concerned, for years, if not permanently.

That is heartbreaking and it has policy implications that go beyond the negative externalities that result when a large business collapses. Byju's positioned itself as the solution to a huge, unmet need. India has an under-educated population struggling for access to better education.

Conventional schools and colleges lack the capacity to fill that gap. Hence, the desperate competition to get into engineering and medical courses. On average, most of India's workforce has 10 years of schooling or less. The average school student has very poor reading or numeracy skills, according to Pratham's surveys. Hence,

the popularity of private tuition and the mushrooming coaching centres.

Every Indian family, regardless of religious affiliation, worships at the altar of education. Every lower-income family knows it is the only honest way to climb the ladder.

Byju's exploited that genuine need and that insecurity to sell courses. Parents scraped together the resources to sign up their children. But because Byju's did not deliver what it promised, the users have lost years of their lives learning little, while parents have lost hard-earned money and, in many cases, they're struggling to repay loans. Edtech offered hope that under-educated youth could leverage it to learn skills they did not acquire in classrooms. This is in analogy to the way fintech has pulled unbanked millions into the formal financial system.

A valuation of any business is based on projections of future earnings. The collapse of Byju's valuation and the impact on edtech funding pulls down the "valuation" of the demographic dividend.

An under-educated population will earn less, which means lower gross domestic product growth through coming decades. That cold equation will translate into misery for millions.

Ashes series, several commentators labelled their "Bazball at all costs" strategy "risky" at best and "reckless" at worst. But can we really evaluate Bazball based on only a few results? It's an identity, a philosophy, and a mindset that create this powerful brand, termed a radically different approach or a nice surprise strategy, where playing for a draw is the gravest sin.

The Bazball approach's applicability to businesses and lifestyles is a hot topic of debate. Specifically, people are debating whether adopting the principles of Bazball can lead to improved market penetration, faster product innovation, and increased competitiveness through the creation of a supportive environment, acceptance of change, and risk-taking.

Not easy, though. While encouraging players to take risks, the fundamental tenet of Bazball instils in them the assurance that they won't be dropped no matter what. In business and lifestyle, how is it feasible to have that type of immunity? So, if combined with objective analyses, would it then become a better lifestyle mantra? Will Bazball eventually undergo Moneyballisation?

Bazball is a transformative idea. "We want to create a legacy in Test cricket," stated Stokes. It's possible he's already done that. In the post-pandemic world, is Bazball the biggest push in society's mindset? Similar to Maximus in the film *Gladiator*, it puts on a show for the crowd and poses the question: "Are You Not Entertained?" What's more, Stokes' squad is entertaining themselves as well.

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

Startup & family business governance



BUSINESS & PURPOSE

R GOPALAKRISHNAN

Some people hold a view that ideas on *neeyat* and governance are relevant only for well-established and listed companies. While the subject is relevant for them, governance is relevant also in startups and family-managed businesses. A metaphor might help to make the point succinctly — just as values and ethics must be addressed early on within families and schools, governance and business *neeyat* must be addressed early in startups and family businesses.

Enterprise is essential for national growth. Family businesses and small companies are the backbone of enterprise; sometimes I wonder whether they themselves realise how important they are. There are about 63 million enterprises registered with the government. Of these, a minuscule 20,000 have capital of more than ₹10 crore. The media focuses on listed companies and startups. In terms of employment, income

generation, and exports, the small and medium sectors are crucial. Several companies in India and overseas have been in the news for governance reasons in recent times: Unlisted startups (Byju's and Paytm), listed companies (Zee and Religare), and foreign entities Tesla and Toyota Motors. Stuart Kirk wrote a piece in the *Financial Times* on January 27, 2024, wondering whether there was any correlation between better governance and company results. I responded by emphasising the obvious about the distinct and separate roles of the management and boards.

The kinetic energy of a company rests with the management, led by the chief executive officer (CEO). The management's role is akin to the raw energy generated by the firing of fuel in the engine compartment of an automobile — innovative ideas pulsating with calorieloads of human energy. To be effective, this energy needs channelising to the wheels of the automobile through the transmission: This is the role of the board. Boards and leadership groups are essential in channelising management ideas and energy for effective delivery to customer and community. A pleasurable car must have both a great engine and a matching transmission system. So too, an enterprise must have fine management with a great board. The board collaborates, yet provides

a challenge to the management. It is not the board's role to design or execute strategies and innovation, though individual directors may contribute through experience and debate.

Private-equity (PE) companies try to achieve the same effect. Since several PE executives have no hands-on business experience, the firms rely on experienced leaders as advisors. Why do some startup founders behave as though the PE providers should provide them money and let the founder do whatever he or she wants — BharatPe, Zilingo, Housing.com? Equally, the greed of some PE executives may pressure founders to grow exponentially. Sequoia is a respected and value-based PE firm, yet it considered ousting its former CEO Michael Moritz from the board chairmanship of a troubled fintech startup, Klarna, which it itself financed. Enterprise sans governance is prone to crashing.

Public markets provide a test of governance. Though imperfect, they are better than no test. India is proud that it has produced about 110 startup unicorns. Bravo. However, only 13 have faced the test of the public markets, accounting for just \$1.5 billion out of a total of \$4,200 billion; of the 13, only six are reported to generate positive operating cash flows, which is the most basic test of business acumen and success. All of these six positive-cash flow unicorns

were founded around 2005, and have built an enterprise track record of almost two decades, and the average age of these six founders was 57 when they began. Startups often manage business for valuation. Family-managed businesses and startups have been combined in this piece about governance, though there are differences. For example, families manage businesses for legacy, with valuation as an outcome. An example of this, Beit Binzagr in Saudi Arabia, in a future column.

The innovative ideas in startups and family businesses would benefit by challenge and debate. Such action does not mean that the board is adversarial to management. As stated in my recent book (*Inside the Boardroom*), behavioural aberrations beyond the boundaries of business sanity and *neeyat* must engage the attention of boards. If not, the question will continue to remain, what was the board doing?

In closing, a potentially controversial view. Courts rely on near-perfect proof and regulators rely on substantive evidence, but boards must rely on and act upon early warning signals. It is common that directors can hear the canary in the coalmine first.

The writer is an author. His new book, Embrace the Future: the soft science of business transformation, is due in February. rgopal@themindworks.me



OPINION

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{ OUR TAKE }

The making
of a contest

INDIA bloc gets to business as the Congress, SP and AAP agree on seats. The alliance must also have a narrative to challenge the NDA

After weeks of waffling over the sharing of seats, the Opposition INDIA bloc is finally getting its act together. Reflecting its federal character, the bloc seems to be building a united front by stitching alliances state by state, with parties deferring to local power equations, and setting aside pride, ego and long-held prejudices to challenge the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which is riding high on Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s charisma, the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, and a heady narrative of religious pride, muscular nationalism and developmental populism. With the Election Commission of India (ECI) set to announce the schedule for the general elections soon, seat talks have predictably gathered momentum. It would help the Opposition, smarting under the recent loss of Janata Dal-United and Rashtriya Lok Dal, and the exits of numerous legislators and leaders from the Congress, improve the optics at least.

On Wednesday, the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Congress settled on a pre-poll alliance for Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Madhya Pradesh (MP). After blowing hot and cold over the number and nature of constituencies, agreed on a 63:17 seat formula for UP in favour of the SP; in MP, the Congress has left a lone seat for SP. Meanwhile, the Aam Aadmi Party(AAP) and the Congress have reportedly settled on a 4-3 seat-sharing agreement in Delhi while the latter has conceded two seats in Gujarat and one in Haryana to the AAP. There are reports that the Trinamool Congress and the Congress have revived seat negotiations. Talks are close to a conclusion within the Maha Vikas Aghadi (Shiv Sena-UBT, NCP-Sharadchandra Pawar, and the Congress) in Maharashtra while the INDIA bloc has a settled look in Tamil Nadu, Bihar and Kerala. The seat agreements reveal that the Congress has finally accepted that it is no longer the political hegemon it once was, and has had to concede seats and even leadership roles, to the dominant party of the state. A touch of realism seems to be shaping its political outreach while potential allies, recognising its decline as a pan-Indian umbrella outfit, are driving a hard bargain. A big beneficiary of this emerging scenario is the AAP, which was born out of a mass movement that targeted political corruption, primarily of the Congress, over a decade ago. Today, the AAP has two state governments to show and it is seeking a national footprint after undergoing a process of normalisation that saw the once crusading post-ideological formation transform itself into a tactically shrewd party focussed on furthering its national prospects even while mired in corruption charges.

However, arithmetic is not enough to win elections, and chemistry among allies is essential for the show to succeed. More importantly, the bloc needs a narrative that can hold it together and force the issue against the incumbent government. PM Modi has already gone on the offensive that negative agendas drive the Opposition. Indira Gandhi in her prime had berated the Opposition in a similar vein with great success! INDIA bloc will have a critique of the party in government, of course, especially when the latter has been in office for a decade. But as it makes a claim to govern, it also needs to offer a transformative agenda to voters to stay in the reckoning. New India is aspirational and the INDIA bloc could be seen as out of sync with the times if its tales are all gloom and doom.

How justifiable
is the Maratha
claim for quotas?

In crucial socio-economic indicators, the community is just behind the Brahmins. But its anxieties, in the backdrop of agrarian transformation, need to be addressed

The Maratha community in Maharashtra holds a significant place in the state’s social and political landscape. Yet, it has time and time again demanded a share of the reservation pie. With the announcement of the inclusion of Marathas in the Socially and Educationally Backward Communities (SEBC), the Maharashtra government has, once again, yielded to a demand that has been repeatedly struck down by the courts.

This time the evidence for the backwardness of Marathas comes from the Shukre Commission report. Set up in December 2023, it submitted its report on February 15, 2024. This is faster than the speed of light: The claim is that two crore people were surveyed over 11 days. Chief minister Eknath Shinde thanked the “3.5-4 lakh” people involved in the survey. These numbers seem incredulous. Maharashtra needs to share its secret ingredients of lightning-fast household surveys far and wide with government agencies and academic researchers.

The Shukre Commission report is not public, but there is empirical evidence from other more carefully done surveys, which allows a detailed assessment of where an average Maratha household stands in relation to average households from comparable groups within Maharashtra.

Along with economist Rajesh Ramachandran, I looked at data from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) to compare Marathas to Brahmins, non-Brahmin forward castes, existing Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Scheduled Caste-Scheduled Tribes (SC-ST) in Maharashtra.

Marathas are more likely to own or cultivate land than all other social groups. They have a lower per capita consumption expenditure than Maharashtra Brahmins, but are at the same level

as other forward castes and OBCs, and significantly higher than SC-STs. Data shows that Marathas have similar levels of poverty as Brahmins and other forward castes, but are less poor than OBCs and SC-STs. In terms of infrastructure, Maratha households have better access to electricity and flush toilets compared to SC-STs. Education-wise, the average Maratha has 6.58 years of education, which is lower than Brahmins but on par with other forward castes and OBCs, and higher than SC-STs.

In sum, available data indicates that in most crucial socio-economic indicators, Marathas are second only to Brahmins in the state, and are significantly better off than all other social groups.

The main bone of contention and the primary motivation for the demand for reservations is access to government jobs. The surprising fact is that even without reservations, in 2011-12, Marathas’ access to government jobs was already similar to that of Brahmins, and higher than that for other forward castes and OBCs, and not different from that for SC-STs.

We examined both rounds of the IHDS data to see whether, between 2004-5 and 2011-12, the position of the politically dominant Maratha community deteriorated relative to the other groups. The short answer is no.

In terms of average per capita expenditure, their position improved over the period. The probability of being poor did not increase. We found some evidence of a decline in the probability of owning or cultivating land, which could be the reason for the heightened anxiety resulting in the renewed demand for secure, well-paying government jobs.

The Marathas are a predominantly agricultural community that benefited from the Green and White Revolutions. While their demand for reservations is not new, today it is juxtaposed against farmers’ unrest. Recognising the volatility of farm incomes, in 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the government’s intention to double farmers’ incomes by 2022. Mint calculations show that for Maharashtra, the target rate set for a seven-year period was 13.5% per year (₹1 lakh in FY16 to ₹2.43 lakh in FY23).

The Doubling Farmers’ Income Committee report in 2018 outlined the growth rates required



Ashwini Deshpande



Extending quotas to relatively richer and more powerful groups would amount to diluting the already small and shrinking entitlement for communities that are truly disadvantaged and discriminated against.

BACHCHAN KUMAR/HT PHOTO

to achieve this target in the remaining four years. Mint calculations, based on the NSS 2019 estimate, indicate that, for Maharashtra, this would be 15.2% per year (₹1.38 lakh in agricultural year 2018-19 to ₹2.43 lakh in FY23).

The initial 13.5% was impossible enough. A growth rate of 15.2% per year seems like a fantasy. Mint calculations for all states reveal that this aim to double farming incomes in seven years was an incredibly ambitious target. It is not surprising that this discussion has gone into cold storage. Other government schemes like PM-KISAN, announced in 2019, provided some succour to landholding farmers but the real value of the ₹6,000 per year given to beneficiaries of the scheme has been eroding.

Overall, there is discontent among powerful farming communities due to the perception that real economic power lies in the hands of the big corporations, and the State, overtly or covertly, acts in their interest. These communities feel

their power slipping away or eroding, in addition to feeling ill-prepared to shift towards urban, formal sector livelihood opportunities.

Individuals or communities who feel strongly that the odds of economic success are stacked against them are more likely to feel deprived. Other estimates from IHDS panel data show that “forward castes were about 30% more likely to feel that they were worse off in 2011-12 than in 2004-05”. Thus, perceptions of being worse off are real: Our analysis suggests that these perceptions are exactly that—feelings, not supported by evidence on the ground.

Having said this, economic changes that give rise to widespread anxieties, definitely need to be understood and genuine grievances, including those that might come from dominant castes dealing with agrarian transformations, need to be addressed.

However, is reservation the real answer? Given increasing privatisation, the base, i.e., total jobs that are eligible for reservations, is already shrinking. Our other research shows how existing OBCs and SC-STs are further lagging behind upper castes on a range of material indicators. In this context, extending quotas to relatively richer and more powerful groups would amount to diluting the already small and shrinking entitlement for communities that are truly disadvantaged and discriminated against.

Ashwini Deshpande is professor of Economics, Ashoka University.
The views expressed are personal

A 90-year journey of
faith and spirituality

On this auspicious day, we find ourselves in the presence of a remarkable soul, Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani, who has traversed nine decades of life’s journey. Today, we gather to celebrate her 90th birthday and embrace the profound wisdom bestowed upon us by the sacred scriptures of different faiths. In this celebration, we draw inspiration from the Bhagavad Gita, the Quran, the Bible, and the Vedas, as we wish my mother a birthday filled with joy, health, and spiritual fulfilment.

Bhagavad Gita: The song of the divine
The Bhagavad Gita, often called the song of the divine, is a sacred Hindu scripture that imparts profound teachings on duty, righteousness, and devotion. As Mummy turns 90, we reflect on the Gita’s timeless wisdom: “For the soul, there is neither birth nor death at any time. He has not come into being, does not, and will not. He is unborn, eternal, ever-existing, and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain.”

These verses remind us that the essence of our loved one is eternal and transcends the passage of time. As we wish her a happy 90th birthday,

we are reminded to celebrate not just the years she has lived but the eternal spirit that resides within her.

Quran: A beacon of light

Turning to the Quran, the holy book of Islam, we find verses that resonate with the spirit of celebration and gratitude. “And We have certainly created man, and We know what his soul whispers to him, and We are closer to him than (his) jugular vein.” This verse encapsulates the divine connection between God and His creation, emphasising the closeness of the sacred to our hearts.

As we extend our heartfelt wishes to her, we acknowledge the divine presence that has guided her through the years. May her 90th birthday be a reflection of the light and love that emanate from the divine source within her, as the Quran teaches us to be grateful for the precious gift of life.

Bible: A tapestry of blessings

In the Christian tradition, the Bible offers solace,

guidance, and blessings. As we celebrate this milestone, we find inspiration in The Psalms: “The days of our lives are 70 years, and if by reason of strength, they are 80 years, yet their boast is only labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.” These words remind us of the brevity of life and the need to cherish every moment.

As we wish her a joyous 90th birthday, we reflect on the tapestry of blessings woven throughout her life. May the coming years be filled with grace, peace, and the enduring love that transcends the passage of time.



Anil D Ambani

Vedas: Ancient wisdom for modern times

The Vedas, the oldest scriptures of Hinduism, encompass a vast body of knowledge and wisdom. From the Rigveda to the Upanishads, these sacred texts delve into the nature of existence, consciousness, and the interconnectedness of all life. “*Asato ma satgamaya/ Mrityorma amritam gamaya*” (Lead us from the unreal to the real, from darkness to light, from mortality to immortality).

On her 90th birthday, we invoke these profound words from the Vedas, seeking guidance and enlightenment for her journey ahead. May she continue to lead a life illuminated by the light of wisdom, transcending the transient nature of the material world.

Tamaso ma jyotirgamaya/ Mrityorma amritam gamaya” (Lead us from the unreal to the real, from darkness to light, from mortality to immortality).

A tapestry woven with faith

As we come together to celebrate the remarkable milestone of her 90th birthday, we weave a tapestry of blessings and wisdom drawn from diverse sacred texts. In embracing the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, the Quran, the Bible, and the Vedas, we recognise the universal truths that bind us all—the eternal nature of the soul, the closeness of the divine, the brevity of life, and the path from darkness to light.

May her 90th birthday be a celebration not only of the years she has lived but also of the profound spiritual journey she continues to embark upon.

As we offer our heartfelt wishes, let us also reflect on the timeless wisdom that accompanies her, making this milestone a beacon of grace and inspiration for us all. Happy 90th birthday to a soul whose journey is a testament to the enduring power of faith, love, and the divine presence that guides us all.

“The mother represents colourless love that knows no barter, love that never dies,” Swami Vivekananda said.

Even as we celebrate your 90th year on this Earth, we equally celebrate the spiritual guidance and faith in a higher purpose that you have instilled in us from the day we were born. I count my 90 blessings but know that they are indeed countless.

Anil D Ambani is chairman, Reliance Group.
The views expressed are personal

A voice that united
a new-born nation

Most of the obituaries on Ameen Sayani, who passed away this week, recalled a “golden voice of the yesteryears”. But what was the social fabric, the sovereign mood that made an Ameen Sayani possible? If nation-building in the first decade of Independence gets its own history, this Gujarati Muslim’s name is sure to figure in it, along with those of his political soulmates—Pandit Nehru, Sardar Patel, Maulana Azad, among many. His voice, transmitted from a foreign land in 1952, unified India culturally. He accomplished what the Hindi Prachar Sabhas couldn’t: Armed with the melody-thread of Bollywood songs, he was more effective than all the missionaries from the Hindi heartland who travelled to South India to popularise the language.



S Gopalakrishnan

The Dakshina Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha was launched in 1918 in Madras. Mahatma Gandhi volunteered his son Devdas to Madras to spread the message of Hindi. In a letter, he asked Devdas to learn a new Tamil word for every new Hindi word he taught there. The desired quid pro quo came about quicker through melody. The tunes in many South Indian films in the 1950s and 1960s were seasoned by popular Hindi film songs. With Sayani counting down Hindi hits on Radio Ceylon, melody lovers in the South were tuning in to

Short Wave 11905 Khz. I was in Class 8 in a school in Kerala 1973, when my classmate Rajiv hummed *Yaadon ki baaraat nikli hai aaj dil ke dwaare* in the classroom. He translated the lyrics for me—“the procession of memories has left today”.

Rajiv’s “Singapore-returned” father had brought with him a transistor and a habit of listening to the radio. Father and son listened to Binaca Geetmala, anchored by Sayani on Radio Ceylon. Ameen Sayani’s mother, Kulsum, met Gandhi in 1917, and since then, she weaved threads of nationalism on the charkha and spread the message of Hindustani. Ameen Sayani considered his mother a great inspiration. He had seen her fight many battles, including the one with the Muslim League’s idea of two nations and two languages. Kulsum’s son, as a much sought-after broadcast voice, would one day flip Gandhi’s famous call to Indians, *bhaiyon aur bahnon to bahnnon aur bhaiyon*.

A rather warped notion about culture led BV Keskar, the then information and broadcasting minister, to the banning of Hindi film songs on All India Radio (AIR). Keskar believed that film songs had become vulgar, erotic and westernised. The same Keskar had closed the doors of India’s public broadcaster on hereditary female singers with his infamous “ban anyone whose private life is a public scandal” diktat.

The ban on broadcast of Hindi film songs on AIR came in 1952. Ameen Sayani started Geetmala over Radio Ceylon in December that year, just before his 20th birthday. He continued it till 1988, and then he became a

part of AIR’s Vividh Bharati service.

What made Ameen Sayani a much-loved household name? Many in the industry in the later years had similar baritone voices and the same command over English, Hindi or Urdu, but no one became as cherished as him. When Ameen Sayani was talking about a song, he took a feather-touch approach, reassuring the listeners affectionately. Talking about family, health, wealth, or relationships, he could organically connect the listeners’ lives to a Hindi film number. This formula made him an all-time model for successful radio jockeying in any mode of broadcasting. A shoemaker sitting in front of Akashvani Bhawan in Delhi’s Parliament Street once told me how Ameen Sayani became a fraternal voice for him and his brother, a tailor who migrated to Lahore after Partition. The brothers were from Lucknow.

The remembrance of Ameen Sayani itself is becoming a social memory. His was not just a singular golden voice, it represented the collective soundscape of a spring, bloomed by the subcontinent’s longing for an aesthetic of freedom.

S Gopalakrishnan is a writer, broadcaster, and founder of the podcast, Dilli Dali.
The views expressed are personal

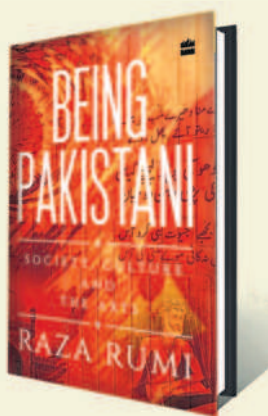
{ EDITOR’S PICK }

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

ANOTHER PAKISTAN

Pakistan’s two major political parties finalised a pact this week to form a coalition government after days of uncertainty following an inconclusive election. The uncertainty turned the spotlight on Pakistan’s fragile democracy and the army’s outsized role in its broken polity, which were the themes of much commentary on the country.

This week, we recommend something beyond the headlines: Raza Rumi’s *Being Pakistani: Society, Culture and the Arts*. The book explores Pakistan’s arts, literature, and heritage and concludes that they are an extension, and a product, of shared South Asian identities. It explores the cultural mores that tie India and Pakistan together by examining visual arts, poetry, music, and literature. It introduces contemporary Pakistani writers and artists as well as the milieu of their works. The book also focuses on artistic traditions and provides an alternative view of Pakistan beyond political instability, economic crisis, and social violence and of people and institutions other than the army, clerics, and religious extremists.



Being Pakistani: Society, Culture and the Arts
Rumi
Year: 2018



The IndianEXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A GOOD REPORT CARD

New study points to welcome trend: Combination of steady growth momentum and moderate inflation continues

A REPORT ON the state of the economy, prepared by economists at the RBI, presents an optimistic assessment about India's growth prospects. Based on high frequency indicators, it says that the economic momentum observed in the first half of the year is likely to have continued in the months thereafter. Growth for the third quarter (October-December) has been pegged at 7 per cent. This is higher than assessments by some analysts. Considering that the National Statistical Office has projected growth at 7.3 per cent for the full year, this would imply a growth of around 7 per cent in the ongoing quarter (January-March) as well. The report is also optimistic on the inflation front, terming recent developments as "favourable". Retail inflation moderated in January, after being elevated in November and December. This continuing combination of steady growth momentum and moderate inflation is welcome news on the macroeconomic front.

On growth, there are several notable points. While some analysts continue to express concerns over the state of the rural economy, the NielsenQ data cited in the report shows that the gap between rural and urban areas is narrowing — FMCG companies observed a 5.8 per cent growth in rural volumes and a 6.8 per cent growth in urban areas in the third quarter. Other indicators of private consumption such as passenger vehicles and two-wheelers are also showing healthy growth in both urban and rural areas. Alongside, real estate and construction continue to witness robust growth driven by household investments in residential real estate and public sector capital expenditure. The report expects investments by the private corporate sector to pick up and "fuel the next round of growth". In his comments in the recent monetary policy committee meeting, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das has also expressed optimism about private investments, noting that the "private capex cycle has turned up". However, so far, investment activity has picked up only in a few sectors, and questions over more productive forms of job creation remain.

There is reason for optimism on inflation. In January, retail inflation fell to 5.1 per cent, down from 5.69 per cent in December. While there are upside risks to food inflation, Skymet, the private weather forecaster, has predicted a normal south-west monsoon. Economists at the RBI believe that "inflation expectations may stabilise and edge down." As per the RBI's own forecasts, inflation is expected at around 4.5 per cent in 2024-25. Jayanth Varma, member MPC, notes that these inflation projections translate to a real interest rate of 2 per cent, which may be considered high at the current juncture. However, Governor Das, and other members of the MPC, believe that the "job on the inflation front" is not over. Over the coming months, if inflation falls in line with the central bank's projections, it could open up space for policy to pivot.

SMALL POLL, LARGE LESSON

Supreme Court's overturning of Chandigarh mayor election result carries a message of primacy of due process

WITH LOK SABHA elections drawing closer, the overturning of the results of the Chandigarh mayoral polls by the Supreme Court carries a message, or a warning, for political players. It took a relatively minor election of a municipal corporation mayor, for a term of one year, to lay down an important red line for those who would seek to bend due process to their will to win.

The attempt to hijack the election evidently did not bargain for SC scrutiny, with the Chief Justice of India perusing first the video tape of what turned out to be rigged polling, and then the ballot papers. At stake were 35 votes, and the parties involved tried to hide behind the very electoral process they were trying to subvert. The returning officer invalidated eight votes cast by members of the AAP-Congress alliance, tipping the scales for a narrow victory for the BJP. Ironically, the ballots he attempted to tamper with — marked with a cross — came back to haunt as the case reached the apex court. Now that the flawed election has been overturned and the candidate of the AAP-Congress alliance has been declared the mayor, it's time to pause and reflect on the way ahead. Murmurs have already begun about the future course of action by the BJP, which has added three AAP councilors to its kitty. The CJI has also expressed concern about horse-trading during the hearing. While there are legal safeguards against defection in state legislatures and Parliament, municipal bodies are more vulnerable. The lawmakers did not anticipate, perhaps, that party politics would permeate local elections, originally envisioned as a platform for citizens to vote for individuals best suited to address day-to-day concerns. However, as was showcased in this election, local corporations have evolved into political hotbeds, mirroring the intrusion of politics into Panchayati bodies long ago.

The mayoral election may have been a small arena, but the stakes were painted larger. After all, AAP leaders had elevated the poll to the national platform by calling it the beginning of the victorious march of the INDIA bloc. This unsavoury episode has ended on a cautionary note: The integrity of the electoral process cannot be compromised, at any level. Too much is at stake.

DEATH AND OTHER DETAILS

Reopened investigation into Pablo Neruda's death shows desire to understand history and icons better

IN 1936, WHEN the Spanish Civil War began, Pablo Neruda was posted in Madrid as a Chilean diplomat. His reputation as a poet had already been considerable, but the war would be a turning point in his career as an activist and lifelong Communist. When his friend, the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, was executed by General Franco's supporters, it would galvanise Neruda to greater political action. "I have been convinced that it is the poet's duty to take his stand along with the people in their struggle to transform society, betrayed into chaos by its rulers....," he wrote later. Whether his politics had a hand in hastening the Nobel laureate's death soon after the 1973 military coup that overthrew the Salvador Allende government in Chile, has been the subject of a decade-long, international investigation. The recent ruling of a Chilean appeals court to reopen it is an attempt, yet again, to bring the issue to a closure.

The official position on Neruda's death had always been prostate cancer. But the first seeds of doubt were sown by his driver, who claimed that he was poisoned, at the behest of the new regime, in the clinic where he had received treatment days before his death. Subsequent exhumation and multiple examinations by forensic experts confirmed the presence of a lethal bacteria, *Clostridium botulinum*, in his body at the time of his death. But it is yet to be ascertained if it was, in fact, what caused his death.

It is hardly surprising, given his gargantuan status, that Neruda continues to fascinate, and in recent days, divide Chile even five decades after his death. Recent evaluation has thrown up disturbing details of his treatment of the women in his life, including his daughter, who was born with hydrocephalus and died young. The attempt to demystify the circumstances of his death stems as much from a desire to know more of the past as to understand icons better — men and women capable in equal measure of tenderness and malice, solidarity and intemperance, greatness and failings.



D B VENKATESH VARMA

EARLIER THIS MONTH, Russian forces captured Avdiivka, a key city on the Ukrainian defensive line in the Donetsk region. With the stalemated Russia-Ukraine conflict now entering its third year, this breakthrough comes against the background of a steady turn in the tide of the war in Russia's favour. It's too early to predict a decisive outcome, but sometimes change comes gradually and then all at once.

A war of manoeuvre in its first year, it's now a war of attrition (Also see 'The Putin pursuit', IE, February 24, 2023, and 'Changing battlefields', IE, July 10, 2023). Exhaustion of the opponent's political will, economic strength and military capacity is its main objective. This works to Russia's advantage, being the larger country with superior resources. A patient Russian leadership and its General Staff have crafted a military strategy that is grinding down Ukrainian capabilities. The Russian military has adapted its battlefield tactics; an expanded defence industry has provided the necessary tools to make it a success.

Wars are messy and prolonged wars, especially so. Russia's military advantage is not irreversible, yet. Ukraine's military potential remains substantial. More fighting units are dug at the next line of defence — around Kramatorsk and on the route towards Zaporizhzhia. The Russian Black Sea fleet has stayed put in port to avoid unmanned marine vehicle attacks. Ukraine continues to get substantial NATO support; more may be coming, not only in the form of long-range missiles but also in terms of air defence and electronic warfare, areas in which Russia is slowly gaining the upper hand. This conflict has valuable lessons to offer. These must not be ignored.

As compared to the slow-moving battlefields, the international context has undergone rapid changes. Critically dependent on external support, Ukraine's position has weakened progressively. Ukraine is learning the hard way that in conflicts involving the big powers, the risk of partners being treated as proxies is a real one. While the EU voted in

A war of attrition

As Russia-Ukraine conflict enters its third year, Russia's military strategy is grinding down Ukraine's capabilities

Critically dependent on external support, Ukraine's position has weakened progressively. Ukraine is learning the hard way that in conflicts involving the big powers, the risk of partners being treated as proxies is a real one. While the EU voted in a \$54 billion multi-year assistance package, a \$60 billion assistance package for Ukraine has been held up in the US Congress. The debate has laid bare deep domestic divisions on America's international priorities. Ukraine enjoyed an uncontested top spot in 2022; now it shares the space with Israel, Gaza, Taiwan and the securing of the US's southern border.

a \$54 billion multi-year assistance package, a \$60 billion assistance package for Ukraine has been held up in the US Congress. The debate has laid bare deep domestic divisions on America's international priorities. Ukraine enjoyed an uncontested top spot in 2022; now it shares the space with Israel, Gaza, Taiwan and the securing of the US's southern border. There is a growing sentiment in Washington that Europe should grow up and learn to stand on its two feet.

Stalemate on the battlefield, military leadership changes, and a more pervasive Ukraine fatigue have added to the sense of gloom in Western capitals. However, the public rhetoric on war aims has remained consistently shrill — vacation of Ukrainian territory, reparations, and accountability for alleged war crimes. Though it is not winning the war, Ukraine's war aims are based on the expectation that it will do so. Whether this is a well-grounded premise or an illusion, only time will tell. Russia's Avdiivka advantage perhaps points to the latter.

Sensing the shifting winds in western capitals, especially in Washington, President Putin timed his widely watched interview with the American journalist Tucker Carlson to once again set out Russia's historic as well as current perspectives on the Ukraine conflict. Russian war aims may not be opened but a peace settlement on Ukraine will not be limited to Ukraine. Putin's gambit is not for now, or for this year, but for the next US administration. Putin is playing the long game — his eventual goal is a new modus vivendi with the US, for which a decisive breaking of Ukrainian resistance is seen as a prerequisite.

Sharp gaps in NATO defence stockpiles and industrial capacities have come to the fore which will take time to fill. The defence spending of NATO states remains uneven. For Ukraine, this provides no relief as its requirements are more immediate. As a sop, the UK, Germany and France have concluded agreements committing security support in case of future Russian aggression — not dissimilar to medical insurance packages that don't tap

ply to current maladies.

Though this began as a European conflict, it has not remained in Europe. Global energy, food and financial linkages have been impacted. In retaliation for support for Ukraine, Russia has undercut French influence in the Sahel region of Africa. Russia-North Korea relations have rebounded almost entirely in response to the Ukraine conflict. North Korea is now an open and aggressive nuclear power. Overshadowed by other more immediate crises in the region, Iran's proto-nuclear capability is left unaddressed. With Russia de-ratifying the CTBT, and with traditional arms control almost dead, it will not be long before the malaise infects the broader non-proliferation regime. US talks with China on arms control are but small raindrops in an otherwise parched sky. A new dark age of unbridled arms competition looms on the horizon.

With the West locked into a semi-permanent conflict with Russia, and the fraying deterrence equations between the big powers, the consequent disequilibrium on the Eurasian continent is a matter of deep concern. It works primarily to China's advantage as it benefits from the confusion at the heart of America's global strategy on priorities and sequencing in the allocation of resources. A prolonged Russia-Ukraine conflict is not in India's interests — it weakens Russia, undercuts European security, and immeasurably complicates US global rebalancing.

Partial battlefield gains can only provide partial gains at the negotiating table. This applies to Russia as it does to the US and its European allies who should pull back from the brink and find a way of reconstructing European security that includes Russia, for there can be no lasting settlement without Russia. Trans-Atlantic security cannot be built on the ashes of global insecurity. To get out of this awful mess, if competence on matters of grand strategy is asking for too much, then common sense should do the job.

The writer is a former ambassador to Russia



AVIJIT PATHAK

WE ARE IN a time when the virus of rote learning, the pathology of MCQ-centric standardised tests, the "success manuals" sold by coaching factories and the psychology of fear associated with board examinations have polluted the entire culture of school education. In this context, the fact that the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) is experimenting with the possibility of "open-book" examinations (OBE) in order to resist this rot, and encourage "higher-order thinking" among students is welcome. It is a refreshing idea, particularly in an environment in which board examinations in many parts of the country cannot be imagined without the use of the surveillance machinery amid fears of mass copying, or leaked question papers. Reports suggest that the CBSE, to begin with, intends to experiment with OBEs in select schools for classes IX to XII, particularly for subjects like English, Science, Mathematics and Biology. Although there is no immediate plan to adopt the OBE format for the Board examination, the experiment is a step forward.

We can orient young minds for OBEs only if we succeed in revolutionising the ethos of the classroom — from the pedagogic practice to the mode of teacher-student engagement. In this context, I wish to stress three points.

First, we need to take the spirit of critical pedagogy with absolute seriousness. This is possible only when children are encouraged to realise and trust their potential, and teachers, far from just "completing" the official syllabus, engage in a meaningful dialogue with young students. This is like walking together, seeing beyond the burden of

BEST OF LUCK, CBSE

Open-book examination experiment bodes well for the classroom

We need to take the spirit of critical pedagogy with absolute seriousness. This is possible only when children are encouraged to realise and trust their potential, and teachers, far from just "completing" the official syllabus, engage in a meaningful dialogue with young students. This is like walking together, seeing beyond the burden of bookish knowledge, overcoming the dead weight of ready-made 'facts, definitions and theories', asking new questions, and thinking creatively.

bookish knowledge, overcoming the dead weight of ready-made "facts, definitions and theories", asking new questions, and thinking creatively.

An important reason behind rote learning is that students are hardly encouraged or trained to see beyond textbooks, study the literature outside the syllabus, relate the classroom to the larger world, and think differently and creatively. The prevalent pattern of school examinations demands nothing more than the capacity to memorise.

Second, OBEs demand qualitatively different kinds of questions and riddles to arouse and activate the critical faculty and creative imagination of young students. What teachers ought to realise is that if the answers to the questions they formulate are already available in the textbooks, the idea of OBE will be reduced to a joke. Hence, those who design the question papers have to work hard, learn and unlearn simultaneously, and transform the task of framing questions into a delicate art.

Let me give a couple of illustrations. If you ask Class XII students to write the exact date and time of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, the answer is already available in the textbook. But then, if you ask them to write a paragraph on the implications of Gandhi's assassination on contemporary Indian politics, no guidebook, no coaching centre manual will help them. They need to think. And this is possible only when the spirit of dialogue and critical pedagogy in the classroom encourages "higher order" or innovative thinking. Or, for that matter, is it possible to

ask these students to write a note on the state of farmers' protest in the context of the constitutional ideal of "fundamental rights"?

In other words, we need to educate educators, encourage them to evolve and grow every day, and teach freely and creatively without fear. Yes, creative and critical thinking requires the spirit of freedom — to see beyond the officially sanctioned textbook, and accept that there can be multiple ways of seeing a phenomenon.

Third, we need to realise that the most challenging examination is the OBE. Yes, it is challenging for the teachers — you cannot ask the same questions year after year; you must constantly activate your mind and experiment with ideas. This task cannot be accomplished by the machinery called the National Testing Agency. Likewise, it is challenging for young students. There is no ready-made answer in textbooks or other "success manuals", they need to sharpen their analytical thinking, creative imagination and style of writing.

In my teaching career of more than three decades, I have always asked my students to bring their books, or any other reading material, and celebrate their exams with the ecstasy of learning and unlearning. In this process, many of them evolved creatively, and emerged as good teachers and researchers. Let examinations be a celebration of creative learning, not a toxic moment of doubt, cheating, fear and surveillance.

Good luck to the CBSE!

The writer taught sociology at JNU

FEBRUARY 24, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

PRESIDENT'S WARNING

PRESIDENT ZAIL SINGH has called upon all citizens to cooperate with the government in putting down divisive forces in the country. Addressing the Parliament on the opening day of the budget session, Zail Singh said in the present complex international situation, it was essential to intensify vigilance for preserving economic and political independence. The country could achieve sustained progress only in a climate of harmony.

PUNJAB BOMB BLAST

FOUR PEOPLE WERE killed in three districts

of Punjab in shooting and bomb blast incidents in the continuing wave of terrorist violence. Two people were shot dead by terrorists at Srigurharsahay in Firozpur district and one each killed in Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts. A police inspector's brother was shot dead and a bomb blast wounded nine persons at Batala in Gurdaspur district. The fresh spurt of violence has claimed 25 lives so far.

NDA's BOYCOTT

THE LOK DAL and the BJP, partners of the National Democratic Alliance, boycotted the joint session of Parliament. Later, Charan Singh and Atal Bihari Vajpayee led a procession of

55 members of Parliament to lodge their protest against the government's failure to maintain law and order and to protect the lives of innocent people in Punjab.

ISRAELI PLANE ATTACK

ISRAELI WARPLANES POUNDED targets in the rebel-held mountains east of Beirut for the third time this week as the Lebanese Army troops patrolled West Beirut, which was crippled by a general strike. Sporadic clashes continued along the green line separating Muslim West Beirut from the Christian eastern sector after a night of heavy shelling in which at least 15 persons were killed and 70 wounded.



Design of a subsidy

Targeted and upfront refill subsidy can help increase LPG usage in low-income households — a critical component of India’s energy transition



FARZANA AFRIDI AND PRABHAT BARNWAL

INCREASING LPG USAGE of low-income households is central to India’s energy transition. A revised version of the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), launched in August 2021, aimed to provide LPG access to an additional 10 million low-income households with one-time subsidies for a cooking stove and gas refill. The government has marked this programme as a flagship but it has also recognised that poor households are not using as much gas as expected. Before PMUY, 87 per cent of rural households used biomass to cook since biomass fuels like wood, charcoal, or dung are cheap or free. Since 2016, this proportion has come down significantly, but most rural households are still using biomass. Specifically, usage of LPG refills in PMUY families is only about half of that of non-PMUY homes.

India’s LPG refill subsidy policy has evolved rapidly: From a universal subsidy pegged to the market price pre-Covid, followed by no LPG refill subsidy in 2021, to a reintroduction of a fixed refill subsidy for only PMUY households in May 2022. The Pratyaksh Hanstantrit Labh (PAHAL) scheme for direct benefit transfer helped reduce the leakage of subsidised gas cylinders to the black market that had occurred when all households were eligible for heavy subsidies and diversion was rampant. However, when it comes to increasing the LPG refill take-up of low-income, PMUY households, the current design of PAHAL may not be adequate. Particularly, paying the full refill price (unsubsidised price) upfront makes it difficult for PMUY consumers, who face a “liquidity constraint”, to purchase refills regularly.

Can the design of the existing LPG refill subsidy programme be altered to provide LPG subsidies more effectively and yet be fiscally neutral?

Using the LPG refill consumption data of all three oil marketing companies for two years (2018 and 2019, when the LPG refill subsidy was universal and pegged to the market price, keeping the subsidised price constant) for the entire Indore district, we find that PMUY and non-PMUY consumers respond differently to the refill market prices. An increase in LPG refill MRP (unsubsidised market price) should not reduce refill purchase when the subsidy is deposited in the customer’s bank account later through PAHAL, but this is not true for PMUY consumers. Hence, even when the bank-deposited refill subsidy increases in tandem with the market price (until early 2020), the refill purchases of PMUY consumers falls.

The data show that low-income households are sensitive to the amount and timing of refill subsidy, even when the post-subsidy price of gas does not change. A Rs 100 increase in the per refill subsidy decreases monthly refill consumption by about 25 per cent for PMUY consumers. The likely reason is the liquidity constraint — if the subsidy is high, this means that there is a large gap between what the household has to pay upfront and the net price after the delayed refill subsidy transfer (after five-seven days of refill purchase).



C R Sasikumar

Our data indicate that the cash-back nature of the refill subsidy is a key factor behind low refill purchases by liquidity and credit-constrained PMUY households. In addition, households are not well informed about the timing and logistics of receiving subsidy transfers. Further, credit constraint, especially since PMUY consumers are more likely to earn their living on a daily or weekly basis, results in binding liquidity constraints.

It is, therefore, not only imperative to provide a substantive, targeted refill subsidy to PMUY households but also consider alternative designs of LPG refill subsidy that reduce the immediate cost of purchasing the refill. Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) is a case in point. The programme provided up to three free LPG refills to PMUY beneficiaries in 2020, between April 1, 2020 and December 31, 2020. PMUY beneficiaries were credited with the advance (upfront subsidy) for buying LPG refills. Our analysis shows a spike in PMUY average refills consumption in April 2020. At the same time, there was no change in non-PMUY consumption — almost wiping out the gap in refill consumption between PMUY and non-PMUY consumers. Moreover, we observe a 20 per cent increase in LPG usage among PMUY households even after this upfront subsidy ends in December 2020. This suggests that a substantive targeted and upfront subsidy may lead to habit formation and thereby a permanent increase in clean fuel take-up, thus allowing for quicker phasing out of the LPG refill subsidy programme.

How can we shift to an on-time subsidy transfer without leakage of benefits away from the intended beneficiary? There are two possible fin-tech-based solutions for reducing the temporary financial burden of the purchase of LPG refill and ensuring that low-income consumers do not have to pay the subsidy amount out of pocket.

Our data indicate that the cash-back nature of the refill subsidy is a key factor behind low refill purchases by liquidity and credit-constrained PMUY households. In addition, households are not well informed about the timing and logistics of receiving subsidy transfers. Further, credit constraint, especially since PMUY consumers are more likely to earn their living on a daily or weekly basis, results in binding liquidity constraints.

One, electronic payment of subsidy amount to the dealer/deliveryman at the point of refill purchase by PMUY consumer. A step for obtaining the consumer’s consent for this subsidy transfer can be embedded (for example, using an automated text or voice message over the phone). Upon confirmation of the subsidy transfer, both the delivery agent and consumer should receive a message notifying it, so that the delivery agent can’t charge more than the subsidised price.

Two, use digital rupee (e-RUPI). The recently launched, purpose-specific digital currency by the RBI fits particularly well, where a digital voucher worth the subsidy amount can be provided to PMUY users beforehand via SMS or QR code. At the time of refill purchase, the consumer will provide the digital voucher to the dealer/delivery man. Since the e-RUPI voucher can be restricted to the specific type of merchant (that is, OMC distributors) it addresses concerns about diversion of the subsidy by households. Alternatively, a RUPAY debit card (issued with Jan Dhan accounts) can be used for advance transfer of the refill subsidy.

Given that an upfront subsidy transfer can increase the demand for LPG refills significantly, it becomes important that the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas and Ministry of Finance combine digital technology with PAHAL and PMUY targeting. Considering the health and time-saving benefits, particularly for the women and children in low-income families, the benefits of removing the delay in subsidy transfer are likely to be huge, even without any increase in the fiscal burden.

Afridi is professor of economics at ISI Delhi and visiting professor at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto. Barnwal is assistant professor of economics at Michigan State University

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“As the Russia-Ukraine conflict approaches its second anniversary, need for peace talks becomes more urgent, and the international community should make every effort to end this bloody conflict... US and the West, who escalated this tragedy... must make greater efforts to bring about its end.” — GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

Big Uncle Xi

With no one in party or government to differ with him, Xi’s self-absorption may precipitate an economic collapse in China



RAM RAJYA BY RAM MADHAV

PEOPLE IN CHINA have just returned to work after a week-long annual Spring Festival celebration that started on February 10, marking the beginning of the Lunar New Year. In a rare public appearance, President Xi Jinping, who, according to the official Chinese media “highly values culture” and has “a profound understanding” of it, arrived at Ancient Culture Street, a Qing-era business street in Tianjin city, about an hour’s drive from Beijing, on the afternoon of February 1 to oversee the preparations for the festival. Walking along the antiquated surroundings, Xi stepped into shops and chatted with the overwhelmed shopkeepers.

Later, delivering his New Year message from the Great Hall in Beijing on February 8, Xi claimed that his government has “made solid progress” in building a “modern socialist country in all respects”.

In the Chinese zodiac, the incoming year is that of the dragon — it symbolises fire and fury and is the quintessence of hard power and ferocity. China has long identified with those qualities of dominance and authority. But Xi insisted that the Chinese dragon is “strong, fearless and benevolent” and embodies the spirit of pursuit of “self-improvement, hard work and enterprise of the Chinese nation for five thousand years”.

Many ordinary Chinese believe that the year of the dragon, which comes once in 12 years, is auspicious, and the children born that year will have better prospects in life. Many women plan to have deliveries during the dragon year. China is currently facing a serious demographic challenge with the median age going above 39 years as against India’s 29. The devastating effects of the “one-child norm”, introduced in the 1980s, continue to haunt China. In 2011, it had 13.27 births for every 1,000 population. Ten years later, that dwindled to 6.39 births. The government was compelled to revise the population policy in 2015 to allow two children, and in 2021, to three children per family. It is hoping that the dragon year will see a boom in childbirths in the country.

But demographics is not the only headache for Xi. The bigger one is about the economy.

Xi wears many hats today. He is the head of the state, head of military and also head of the Party. Inside the party, he heads many important committees, including those dealing with foreign policy, Taiwan, internet control, government restructuring, national security, police, secret police and even judiciary. He proved himself adept at successfully administering most of these departments.

But, to his chagrin, one department is proving to be a disaster — the economy. The Chinese economy, which experienced three decades of unrelenting GDP growth of above 10 per cent, is today struggling to maintain even half of it. Predicted not long ago by the IMF to overtake America by

2028, it is stuck in the spiral of deflation, shrinking markets, dwindling exports, and staggering bad debts.

Many experts blame Xi for this debacle. His paranoia about an imminent conflict with the West drove him to prioritise national security over the economy. A heady cocktail of economic inexperience and ideological overdrive resulted in reckless actions against big-tech companies, both domestic and international. Episodes involving real estate giant China Evergrande Group and Jack Ma of the successful Alibaba Group are examples of Xi’s malicious ways of functioning.

Premier Li Qiang, who led a big delegation to Davos earlier this month, claimed that China’s economy was growing at 5.2 per cent. But the situation on the streets of Shanghai, Beijing and other cities tells a different story. Shops and business establishments are empty as fears about economic downturn led to the world’s largest and most prosperous middle class shying away from domestic spending. Tens of thousands of employees heading home for the Spring Festival were told by their employers not to return. Unemployment rates are at an all-time high. All these indicate that the actual GDP growth may not be more than 1.2 — 1.5 per cent.

As the economic woes grow, Xi appears to be turning increasingly to Mao. When things were not going right, Mao decided to experiment with fanciful ideas like the Great Leap Forward in 1958, followed eight years later by the Cultural Revolution, resulting in disastrous consequences for the economy and humongous human suffering. As people suffer from the economic decline, Xi too is resorting to clumsy rhetoric.

“We have more deeply realised that building a strong country and realising national rejuvenation on all fronts through a Chinese path to modernisation is not only a bright road for the Chinese people to pursue a better and happy life but also a just way to promote world peace and development,” he pontificated.

Xi is doing one thing right though — continuing his iron grip over the party and the country. The Soviet communist leader Vladimir Lenin had once advised that “for the centre to actually direct the orchestra, it needs to know who plays the violin and where, who plays a false note and why”. Xi has gained such absolute control — the kind that never happened, even during Mao’s era. All the seven members of the Chinese Communist Party’s Standing Committee are loyalists of the leader.

A study conducted during Xi’s second year in office found that he was appearing in papers more than twice as often as his predecessors. The state news agency, Xinhua, adopted a nickname for the leader: “Xi Dada” — Big Uncle Xi. Thousands of art students applying to the Beijing University of Technology had been judged on their ability to sketch Xi’s portrait.

Xi assumes that all this is his strength. But tragically, it could be his weakness too. With no leader in the party and government to differ with him and offer valuable suggestions, this self-absorption may precipitate an economic collapse, leading to the same disastrous consequences that Mao had inflicted on the hapless citizens in the form of famines, plagues and purges seven decades ago.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

UNEASY COALITION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Crown of thorns’ (IE, February 23). Manipulating an election outcome is not something new for the army generals in Pakistan. But what is different this time is the army’s attempts to counter Imran Khan’s popularity through devious means. That the second and third runner-ups of the race have decided to bury their differences and come together to keep the winner out is likely to have repercussions. Somehow back in power, Shehbaz Sharif and his government have to tackle wide-ranging problems. Whether he, as the head of an uneasy coalition, can do it is anybody’s guess.

Vijai Pant, Hempur

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Crown of thorns’ (IE, February 23). Pakistan’s election has produced a peculiar situation. After prolonged parleys, Shehbaz Sharif of PML-N will be the prime minister with only 75 seats and PPP with 54 seats will extend support from outside. This coalition is not a guarantee of a stable government. Pakistan is in a precarious economic state with heavy debt. Peace is elusive at the borders with Afghanistan, Iran and India. Under these circumstances, the Pakistan PM must endeavour to establish peace within the country and on the borders. Only in a peaceful environment is economic progress possible.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi

VOICE OF A NATION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Like a friend’ (IE, February 22). Songs were pivotal to the success of films in those days and Ameen Sayani’s shows gave them a platform. His voice was the sole reason for the show’s longevity for 42 years, and the free-flowing style of conversation is what we eagerly waited for every week. He hosted over 54,000 radio shows and 19,000 commercial spots in his six-decade-long career. At the peak of his stardom, he would get 65,000 letters per week. The 1977 film Kinara’s song ‘Meri awaaz hi pehchaan hai’ is as much related to the late Lata ji as it would be to Ameen Sayani sahab.

Bal Govind, Noida

COURT’S TASK

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘A long institutional road’ (IE, February 23). It is a shame that it needed the highest court in the land to point out the brazenness of the Chandigarh mayoral polls episode. But what else can be expected when toppling elected governments is applauded and touted as Chanakya-neeti rather than a subversion of democracy. One looks up to the SC to uphold the spirit of democracy, beyond just maintaining a facade which suits the political order. It would also be great to see a judicial restraint on the rampant use of government agencies.

Rahul Gaur, Gurgaon



THIERRY MATHOU AND PHILIPP ACKERMANN

Two years on, elusive peace

Only one side in the Russia-Ukraine conflict is committed to finding a solution

TWO YEARS AGO, to the day, President Vladimir Putin launched an unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine with far-reaching, dramatic consequences. Consequences for the Ukrainian people who have been valiantly resisting the invasion and facing Russia’s indiscriminate attacks against civilian targets. Consequences also for the rest of the world. As underscored in the France-India Joint Statement of January 26, the entire world has to endure the economic and food security impact of the war, with developing and least developed countries suffering the most. Why must poorer countries pay the price of Russia’s misguided invasion?

Two years ago, President Putin thought he could march into Kyiv and take Ukraine by force, in pursuit of his imperialist vision. Two years later, it is increasingly obvious that Russia has already suffered defeats in many ways. It has failed to prevail over a smaller and weaker country. European and Euro-Atlantic alliances have only grown stronger, with Sweden and Finland joining NATO.

Both Germany and France have recently underscored their strong bilateral support for Ukraine. On February 16, both Chancellor Olaf Scholz and President Emmanuel Macron signed security agreements with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy

for the next 10 years, with very significant announcements of additional military aid in 2024. The European Union has opened accession negotiations with Ukraine. At the United Nations, 143 countries have condemned Russia’s war. The human, military, economic, and diplomatic toll for Russia keeps mounting.

France and Germany, together with their European partners and the EU, will continue to provide unwavering support to the Ukrainian people’s right to self-defence. We are clear-sighted on what is at stake in Ukraine, and that is why our support will not falter. Taking place in Europe, this conflict is obviously crucial for European security. But its repercussions matter well beyond Europe. What is at stake on the battlefields of Ukraine is a simple question: Can a powerful country annex its weaker neighbour by force? The answer to this question will define international peace and security in this century. It will determine whether we plunge into an “era of war”. A Russian victory in Ukraine would only encourage imperialist appetites across the world. It would mean greater insecurity in every region.

No responsible nation wishes to live in a world where might makes right and where a stronger neighbour can violate interna-

tional borders by force. It is the opposite of a world where international life obeys a set of fundamental principles. Germany and France are determined to uphold the basic principles of the United Nations Charter wherever they are undermined: We defend them as forcefully in Europe as we do in the Indo-Pacific. And we do so together with key strategic partners such as India. India is a major, responsible power that has both the capacity and the willingness to step up in defence of the rule of law. The world needs India’s voice to carry louder.

That is why France and Germany supported the Indian G20 Presidency’s push for ambitious language on the conditions for peace in Ukraine. As stated in the New Delhi G20 Leaders’ Declaration, peace in Ukraine must be “comprehensive, just, and durable” and “uphold all the purposes and principles of the UN Charter”. Only if these principles are respected, can peace in Ukraine keep the spectre of an “era of war” away.

Unfortunately, that is not Russia’s position so far. What Moscow calls “negotiation” is actually a maximalist call for Ukraine’s surrender and the annexation of its territories, in complete contradiction to the principles of international law. This is because President Vladimir Putin, in his own words, fundamen-

tally denies the very right of Ukraine to exist as an independent nation. This is no path to negotiation and peace.

In contrast, Kyiv has put forward a 10-point peace plan, based on the principles of the UN Charter, to bring about a just and durable end to the war. And Ukraine has strived to associate as many countries as possible to chart a way to peace: From Copenhagen to Jeddah, Malta, and, more recently, Davos, there are now more than 80 countries from all continents, including India, involved in these talks. Ukraine has also made it possible to ensure a grain corridor out of its ports in the Black Sea, thus mitigating the global food security impact, despite Russia cancelling the Black Sea Grain Initiative. It is clear on which side the real commitment to peace and diplomacy lies. Russia, however, seems to have chosen to slide further towards a dead end, although it is in Moscow’s hands to end its invasion. The situation is difficult. But two years after the Russian aggression, we must more than ever support all efforts to find a pathway to peace.

Mathou is Ambassador of France to India and Ackermann is Ambassador of Germany to India

Russia-Ukraine war, two years on

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine completes two years, taking stock of some key questions, of the present and the future, around the European war that has impacted the world in multiple ways — where does the war stand, and where is it headed?

EXPERT EXPLAINS



NANDAN UNNIKRISHNAN

ON FEBRUARY 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Two years later, an end to the biggest war in Europe since World War II is nowhere in sight. The fighting has displaced millions of Ukrainians, altered the geopolitical landscape of Europe, and hit economies around the world by disrupting supply chains, adding to inflation, and triggering great economic uncertainty.

On the second anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine, where does the war stand, and how far have the two sides — Russia and Ukraine, backed by the West — met their main objectives?

When the war started, perhaps the whole world expected Russia to quickly overrun Ukrainian defences and occupy the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv. At the beginning of February 2022, then Chairman of the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley reportedly told congressional leaders that in the event of a full-scale Russian invasion, Ukraine could collapse in 72 hours. It is now two years since the invasion began — and the Ukrainians have kept the Russian forces at bay and defended their country with a lot of resolve.

However, the momentum in the war today rests with Russia. The Ukrainian forces are feeling an acute shortage of equipment and manpower. Russia, on the other hand, has been able to successfully readjust and readapt their tactics to the new kind of war that is being fought. And most importantly, it has been able to protect its economy from Western sanctions. Today, the Russian economy is actually booming. This is something the West did not expect.

What exactly do you mean by a “new” kind of war?

This is not the kind of blitzkrieg that, let’s say, we have seen the Americans do in Iraq, Afghanistan, and in other places, where there’s a shock-and-awe element — send a lot of airplanes, missiles, take out the enemy’s air defences, and then march in triumphantly and take over the country.

In Ukraine, the Russians met with a fairly resolute defence. And when they realised that this was going to be a longer war, they readjusted their tactics to that assessment.

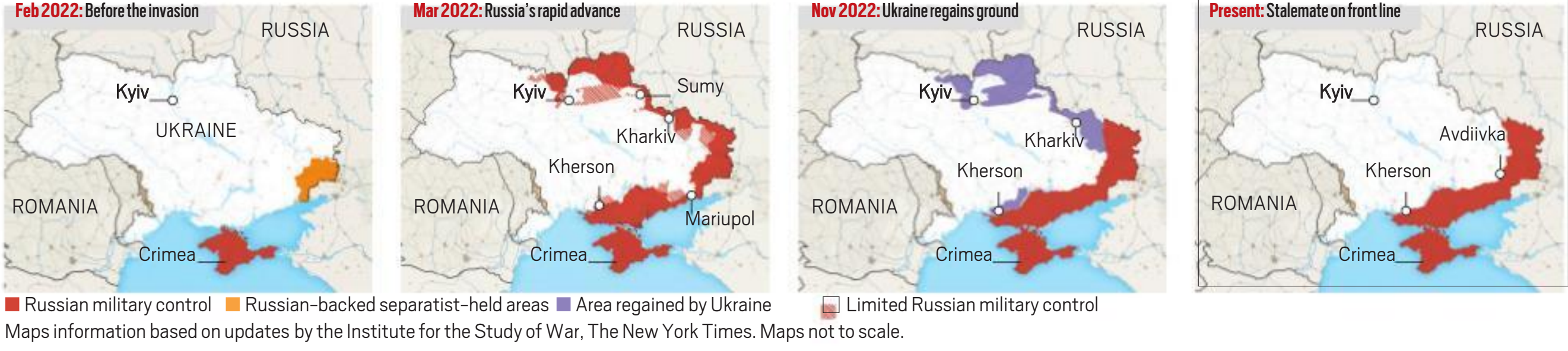
One example is that of drones. Ukrainian drones initially had very significant successes. The Russians understood that — and not only did they adopt the use of drones themselves, they also found ways to defend against drones. So occasionally, a drone will still go deep inside Russia, but they are not able to inflict the kind of damage that they did in the first few months of the war.

To Europe, Russia appears more menacing today, while it itself remains dependent on the US for security. Donald Trump has said he won’t help countries that don’t spend on their defence. What’s in store for the trans-Atlantic military compact, within and outside the NATO framework?

There is no immediate challenge to the trans-Atlantic framework. NATO is not going to be shaken. If anything, NATO has been strengthened by Russia’s actions. New countries like Finland and Sweden have joined NATO, and the length of Russia’s border with NATO has in fact increased.

However, the war has impacted the economies of Europe, and so, politics is beginning to kick in. In some places, far-right

THE WAR IN UKRAINE, IN FOUR MAPS



RUSSIAN ADVANCE, UKRAINIAN COUNTEROFFENSIVES, & STALEMATE

PRELUDE

(April 2021-Feb 2022)

From April 2021, Russia began to build up forces in Crimea and on the Ukraine border. The West was highly critical, but most experts did not believe that Russia would ultimately start a war. By February 2022, 190,000 Russian troops were massed at the Ukraine border.

INITIAL MONTHS OF THE INVASION

(Feb-July 2022)

Russia launched the invasion with air strikes on major Ukrainian cities and a three-pronged ground invasion from the south, east, and north. In mid-March, Russian forces encountered stubborn resistance around Kyiv; March saw the highest civilian casualties of the war. After Russia had pulled out from Kyiv by April 6, evidence of summary executions, torture, and rape emerged from the suburb of Bucha. On April 14, Ukraine struck a massive symbolic blow by sinking the *Moskva*, the flagship of Russia’s Black Sea fleet.

On April 18, Russia launched an offensive in the east. Mariupol fell on May 20. By month-end, Russia controlled all Ukrainian Black Sea ports except Odesa.

Through June, Russia gained ground in Luhansk province. Meanwhile, the Russian naval blockade of Ukraine had caused a global food crisis. On July 22, Moscow and Kyiv signed the Black Sea Grain Initiative to allow the free movement of grain ships from Russia-controlled Ukrainian ports. By the end of the month, all of the eastern province of Luhansk was in Russian hands.



Buildings destroyed by a Russian missile near Avdiivka, on February 19. Reuters

UKRAINE FIGHTS BACK

(Aug-Dec 2022)

During this phase, the heaviest fighting was in southern Ukraine. There were fears of a nuclear disaster after the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant was caught in the crossfire. On August 29, Ukraine launched its first counter-offensive, in the Kharkiv region, and made some surprising gains. In September, Putin ordered partial mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of reservists. The Nord Stream pipeline was sabotaged on September 26.

On October 8, a large explosion badly damaged the Kerch Strait bridge on the major supply route for Russian forces in Ukraine. Russia responded with missile and drone strikes on

Ukrainian cities and infrastructure. Through the last three months of 2022, Ukraine retook significant territory in Kharkiv and cut off important Russian supply lines. Russia withdrew across the Dnipro river, as Ukraine took back Kherson. By the end of the year, only 14 per cent of Ukraine still remained under Russian control.

A BLOODY STALEMATE

(Jan-May 2023)

In January, several NATO countries promised tanks to Ukraine, which asked for fighter jets as well — a request that is yet to be granted. The war entered a stalemate, with both sides incurring massive costs for small gains. The Battle of Bakhmut was

symbolic of the high-cost, low-gain situation. After the Wagner private militia suffered heavy losses, tensions mounted between Wagner and Russian regulars. Meanwhile, Putin announced plans to “take all of Donbas” by March.

Bakhmut fell on May 20. The Russians suffered close to 100,000 casualties, including 20,000 deaths, according to US estimates.

SUMMER COUNTEROFFENSIVE

(June-Nov 2023)

An uptick in military activity around June 8, signalled the start of Ukraine’s counteroffensive. On June 24, the Wagner Group mutinied, captured Russian cities, and started to march towards Moscow. However, it was put down in 36 hours, with Belarus’s President Aleksander Lukashenko brokering a deal.

By November, it was clear that the stated objective of the counter-offensive (to liberate all of Ukraine) would not be achieved. Ukrainians faced heavy casualties, and suffered heavy material losses. At the same time, support for Ukraine seemed to be dwindling in the West.

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

(Dec 2023-present)

With Kyiv under pressure, Russia launched a spate of missile and drone attacks. Ground operations continued as well. On February 16, Russia captured the town of Avdiivka, its most significant territorial gain in more than nine months.

ARJUN SENGUPTA

anced position when the war started, and for refusing to join the chorus of condemnation of Russia. And while the war affected global supply chains and commodity prices, in some areas, India benefited.

One, India had sudden access to cheap Russian oil, which the Russians sold to India in large quantities and at a great discount. So it was able to withstand any shock of an oil price rise. Oil is a very sensitive issue for India because it imports 90 per cent of its domestic consumption.

India has also managed to maintain fairly good links on both sides. When the war started, India was able to get Indian students out of Ukraine safely. And recently, there have been visits by Ukrainian ministers to India.

Of course, historically, India has much stronger links with Russia. And that is likely to continue.

How has the war impacted China, which announced a “friendship without limits” with Russia?

The China-Russia relationship is stronger today, and trade has gone up too. China benefited by buying a lot of Russian crude, available, presumably, at a discount.

In strategic terms, China has been a gainer, because the US has been distracted. What is happening in Ukraine and now in Gaza keeps the US away from the Indo-Pacific and its containment policy of China, which Beijing would be quite happy about.

Had the US not been distracted, what would it have done regarding China?

While the concrete plans are difficult to lay out, the United States would probably have undertaken steps to squeeze China militarily, maybe by supplying arms to Taiwan. Today, if the Chinese decide to move against Taiwan, would the United States have the capacity to fight a third war? Not that I think China is interested in militarily moving against Taiwan — but I think the Taiwanese would be looking for that kind of reassurance.

The second would be a greater focus on economic policy. The US has announced the desire to try and restrict the kind of technologies that go to China, but there is no consensus on that yet. For example, they still need to convince the Europeans to fully subscribe to that policy.

Two years of war later, how could the third year turn out? When might the war end, and how?

It is unlikely that Russia intends to take over all of Ukraine. So the question would be to try and understand what the Russians would consider to be a victory, and what such a victory would mean for the Americans and for Ukraine.

Second, I do not expect any peace talks to take place this year at least. If anything [like peace talks] starts, it will be next year.

At present, Ukraine’s peace plans and Russia’s peace plans are in contradiction. Ukraine’s peace plans are fundamentally premised on a return to the 1991 border, which is not acceptable to Russia. Russia incorporated Crimea in 2014 and, more recently, it has taken large chunks of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, Mykolayiv, and Zaporizhzhia. The Russians are not likely to accept any negotiation on these territories.

However, Putin has said that he is willing to negotiate. I suspect the Russians feel negotiations will only be meaningful if the Americans are involved in them. The Russian story is that this is a proxy war with the West, with NATO. So if at all negotiations are to be held, NATO would have to be present.

Nandan Unnikrishnan is a Distinguished Fellow at Observer Research Foundation, and one of India’s foremost experts on Russia. He spoke to *Yashree*.

EXPLAINED LAW

Donor gametes are allowed: what the new rule on surrogacy says

ANONNA DUTT
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 23

THE CENTRE amended the surrogacy Rules on Wednesday to allow couples to use donor eggs or donor sperm for surrogacy. This overturned a previous amendment made in March 2023 that banned the use of donor gametes.

The new notification states: “In case when the District Medical Board certifies that either husband or wife constituting the intending couple suffers from medical condition necessitating use of donor gamete, then surrogacy using donor gamete is allowed.”

While the relaxation is for “intending couple”, the notification said that if a divorced or widowed woman opts for surrogacy, the egg has to come from the mother: “Single woman (widow or divorcee) undergoing surrogacy must use self-eggs and donor sperms to avail surrogacy procedure.”

What are the implications of this amendment?

Prior to the March 2023 notification — which insisted on the use of both eggs and sperm from the intending couple — surro-

gacy rules allowed the use of donor eggs, but not sperm.

The March 2023 notification was challenged in the Supreme Court by a woman with Mayer-Rokitansky-Kuster-Hauser (MRKH) Syndrome, a rare congenital disorder that affects the reproductive system and can cause infertility.

Experts said the new amendment will keep surrogacy open to older women as well as those who cannot produce eggs because of certain medical conditions. “The women who opt for surrogacy are likely to be older, having tried other methods of getting pregnant before considering surrogacy. This is the reason some of them would need a donor egg. This is a very positive decision,” Dr Anjali Malpani, an IVF specialist from Mumbai, said.

The quality and number of eggs go down with age, Dr Malpani said. While the decline accelerates after the age of 35 years, doctors recommend definitely using a donor egg after the age of 45 years.

Dr Nutan Agarwal, head of the department of gynaecology at Artemis Hospital, said the need for donor eggs and surrogacy will arise in very few women.

“Surrogacy with donor egg will be re-

quired only for women who do not have a uterus — or have conditions that affect the functioning of the uterus — along with certain conditions affecting their ability to produce eggs,” Dr Agarwal, who was formerly a professor at AIIMS, said.

“This happens mainly in women with gonadal dysgenesis — congenital conditions that affect the entire reproductive functioning,” she said.

Dr Malpani said: “Less than 1% of women dealing with infertility would require both a donor egg and surrogacy. As it is, surrogacy is required by very few — maybe 2 out of 100

patients who come to me.”

What are the contentions with surrogacy for single women?

The Act allows access to surrogacy only to two categories of single women — those who are widowed or divorced. Even in these cases, the regulations stipulate that the woman’s own eggs have to be used; this was underlined by the recent notification as well.

These provisions have been challenged in the Delhi High Court by a 44-year-old unmarried woman. The petitioner has questioned the association of marital status with



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Reduce the exits

To attract enough growth capital, India must help MNCs operate in a conducive environment

NEARLY 11 YEARS ago, in May 2013, Unilever announced the buyback of a 22.5% stake in Hindustan Unilever at a hefty 20% premium to the last traded price, resulting in an inflow of \$5.4 billion. There were several other buyback offers around the same time—the fact that many multinational companies (MNCs) bought back shares to try and raise their ownership level to 75% signalled their confidence in the large and lucrative Indian market. Of late, however, there have been several instances of MNCs quitting India or scaling down their stake in their India subsidiaries. Last week, Novartis AG, the Swiss pharmaceutical company, said that it has begun a strategic review that will include an “assessment” of its 70.68% stake in Novartis India. Exactly three months ago, Astra Geneca announced it was exiting India as part of a global strategic review.

The biggest of such exits was the Holcim group’s sale of ACC and Ambuja Cement to the Adani group for \$6.4 billion in September, 2022. Given India’s very promising growth story, it was surprising that Holcim wanted to exit, even though the official reason the group gave was its keenness to lower its carbon footprint. The exits from what is arguably the world’s fastest-growing market suggests not every global corporation is necessarily enticed by the Indian opportunity. While consumer-oriented MNCs in India have done exceptionally well as have those in the engineering and automobile spaces, the list of casualties is not small. Many telecom ventures were compelled to shut shop due to an unreliable regulatory environment. So, while a Maruti has been a roaring success, Vodafone, which has invested billions, is in bad shape. Again, CarreFour decided to wind down its operations after a short stint though some of that was due to its own internal problems. Many other pharma giants such as Pfizer, Sanofi, and GSK have either trimmed manpower or trimmed operations in core functions.

Some of the exits or downscaling are for internal reasons. For example, one can appreciate that Citigroup sold off its retail portfolio in India as part of a larger global re-organisation aimed at making the operations simpler. It is also entirely possible that some, like Whirlpool, which has brought down its stake from 75% to 51%, or a Thomas Cook which has pared its stake to 64% from 72%, are trimming their ownership as they want the stock to become more liquid. That is good news for local investors. If some are offering more floating stock, that helps minority shareholders.

However, one hopes these stake sales are not aimed at driving up the share price before a total exit. At a time when India is looking to attract foreign direct investments (FDI), the environment must be conducive. The fact is FDI in India has fallen over the past year even though the bullishness on the country’s prospects has increased. Net foreign investment in the year through September fell to \$13 billion, calculations from HSBC Holdings showed, from \$38 billion in the same period a year earlier. The PLI (performance linked incentive) scheme has attracted players like Apple, which is encouraging. But global corporations should be enabled to operate big businesses in the country, across sectors, in a stable regulatory environment. Importantly, the playing field should be level. Else, India may not be able to attract enough growth capital.

Rivian's expensive EVs can't find reverse gear

I’VE ALWAYS HAD a soft spot for Rivian Automotive Inc. The California-based EV manufacturer has an exciting brand, and its tech-laden vehicles are very compelling — provided heavy, insanely quick trucks and sport-utility vehicles are your thing. But its results this week were hard to admire. Having eaten through more than \$18 billion since 2019, the company still managed to lose more than \$40,000 on each vehicle sold in the fourth-quarter (and that’s before considering huge research, administrative and selling expenses).

The stock sank by 26% on Thursday, cutting its market capitalization to a record low of \$11 billion — which is less than the sum it raised via a blockbuster initial public offering in 2021. The despair reflects the fact that Rivian can’t find reverse gear; salvation appears to lie only in plowing ahead and spending billions more.

Elements of what makes Rivian so impressive — the fact that much of its technology is developed in-house (at great expense), and it builds vehicles itself, rather than outsourcing — have become big liabilities.

Investors hoped its high fixed costs would be absorbed by increasing vehicle output — in other words, spreading the burden over larger volumes. So this week’s guidance of unchanged production in 2024 was a big blow. While the targeted output of just 57,000 vehicles reflects a planned shutdown of the Illinois factory for various improvements, the slowdown may also point to weaker demand for its vehicles that cost in excess of \$70,000.

Rivian will have to find other levers to curtail losses. Raising prices looks challenging given high interest rates and pricing pressure in EVs, hence its focus is on reducing engineering and purchasing costs, while boosting production efficiency.

Falling battery metal prices should help, as might the 10% workforce reduction announced this week. But I don’t blame investors for being skeptical about its ambition to reach achieve positive gross margins by the end of 2024.

Profitable auto industry incumbents are tapping the brakes on their EV plans, and many of them have production lines that can churn out combustion engine models instead, depending on demand. Pure EV companies don’t have this luxury, of course.

Indeed, in some areas, Rivian is having to spend more. For starters, the company’s depleting order backlog requires that it find new customers by investing in showrooms and test drives. (As fellow EV neophyte Lucid Group Inc. has discovered, it isn’t enough to build attractive vehicles, if buyers don’t know about them.)

But its main focus is on a lower-priced midsize SUV, called the R2, which it hopes will transform it from a low-volume, premium automaker into one with mass-market appeal. The R2 will be unveiled next month but won’t go into production until 2026, at a new plant in Georgia. Groundbreaking on the \$5 billion factory begins soon.

On a superficial level, it seems insane to build a second plant when the EV market is slowing and the first site doesn’t make money. While I share Rivian’s conviction that the auto market will electrify eventually and that its new plant should be more efficient (due to lessons learned), its determination to keep expanding is quite the bet.

The company’s \$9.4 billion cash pile sounds impressive but at the current rate of consumption, it will be cut in half by the end of this year. Analysts don’t expect Rivian to become profitable until 2029, before which it could lose another \$15 billion or so, according to their estimates compiled by *Bloomberg*. So there’s no question Rivian will have to raise capital at some point and an equity raise would now be highly dilutive (Rivian has also issued convertible bonds in the past).

During a call with analysts, Chief Executive Officer Robert Scaringe was asked whether a more protracted shift to EVs and the brutal pricing environment might require a rethink of Rivian’s cash-consuming strategy. (Cost-sharing partnerships are a big trend in the automotive world.)

But beyond staggering the Georgia investment into two chunks, his response seemed to be that the R2 will save the day. I’m sure it will be another impressive vehicle but his answer was also a reflection of the corner Rivian has backed itself into.



CAUTIOUS AGREEMENTS
Union minister for commerce & industry Piyush Goyal

India does not rush to conclude trade negotiations and follows a careful and calibrated approach because Free Trade Agreements impact the country for several years

GLOBAL TRADE

MC13 COULD TACKLE APPELLATE BODY STALEMATE, PLURILATERAL TRADE DEALS, AND FISHERIES SUBSIDIES

WTO Ministerial: What is at stake

THE 13TH MINISTERIAL Conference (MC13) of the WTO is scheduled from February 26-29, 2024. At Abu Dhabi What is at stake at this edition?

Dispute settlement

The most critical issue on the agenda of MC 13 is the restoration of the Appellate Body (AB), envisaged in the WTO Agreement as the second tier of the dispute settlement system. The AB became non-functional about four years ago as a result of targeted action by the US to block nominations for appointment to vacancies due to retirements. Without the AB, the dispute settlement system of the WTO has ceased to be automatic and binding. As a result, it can now neither assure preservation of the rights and obligations of members nor serve to provide security and predictability of the multilateral trading system. There is a virtual return to the GATT era, when negotiations between parties played a major role and power-play prevailed in the settlement of disputes. In order to justify its action, the US launched a severe criticism of the functioning of the AB, but for a long time refused to participate in discussions to address its shortcomings. It was finally agreed at MC 12 that discussions would be held with a view to having ‘a fully and well-functioning dispute settlement system’ by 2024. Discussions have indeed been held and suggestions given on some aspects of dispute settlement procedures but with a few days to go before MC 13, there is no recommendation at all on the AB in the Abu Dhabi package put up to ministers. Now, the US is saying that the mandate is to conclude the talks by the year-end.

Negotiating function

The negotiation function of the WTO, particularly on rule-making, has been sluggish from the outset. With diverse economic situations and dif-

ferences in stages of development among members, slow progress in concluding trade agreements is inevitable. However, decision-making by consensus, a legacy from the GATT days, makes the task doubly difficult. Many members have been looking at the possibility of making progress by sidestepping consensus and adopting open plurilateral agreements (OPAs), where a subset of members accounting for a substantial

proportion of world trade decide to go ahead without waiting for all members to join. Doors remain open for the remaining WTO members to join later; irrespective of their participation, they get all the benefits. Precedents for OPAs have existed since the GATT days and in the WTO, but a group of members led by India and South Africa are firmly opposed to such agreements, as they consider the initiative to be inconsistent with WTO obligations. Meanwhile, there is growing momentum in favour of negotiating OPAs. Agreements have been given a final shape among large groups of members on Services Domestic Regulation and Investment Facilitation for Development. Can the opponents be persuaded at MC13 to show flexibility and support open multilateralism? The draft Abu Dhabi package hints very cautiously at the idea by talking of flexible, constructive, or responsible consensus. If the ministers are agreeable, OPAs can help to revitalise the

negotiating function.

Agriculture

At MC11 and MC12, ministers shied away from any substantive outcome on negotiations in agriculture. It appears that MC13 will be no different. Wide differences prevail among major players (the EU, the US, Cairns Group, G33, and G10) on the level of ambition to be aimed at for reduction commitments to be undertaken in negotiations. On the priority issue of public stockholding (PSH) for food security, the US and the Cairns Group maintain that finding a permanent solution can be possible only within the context of domestic support negotiations. The Abu Dhabi text does not reflect any agreed modalities for reduction of support and protection. At

MC 13, ministers will do little more than suggest that members try to reach an agreement on modalities by MC 14.

Fisheries

Buoyed by the success in adopting the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies at MC 12, the WTO members have now engaged in the second phase for negotiating additional disciplines on the types of fisheries subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing. The draft text seeks to list subsidy practices that would be presumed to contribute to overcapacity or overfishing and is, therefore, prohibited. However, the listed subsidies would be permissible if measures are implemented

Can opponents be persuaded at MC13 to support open multilateralism? The draft Abu Dhabi package hints cautiously at the idea

Pilgrimage commerce and sustainability



RAMEESH KAILASAM

CEO, Indiatech.org

AYODHYA, A PLACE deeply woven into India’s cultural and religious tapestry, is attracting millions of devotees from domestically and internationally, creating a convergence of spirituality and pilgrimage commerce. Ayodhya is still, I would say, in the greenfield category when it comes to pilgrimage tourism and has the luxury of establish practices and infrastructure to keep it environmentally sustainable. Many leading brands have already stepped in, to support various activities besides reinforcing the necessary supply lines to keep up with the pace of pouring pilgrims. There is a unique opportunity to transform Ayodhya into a sustainable model city and the administration seems to be actively involved in addressing the potential environmental impact of the increased footfall post inauguration of the Ram Mandir.

The city has become a magnet for various brands, with several leveraging the moment, marketing their initiatives to align themselves and the immense branding opportunities and potential for new business in the times to come. Global brokerage firm Jefferies estimates a footfall of around five crore people annually and to navigate this influx, a collaboration between the government and the corporate sector is crucial in establishing the new Ayodhya as a model sustainable city. As Ayodhya embarks on its journey to become a sustainable city, it requires solutions on multiple aspects. Emerging startups like Tinge of Green have proposed

various steps in this regard to address environment, air quality, water conservation, cleaning the Sarayu river, waste management, community engagement for sustainability, green homestays, and even recycling flowers and offerings. Ideally, such an effort should be taken up in all pilgrimage tourist spots with heavy footfall.

We can pick up, learn from, and collaborate with many Indian businesses that have successfully implemented these so various steps in this regard to address environment, air quality, water conservation, cleaning the Sarayu river, waste management, community engagement for sustainability, green homestays, and even recycling flowers and offerings. Ideally, such an effort should be taken up in all pilgrimage tourist spots with heavy footfall.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his ‘Mann ki Baat’ address in 2018, mentioned the need for the country to emulate The Punyam Poonkavanam initiative at Sabarimala to promote cleanliness

environmentally-friendly alternative to traditional plastics and poly films.

In Ayodhya, substantial efforts are underway to manage solid waste efficiently, with a solid waste plant near completion. India’s largest flexible packaging and solutions company, Uflex, provides a good model for recycling through innovative technologies, as it has established industrial facilities for recycling MLP (multi-layer mixed plastic) waste and has recently made strides in enzyme-based delamination and recycling technology designed specifically for aseptic packaging. Another example of recycling is the Hyundai Motor India Foundation’s (HMIF) initiative of utilising factory waste, upcycling 43,370 benches and desk sets. This has benefited 331 schools and 433,000

school children and thus serves as an example of sustainable practices and waste management that can act as a potential blueprint for Ayodhya’s waste recycling initiatives. Initiatives from startups like Shayna Ecouinified Private Limited, which is working with various cities to convert plastic waste into walking tiles in pavements, bins, and seating furniture for parks, is worthy of a men-

tion.

One of the major waste management challenges stems from the lack of widespread sorting at the source. Ayodhya could possibly adopt ITC’s Well-being Out of Waste (WOW) programme that aims to raise awareness about source segregation, recycling, reusing, and implementing effective waste management systems. This programme has collected 64,000 metric tonnes of dry waste across 1,270 wards in various cities and districts across the country with a participation of 2.2 crore citizens from more than 55 lakh households and approximately 2,100 corporates.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his ‘Mann ki Baat’ address in 2018, mentioned the need for the country to emulate The Punyam Poonkavanam initiative at Sabarimala to promote cleanliness. He commended the efforts undertaken by volunteers and staff engaged in keeping the Lord Ayyappa Temple and its surroundings clean. At the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), PM Modi announced Mission LIFE to bring individual behaviours at the forefront of the global climate action narrative and strive to replace the ‘use-and-dispose’ economy driven by mindless and destructive consumption with a circular economy. It is therefore the responsibility of pilgrims to ensure that the *punya* they earn upon visiting the temple and holy city is retained by them being responsible and behaving in an ecologically conscious way.

all communication on earth, there could be military applications that could strengthen the hands of the enemies. It would be good if the government takes the Opposition into confidence and considers its inputs. At least on the issue of commercialising the potential of the space sector, no politics should be involved.

—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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Democracy will never be supplanted by a republic of experts—and that is a very good thing

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

— Ramnath Goenka

CENTRAL BANK WORK ON LOWERING PRICES IN DELICATE BALANCE

THE Reserve Bank of India appears to be in its final leg of bringing inflation to heel. Though headline inflation is showing steady signs of easing, the central bank's six-member Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) is steadfast on retaining repo rate at 6.5 percent as any "premature move (to cut rates) may undermine the success achieved so far". As we navigate the 'last mile' of disinflation, the policy imperative is to ensure a durable decline in price rise and aligning not just headline, but also core inflation, to the 4 percent target. If declining global commodity prices and higher government capex are positive signs for growth, the government's fiscal consolidation drive will help lower inflationary pressures and the evolving trajectory of current account deficit suggest that India is well placed in terms of macro-financial stability.

That said, consumption demand revival holds the key in sustaining the current growth momentum, which in turn depends on falling unemployment and rising household income. As it is, private consumption, which accounts for 57 percent of the GDP, continues to suffer due to elevated food inflation, particularly in rural areas. High inflation erodes purchasing power, especially among the low-income brackets; so restoring price stability is non-negotiable. While a tight monetary policy lowers high inflation, it is important to minimise the output costs of disinflation during the process. As such, the current real interest rate of 2 percent (repo rate adjusted for year-ahead inflation projections) "creates the very real risk of turning growth pessimism into a self-fulfilling prophecy", and hence the MPC's external member Prof Jayanth R Varma, the lone dissenter, is battling for a 0.25 percentage point rate cut.

While the government's ongoing prudent fiscal policy certainly helps anchor the long-term inflation expectations of market participants, the implications of the elevated food inflation to the overall pricing pressures and its volatile nature are hard to miss. Which is why, the majority of the MPC is firm on sticking to a tight monetary policy to rein in household inflation expectations and arrive at the 4 percent target. As we navigate disinflation, RBI's caution and conservatism are welcome. At the same time, the central bank also has to undertake the most difficult job of ensuring that it does not move too soon or wait too long to cut rates.

PREVENT HOME BIRTHS WITHOUT SKILLED HELP

IT was a case of YouTube inspiration gone wrong. A 36-year-old woman and her newborn died in the capital of Kerala following a botched-up home birth, which her husband allegedly tried to carry out with the help of childbirth tips on YouTube. The police have arrested the victim's husband, who insisted on denying his wife modern institutional care, on charges of murder and Penal Code section 315 (act done with intent to prevent child being born alive or to cause it to die after birth). A detailed probe has been ordered to look into the complicity of others, particularly his first wife, who apparently assisted the failed delivery with the help of acupuncture techniques.

That two lives were lost despite the intervention of the state machinery makes the matter more complicated. It is learnt that ASHA workers and ward councillors had repeatedly requested the husband to take the victim to the hospital as she had had three caesarean births. A doctor from the district medical office visiting them had insisted on institutional care. But the husband apparently refused to heed the advice and even prevented other health workers from entering the home. As Health Minister Veena George rightly said, the mother and child consigned to death by the husband is a "serious crime".

Institutional deliveries have been rising steadily across the country; the current national average of home births is only 4.5 percent. It must be noted with pride that maternal mortality has also come down in the country. That two lives were lost in a state that is one of the best performers on institutional births, and maternal and infant mortality, is shameful. The state government must take serious note that the trend of opting for riskier home births is on the rise, thanks to misinformation spread through social media about the benefits of 'natural' childbirth and fear-mongering on C-sections. According to the health department, 266 home births happened in Malappuram district alone in 2022-23. Patriarchal mindsets also play a role and women often have no say in these matters. The government must also put under scanner those institutions which facilitate these births by offering traditional midwives and hold them accountable. Childbirth at home without skilled care is a public health issue and must be prevented at all costs.

QUICK TAKE

LIFTING BRAIN FOG

MOST of us know somebody or other complaining of a post-Covid brain fog, whose symptoms range from increased forgetfulness to difficulties in concentrating. A new study published in *Nature Neuroscience* says it could be caused by a leaky blood-brain barrier. If abnormalities occur in the lining of blood vessels in the brain, it can wreak havoc by driving changes in neural functions. Other scientists in the field have called for a larger study on this vital lead given by Trinity College Dublin researchers. Given that this phenomenon directly affects work, it may be time for large employers to sponsor research to lift the bewildering fog once and for all.

ARVIND Panagariya, chairman of the 16th Finance Commission, has an unenviable task. The economist has to bring order to the sharing of resources between the Centre and states and between the states themselves. He has held one meeting and one member is reported to have resigned. This resignation must have taken him by surprise, the genial soul that he is.

War has started between the states and the Centre even before Panagariya has had time to take stock. The Kerala government has gone to court against the central government on the restrictions placed on state borrowings, and their case may have merit. They argue that, under the Constitution, the central government has no power to restrict borrowing by states. Article 293(1) of the Constitution specifically states, "Subject to the provisions of this article, the executive power of a state extends to borrowing within the territory of India upon the security of the Consolidated Fund of the state within such limits, if any, as may from time to time be fixed by the legislature of such state by law and to the giving of guarantees within such limits, if any, as may be so fixed."

The Seventh Schedule under Article 246 reinforces this view. 'Public debt of the Union' comes under the Union List as item 35, while 'Public debt of the state' is shown as entry 43 in the State List. Thus, on the face of it, decisions relating to state debt are to be controlled by the state legislature, not the government of India.

In 2003, the Fiscal Responsibility and Budgetary Management Act restricted the overall borrowing to 60 percent of the GDP, of which the central share was to be 40 percent, thus limiting the states' share to 20 percent. In the first two decades of the law, the states did not question this limit.

In 2018, through an amendment to the FRBM Act brought in by the Finance Act, the central government introduced the concept of 'general debt', the total state and central debt. The general debt was pegged at 60 percent of GDP with 40 percent going to the central government. This concept allows the central government to restrict state borrowing legally; according to Kerala, this violates the Constitution.

In his reply, the Attorney General referred to the importance of financial prudence for the nation: "Increases in the state's debt servicing liabilities as a consequence of higher borrowing will reduce the availability of funds for development, leading to impoverishment of people and loss of state income, and hence also loss of national income. It may also engender various social and other problems." Kerala pointed out that not only has the borrowing

There is a view that the Centre shares more of the tax kitty with states following Finance Commission counsel. But the share has shrunk thanks to some nifty shifts

THE ART OF GIVING LESS WHILE SEEMING TO SHARE MORE

K M CHANDRASEKHAR

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



SOURAV ROY

limit been restricted, the public account and off-budget borrowing by state public enterprises has been included in the definition of public debt, further reducing the states' capacity to borrow and seriously damaging its welfare activities.

The state government later claimed the central government was willing to increase the state's borrowing limit this year, provided the state withdrew the Supreme Court case. If true, the finance ministry probably feels that, constitutionally, it is on a weak wicket. Their assumption that Article 293(4) gives them the power to restrict market borrowings of the states may not be correct; in the context, the Article appears to relate only to borrowings from the central government. Nor is Kerala the only aggrieved state. When the state organised a public protest in Delhi, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan had Arvind Kejriwal,

Bhagwant Mann and Farooq Abdullah by his side. Karnataka organised a separate protest on the same subject.

Have some states been discriminated against? The 16th Finance Commission must study this allegation and impartially make its recommendations.

When I was Vice Chairman of the Kerala State Planning Board, the 14th Finance Commission submitted its recommendations. The share of the states in the total divisible pool was increased from 32 percent to 41 percent. On the face of it, this looked like a huge jump, but it was much less.

Until the 13th Finance Commission, the mandate of the commission was restricted to non-plan finances. The 14th commission was the first to consider all resources, plan and non-plan. The plan share was 6.5 percent; hence, the state resources automatically increased to 38.5 percent. The 13th

MYANMAR FACES LOSS OF GENERATIONS TO CIVIL WAR

ON February 1, Myanmar completed three years since the coup d'état led by General Min Aung Hliang. The intense civil war that followed the 2021 coup, the lack of a political will to move towards any forms of resolution, and the deteriorating economic conditions have all contributed to bringing the country back to year zero, undermining the minimal progress achieved during a decade of political change.

The civil war that began in 2021 has seen three main groups fighting for political control. Of the three, one is the Myanmar military, which is focused on maintaining political control following its capture of power. The ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and the People's Defence Force (PDF) are the other two. The former has been fighting the military ever since independence. The latter emerged in the aftermath of the 2021 coup.

In Myanmar, there is a unique relationship that binds the military with the ethnic groups. During the nationalist movement in Burma, the Burmese interim government led by General Aung San fought the colonial presence in the country. The British divided the ethnic groups from the Burmese interim government with promises of recognition and political rights, where the groups could gain their own advantages under the British. However, the Burmese interim government and the ethnic groups entered into the Panglong agreement of 1947 which allowed the ethnic groups the right of autonomy within a federated structure allowing for certain privileges. This led to the Burmese interim government and the ethnic groups combining their efforts to remove the colonial presence.

Following the 1962 coup d'état under General Ne Win, years of military rule kept a tight lid on the differences, but widened the gap between the ruling establishment and the ethnic armed groups. While the military government was able to establish tenuous ceasefires with some of the armed groups, others continued fighting. With Aung San Suu Kyi coming to power in 2016, a 21st century Panglong agreement was envisaged to bring in a lasting peace, albeit prematurely. But it made little headway. Then came the 2021 coup.

The PDF, unlike the ethnic armed groups, emerged recently during the uprisings against the junta in the aftermath of the February 2021 coup, which saw a more ac-



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ASIAN AXIS

tive response from the civilian population against the junta leadership. Most of these groups have taken inspiration from the national unity government in exile, but were disadvantaged due to the lack of a structured leadership, command base and resources to sustain their activities. Where they have an advantage is in how their efforts, triggered by the changed ground realities, have influenced the group's resistance.



Though rebel groups fighting the junta have made gains, their success will be limited without sustained international backing. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of young Myanmar are dying on both sides of this protracted conflict

The PDF has given the military some of the most long-drawn battles since the coup, pushing the resistance against the military to the grassroots. This strong response from the civilian population was unusual, because during earlier military rules since the August 1988 revolt, the civilian Bamar ethnic majority were more easily pliable and subjugated by the military. However, this time around, the brief period of democratic rule, the experience of relative change in the political environment, led to a remarkable shift in how the civilians mobilised themselves. This is the clear shift that the junta

misread, which has been the nuanced ray of hope in how the conflict has evolved.

Throughout the last few months the PDF and the ethnic armed groups have staged a strong pushback against the military and have made advances that ushered in a phase of change, even if this remains limited for the time being. These small advances contributed a sense of energy to the forces opposing the military, though it would be premature to call these as major shifts in the political scenario. The military has lost nearly 30,000 soldiers and efforts to recoup has led to forced conscription where the youth are being drafted into the civil war in the most uncivil fashion. This approach to recalibrate its strength and control will put at risk an entire generation of youth, significantly altering the nation's demography, placing young lives at risk. Moreover, the recruitment of child soldiers on both sides of the political divide creates the added risk of a generational loss in the ensuing conflict.

A report published by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in end of 2023, titled *Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan Myanmar* for the year 2024, estimates that the dire circumstances within the country has pushed nearly 19 million people to the brink. The humanitarian situation was also exacerbated by the devastating effects of Cyclone Mocha, which hit Myanmar in the summer of 2023, combining both natural and political crises in a smoldering cauldron.

While the recent victories of the PDF and EAOs have offered some degree of hope. But, in order to achieve sustained advances, these groups need to be supported both financially and militarily, which cannot happen as the non-interference in internal affairs principle automatically kicks in negating the amount that the international community can do. As the conflict in Myanmar continues, it only reveals that the level of losses are going to be truly high, regardless of who wins in the end.

(Views are personal)

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Farmers' concerns

Ref: Govt, farmers need common ground to offset market whims (Feb 23). In their determined pursuit of securing guaranteed MSP for all 23 crops, the farmers sat through punishing weather conditions near Delhi. This has enabled them to grab the attention of the country. Unfortunately, the Centre appears not interested in making any meaningful concessions that address their concerns. **R Sivakumar, Chennai**

Flexibility needed

The farmers and government are once again in a standoff. The Centre has shown flexibility by including maize, cotton and pulses among the crops that will get guaranteed MSP. The ball is now in the farmers' court. They must scale down their demand. **George Jacob, Kochi**

Kerala contest

Ref: CPM goes all-out to outwit Kerala Cong (Feb 23). I feel the editorial has painted a rosy picture about CPM's prospects. The people of the state typically rally behind big national parties like the Congress during Lok Sabha elections. Also, this time around, the BJP is looking very strong with popular leaders like Suresh Gopi and Anil Antony in its fold. **Venkat Desikan, Chennai**

More Narimans

Ref: *Nariman point is courage of conviction* (Feb 23). Though everyone cannot be like Nariman, we need more lawyers like him. To become like him, one must read everything that comes to hand and be obsessed with the law. Above all, one must be principled and have strong courage of conviction. **Ravi Nair, Kollengode**

Golden voice

Being an ardent admirer of Ameen Sayani, I am saddened by his departure. During my younger days in Mumbai, I, like several others, had always made it a point to return home from work on time on Wednesday so as not to miss the Binaca Geetmala presented by Sayani. The golden voice of the radio will keep ringing in the ears of those from my generation. **P G Menon, Chennai**

Cat call

The Calcutta High Court's observations on the naming of two big cats are quite relevant in today's polarised society. The naming had nothing to do with secular tradition. The word secular has now become fashionable. History shows us that tolerant religions are always besmeared with abominable name-calling. **Jitendranath Guru, Padampur**



A thought for today

There's no such thing as junk food.
There's junk and there's food

MARK HYMAN

What Are You Eating?

Ultra-processed food here to stay. Home cooking's an antidote

Maharashtra's Food & Drugs Administration will perhaps top popularity charts among nutritionists. It's pulled up McDonald's for mislabelling cheese analogues as the real deal. Accurate labelling is not just about being fair to customers, it also flags potential allergens. This incident feeds into the many problems posed by ultra-processed food (UPF).

Ultra-processed, ultra-dicey | UPF's usually have five or more ingredients, including additives that are not used in home cooking. Their range is staggering. It spans ice creams to meats used in fast food chains. They are convenient and attractively packaged. But they increase the risks of being struck by non-communicable disease. Hence the term junk food. It gives more calories for every mouthful but falls short of adequate nutrition content.

Economics of UPF | Junk food industry arose out of farming surpluses. The conditions still hold and the economics of transforming extra production into junk food is compelling. It's a category that grows along with a country's transition out of agriculture.

Mass and premium | A WHO report that brought out the affordability aspect of junk food partly explains its popularity. The years 2019 to 2021 were economically challenging in India mainly on account of the pandemic's outbreak. In each of those three years, readymade and convenience food recorded a volume growth in double digits. It was out of sync with the larger story of economic distress. Wealthier consumers are moving away from UPF's, into more wholesome and organic foods. There are two opposing trends at play. But affordability is a factor hard to ignore in the mass market.

Solution at home | The most effective step food regulators can take is to ensure that UPF's are accurately labelled. And prominently. Consumer awareness is an effective shield. However, the best way to get nutritionally the most out of every mouthful is to enjoy home-cooked food. Without making it a social burden for women. India's rich culinary tradition, based on a mix of fresh ingredients, will always be the real deal.



Case By Case

Kerala HC shows how judges can protect women's rights

A judge expressed 'shock' that in Kerala, of all states, a woman was given 'written instructions' by in-laws to help conceive a 'good baby boy'. And that for long, state depts ignored her pleas. The petitioner (39), married in 2012, was long tormented by in-laws and husband for giving birth to a girl, a 'financial liability' for the in-laws.

Home truths | Surely the judge knows that obsession for boys is unsurprising in modern-day Kerala? It's no news the oncematriarchal state is jauntily patriarchal today. Only recently, HC took the state to task for denying pension to a divorced daughter of a freedom fighter. In Sabarimala, it took an SC order for women to breach hoary temple customs. Kerala movie world's vicious misogyny and abusive actors' troll armies cannot have escaped the judiciary's attention either. Kerala's society can plumb patriarchy's depths as effortlessly as any other. In January, a judicial officer took her own life - her notes alleged severe workplace harassment.

Court matters | Where Kerala stands out is in the fight in its women. That's why they knock at court's doors - especially on family matters, where those in most states would balk. So, Anupama Chandran, a politician's daughter, justly won back her child, 'kidnapped' by her parents. HC junked a govt dept ban on hiring women for jobs with night shifts. HC has often restored women's rights. Even under socially embedded patriarchy so long as courts have women's back, women can hope to have their rights realised.

Why IP Holders Are New Barons Of 21st Century

But AI tools pose a big challenge to copyright regime

Copyright is one of the biggest money machines in the world. **Who Owns This Sentence?** A History of Copyrights and Wrongs by David Bellos and Alexandre Montagu describes how the concept of intellectual property swelled in the last few centuries. Today, intangible assets eclipse land, plant and machinery and other material wealth; those who own intellectual property are the barons of the 21st century, and these are usually big corporations.

Crossborder licensing of IP was worth \$508 billion in 2021. This includes patents, trademarks and copyright. While patents remain for 20 years and trademarks lapse when not being used, copyright is automatic, lasts a century or more, and covers more and more, from books to films, sounds to photos, software and architecture and graphic design.

This was not an intuitive concept for most of human history. There is little moral justification for it, argues the book. Creative expression, which cannot be depleted by consumption, was not seen as heritable property, but as something meant for the public.

And it's not about the rights of creators either. Authors' incomes have been falling ever since these laws were passed, but copyright industries have grown richer. So many things are protected by copyright that it's hard to calculate what we indirectly pay this machine. It is an engine of inequality, in a way that economists have not fully contended with.

With successive laws and acts, the threshold of 'original' work has been set so low that almost anything can be closed off and monetised. In US, a work is copyrighted for 70 years after

the author's death. Disney fiercely protected any reference to its Mickey Mouse - copyright lapsed only last month - while freely plundering myths and tales around the world. The Happy Birthday tune was minting money for a company every time it was used in a show or movie, until recently.

America was a pirate nation that built its economy and culture from ideas, books, machines and devices culled from the rest of the world for free. Today more than a quarter of international IP payments flow there, its foreign sales bring it more than agriculture, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, airplanes or rockets - these copyright industries comprise between 8-12% of its economy.

mindfield
SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



Copyright and its restrictions have been resisted, especially by artists and writers. Software has seen a movement for collaborative invention. Creative Commons licences offer authors a suite of protections, with different levels of protection between personal control and public ownership. Photography wasn't allowed a patent, nor was the internet, nor does Wikipedia seek ownership, nor do advances in maths. The question is, will these free zones increase in the future, or will they be reined in by law?

AI is a new challenge. Machine learning creates outputs without human involvement, but their underlying training material is based on copyrighted human inputs. If a few software corporations that own copyrights in AI programmes are allowed to own services and simulations they create, then we're all in their hands. AI tools will spawn the next generation of copyright litigation. Will the copyright regime cope or will AI break the back of the current system?

- One thing is clear on the **second anniversary of Ukraine-Russia war**: It's nowhere near ending
- A Ukrainian academic argues why the world must help her country win the war
- A former diplomat from Türkiye, which has tried to broker Kyiv-Moscow truce, argues the first priority must be peace
- We also give a snapshot of the only clear winner of this and, indeed, any war: Global military industrial complex

'Stop Putin in Ukraine. Prevent WW III'

Anastasia Piliavsky



Columnist based in Odesa

Make no mistake - Russia's war in Ukraine is already a world war that has split much of the world into two battle-camps.

Who's with Ukraine? | Ukraine Defence Contact Group, which coordinates military aid to Ukraine, includes 63 countries, nearly a third of the world's sovereign states.

Who's with Russia? | Its allies include Belarus, Iran and North Korea, which openly supply shells and drones. Plus, countries like Uzbekistan, Myanmar, Mali and Eritrea, which fund the war by expanding their trade and help Russia to dodge economic sanctions. Its BFF is China, whose trade with Russia last year surged beyond \$200 billion.

Grit-upmanship | That two years into the full-scale invasion, the battlefield should still be confined to Ukraine is credit to nothing other than the Ukrainians' own resolve. They have held Russia back without a navy or long-range missiles of their own, with minimal air cover, vastly outnumbered and outgunned. The painfully slow and uncertain drip of American arms has put to rest the myth of America's proxy war. This is Ukraine's own anti-imperial war of independence, fought for two years with no breaks under conditions of chronic shell famine. Its army performed many miracles - from the Kyiv and Kharkiv counter-offensives to sinking 25 Russian warships.

Weapons race | Yet since 2021, Russia's military production has grown by 400%, Europe's by only 20%. As American arms manufacturers struggle to produce enough for Ukraine, another myth died: that this war is driven by American arms dealers' interests. Ukraine is making a lot more weapons now, including a vast army of drones. But with American aid stuck in electoral ping-pong and Europe still groping toward a common policy, Ukraine can fall.

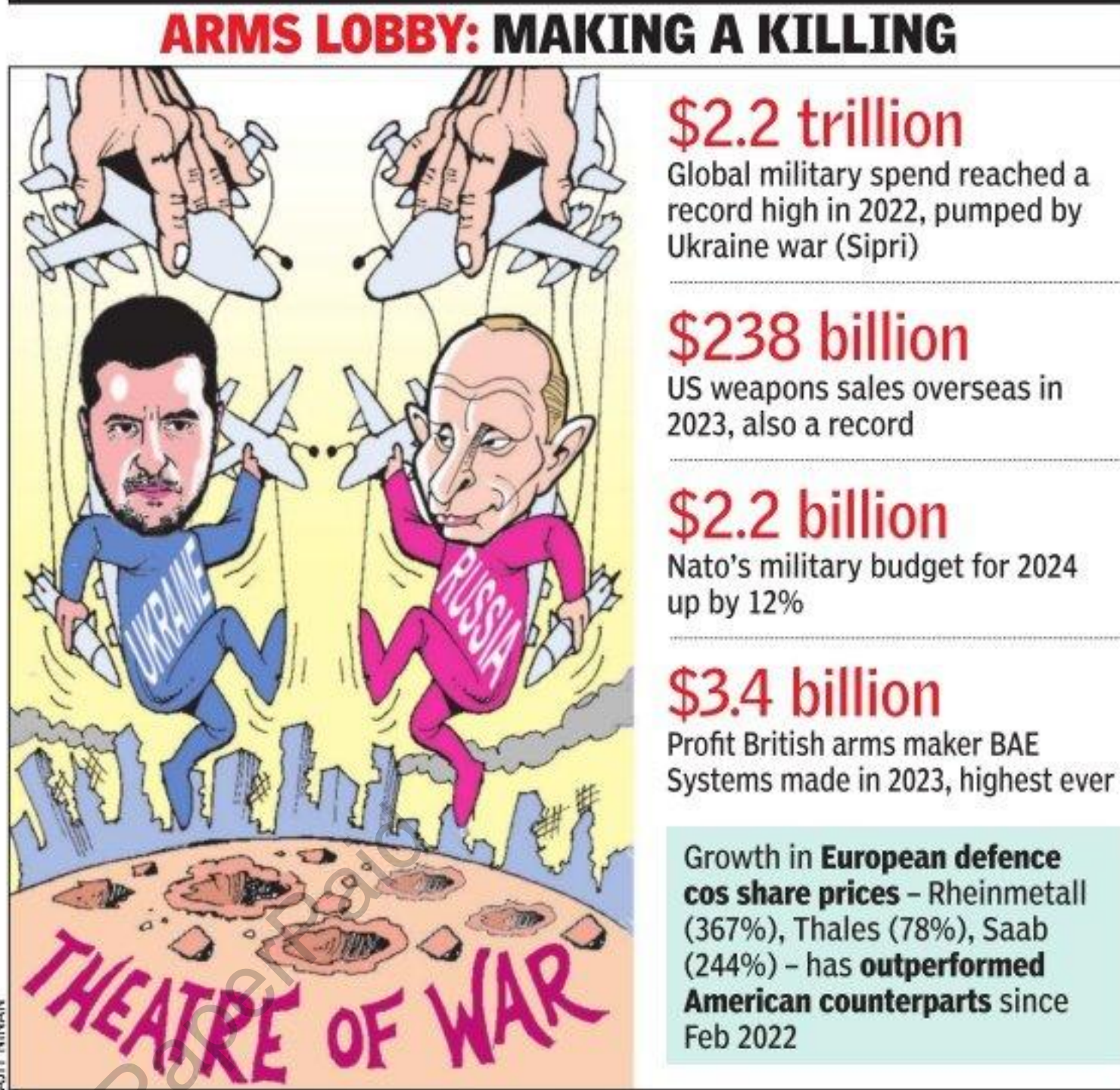
The Tucker Carlson reveal | There is a self-soothing argument that war would end if only Zelensky could be persuaded to sit down with Putin, give him what he has already seized and move on to rebuilding a rump Ukraine. But Putin has made it clear that he intends to keep going, across Ukraine and beyond. In a recent interview, while describing the Ukrainian state as historical nonsense, he repeatedly dodged the question of whether he would agree to stop if allowed to take the occupied territories. Putin compared Ukraine to Poland in World War II and himself, by implication, to Hitler.

Who will Putin target next? | Perpetual conquest of Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine) is a matter of Russian state policy. Russian state TV is filled with calls to invade Poland and Latvia, to nuke London and New York. Eastern European, Scandinavian and the Baltic States are already mobilising troops for self-defence. However grim the prospect for Ukraine, for the foreseeable future, its border with Russia will remain a frontline.

At stake is a rules-based international order. What should trouble India is not the bloodiness of Russia's conquests as such (America's intrusions into other states have also been bloody), but Russia's brazen attack on this order's jocular - the principle that borders cannot be altered by force. This is the global charter for strategic peace.

As Kenya's ambassador to UN noted, African countries accepted colonial borders, drawn crudely with a ruler, because they understood the harrowing consequences of redrawing them along ethnic lines. Putin does not need Ukrainian lands (most of Russia is unpopulated); neither does he need Ukrainian resources (he has plenty of oil and gas). His success would open the floodgates to imperial conquest.

Will China follow suit? | India has been one of the greatest beneficiaries of the rules-based international order, which has allowed it to rise and prosper in a peaceful Asia. Should Ukraine fall, India would lose this stability. Taiwan may be China's first target, but in a disinhibited world, India's Northeast, with its Assamese oil, would surely follow. After



decades of relative peace with China, this may be hard to imagine. But peace can be surprisingly fragile. To Ukrainians, a third of whom have relatives in Russia, such a war seemed unthinkable. India has no such ties with China, which is also more populous and richer than Russia.

Will Goliaths overrun the world? | No matter how many arms Ukraine will produce and procure, Russia is much bigger, and it will not be possible to hold the 1000-km frontline without the collective will to defend Russia's army. Last year India spent \$37 billion on Russian crude oil (13 times more than in 2022). In the short term, cheap oil may seem essential for India's rapidly growing economy, but the consequences of Ukraine's collapse, which this money brings nearer, would be a strategic disaster for India. Having mourned many friends in Ukraine, I dread the thought of coming to mourn Indian friends too.

'Zelensky must listen. Ukrainians want peace'

Aydin Sezer



Columnist based in Ankara

From both Ukrainian and Western perspectives, Ukraine-Russia war is only getting more complicated. Its economic damage is of course not being felt by the West alone, but the whole world. As the war enters its third year, people are feeling pessimistic about it ending anytime soon. But that's what everyone wants. And that can only be brought about by resuming peace negotiations.

Talks Boris wrecked | Türkiye facilitated peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine in Istanbul during the second month of the war, ultimately leading to

Subsequently, he declared that there would be no talks as long as Putin remains in office. But again, the question is whether Zelensky adopted this stance out of his own free will or it was dictated by Western nations.

72% Ukrainians want talks | In the most recent survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 72% of Ukrainians believe that talks with Russia ought to get underway. In just one year, the proportion of Ukrainians who think Ukraine can win "only militarily" has dropped from 35% to 23%.

On the one hand, Zelensky's decision on peace talks should be shaped by Ukrainian domestic politics. But on the other, he has to act in accordance with the signal he will receive from the West. Whatever this signal is, it will not be simple for Zelensky to go against it. He has of course been calling for more help from the West.

If Trump wins presidency | Whether the war can be brought to an end is tied right now to two key factors. One, somewhat paradoxically, it will likely conclude faster if Trump wins the US election.

If Zelensky loses presidency | Two, an end will also be brought nearer if Zelensky is forced to resign as president. At the least, this will give a push to peace discussions. But even in this scenario, domestic dynamics will not be the only shaping factor. Western preference will again have a big vote.

Western economic sanctions are clearly taking a painful toll on Russia. What must also be noted is that those embargoes are starting to become too costly for the West as well. Particularly in EU counties, citizens are putting more pressure on their governments to change their present approaches to the war. Thus, if necessary, the West may abandon Zelensky.

Putin alone is comfy? | Within Russia, despite all of the drawbacks of Western embargoes, Putin's popularity has kept rising. Even the war retains its popular backing. This is because of how Putin has reorganised Russia's industrial sector during wartime. A policy of import substitution has been implemented. In particular, oligarchs' money, which could not leave the country due to Western sanctions, paved the way for capital accumulation in the country. From this perspective, Western sanctions have furthered Russian interests, and Putin's.

His job has become easier because of how the war has enabled a reconstruction of Russian identity. Rising nationalism and antipathy to the West have also prevented a Russian opposition from emerging.

Trump-Erdogan duet is coming? | Türkiye is a powerful Nato partner that has avoided becoming involved in the conflict. And it has repeatedly stated that it is willing to mediate between the two warring countries. Erdogan helped broker the grain deal process. Thawing of relations with the West should also give it a bigger role in any peace talks sparked in Washington. This brings us back to the Trump factor. Erdogan is one of the leaders with whom Trump gets along. Couldn't the two together bring about peace?

Calvin & Hobbes



Celebrating The Shakti We Call Maa, Mata, Amma

Anil D Ambani

On my 50th birthday, my mother, Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani, dug out the pillow that used to lie in my crib. She had embroidered the words, 'Mothers hold their children's hands for a while but their hearts forever.' And it's true. My mother is the bedrock of my existence and has sculpted the very essence of who I am. She epitomises strength, compassion, patience, and stability - virtues that make her nothing short of extraordinary. She is more than a parent; she is my guiding light, my unwavering source of motivation, and my ultimate sanctuary of comfort.

I recognise that my profound admiration and love for my mother are sentiments many share, each cherishing their unique bond with the maternal figure in their lives. Pondering the linguistics, it's fascinating to observe how the term

'mother' echoes a universal sound in languages across the globe. In Hindi, we say 'maa', in Gujarati 'mata', in Urdu 'amma', and in English 'mama'. This linguistic symmetry is a testament to the universal essence of motherhood. The 'ma' sound, often among the first vocalisations of a baby, is instinctively associated with the most primal and profound relationship - that between a mother and her child.

Mothers, in their silent, often unnoticed ways, are the architects of society. They lay the foundation of our character, instilling in us values and wisdom that precede any formal education. They are the unsung heroes whose dreams and aspirations often take a back seat to nurture the potential in their children. Their love, a universal language, speaks directly to the heart, transcending the barriers of speech and cognition.

Often attributed to a Hadith, a line in Arabic says, 'Al-jannatu tahta aqdamil ummahat' - paradise lies under the feet of mothers. Even the Old Testament's Exodus emphasises honouring one's mother. In the New Testament, Jesus is on the cross but tries to ensure that his mother is taken care of by his disciple John. The Quran 31:14 specifically talks about the hardship and sacrifice of mothers and the eternal gratitude that must ensue.

Truth be told, every mother is a manifestation of Shakti, through her role as a life-giver, nurturer, and protector. Her inherent strength, resilience, and unwavering love mirror the qualities of Shakti, as she tirelessly works to create, sustain, and transform the lives of her children and family.

In the rich tapestry of Bharat's past, the maternal archetype is portrayed with divine reverence and multifaceted



THE SPEAKING TREE

Sacred space



Having bumbled through eighty years...I am no wiser than an old cabbage... for the most part I have followed instinct...this has resulted in a modicum of happiness. Life hasn't been a bed of roses...yet, quite often, I've had roses out of season.

Ruskin Bond

Religious apartheid

Karnataka’s proposal to tax several Hindu temples smacks of discrimination

In a move reminiscent of the historically partisan practice of jizya, the Congress Government in Karnataka has proposed a plan to collect funds from Hindu temples as a form of tax. Understandably, the move has sparked a controversy and reignited debates over the treatment of Hindu places of worship and whether these are being unfairly targeted. While some argue that the move is a necessary step to ensure the upkeep of Hindu religious institutions and support the livelihoods of the priests involved, others see it as discriminatory and belonging to a regressive era when non-Muslims were subjected to jizya, a special tax. While the proposed tax is not explicitly religious in nature, its resemblance to jizya has not gone unnoticed and critics view it as a form of economic discrimination. One of the primary concerns raised by the move's opponents is the selective targeting of Hindu places of worship as similar demands are not being made of other religious institutions, such as mosques or churches. This asymmetry has led



to accusations of bias and favouritism on the part of the Government. If the aim is to genuinely improve facilities at religious places, it should be even-handed and not selective. Our Constitution is clear about religious freedom and equality and all Governments across the country must comply with that. Arguing that it is a matter of fiscal responsibility, however, the tax proponents point to the vast wealth accumulated by some temples. They reason that it is only fair for these temples to contribute to the broader welfare of society. Additionally, they contend that the funds collected will be used for the benefit of the community, including the preservation of cultural heritage and the support of religious practitioners. The proposal has sparked widespread outrage among certain segments of the Hindu population, which sees it as an encroachment on their religious freedoms and an attempt to undermine their heritage. For many Hindus, temples are not just places of worship but symbols of their cultural identity. Any attempt to impose financial burdens on these institutions is viewed as an attack on their way of life. Moreover, the Government's involvement in the financial affairs of temples raises broader questions about the separation of religion and State. By exerting control over the finances of Hindu religious institutions, the Govt risks overstepping its boundaries. In this light, it is essential for the policymakers to tread carefully and consider the implications of their actions. While temple maintenance and priest welfare are undoubtedly important issues, these must be addressed in a manner that respects the rights and sensitivities of all citizens. Ultimately, the debate over the temple tax in Karnataka raises fundamental questions about religious freedom and the role of the State in religious affairs. Meanwhile, it is crucial for all stakeholders to engage in constructive dialogue and seek solutions upholding the principles of fairness; only then can we ensure that our society remains true to its values of pluralism and tolerance.



Youth employment: From seekers to innovators

Active participation in Govt schemes and emphasis on entrepreneurship offer promising avenues towards a brighter future for India’s rural youth

In 2023, India experienced a notable surge in unemployment rates, impacting both rural and urban areas. Particularly concerning was the rise in urban unemployment, escalating from 8.5% in October to 9.3% in November and further climbing to 10.1% in December, mirroring levels from a year prior. This surge has undeniably heightened stress among the younger generation, actively seeking job opportunities, with thousands applying for each available position. In the age of technology, however, a paradigm shift is encouraged—from job seekers to job providers. The youth grappling with unemployment challenges are urged to redefine their goals and leverage their potential and skills. Sayeed Toiba Kousar, a 22-year-old resident of the border district Poonch in Jammu and Kashmir, emphasises the transformative role technology can play in the employment landscape. Through the strategic use of technology, the younger generation can not only secure employment but also venture into



becoming job providers. Azhar Ali, a 24-year-old cricket enthusiast, underscores the importance of effective facilities for skill enhancement. He believes that with the provision of adequate facilities, the youth can excel in their respective fields, significantly contributing to societal and national development. Azhar contends that timely access to essential facilities is crucial for the younger generation to play a more impactful role in the country's progress. Muhammad Waqar, a 22-year-old, advocates for a focus on sports activities at the school level to divert youth from addictive behaviours and guide them towards establishing self-employment opportunities. Ajaz Hussain, aged 27, emphasises creating opportunities aligned with children's interests to inspire

self-reliance, benefiting both the individual and the country. Rashid highlights the importance of parental involvement in identifying and nurturing their children's interests, guiding them towards the numerous opportunities available today in areas such as sports, the internet, singing, dancing, art, painting, photography, and sculpture. In the current scenario, various skill-related schemes are being implemented by both central and state governments across India. Notably, the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), operated by the Ministry of Rural Development, stands out as one of the most effective projects. This initiative focuses on promoting self-employment and supporting rural individuals, especially economically disadvantaged young men and women. In Jammu and Kashmir, the Jammu and Kashmir State Rural Livelihood Mission (JKSRLM) oversees the implementation of NRLM, aiming to integrate the poor into self-help groups and connect them with self-employment opportunities.

The primary goal of JKSRLM is to reach 66% of the rural population in 125 blocks of Jammu and Kashmir, providing sustainable livelihood opportunities to uplift them from poverty and enhance their standard of living. The Indian government has initiated various poverty alleviation schemes to improve the quality of life for the poor. It is crucial for the youth to actively engage with and benefit from these government schemes, fostering self-reliance in employment matters and contributing to societal development. To ensure the success of these schemes, relevant departments should actively provide information and guidance, encouraging their 100% implementation and timely achievement of goals. By embracing the shift from job seekers to job providers, youth can play a vital role in shaping a more prosperous and self-sufficient future for themselves and the nation. (The writer is from the Poonch district of J&K. He writes on socio-economic development challenges of his community; views are personal. Charkha features)



SOHAIL ALI

The boycott at Doha

The Taliban’s obscurantist mindset and their harbouring of terrorist organisations pose a serious threat to Muslim countries

Given the obscurantist and misogynistic mindset of the Taliban, it is hardly surprising that they boycotted the conference, hosted by the United Nations, to discuss the humanitarian crisis facing Afghanistan, and cooperation on the human rights issue. They spurned the UN's invitation saying that they would attend only if they alone were officially representing Afghanistan, as inclusion of other groups would jeopardise progress. This exclusivist mindset, which reflects their intolerance of the existence of any organisation that does not share their obscurantist Islamist worldview, and does not owe allegiance to them, is at the core of their rejection of democracy, and advocacy of an Islamist theocracy manifest in their designation of Afghanistan as an Islamic Emirate, run according to the dictates of mullahs. The Taliban are unlikely to have realised that they have shot themselves in the foot by boycotting the conference held in Doha on February 18 and 19 under the chairmanship of the UN secretary-general, Antonio Guterres. Besides the special envoys of 25 countries, members of Afghanistan's civil society and women's groups, it was attended by representatives of the European Union (EU), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). By not attending the conference, the Taliban have only perpetuated their isolation in the world. They obviously do not seem to mind that since humanitarian assistance continues to come in for the sake of the country's people suffering from natural disasters like floods and earthquakes as well as the violence stalking the country. The OIC's role was outlined by Ambassador Tarig Ali Bakheet, special envoy of organisation's secretary-general. During his interventions, Bakheet recalled his organisation's commitment to support Afghanistan and engage in a constructive dialogue with the country's de facto authorities [Taliban] "on issues and topics included in the relevant resolutions of the [OIC's]



Council of Foreign Ministers. In this regard, he reviewed OIC efforts in providing humanitarian assistance, sending scholars delegations, and holding a conference on women's rights in Islam hosted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." Ambassador Bakheet was referring to the international conference on "Women in Islam: Status and Empowerment" (November 6 to 8, 2023), organised by the OIC's general secretariat and hosted by Saudi Arabia. It included in its Final Declaration 20 recommendations highlighting the rights that Islam gave to women and the status of women in Islam. These also addressed the challenges and opportunities pertaining to the realisation of women's rights and enhancement of their role across all fields and at all levels of society. The conference also produced "The Jeddah Document on Women's Rights in Islam" which, as stated by OIC's secretary-general, Hissein Ibrahim Taha, in his address at the conference's closing session, would serve as an intellectual and practical reference document that could be adopted by legislative bodies and human rights organizations in member states and all Muslim societies when considering the

IF THE OIC AND THE MUSLIM COUNTRIES ARE SERIOUS ABOUT WOMEN'S RIGHTS, THEY MUST WORK OUT TOUGH ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL SANCTIONS THAT WOULD COMPEL THE TALIBAN TO CHANGE THEIR POLICIES IN THIS REGARD

rights of Muslim women. It will be submitted for adoption at the forthcoming Islamic Summit, scheduled to be held in Gambia at the end of this year, and subsequently presented to all relevant international fora. He hoped that those doubting Islam's fairness toward women would consider women's rights as set out in this document, and not on the basis some isolated social practices in some Muslim societies that in no way reflect the sublime vision and universality of Islam and its teachings. Taha's not-so-veiled rejection of the Taliban's views on women's rights in the last sentence above, will not please the mullahs running Afghanistan. Nor will they be amused by his affirmation that women's empowerment issues would remain high among the OIC's priorities, and that the OIC would launch and support numerous efforts and initiatives to elevate the status of women in Muslim societies. Taha's words carry a special significance as he spoke in Saudi Arabia where, under the leadership of the crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman al Saud, significant steps have been taken to improve women's position. Women can now attend sporting events, need not wear the abayah, a long, loose-fitting, garment covering the entire body,

except the face, hands and feet, in public, and can get driving licenses and can go to work, study or run errands without male escorts. While women demanding more freedom are treated harshly and much more remains to be done, the gains have been considerable compared to the situation earlier. One can be certain that the Taliban would not change their views. Bigots dig their heels deeper and deeper the more people reject their creed. If the OIC and the Muslim countries are serious about women's rights, they must work out tough economic and political sanctions that would compel the Taliban to change their policies in this regard. They must also take measures to compel the Taliban to act against terrorist outfits like a Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) active in Afghanistan. The former is targeting Pakistan and the latter Iran. Given, however, their obscurantist creed, and determination to impose their version of sharia law globally, there is no reason why they will not strike other countries in future, particularly the Muslim ones they consider as apostatic. (The author is Consulting Editor, The Pioneer. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



DEMOCRACY UNDER THREAT?

Sir — As per a report the Congress Party on Thursday alleged that democracy is being "murdered" in the country after microblogging platform X voiced disagreement with the Centre's order to block accounts and posts related to the ongoing farmers' protests. Congress MP Rahul Gandhi claimed the public knows that the government has "murdered democracy" and will give a strong answer. Rahul Gandhi asked "If farmers ask for MSP, shoot them. Is this the mother of democracy? When the youth ask for appointments, refuse to even listen to them this is the mother of democracy? If a former governor tells the truth, send the CBI to his house. Is this the mother of democracy?" Freeze the bank account of the most prominent opposition party. Is this the mother of democracy? Section 144, internet ban, sharp wires, tear gas shells is this the mother of democracy? Be it media or social media, suppressing every voice of truth — is this the mother of democracy?" the Congress leader Gandhi said. According to sources The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology had ordered social media platforms to temporarily block 177 accounts linked to the farmers' protests at the request of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). Farmers from across the country have been protesting to press the Centre for their demands, including a legal guarantee on the minimum support price (MSP) for crops and farm loan waivers. Bhagwan Thadani | Mumbai

PASSPORT OFFICE WOES

Sir — It is observed that a huge gathering above five hundred applicants including aged and mothers carrying just born babies are standing in queue, outside the office on Thursday i.e. open day, to get solve the problems of passports to be issued at RPO, Secunderabad. Moreover over the area traffic police lift the vehicles parking outside the said office. The concerned authorities of the passport

Two legendary figures depart



India has lost two of its most illustrious and influential personalities, Fali S Nariman and Ameen Sayani, who left behind a legacy of excellence and innovation in their respective fields of law and radio. Fali S Nariman was a renowned jurist and senior advocate of the Supreme Court of India. He was involved in several landmark cases that shaped India's constitutional law and judicial system. He was a champion of civil liberties and the independence of the judiciary. He resigned as Additional Solicitor General to protest against the Emergency in 1975, the only law officer to do so. He received several awards and honours, including the Padma Vibhushan, the Gruber Prize for Justice, and a nomination to the Rajya Sabha. He was also an avid reader, writer and speaker on various topics of law, politics and culture. Ameen Sayani was the iconic radio presenter and host of the popular radio show Binaca Geetmala, which ran from 1952 to 1994 on Radio Ceylon. He revolutionised Indian broadcasting with his signature greeting, "Behno aur Bhaiyo", and his warm and friendly style of hosting. Nariman and Sayani were both Parsis who belonged to Mumbai and made their mark on the national and international stage. They were both respected and admired by their peers and fans for their passion, integrity and innovation. They were both involved in the mission of nation-building and inspiring generations to fight for a just society. They will be dearly missed by their family, friends and fans. May their souls rest in peace. Amarjeet Kumar | Hazaribagh

office should provide the same facility i.e. open day at all passport offices of Hyderabad to solve the aroused problems instead of a single door at Secunderabad. Thus the applicants can reach their nearest office and the rush at a single door will also be diluted. The concerned area traffic police should also provide sufficient parking places instead of lifting and imposing huge penalties on applicants. Hope the area Corporator, MLA, Concern Minister and the authorities of passport offices and traffic police will take necessary action soon and will provide mental and physical relaxation to the applicants. Arif Hussain | Secunderabad

ODISHA TO IMPROVE SPORTS INFRA

Sir — The Odisha government has decided to renovate Barabati Stadium in Cuttack. The Barabati stadium is one of the oldest stadiums in the state. This stadium has witnessed many national and international sporting events in the past. Barabati Stadium is also known to be the

hub of cricket in Odisha. To revive Odisha's cricketing history and groom young cricket aspirants in the state, it was necessary to redevelop it. A Sports complex having world-class facilities for other sports will also be built along with the new stadium. A few days back a cricket stadium in Sambalpur was also decided for renovated. After Hockey and Football, Odisha is now investing in the cricketing ecosystem and infrastructure. This move will assist youths in the state who want to make a career in sports. The developed sports infrastructure will make Odisha a hub for many national and international sporting events. The development of sports in the state will boost the economy as well. Odisha has already hosted the Hockey World Cup and FIFA World Cup and in its way to becoming the sports capital of India. Deba Prasad Nayak | Dhenkanal

FIRST COLUMN

THE STRESS BEHIND THE TEACHING PROFESSION

Teachers have alarming rates of burnout and attrition worldwide



College degrees, good education and satisfying jobs are all things that people generally strive for. Teaching is one of the most visceral jobs most people will ever experience. Teachers since ages have proven to be vital because they shape the lives of students and help them develop the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the world.

It is interesting to note that many people today believe the stereotype that teaching is a stress-free job. It is the only profession that gets summers and weekends off. Moreover, it is typically a job that people only do because they cannot do anything else. The adage those who can, do; those who can't, teach is widely believed. However, the reality is that there is a great amount of stress associated with this type of profession.

There is no denying the fact that the teaching profession is emotionally, physically and mentally exhausting. Many teachers across the world are experiencing teacher shortages. As per the latest survey, it was found that almost 50% of the new teachers who join with super excitement, passion and a dream to take on the world quit within the first five years of teaching, which begs the question: why do so many of them leave after going through years of college for this profession? Without enough teacher, one cannot successfully educate their children. Moreover, the most disturbing part is that the education system relies on massive amounts of unpaid labour. According to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the average teacher works for 52.5 hours a week, over 30% more than they are contracted for. Multiple surveys declare uncertainty, workload, negative perception about the job, concern for others' well-being, health struggles and playing multiple roles have hampered school teachers' mental health and well-being.



Not only this, research also indicates that burnout contributes to high attrition rates among educators. Making teachers work beyond their contracted hours and not paying for it: giving them five hours or less per week to plan for 30 hours of instructions, grading and providing feedback on assignments for almost 200 students on an average, analysing data, contacting parents, attending meetings, preparing teaching materials, expecting teachers to implement new initiatives, programs and practices without proper training, completing administrative tasks, expecting teachers to differentiate and individualise instructions for a class with 30+ students and above all blaming teachers for all education-related issues despite not including teachers in decision making of education-related issues prove out to be a few reasons for teacher burnout. The constant turnover rate of teachers, lack of interest in teaching and lack of commitment to the profession continue to be a major concern for school systems all over the nation. Stress has become a common characteristic of teachers and with the increased amount of accountability, teachers play a significant role in students and schools resulting in poor classroom engagement and ultimately low student achievement.

To be an effective educator, all teachers need to maintain their psychological well-being. For an ordinary human being not related to this profession, a teacher is a person who is working around 1800 hours a year, whereas in reality, they are the ones who are working around 2300 hours a year on average which shows that approximately 550 hours are unpaid working.

Remember, the teachers cannot effectively accomplish all necessary tasks only during their contract hours. The growing concern is the psychological well-being of teachers not only at the school level but also at the college level.

(The writer is an educator, views are personal)

Farmers demand MSP protection

The imperative need for a legislation-backed MSP grows ever more urgent, promising stability and prosperity for the backbone of India's economy



The resurgence of protests by farmers has brought attention to their longstanding struggle for sustainable profitability in the agricultural sector. Although their demands are diverse, their primary request is for a legal guarantee for MSP (Minimum Support Prices). Farmers believe that the government has not shown genuine interest in effectively implementing MSP, which has led to distrust, frustration, and the need for a legal guarantee. These issues have forced them to leave their homes and farms and take to the highways in protest, resulting in the death of three farmers a couple of injuries, and disruption of normalcy that has affected the commuters and business activities.

In September 2020, the government introduced three controversial farm laws that were met with widespread protests and demands for their repeal. While the laws were eventually repealed in November 2021, there has been no interim report from the Committee on MSP formed to address farmers' concerns. This delay in decision-making perpetuates uncertainties in the agricultural sector and undermines the effectiveness of the present MSP as a stabilizing force.

MSP was introduced in 1966-67 to ensure food security amid food scarcity. Despite broad political support for a legal guarantee for MSP, successive governments have failed to formalize this issue, leaving the agricultural sector in a state of uncertainty. However, it is high time to address the weakening of the decades-old MSP policy, remove the complexities surrounding its legislation, and recognise the potential benefits of legalising MSP to fuel the wholesome growth of the agriculture sector, which is the country's lifeline. The Modi government has demonstrated its commendable ability to revamp decades-old mechanisms with various robust reforms such as the amendments to Indian Penal Codes and the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir, and now they must take bold steps to address this pressing issue.

Why farmers asking for legal guarantee: The MSP is an administered advisory price for 23 crops and is determined annually by the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) as a key government intervention to insulate farmers from price volatility when the market prices fall below the MSP as well as of consumers against corrupt manipulative market inflation and maintains food security. It has been in existence in India for more than five decades. Why, then, are farmers asking for a legal guarantee? Only 6% of farmers benefit from MSP, and it procures just 11% of total agricultural output in the country, according to the latest available NITI Aayog data.

Over 90 % of crops are sold at prices that are 20-30% lower than the declared MSP, leading to average losses of Rs 20,000 per acre and about Rs 10 lakh crore annually for farmers. A study by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development found that Indian farmers have been suffering losses since 2000 due to ineffective policies. The report revealed that Indian farmers lost Rs 45 lakh crore during 2000-2017 due to low prices.

Misconceptions in legalising: The legalisation of MSP has been hindered by exag-



gerated claims about its fiscal costs. These claims have misled successive governments, and it is essential to clarify that legalising MSP does not entail the government procuring all agricultural produce. The apprehensions over excessive fiscal requirements are unfounded and should not prevent the legalisation of MSP.

To make MSP a legal guarantee, necessary amendments are needed in the Agricultural Produce & Livestock Market Committee (APMC) Act by incorporating a clause that auction of farm produce in APMC's markets is legally not permitted below the declared MSP prices. The apprehensions on the operation of MSP legal guarantee are that most of the sales of farm produce are not in APMCs, and traders may boycott the purchases of farm produce. The government does not have physical and economic resources to purchase, store, and market the procured farm produce, which is an irrational argument. Government intervention is necessary only when market prices fall below MSP, and it does not require the procurement of the entire marketable surplus.

The potential boycott of farm produce in places MSP legal regimes by the traders is an irrational argument because the commodity's supply is tight against the demand for farm produce. First, this was also evident from the fact that the government could manage to procure only 26 million tonnes of wheat at MSP against the target of 44.4 million tonnes fixed for the 2023 season. Second, the government's expenditure on procurement and imports of farm produce like edible oil and pulses, and on procurement of food grains on MSP in 2022-23, has already surpassed Rs 5 lakh crore and Rs 2.28 lakh crore, respectively. Claims that the MSP legal guaran-

tee will create fiscal disasters for India are baseless. According to government estimates, the MSP values of the total production of the 23 crops worked out to be around Rs 17 lakh crore, and some studies worked out to be around Rs 10 lakh crore. Furthermore, only 70% of the farm produce comes to markets as a marketable surplus, and farmers' families consume the rest for household purposes. The MSP legal guarantee will cost the government about Rs 5 lakh crore if traders or big corporations engaged in processing boycott the APMC's markets, which is an unlikely scenario. It is time to dismiss the misconceptions surrounding the legalisation of MSP and focus on the merits of providing a legal guarantee for MSP. Merits of legalising MSP: Farming is inherently risky, influenced by factors such as weather conditions, pest attacks, and market dynamics. By establishing a legally binding framework for minimum floor prices across all crops, will mitigate the current challenges and safeguard farmers from unpredictable fluctuations in the prices of their produce.

However, the government has proposed buying cotton, maize, tur, urad and Masur for five years directly from the farmers at the MSP without any quantitative limit. Notably, these crops are grown outside Punjab and Haryana, the home states of the protesting farmers. From this, can it infer that small pulses growing farmers all over the country stand to benefit? Legalising MSP for a wider variety of crops ensures that the benefits of price stability are not limited to specific segments of the farming community. Small and marginal farmers cultivating diverse crops can access the protective shield of MSP, contributing to inclusive agricultural growth, and playing a pivotal role in ensuring food security for the

nation by maintaining a stable production environment for key staples, contributing to the overall food security of the country.

A legal framework enables the government to conduct strategic operations in domestic and international markets. By selling procured produce at minimal markups during times of higher market prices, the government can manage inflation surges, ensuring price stability for consumers.

MSP reduces the vulnerability of farmers to market fluctuations, ensuring a minimum income for their produce. Farmers can navigate uncertainties more confidently, knowing that the government is legally bound to intervene when market prices fall below the MSP. A guaranteed MSP leads to increased rural income. This, in turn, stimulates the rural economy by boosting demand for goods and services, creating a positive ripple effect in various sectors.

The way forward: Policymakers can pave the way for a more secure and prosperous future for farmers by dispelling misconceptions and addressing concerns. Replacing the decades-old and inefficient MSP policy with a legislatively guaranteed MSP offers a comprehensive solution to the challenges faced by the agricultural sector. It not only ensures consistent implementation but also promotes diversification, inclusivity, and economic resilience, contributing to the wholesome well-being of farmers and the prosperity of the rural economy. This will help to fuel the dream of a 'Viksit Bharat'.

(The author is Vice-Chairman of Sonalika Group, Vice-Chairman of the Punjab Economic Policy and Planning Board, and Chairman of ASSOCHAM Northern Region Development Council; Views expressed are personal)

The enduring legacy of Ameen Sayani, the radio icon

Sayani's influence extended far beyond the confines of the studio, earning him a place in the hearts and minds of millions

In the melodic realm of post-independence, India emerged a captivating voice that transcended mere broadcasting to become a cherished companion for countless listeners for almost four decades. With the resounding greeting, "Namaskar bhaiyon aur behno, main apka dost Ameen Sayani bol raha hoon," Ameen Sayani forged an indelible connection through the airwaves, beckoning listeners to join him on a journey of music and camaraderie. This golden voice of radio passed into eternity on February 21, 2024, in Mumbai. He was 91. His voice, emanating from vintage radio sets, possessed a captivating charm, diverging from the seriousness of his



peers. Ameen Sayani's pioneering radio show, starting as a modest segment on Radio Ceylon, swiftly became a cultural sensation in the 1950s. From Binaca Geetmala to Hit Parade and Cibaca Geetmala, his presentation remained timeless, bridging simplicity and connection, resonating with ordinary hearts. Geetmala transcended borders, captivating audiences across Asia and East Africa

and fostering unity through Hindi film melodies. With 90 million listeners, it has evolved into a cherished tradition, binding families over enchanting tunes.

They were not merely a fleeting waltz through the sonic realms; it was a timeless symphony, a melody that lingered in the hearts of generations. With the gentle caress of nostalgia, it continued its melodious journey, spanning the years from 1952 to 1994, a testament to its enduring charm and universal appeal. And like a phoenix rising from the ashes of bygone eras, it experienced resurgences in the dawn of new millennia, revivals in 2000-2001 and 2001-2003, each breathing new life into its hallowed name.

Beyond the airwaves, Ameen Sayani's unparalleled contribution as a voiceover artist echoes through the annals of time, with over 54,000 radio programmes and approximately 19,000 jingles to his credit — a testament to his lasting impact on the hearts and minds of a nation. Bhajan Samrat, Anup Jalota while sharing his thoughts with me on hearing the news of Ameen Sahab's demise said that he was one of the pioneers in the field of entertainment in broadcasting media and the texture of his voice captivated many people. "Today many of the anchors try to copy his texture and finesse", he said, adding, "It was almost a miracle that any song that Ameen Sahab would announce in his Binaca Geetmala, would go on

to become a hit. Phrases like "Aawaz ke duniya ke doston", and "Bhaiyon aur Beheno" were introduced by him which people are using today and trying to establish themselves. He was very mild in his behaviour and very gentle. "Listening to Ameen Sayani's iconic radio show, 'Binaca Geet Mala,' with my siblings was a cherished ritual in our household," reminisces Dr Sumitra Guha, a renowned classical vocalist and recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademy award. "The mesmerising voice of Ameen Sayani filled our hearts with joy, as we eagerly awaited the melodious tunes of legendary playback singers like Lata Mangeshkar. His captivating narration and the golden era of Bollywood music left an indelible mark

on my soul. It was truly a magical time, enhanced by the charm of our beloved host." Writer, social activist and President of the Guild of Services, Meera Khanna shares her memories of growing up listening to Ameen Sayani. She says, "With the passing away of Ameen Sayani it is as if a precious memory of childhood has slipped away. The 'Binaca Geetmala' which he hosted in his amazing voice was an integral part of a childhood when television had not invaded homes. Gathered around the radio or with the transistor stuck to the ear Ameen Sayani invited you to float on the melody or foot tap to the rhythm of the most popular Hindi film songs. Thus, every week Ameen Sayani was the friend who vis-

ited with a bouquet of melody rhythm and poetry. Millions in this country will remember with the nostalgia of the times when pleasures were simple and radio hosts made you feel good about our world." Smita Vats, Founder and President of ITIHAAS (Indian Traditions Heritage and Society) kept it simple when she said, "My memories are just of his voice... diction, and metre while reading and talking. All lost now, as no one speaks well these days." Throughout his illustrious career spanning decades, Sayani epitomised innovation and authenticity. Amidst evolving media landscapes, he championed radio's timeless ability to unite communities. Beyond the airwaves, Sayani's magnetic charisma

made him a sought-after emcee, infusing every event he hosted with enchantment. Veteran journalist and author, Khushwant Singh eloquently captured Sayani's significance, saying, "Ameen Sayani wasn't just a radio presenter; he was a storyteller whose voice painted vivid images in the minds of his listeners." In the words of the man himself, "This is Ameen Sayani, signing off with the hope that you'll join me again next week, same time, same station." As we bid farewell to this titan of the airwaves, his voice and legacy will long be cherished. Farewell Ameen Sahab!

(The writer is programme executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Ukraine war, two years

India has exhibited deft diplomacy

WITH the fall of the fortified Ukrainian city of Avdiivka, the third year of the Russia-Ukraine war is likely to be fiercer than the first two. Russia still needs to invest considerable military brawn to take four to five similarly fortified cities. The West is unlikely to meekly accept the inevitability of the Russian advance and may inject more viciousness into the battle. This is President Vladimir Putin's moment after the death of Alexei Navalny, the last flicker of dissent in Russia, and the resilience shown by the Russian economy despite Western sanctions. Yet, there is no diminishing Western appetite to arm Ukraine, and the conflict is set to endure.

As the war drags on, there are increasing suggestions from the West for India to act as a mediator. As Foreign Minister S Jaishankar said, India will be happy to mediate but won't take any initiative on its own. Very early on in the conflict, India had seen through the moral posturing that masked the West's strategic designs against Russia. New Delhi has asserted from the very beginning that war could not be a solution; priority should instead be given to dialogue and diplomacy. In essence, rather than see one side suffer a defeat, India will be happy with a solution that addresses Ukrainian insecurities, Russian expectations and European anxieties.

However, contrary to the Western perception, India has been proactively neutral instead of being a fence-sitter. It has robustly shepherded its national interests, especially in oil, defence and fertilisers. New Delhi mediated successfully in the imbroglio over the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. India has also been keen that the conflict remains confined to the European theatre so that it doesn't spill over to the Indian Ocean or derail its Act East policy, especially with regard to China.

INDIA regrouping

Bloc members teaming up to take on BJP

KEY constituents of the Opposition bloc INDIA are finally getting down to brass tacks ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. The Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) are on course to seal a seat-sharing pact in Delhi. Of the seven parliamentary seats in the Capital, AAP is expected to contest four, leaving the rest for the Congress. With AAP's senior leaders in the crosshairs of Central probe agencies, the party is banking on the Congress' support to upstage the BJP. Though AAP had swept both the 2015 and 2020 Assembly elections, it was the BJP that had won all seven seats in Delhi in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha polls. AAP is hoping for a turnaround this time, even as the Congress is looking to revive its fortunes after successive poll debacles in the Capital.

The AAP-Congress candidate's victory in the Chandigarh mayoral poll following the Supreme Court's intervention seems to have galvanised both parties into resolving or setting aside their differences. Their seat-sharing arrangement in Gujarat, Haryana and Chandigarh is also being regarded as a done deal; however, a consensus has remained elusive in Punjab.

In Uttar Pradesh, the Samajwadi Party has tied up with the Congress. The former will contest 63 seats and the latter 17. This is the first major accord between INDIA members. The two parties have reportedly finalised an agreement in Madhya Pradesh too, something which had not happened in last year's Assembly elections. Opposition parties have begun to realise that they cannot challenge the dominant BJP on their own in the majority of the states across the country, even though the Trinamool Congress has decided to go solo in West Bengal. Bihar CM Nitish Kumar's return to the NDA fold and the defection of veteran party leaders like Ashok Chavan have apparently prompted the Congress to be more accommodative of its allies. This bodes well for an alliance that is struggling to find its feet.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 1924

FIRING AT JAITO

IT is a striking coincidence that on the very day and perhaps about the very time when the Legislative Assembly was listening to Mr Rangachariar's explanation of his Bill to restrict the use of firearms for the dispersal of assemblies to really necessary cases, there happened at a place, not far from the Capital of India, one of those grim tragedies through the use of firearms, which, no matter what might be their rights or wrongs, are bound to be universally deplored. We do not at the time of writing know all the facts of the case and so far as we do know anything about the incident, there are clearly two versions which conflict in some material particulars. But it is not necessary to know more about the incident than we do to see that it raises exactly the questions which Mr Rangachariar's Bill is an attempt to settle, namely whether for the object which the authorities had in view firing was an absolute necessity, and whether assuming that it was necessary, the conditions that required to be fulfilled before firing was resorted to were satisfied. Another question which the incident raises is as important as either of the above two, though it is not touched by Mr Rangachariar's Bill, so far as one can judge from his explanation, namely whether assuming that firing was justified, steps were taken to ensure its being confined to within strictly necessary limits, so that the casualties might be no heavier than the circumstances of the case made imperative. All these questions must be answered before the public can be satisfied that the deplorable tragedy that has just taken place was unavoidable.

The message from two SC verdicts

The ruling party's confidence should not prompt its supporters to shake foundations of Indian democracy



NOUS INDICA
RAJESH RAMACHANDRAN

THE Supreme Court's judgments on the electoral bonds and the Chandigarh mayoral election are epoch-making. There cannot be a graver offence to democracy than anonymous election funding. Anonymity is synonymous with deception and corruption. While nameless funders possibly conceal their business and personal objectives, only transparency can help make the voter do a cost-benefit analysis between a funder and the funded political entity. So, it is imperative for the voter to know who is funding his or her chosen candidate.

By delivering a verdict annulling the electoral bond scheme, the apex court Bench headed by Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud has saved the constitutional foundations of the Republic. This ruling, while enhancing the SC's stature as the final institutional bulwark of constitutional morality, also points fingers at other constitutional bodies that have begun to behave like government appendages.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) was a fiercely independent institution when it was helmed by TN Seshan. Herein lies the sad story of Indian institutions. The character of most of these institutions changes with the person at the top. The court's order on electoral bonds is a wake-up call for the ECI. Indian elections are free and fair. But the first-past-the-post system seeks its credibility entirely from the institution that conducts the polls. And if the conductor falters, the process gets easily accused of manipulation.

That is something the Indian



EPOCH-MAKING: The Supreme Court's judgment in the electoral bond case has enhanced its stature as the final institutional bulwark of constitutional morality. ANI

democracy can ill afford, particularly in the context of all the barbs of it being an elected autocracy hurled by the Western academia and its media.

Equally important is the SC verdict reversing the Chandigarh mayoral poll result. Presiding officer Anil Masih was caught on camera blatantly defacing ballot papers to make valid votes for the AAP-Congress candidate invalid. This was nothing short of 'murder of democracy', no doubt.

A local poll to elect a mayor became a test case, and the court has majestically ensured that the Indian system passes it to prove that it still works. But how many such tests and shocks can the system withstand before it capitulates is a question that the votaries of the strong government need to ask themselves. A strong government derives its strength from the people's conviction, not from arm-twisting tactics of its storm-troopers.

Despite the two setbacks from the top court, the BJP is on an unassailable electoral upswing. The consecration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya has created such a groundswell of religious goodwill for PM Modi among

A local poll to elect a mayor became a test case, and the court has majestically ensured that the Indian system passes it to prove that it still works.

temple-going ordinary Hindus that it is now a mundane exercise for him to convert it into political capital for the polls. Then, of course, there is the added advantage of the Opposition remaining a house divided. Going by the last election's schedule, there are less than 50 days left for the first phase of polling. Yet, the Opposition has not firmed up poll tie-ups.

All those who may call the Indian democracy names after the elections should seriously look at the sorry state of the Opposition right now. As of today, it is not clear whether AAP and the Con-

gress will have an alliance in Punjab. Even in Delhi, where a 4-3 formula of seat-sharing is being talked about, there is no official announcement so far. The Samajwadi-Congress alliance in Uttar Pradesh is the only one that has been sealed. Meanwhile, Rahul Gandhi has taken a break from his yatra to lecture at Cambridge, as if Oxbridge scholars' votes count in Amethi or Wayanad.

The urgency of a group preparing to take on a juggernaut is glaringly missing in the terribly slow pace at which Opposition parties move. Incidentally, the Left, which is the fulcrum on which the Opposition in Delhi turns, has announced its candidates, including the one who would take on Rahul, if he contests from Wayanad. But a political understanding with Mamata Banerjee that could have altered the scene in West Bengal is still eluding the Congress as the BJP tries to project itself as her biggest challenger in the state.

Unless there is an unseen anticumbency storm gathering amongst the masses, there is no chance of a serious challenge to PM Modi's electoral pole position in these circumstances. The possibility of a third term for Modi

looks strong. However, that confidence should not prompt his followers to shake the foundations of Indian democracy — which is the message from the SC verdicts.

A recent issue of *The Economist* magazine has a brilliant leader on the perils of national conservatism. In the context of the American elections, the magazine talks about Trump's aides readying a programme "to capture the federal bureaucracy". To eulogise Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher as torchbearers of virtuous conservatism while condemning all newbie national conservatives as illiberalists opposed to multilateralism abroad and pluralism at home is obviously polemical. Reagan's initiation into politics was as an FBI informer ratting out communists in Hollywood; but for the Falklands War, Thatcher would never have found her feet. Both appealed to fiercely nationalist sentiments.

Nationalism is undeniably the core of conservatism. It suddenly cannot become dirty when bandied about by populists and anti-elites. But the difference now is the new attempt to subsume the entire system within the underbelly of the political executive. Indian bureaucracy has for some time now been caged parrots and pet falcons who sing and hunt for their political master. This situation cannot be blamed on any one party. A former bureaucrat, who had hunted down Subrata Roy for the UPA, was given cabinet rank long after retirement by a Left government this week.

Well, the capture of the bureaucracy by the Indian political class predated the global trend of national conservatism. Nevertheless, the two SC verdicts point towards the slippery slope we have reached. All that is left between the pinnacle of proud national achievements and the abyss of complete systemic breakdown are a few constitutional bodies. Remember, there can be no Ram Rajya without strong democratic institutions!

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The independence of judges is best safeguarded by the judges themselves. — Fali S Nariman

A rollercoaster electoral battle

SATISH KUMAR SHARMA

ON a hot, windless evening of May 1996, the counting of ballots for the Vadodara Lok Sabha election threw up a cliffhanger — lightweight Congress candidate Satya-jitsinh Gaekwad was ahead of his formidable BJP rival Jitubhai Sukhadia by all of 17 votes. I was then a DCP in the city and in charge of law & order and security at the counting centre, a polytechnic college. My batchmate, IP Gautam, was the Collector and the District Election Officer (DEO).

For Gautam, it was a tricky situation as the Congress candidate was demanding that he be declared the winner, while the BJP nominee wanted a recount. The latter's party was ruling the state; the CM and senior leaders of both parties were making frenetic phone calls to the DEO.

Gautam acted swiftly. First, he disconnected his telephone. Next, he agreed to consider the BJP candidate's petition for recounting and gave him an hour to file it.

I was at the control room of the counting centre when supporters of both parties gathered outside. Before I could react, hundreds of them thronged the passage outside the control room. Anything was possible — a clash, a stampede or ransacking of the counting centre. I rushed out and employed the force available to push the crowd back and clear the passage. Then, I called for reinforcements. The personnel arrived within minutes and we managed to restore order inside the building and outside.

On returning to the control room, I found the DEO wondering whether he should allow recounting. If he allowed it and the BJP candidate emerged the winner, his impartiality would come under a cloud and the Congress nominee was sure to demand a second recounting. If he rejected the petition, his decision was likely to be challenged in the court, and perhaps successfully.

Only days earlier, Gautam had had a confrontation with the redoubtable TN Seshan, then Chief Election Commissioner (CEC). A difference of opinion over a technical point had snowballed into a showdown. Gautam had held his ground and explained his position in a letter. Finally, Seshan had to blink. But now, Gautam was facing a new problem.

Past midnight, the BJP candidate submitted his petition for recounting. The safe course for the DEO would have been to allow it, but he chose the correct option. He fixed an open hearing to consider the plea. Meanwhile, both parties had marshalled legal teams to plead their case. Gautam heard the arguments and counter-arguments and then passed a reasoned order rejecting the petition. To this, the Central observers gave their consent and the order was faxed to the CEC for confirmation.

The wait was pregnant with suspense. At last, in the wee hours, the Congress candidate was declared the winner.

As expected, Gautam's decision was challenged, but both the high court and the Supreme Court upheld it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Need to find middle ground

Apropos of the editorial 'Death of a farmer'; the death of Shubhkaran Singh in a clash between security personnel and protesting farmers is tragic. Hundreds of lives were lost in 2020-21 during the farmers' agitation against the three now-repealed contentious farm laws. With no sign of a deadlock breaking anytime soon, the standoff can claim more lives. Let the stir not take another unsavoury turn. That four rounds of talks have failed to break the stalemate and instead led to the hardening of battlelines is concerning. The cultivators' key demand, a legal guarantee for the procurement of their produce at the MSP, must be given due consideration.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, BY MAIL

Farm leaders must act responsibly

With reference to 'Death of a farmer'; the use of brutal force by the Haryana Police against the protesting farmers has further aggravated the situation. The only way out of the deadlock is through negotiations between the Centre and the growers. In the meantime, the security personnel deployed at the site of the agitation must exercise utmost restraint while handling the protesters as an uneasy calm prevails on the Punjab and Haryana borders. The farmer leaders must also behave more responsibly so as to ensure that no more innocent protesters are killed amid the standoff. The cultivators' demands may be fulfilled eventually. But will it bring Shubhkaran back to life?

NK GOSAIN, BATHINDA

Strengthening ties

With reference to the editorial 'US help along LAC'; in the ever-shifting landscape of global politics, national interests reign supreme. The current administration adeptly navigates this reality, ensuring a delicate balance. India's march towards economic progress and military self-sufficiency showcases a promising trajectory. In collaborating with the USA, there is an opportunity to sway Pakistan away from deepening its ties with China. By exemplifying a responsible conduct, India aims to assure its neighbour of cooperation and support if the latter adopts an anti-terrorist stance. This strategic diplomacy aligns with India's broader objective of fostering amicable relations

with friendly nations and reinforcing a commitment to regional stability and prosperity.

VUJAY KUMAR KATIAL, BY MAIL

Weaponisation of agencies

The raids by the CBI on former Jammu and Kashmir Governor Satyapal Malik's premises are proof that the BJP is not keen on dispelling the allegation that it is misusing probe agencies to target its political opponents and critics. It is so glaringly obvious that the former Governor is being targeted for his criticism of the saffron party and the PM. The way investigation agencies have been going after Opposition leaders is just unprecedented. The mainstream Indian media must do more to highlight the arbitrary and selective action of such Central agencies.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI

A win for gender equality

The Supreme Court is right to note that terminating the employment of a woman on the ground that she has got married is a 'coarse case of gender discrimination and inequality'. For decades, countless women employed across different sectors have faced the harsh reality of being forced out solely because of their marital status or family obligations. Such discriminatory practices only perpetuate gender inequality and hinder a woman's professional growth. The apex court's direction to the Centre to pay a compensation of Rs 60 lakh to a former military nurse who was removed from service under a now-defunct Army order that cited marriage as a ground for the action is welcome.

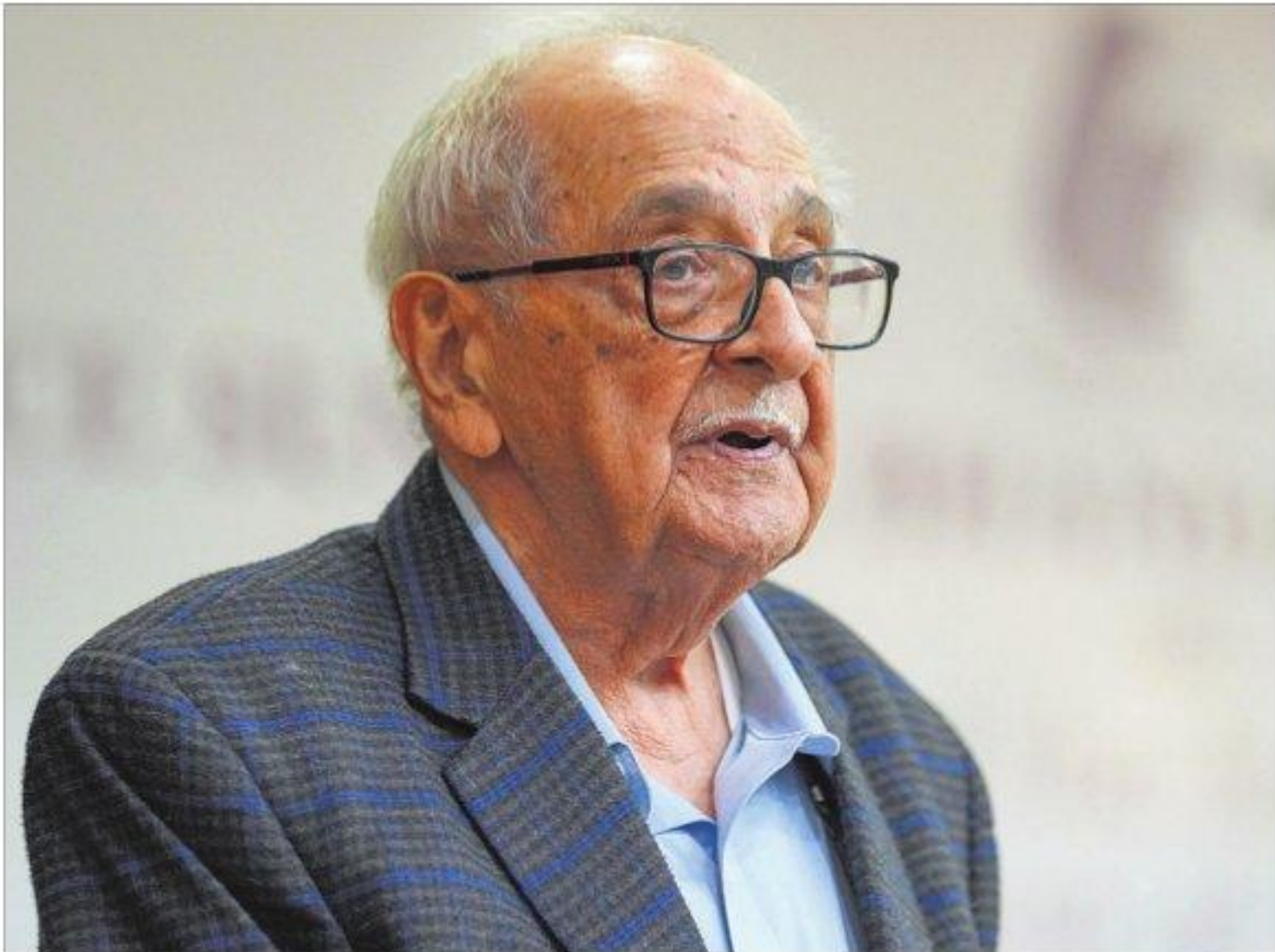
YASH PAL RALHAN, JALANDHAR

Doctors' pet peeve

Refer to the middle 'The epidemic of cyberchondria'; the writer has rightly highlighted the growing practice of tech-savvy patients diagnosing themselves of a condition after looking up some symptoms they have on the Internet. The case of the IT professional suffering from knee pain that the writer has cited is surely not an isolated incident. Most patients who have phones turn hypochondriacs. It is ironic that so often, it is the patient who tells the doctor what condition he or she is supposed to be diagnosed with and how it is to be examined and treated. No wonder this leaves a doctor harried.

BEANT SINGH, BY MAIL

A champion of free speech



CONSCIENTIOUS: Fali Nariman was a lawyer who ensured that justice was served to the last man standing. PTI

IN the wee hours of February 21, our nation lost one of its most illustrious jurists and a guiding light of Indian jurisprudence. Fali Sam Nariman's legacy transcends his remarkable career, leaving an indelible imprint on the legal landscape. The highly regarded legal luminary had once remarked that law is a matter of the heart as well as the head. It was this ethos that led him to be the conscience-keeper of the Bar and the Bench. He was not the one to mince words while voicing his disapproval of judges pandering to the executive. For decades, Nariman was a bulwark against the Executive's attempts to influence the appointment of judges in the higher judiciary. It was his legally impeccable submissions in the First Judge Case (SP Gupta vs Union of India) and the Second Judge Case (Supreme Court Advocates on Record Association vs Union of India) that resulted in the collegium system of judicial appointments. His role was crucial in the striking down of the National Judicial Appointments Commission by the Supreme Court. However, he never grew complacent and continued to work to make the collegium system more transparent and accountable.

Our constitutional jurisprudence is currently centred around the 'basic structure doctrine' evolved in the Kesavananda Bharati case. Nariman assisted the lead counsel, Nani Palkhivala, during the hearing of that case and had recently remarked that this doctrine was responsible for upholding the Constitution, as it was intended to be. Immediately after the landmark ruling in the Kesavananda Bharati case, Nariman also successfully supported the contentions of the petitioners in the Golaknath case, leading to the ruling that the Parliament could not curtail the fundamental rights ensured under the Constitution. Several landmark cases argued by Nariman have also been instrumental in affirming the principles of the Constitution. Being a passionate champion of free speech and secularism, Nariman played a pivotal role in *The Indian Express* case, in which the apex court held that freedom of speech under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution is inclusive of the 'freedom of the press'. He ardently advocated for the right to freedom of expression and religious freedom in *Bijoe Emmanuel vs State of Kerala* and stood for the rights of minority

Nariman's role was crucial in the striking down of the National Judicial Appointments Commission. He kept working to make the collegium system more accountable.

educational institutions in the TMA Pai Foundation case.

Despite his career reaching great heights, Nariman emphasised the significance of integrity above all. He was appointed as the Additional Solicitor General of India at a young age, but was courageous enough to give up the honour in protest when the Emergency was declared in 1975. While representing the Gujarat Government in the Narmada Dam rehabilitation case, he observed that violent incidents against Christian missionaries were becoming widespread in the area. When the violence did not abate despite his intervention, he returned the brief.

Nariman was a staunch proponent of democratic values and believed in the importance of dissent not only as a safety valve but also as a message to the public about the robust functioning of the apex court. He commended the lone dissent of Justice HR Khanna in the infamous *ADM Jabalpur vs Shivkant Shukla*. Pointing out the absence of similar dissent in the recent judgment on Article 370, he had quoted American judge Justice Stanley Mosk: "A dissent may salvage for tomorrow a legal principle that has been omitted or forgotten today."

Nariman's contributions were not limited to the judicial sphere. He served as a member of the

Rajya Sabha from 1999 to 2005, where he introduced a Private Members' Bill, the Judicial Statistics Bill, 2004, to collect empirical data on the functioning of all three tiers of the Indian judiciary so that the backlog of cases could be addressed.

Though Nariman never contested the Supreme Court Bar Association elections, he was cognisant of the importance of a strong Bar. He would ensure his participation in the Bar discussions and voting in every election. He was an enthusiastic participant in the Friday Group discussions held by the association and would engage with young advocates. Nariman's personality was never overshadowed by his success. I recall him sitting in the common room for lawyers at lunch, with the sandwich that was brought to him every day. However, whenever any lawyer offered him food, he would accept it humbly, regardless of the social or professional standing of the lawyer.

Nariman's son, Justice Rohinton Nariman, not only kept his legacy unblemished but also added a cherry at the top. He first proved himself to be one of the greatest lawyers in his generation, and subsequently, he showcased his commitment to the judiciary by giving up his flourishing practice to accept his elevation as a judge of the Supreme Court, thereby becoming only the fifth judge to be elevated to the apex court directly from the Bar. Their honesty and dedication were demonstrated by their commitment and conduct when, in some instances, the two represented opposing sides in the courtroom.

A great lawyer is one who leaves behind a legacy for many generations to come. Our country has witnessed the presence of a select group of legal stalwarts who have not only been the pillars of the fraternity but have also consciously made efforts to strengthen the Bar and the judiciary. Fali Sam Nariman was one of the last of these legendary lawyers who ensured that justice was served to the last man standing. He had once joked: "Most people retire, but lawyers never do; they only drop dead." He was preparing for a hearing just the day before he left us all, and indeed, any other way to go would have been unimaginable for him. His death has created a void that can never be filled, but we must cherish the legacy he has left behind.

At home in the court



ICON: Nariman, who received the Padma Vibhushan in 2007, was far more than a successful lawyer. PRESIDENT'S SECRETARIAT

THE passing of 95-year-old Fali Nariman marks the end of a constitutional era. For the Indian legal world, he was Obi-Wan Kenobi, Albus Dumbledore and Gandalf the Grey rolled into one. Prime Ministers, Chief Justices, Editors-in-Chief, Chief Know-alls — all sought his legal services and valued his advice in law and in life. He could scare clients, solicitors and instructing counsel in conference and yet put their case in court so beautifully that it seemed obvious to them that right would be done unto their cause.

He became a lawyer in 1950, when the Constitution had just been born, and practised law till the last evening of his life as the Constitution was being hollowed out, despite his stout defence of its moral core. His wish to die in a secular India has probably been fulfilled. Whether a secular India will long survive his departure is a question that his successors will have to answer. He was a proud Parsi and a prouder Indian. In a speech at a book release, he said: "I have never felt that I lived in this country at the sufferance of the majority. I have been brought up to think and feel that the minorities together, with the majority community, are integral parts of India."

As a member of a minuscule minority, he never tired of reminding the nation that its magnificent Constitution was written by the Constituent Assembly, 80 per cent of whose members were orthodox Hindus, with President Rajendra Prasad being the most orthodox of them. In his last years, he was increasingly worried about the nation's drift towards majoritarianism. The sight of a saffron-robed Hindu monk ruling India's most populous state was to him a portent of a non-secular India.

While the law was his life's mission, he was much more than a successful court lawyer. He was often the moral core of constitutionalism in this country. When the Emergency was declared in June 1975, he resigned as the Additional Solicitor General of India. This was at a time when few people dissented and no one knew how long the dark era would last. In later years, he shaped the inde-

While the law was his life's mission, he was much more than a successful court lawyer. He was often the moral core of constitutionalism in this country.

pendence of the judiciary by leading the arguments in the judges' appointments cases and the National Judicial Appointments Commission case, where he told the court: "My client is the independence of the judiciary." He also served a term as a nominated member of the Rajya Sabha, where his pointed interventions and expert opinion were greatly valued by all members of the House.

He wrote frequently on matters of law and matters of the moment. His articles and books made the readers see things the way he wanted them to see it. His public speeches were carefully crafted and he did not riff extempore for a speaking engagement. He was a collector of ideas and phrases that he would store away in his memory or his notebooks, to bring out at an appropriate time. His reading was vast and ranged a variety of topics.

Thus, his speeches and articles were a glorious patchwork of carefully curated quotations and precedents worked into an orchestrated delivery in his stentorian voice. He linked all the stories and quotations into a magnificent whole with vivid imagery that illuminated any talk or argument he made. His written speeches were printed in a manner which when read aloud, had his high

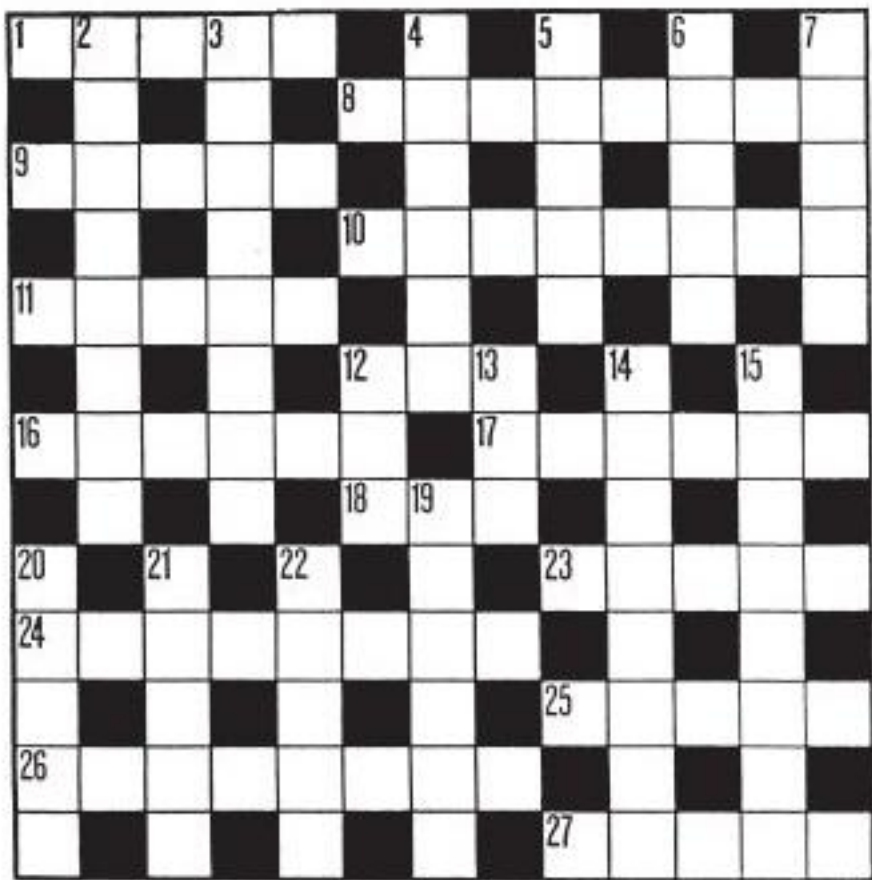
notes properly emphasised. For example: "Never forget that the Indian nation was born Great, and will always remain Great. Even though some of the people that inhabit it from time to time are NOT."

He was a mentor and counselor to many, who would turn to him for words of comfort and advice. Anyone who unburdened his troubles to Fali always went away with hope that things would improve after whatever advice he offered. Everyone who came to him for help, legal or otherwise, got something. It may not have been entirely what they wanted, but it was something that he could get or give and something that they could live with.

His conferences for matters in court were conducted on a huge book-strewn round table. As he listened to the deliberations, his mind working furiously. The essential arguments were quickly dictated on to a note of arguments that would be constantly thought over and revised till the moment of delivery. When he stood up in court, he was always listened to with the greatest of respect. Sometimes, judges had to restrain themselves from immediately ruling in his favour. Younger judges were advised by their more experienced brethren to dictate judgments in his matters after some time, when the magic of his advocacy had worn off a bit.

His burial at the Parsi cemetery near Khan Market in New Delhi was attended by a host of his pupils, who had grown up to be judges, senior advocates and advocates of repute. He was laid to rest near his wife of over 60 years, Bapsi Nariman. His son Justice Rohinton Nariman (retd), daughter Anaheeta, his grandchildren and great-grandchildren were all there. His long-time junior and disciple Subhash Sharma from Jammu remained faithful to the last. The grave closest to him was occupied by his old chamber-mate, one-time rival and later friend Soli Sorabjee. About Soli, Fali had written in his autobiography *Before Memory Fades*: "... for a long while we were rivals, later unfriendly rivals, but now, in the evening of our lives, we are friends." I hope that the two friends and constitutional warriors are watching from their graves an India that remains true to its Constitution.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- Deep crack in ground (5)
- Item by item (2,6)
- In reserve (2,3)
- Produce no response (4,4)
- Administered (5)
- Guided (3)
- Regain consciousness (4,2)
- Too (6)
- A hard pull (3)
- Full of laughter (5)
- Approve of (4,4)
- Spurious (5)
- Maintain one's effort (4,2,2)
- Careful consideration (5)

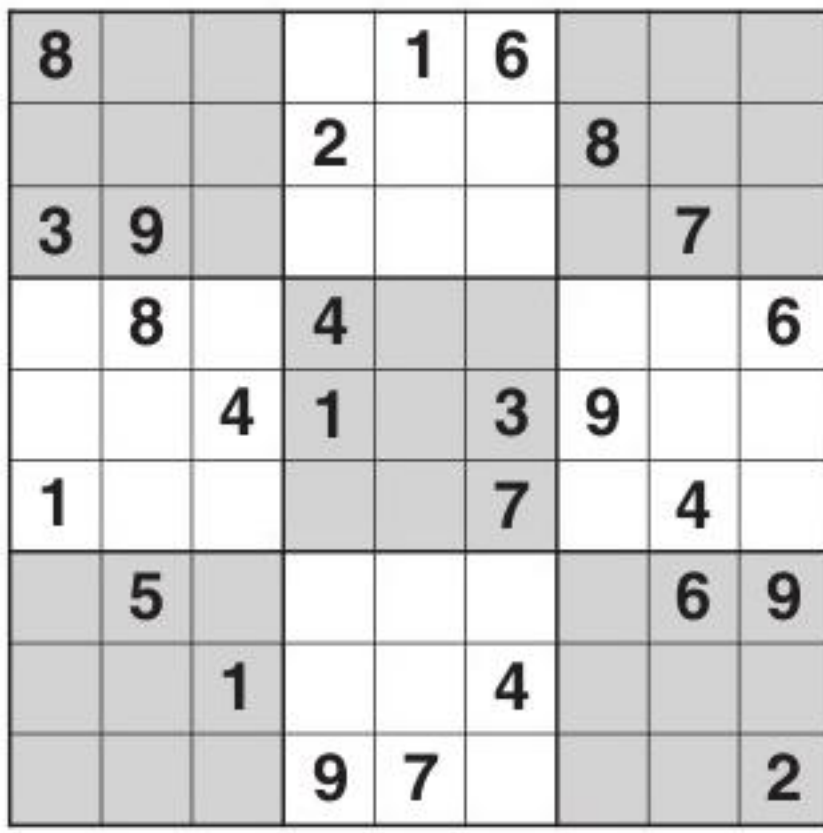
DOWN

- Importunate dependant (6-2)
- Commonly designated (2-6)
- Employ (6)
- Answer (5)
- Flaw (5)
- Sudden overwhelming attack (5)
- Person's destiny (3)
- Follow persistently (3)
- Dwindle to nothing (5,3)
- Competent in many fields (3-5)
- False (6)
- Throttle (5)
- Foreign (5)
- Be in store for (5)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Pack animal, 6 Aged, 10 Match, 11 Herculean, 12 Terrible, 13 Tinge, 15 Upright, 17 Shallow, 19 Helping, 21 Outdoor, 22 Set on, 24 Informal, 27 Translate, 28 Guise, 29 Sole, 30 Settlement.
Down: 1 Pump, 2 Cathedral, 3 Abhor, 4 Inhibit, 5 Airless, 7 Glean, 8 Donkeywork, 9 Subtract, 14 Such as it is, 16 Glibness, 18 Look-alike, 20 Grimace, 21 Offbeat, 23 Trail, 25 Rogue, 26 Heat.

SU DO KU



V. HARD

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

FEBRUARY 24, 2024, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1945
- Phalgun Shaka 5
- Phalgun Parvishite 12
- Hijari 1445
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 15, up to 6.00 pm
- Atiganda Yoga up to 1.34 pm
- Magha Nakshatra up to 10.21 pm
- Moon in Leo sign
- Magh Purnima
- Shri Guru Ravidaas Jyanti.

FORECAST

SUNSET:	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	18:17 HRS
SUNRISE:	SUNDAY	06:53 HRS	
CITY	MAX	MIN	
Chandigarh	22	09	
New Delhi	25	08	
Amritsar	22	07	
Bathinda	23	08	
Jalandhar	22	08	
Ludhiana	22	09	
Bhiwani	23	11	
Hisar	23	07	
Sirsa	23	10	
Dharamsala	18	06	
Manali	11	-01	
Shimla	15	03	
Srinagar	10	-02	
Jammu	24	07	
Kargil	02	-12	
Leh	02	-10	
Dehradun	23	07	
Mussoorie	16	01	

TEMPERATURE IN °C