

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Exercise restraint

Leaders should not lower the bar in poll speeches

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi's remarks at a rally in Rajasthan's Banswara on Sunday have triggered a row ahead of the second phase of the Lok Sabha elections. Tearing into the Congress manifesto, the PM alleged that the Opposition party was planning to give people's hard-earned money and valuables to *ghuspaithiye* (infiltrators) and 'those who have more children'. Out of context, he also referred to then PM Manmohan Singh's 2006 statement that weaker sections and Muslims had the 'first claim' on the country's resources. Describing the PM's comments as 'hate speech', several Opposition parties have urged the Election Commission of India (ECI) to take action against him. The Congress has alleged that the remarks were divisive, malicious and aimed at a particular religious community.

The unsavoury controversy has raised the prospect of campaign speeches becoming more vicious and venomous over the next few weeks. The onus is on senior leaders of various political parties to lead by example and avoid crossing any red line. A major challenge for the ECI is to deal with every complaint and counter-complaint on merit and take decisions freely as well as fairly.

It's not uncommon for politicians to get carried away by their emotions or biases in the poll season. During an election rally in Karnataka in April 2019, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi had allegedly asked why the Modi surname was common to 'thieves'. The unacceptable comment had got him into trouble as BJP MLA Purnesh Modi filed a criminal defamation case against him. Rahul had eventually lost his Lok Sabha membership, which was restored only after the Supreme Court stayed his conviction in August last year. Sounding a note of caution, the court had said: 'The alleged utterances are not in good taste. A person in public life is expected to exercise a degree of restraint while making public speeches.' PM Modi and Opposition leaders should pay heed to this sound advice and refrain from any outburst that can vitiate peace and communal harmony.

Gukesh's triumph

A great leap forward for Indian chess

IN the world of chess, where strategy and intellect reign supreme, D Gukesh has etched his name in history. At 17, this prodigious talent hailing from Chennai stunned the world on Sunday by emerging victorious in the FIDE Candidates tournament in Toronto, securing his place as the youngest-ever winner of this prestigious event. His journey to the summit of chess excellence has been nothing short of remarkable. Defying the odds and surpassing the expectations of many, he exhibited a level of composure and maturity far beyond his years. Through 14 rounds of gruelling classical chess, Gukesh remained unfazed against seasoned opponents, showcasing a blend of tenacity and brilliance. Facing off against top-ranked players — from Hikaru Nakamura to Fabiano Caruana and Ian Nepomniachtchi — Gukesh stood tall.

Mentored by the legendary Viswanathan Anand, Gukesh epitomises the high stature of Indian chess on the world stage. Exuding humility and determination, the champion says that he is driven not by the pursuit of records, but by a simple desire to play his best chess. This augurs well for him as he prepares to take on China's Ding Liren for the World Championship title later this year.

Notably, this year marks a milestone for India as a record five players qualified for the Candidates tournament. Three of them — Gukesh, Praggnanandhaa and R Vaishali — hail from Anand's academy. As India celebrates their feats, it is imperative that we seize the moment to propel the game to greater heights. With more elite tournaments and a supportive ecosystem in place, the country can ensure that Gukesh's victory marks the dawn of another glorious era of Indian chess.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, APRIL 24, 1924

Europeans on the warpath

THE letter which the European Association of Calcutta had addressed to the Secretary of State for India on the subject of Indian Reforms deserves notice only as showing how hard fallacies and prejudices die which have their roots in fancied self-interest. There is not a single statement in this letter, not a single argument the absurdity of which has not been repeatedly demonstrated by speakers and writers. And yet these statements and arguments are here clothed in the garb of truisms and put forward in a document addressed to the highest official authority connected with the government of India. To make such statements and arguments the subject of a serious examination is not only to waste time and labour but to dignify them with a notice which they do not deserve. But when an obliging news agency gives to such a letter all the publicity in its power, it is not possible to wholly ignore it. The letter starts with a proposition which has all the appearance of a universally accepted truth, but which in reality embodies one of the most obvious of all fallacies in politics. The association, we are told, is emphatically of the opinion that there is not now and never has been any genuine appeal from the 'peoples' of India for self-government. Not even a moment's reflection is needed to show that this short sentence of three lines contains as many gross errors, whether of fact or of thought. India has no 'peoples' but only one set of people. The question whether there has been an appeal from these people for self-government is not one of opinion but of fact, and this question can be answered only in one way by any man of ordinary honesty and intelligence.

Our planet's sustainability at stake

Existential problem caused by climate change can't be solved by the paradigm of capitalist economics

ARUN MAIRA
FORMER MEMBER,
PLANNING COMMISSION

IN its recent verdict in the case of the Great Indian Bustard, the Supreme Court has recognised the fundamental right of humans to be free from the adverse impact of climate change. The ruling has dismayed policymakers and builders of renewable energy infrastructure. They say the judges are setting aside the advice of scientific experts and delaying the construction of infrastructure for reversing climate change. The court admits that climate change has brought jurisprudence into uncharted territory. Solutions cannot be found with the same way of thinking that has caused the problem. The existential problem caused by climate change cannot be understood and solved by the prevalent paradigms of capitalist economics and unsystemic science.

In capitalist economies, natural capital is the property of its owner. Kings and landlords owned the land, water and forests, and all the fish and animals within their private estates. They also owned the produce of all humans who lived and worked on their land as their serfs or slaves. Owners who stayed on their land and interacted with the people on it could see their forests and watch their crops grow, and their workers sweat, and sense how the system worked. Absentee landlords did not care. They wanted their profits regardless of the damage to their land by droughts and floods, besides the sufferings of their workers.

The development of commodity markets, in which animals, farm produce, timber and miner-



CLIMATE CHAOS: The wellbeing of all must be protected for sustainable development. REUTERS

als could be bought and sold with money and prices determined by traders, converted natural capital into financial capital. Financial markets created a new class of capitalists, even further removed from reality than absentee landlords, who gauge the condition of the world from charts of how prices move in commodity exchanges and stock markets. When labour went off the land into factories, workers were paid for the time they spent in factories and what they produced during that time. Their skills and labour became commodities purchasable for a price by owners of enterprises.

Property rights are an ancient principle of economics and jurisprudence. Human rights were recognised much later with political movements, often violent, to abolish slavery, and to pay fair wages and provide safe working conditions for workers. Gigwork is the 21st-century way to convert labour into a commodity again: workers on demand, payment only for the work done, and no social security — good for business owners, but bad for the people.

Garrett Hardin's theory of the 'Tragedy of the Commons' underlies the ideology of privatisation. The theory is that property which belongs to everybody is

Citizens with diverse needs must listen to each other to come to a consensus about the type of society they want to create for themselves.

careless for by nobody. Therefore, the commons must be parcelled out to private owners to manage their own pieces efficiently, motivated by a drive to make more profit for themselves. Damage to the global environment, which belongs to everybody, has become a global-scale tragedy of the commons. It cannot be solved by further privatisation of property. A new theory of governance is required to obtain the 'Promise of the Global Commons'.

Francis Bacon boasted at the birth of the European Enlightenment in the 17th century that science would give humans the power to control unruly nature.

Scientific discoveries in physics, chemistry and biology have produced powerful tools for exploiting the earth to improve humanity's material wellbeing, and technologically advanced nations are envied for the material wellbeing of their citizens. Overexploitation has harmed the health of the earth. Thus, with technological hubris, humans have destroyed the sustainability of the planet and harmony among people.

Modern science has broken the complexity of systems into small components. Separate sciences are advanced by experts who know more and more about less and less. They are like the blind men around the proverbial elephant. None sees the whole reality. Modern medicine has developed marvellous drugs and surgeries to repair various organs of the body. The side effects of the treatment of a diseased organ make the patients' condition worse by harming other organs. Better health requires more generalists who understand the person's body and mind.

Economics broke away from other social sciences in the last century, with all going into their specialised silos. Economics focused on the productivity of natural and human resources to increase the GDP. Economists know how to increase the materi-

al size of an economy, but not how to improve equity in the economy and sustainability of natural resources, along with growth.

Economists, like other scientists, look for causal relationships among various forces within a system, presuming all are unidirectional. The modern scientific approach cannot understand forces that mutually arise and have circular relationships of cause and effect with each other. Economists who advocate for higher GDP first to grow more resources to improve the HDI (human development index) and later for environmental sustainability fail to see that human development and sustainable natural resources are prerequisites for economic growth and will always be its foundations.

Humans are part of nature's complex system, along with the soil, water systems and diverse species of plants, animals and insects. The wellbeing of all must be protected for sustainable development. Conservationists who focus on only one part of the system and advocate for more trees, or for the protection of one species like the tiger, are not taking a systemic view of the whole system. And those who want poor people to be cleared out of the commons to protect forests and tigers fail to see that humans are also an integral part of the system. Such scientific solutions for sustainability can be inhumane.

Complex systems can be understood only by listening to multiple points of view. The rule of law and speedy justice make countries attractive for financial investors and citizens. However, investors and citizens have different needs, and therefore different interpretations of law. Good governance and justice for all require those who govern to continuously listen to the people. Courts and experts within their narrow specialisations cannot create a consensus among citizens. Citizens with diverse needs must listen to each other to come to a consensus about the type of society they want to create for themselves.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

We are running out of time, we must have a planetary solution to a planetary crisis. — Al Gore

Retirement parties with twists & turns

ARSHEE KHOSLA

JUST as death is predestined, the date of retirement becomes a certainty the moment one is selected for government service. As a civil servant, I have attended countless retirement functions. The last working day of the month is reserved for superannuation parties.

On one such day in 2017, a senior officer was set to retire and he had generously organised a buffet lunch in the office. By noon, the tables were cleared, the floor was mopped and large food containers were placed neatly in a row. The lunch had been announced a day in advance, and hence the majority of the staff members, if not all, were without their tiffin boxes. The office corridors were getting a dose of an air freshener when nature decided to shake things up a little. Tremors rattled the building, forcing the employees to scamper off towards the exit. The fact that the structure had been raised back in the 1980s expedited our exodus. Surprisingly, the hullabaloo died quickly and everyone came back, disapproving of economist Milton Friedman's remark that there was no such thing as a free lunch. I was sceptical to re-enter the building, but was prodded to overcome my fear. It won't be an exaggeration to say that the party was a resounding success as everyone ate like there was no tomorrow.

During these farewell parties, colleagues usually say a few words about the departing employee. It is often a routine affair as the majority of the guests wish the person good health and thank him/her for the services rendered. A close colleague may even recite a poem in honour of the retiree. Family members, too, are felicitated and invited to share anecdotes and experiences. One such gathering was for a beloved staff member. We were joined by his wife, children and grandchildren. Everyone had got their turn to speak. The youngest invitee, the retiree's grandson, was also keen to chip in.

This was in June 2022, when Punjabis were recovering from the shock of singer Sidhu Moosewala's murder. The child, barely 6-7 years old, held the mic and sang, 'Ghare bai kay, ghare bai kay, maariyaan ni gallaan!' His bewildered mother snatched the mic and started apologising, while the room rippled with laughter. The little genius had managed to hit two birds with one stone: he had paid a tribute to Moosewala and at the same time, conveyed to the audience that his grandfather did not while away the time at home in idle talk.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Lower premium amount

This refers to the editorial 'health insurance'; it must be kept in mind that most senior citizens who retire from the private sector do not have the resources to pay hefty premiums. To ensure effective use of the facility offered by the IRDAI (Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India), the government must make arrangements to lower the premium amount by way of discontinuing GST on the sum for senior citizens; otherwise, the age concession will be of no use. Balancing compassionate care with fiscal responsibility will safeguard both patients and insurers.

CHANDER SHEKHAR SHARMA, MOHALI

No overreaction on Muizzu's win

Apropos the editorial 'Maldivian elections'; President Mohamed Muizzu had campaigned on the 'India out' theme and his government had asked for the minuscule number of Indian troops in the country to be withdrawn. Muizzu drew Male closer to Beijing by giving contracts for infrastructure projects. The Indian government has done well not to overreact to his party's win and made an attempt to distance Male from New Delhi with a pragmatic approach. Delhi must, of course, draw the line on matters that undermine its security and core interests.

SS PAUL, NADIA

Private investment in sports

With reference to the news report 'Right move, Gukesh becomes youngest to contest world title'; Gukesh has shown that not only does he possess exceptional talent but also has a mature head on his shoulders. Since the beginning of 2024, the world's top-ranked players have included Viswanathan Anand, Gukesh, Praggnanandhaa, Arjun Erigaisi and Vidit Gujrathi, which is testimony to the amazing chess talent in our country. The chess ecosystem in India is flourishing at a rapid pace, with young players from tier 2 and 3 cities playing really well. Private investment in any sport helps it to grow, and Tech Mahindra becoming a joint venture partner in the Global Chess League is a welcome step.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Insult to democracy

With reference to the news report 'Mohinder Singh Kaypee third party-hopper to enter Jalandhar battle arena'; this opportunism is disgusting. Defection is an insult to the sacrifices of our freedom fighters and the people who lost their lives in the struggle for Independence. They fought to end the oppression of foreign rulers with a hope that they would achieve democracy where people would elect trustworthy leaders. When power-hungry leaders switch sides to other parties for personal gains, people feel cheated and democracy becomes a laughing stock.

FAQIR SINGH, DASUYA

Election rhetoric

Refer to the news report 'PM doubles down on anti-Cong pitch, claims it will seize, redistribute wealth'; election campaigns by political parties are justified, but only when they are fair and not polarising in nature. India does not need rhetoric from any party on the distribution of wealth. Once such links are made, the narrative around them can acquire a life of its own, far removed from the real issues. It is, however, true that the benefits of India's brisk growth have been unevenly distributed under the rule of the Congress as well as the BJP. Adequate industrial jobs were not created. So, the shift from farm to factories on the scale required did not happen. This is the reason every political party is relying on offering welfare schemes to entice voters.

SATWANT KAUR PANESAR, BY MAIL

EC's litmus test

The opinion polls of the first phase of polling have not exactly gone in favour of the BJP. In recent days, PM Modi has raised his pitch against the Congress. His remarks border on hate speech if one considers the guidelines laid down by the Election Commission. The Congress has rightly taken the matter to the poll panel. Uddhav Thackeray was sent a notice on using words like 'Jai Bhawani' in his party's anthem, whereas when PM Modi urged people of Karnataka to say 'Jai Bajrang-bali' while casting their vote, it was overlooked. In fact, it is a litmus test for the Election Commission to exhibit impartiality.

YASH KHETARPAL, PANCHKULA

Long way to go

Vodafone Idea will need more capital infusion

Vodafone Idea's ₹18,000 crore follow-on public offering (FPO), its last-ditch attempt after failing to raise funds over the past few years, has revived hopes of a turnaround for the cash-strapped telecom services company. The FPO has found significant support from overseas investors, and it has been subscribed nearly seven times, receiving a total of around ₹90,000 crore in bids. While the successful FPO is a positive and may give Vodafone Idea a fresh lease of life, its impact may be limited, given the quantum of its losses and liabilities. The company was saddled with debt of around ₹2.15 trillion as on December 31, 2023. This includes deferred spectrum payment obligations of ₹1.38 trillion and an adjusted gross revenue liability of ₹69,020 crore due to the government, apart from ₹6,050 crore due to banks and financial institutions, and ₹1,660 crore worth of optionally convertible debentures.

The telco has other fronts to worry about as well, the biggest being the subscriber base erosion it has been facing for several months now. The latest data from the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) put the Vodafone Idea wireless subscriber base at 221 million as of January. By comparison, Bharti Airtel's mobile user base was at 382 million and Jio's at 464 million. Vodafone Idea also has a lot of catching up to do in 5G services as its rivals are way ahead. At the time of announcing the FPO last week, the Vodafone Idea management elaborated on the company's plans to launch 5G services. It intends to cover 40 per cent of its revenue base with 5G services in the next 24 to 30 months. But the telco's 5G network order placement will be linked to its capacity to raise funds.

It is clear that the fundraise from the current FPO round will not be enough for the company to invest in 5G and network expansion as well as service its debt. Telecom is a cash-intensive sector where one-time fundraise cannot be a solution for any company. With little financial support coming in recent times from the promoter companies — Vodafone Plc and Aditya Birla Group — the telco needs to bite the bullet and rationalise tariffs. The monthly average revenue per user (Arpu), a benchmark for the health of a company and the sector, needs to go up substantially — not just for Vodafone Idea but also for the telecom industry — to make business feasible. Vodafone Idea's monthly Arpu stands at ₹145, much lower than Jio's ₹181.7 and Airtel's ₹208. India's telecom Arpu, at ₹152.50, is a fraction of the global average.

Against this backdrop, a tariff rationalisation could go a long way in ensuring Indian telecom does not have to face a duopoly-like situation. The Union government, which is the largest shareholder in Vodafone Idea, with a 32.19 per cent stake (before FPO) after it converted the telecom company's accrued interest on adjusted gross revenue arrears into equity in February 2023, has the option to further convert its dues into equity later. But the company must focus on developing a robust business model after a successful FPO. Signs of revival will also enable it to raise more funds for expansion.

Divided Maldivian polity

India should review its position

On Sunday, results were announced for elections to the Indian Ocean nation of the Maldives, and the outcome would not have been viewed with favour in New Delhi. The People's National Congress (PNC) of President Mohamed Muizzu won a landslide victory, bagging considerably more seats than were earlier hoped. Of the 93 seats in the Maldivian Parliament, the PNC won 70. The Maldives Democratic Party, which previously held a majority in the legislature, saw its share drop to 15 seats. Importantly, even progressive areas like parts of the capital Male, which were less likely to vote for the Islamic traditionalism of Mr Muizzu, this time went over to the PNC. Two former Presidents, Mohamed Nasheed and Abdulla Yameen, formed new parties that failed to trouble the scorers. The PNC now has complete control of the country's establishment, and can make institutional and strategic changes it desires.

Mr Muizzu, who was elected President in November 2023, has made anti-Indian and anti-West rhetoric a cornerstone of his appeal. The slogan that Mr Muizzu's party has put forward is "India out", crafted in fact by Mr Yameen when he held power in the past. The claim — buttressed by ample disinformation on social media — is that India is militarily interfering in the country, in part through the presence of a handful of Indian soldiers on Maldivian soil. These were there to maintain equipment, including helicopters, given by India for largely civilian purposes. Since Mr Muizzu's assumption of the role of President last year, many of the soldiers have been replaced by civilian personnel. Such a trend by itself is not entirely alarming; it is not unusual in democratic politics for resentment against larger neighbours to become a method of mobilising voters. The complication for New Delhi is that Mr Muizzu has added to his anti-Indian rhetoric with pro-Chinese messaging. A new Maldivian President's first visit is traditionally to India; Mr Muizzu instead went to Turkey. Recently, however, he made a high-profile visit to China, following which it was announced that a new security agreement would be signed. While this focuses on internal security, the training of local security forces and the gift of "non-lethal" equipment like teargas — and therefore cannot be called military cooperation — it nevertheless demonstrates that New Delhi may have miscalculated in failing to manage Maldivian discontent. Losing a strategically vital archipelago in its backyard to Beijing should be a concern for New Delhi.

However, far from being placatory in response to Mr Muizzu's provocations, the Indian response has been counter-productive. An anti-Maldivian social media campaign, the obvious promotion of Lakshadweep as an alternative tourist destination, and the refusal to provide an alternative proposition to Beijing's were miscalculations by the Indian government. The notion that the Maldives would collapse without Indian tourism — India is now only the sixth-largest provider of tourists to the islands, with China and Russia on top — is clearly not tenable. New Delhi cannot compete with Beijing's deep pockets even in its own backyard. Instead it must focus on answering the very real development and security aspirations of the country. Pro-Chinese sentiment could be a passing phase; it must not be allowed to become a permanent feature of one of India's close maritime neighbours.

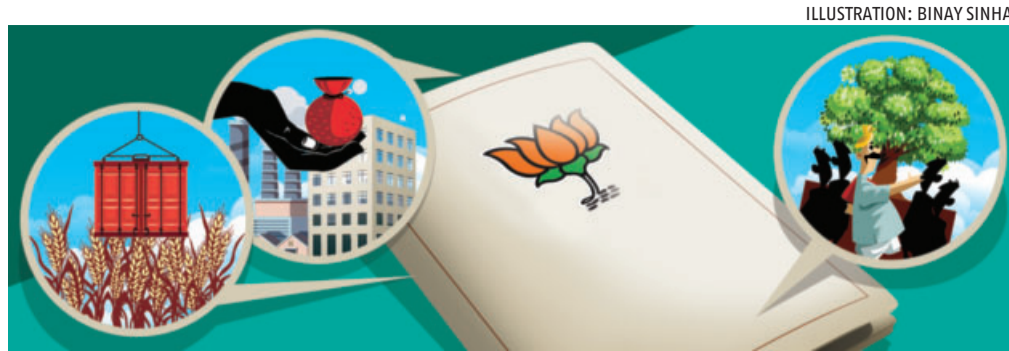


ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Beyond promises

The BJP's election manifesto raises many economic-policy issues requiring a more holistic approach

Election manifestos, released before general elections, say a lot about political parties' aspirations, promises, and vision. Understandably, such a document attracts more attention when it is from the ruling party and more so when there is a possibility that the party will return to power after the general elections.

The manifesto released by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) before the start of the seven-phase general elections of 2024, therefore, has attracted more than its usual share of attention and commentary. This article attempts an analysis of only three key economic policy promises that the BJP's manifesto has made. The objective is to understand what these promises might imply for governance in the coming five years, assuming that the BJP retains power at the Centre.

A major element in the economic content of the manifesto is its emphasis on boosting investment in general and, particularly, in over a dozen sectors like infrastructure, automobiles, electric vehicles, semiconductors, aviation services, and textiles. Investment, led by governments at the Centre and the states, has been the hallmark of the BJP rule in the last five years. This strategy helped the Indian economy recover from the Covid shock and the continued focus on investment is only to be expected.

But the manifesto appears to have ignored the absence of a strong revival in private-sector investment so far, which has been a cause for concern. With consumption growth continuing to remain muted, there is a need for concrete steps to attract the private corporate sector to increase its investment. And the task of ensuring the much-needed revival of private investment could perhaps be achieved with less difficulty if the long overdue factor-market reforms become a priority for the government that comes to power at the Centre in June 2024.

It is in this context that the BJP manifesto's failure to underline the need for specific factor-market reforms like changes in laws on land acquisition for industrial projects and in labour policies to make them more flexible is deeply worrying. A steady increase in capital investment by the government, as seen in the last four years, is welcome, but this trend is yet to encourage the private sector to chip in with higher investment from its side.

One of the ways to expedite private-sector investment is to relax land and labour laws and bring in other policy changes to improve the ease of investing and doing business. The economic manifesto of the BJP does not live up to those expectations of adequate policy changes.

Of course, the promise of judicial reform to accelerate e-courts in mission mode, expedite resolutions of old as well as pending cases, and create an ecosystem for alternative dispute resolution should attract private investment, just as the promise of a more efficient health care system and education infrastructure will be a long-term help. But a clear signal on what the new government should do with regard to ushering in land and labour reforms would have been welcome. Or have those tasks been left to the 100-day action plan or the five-year agenda that civil servants have been asked to prepare?

The manifesto raises two other questions. There is a promise to strengthen the flagship income transfer scheme for farmers, or the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana, announced a few months before the 2019 general elections. Note that the 2024 manifesto of the BJP talks about strengthening this scheme but there is no hint of an increase in the annual assistance amount of ₹6,000 for a farmer household. Nor is there any promise of a legally mandated review of minimum support prices for agricultural crops, although the manifesto assures periodic



RAISINA HILL
A K BHATTACHARYA

How young India views the world and polls

The low registration of first-time voters has justifiably caused a lot of concern and comment. "Apathy", "cynicism" and logistical difficulties are some explanations given.

This column shares some findings of a recent ethnographic study on young India that may shed more light on this phenomenon. Called "Drivers of Destiny", the study was done with 18-21 year olds, who have just entered or will soon enter the workforce, and 22-30 year olds, who will soon become the ruling age cohort. Drawn from large and small towns of Ahmedabad, Aurangabad, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, Coimbatore, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Guwahati, Jamshedpur, Lucknow and Delhi, the respondents had some years of college education (dropouts, and all grades of colleges were included). Many were first-time collegegoers in their family — not surprising, given India's education demographics. A good way to think about them (which was the basis for the sample design) is that they represent the "leading edge" of the "mass" or "middle" young India, and form the core of tomorrow's India.

The study was not about voting behaviour but getting a holistic and "people-level" understanding of the young men and women who would power India through the next half century at least — understanding their inside world and how they make sense of the complex outside world, seen through their prism. Quantitative surveys have produced limited insight on a subject so complex and deeply layered, hence the ethnographic approach was deployed to hear and understand from inside the group rather than impose frameworks for understanding from outside of it. The study, commissioned by this columnist, was led by Dr Mathangi Krishnamurthy, associate professor of Anthropology at IIT Madras, with a team of young researchers that she assembled.

First a quick demographic reality-check on this

group. The majority are from modest-income homes and have had "modest" quality of education, as expected but often not acknowledged.

Seventy per cent urban and 58 per cent rural respondents are still students, and only 5-8 per cent urban/rural say they are unemployed (2023, TGI data from Kantar). The hardest hit by lack of jobs are 22-30 year olds: 53 per cent urban and 73 per cent rural are married, and only 8-13 per cent are still students.

The ethnographic study findings suggest that politics is not on the radar of 18-21 year old Indians. The majority do not read about politics or see themselves as a political voice. They also do not make the connection between "my vote" and "the government", which they see clearly as an entity that does things, a sort of a utility. Many want a predictable government job. They do not see themselves as having high stakes in political movements and are not interested in voting. Clearly, colleges today are not the hotbed and cradle of politics they once used to be, where future political leaders would cut their teeth.

They are, however, very aware of social issues and know about Chandrayaan and its quest, Swachh Bharat, Make in India, social and communal clashes, conflicts between countries of the world, and so on, mostly through social media and the internet.

They see politics as being about social issues and a means of social change, but their high engagement with social issues is through their very personal lens and their own immediate context: "I want to change the world / I want the world to change to be a better place for me."

Their idea of the "nation" is only vaguely an ideological and institutional one needing work to strengthen. More prominently, it is a social, personal, cultural entity that is their home — "not perfect, I want to go outside and see the world, but this is home, and it will get better slowly". They are aware

increases in them. In addition, there is a promise for strengthening the crop insurance scheme and encouraging crop diversification as well as increased cultivation of pulses and oilseeds, where the country continues to remain dependent on imports.

Now, all these promises must have been reassuring from both fiscal responsibility and agricultural points of view. But there is no clarity on how these schemes would be strengthened, crop diversification would be achieved, and more pulses and oil seeds would be grown. None of those promises is easy to fulfil. Perhaps more planning would be needed to implement them.

What is decidedly worrying is the wide berth given to the much-needed tasks of reforming the three agricultural laws passed by Parliament in 2020 but had to be withdrawn in the face of a prolonged farmer agitation around Delhi. These laws were well intentioned, aimed at setting up mechanisms to allow farmers to sell their farm produce outside the Agriculture Produce Market Committees, undertake contract farming, and market their produce freely and to exempt a variety of crops from several restrictions like those for holding of stocks under the Essential Commodities Act. The BJP's manifesto is silent on how the goals of these laws, now withdrawn, would be achieved.

Finally, the ruling party's manifesto promises fiscal autonomy for panchayati raj institutions to make them sustainable. Fulfilling this promise will certainly bring about a positive change in the country's governance structure. But once again the manifesto falls short of explaining what kind of fiscal autonomy is being proposed for panchayati raj institutions.

Since 1993, when the third tier of governance was statutorily empowered, all the five Finance Commissions have made several recommendations on enhancing the distribution of resources to urban and local bodies. Even the Tenth Finance Commission, which was set up a year before the law on the third tier of governance was passed, recommended a small portion of total resources to be earmarked for these local self-government bodies.

However, three major issues have emerged. The transfer of resources to urban and local bodies has been lower than what had been recommended. The shortfall has been 5-18 per cent. The absence of accounting and auditing facilities at the level of the third tier of governance has remained a cause for concern. Institutional support to these bodies is sorely missing. Worse, most states have been reluctant to set up state finance commissions at a regular frequency to ensure a smooth flow of resources and support system for rural and urban local bodies. There have been long delays and gaps in their setting up with almost half the states having set up only five or six state finance commissions so far. Clearly, there are serious institutional gaps and weaknesses, which need to be addressed before taking up the challenge of providing fiscal autonomy to panchayati raj institutions.

Promises tend to become irrelevant if care is not taken to create necessary enabling conditions to make them feasible. This is even truer of electoral promises.

of India's growing importance in the world and see it as a big positive.

Their dreams are plenty and very specific about all material things they would like for themselves, as also for their immediate community and those they consider their own. But they also want happiness, joy, community, calm, and family support. Parents are supportive, they feel, but limited in their ability to give the support that a trusted peer community can, though they struggle to get it, as it is not easily available. They want the freedom to aspire but also the stability and rootedness of life, the liberalism and anonymity of a metro but also the sense of community of the small town.

On the flip side, "entropy" and "overwhelmed and anxious" probably describe this group best, and they live in the short term.

Overstimulated with information, social media, and a whirling hyperactive world, overwhelmed by the constant change around them, and anxious trying to cope, they are short on attention span and constantly in a state of mental movement. Perhaps the lack of large institutions and predictable lives they can lean on is the cause of it — this generation in India has a lot less of it than any generation before. Social scientists think in terms of agency and structure — respectively defined as the "ability to affect their environment or make truly free choices" and "conditions in the environment that limit choices and opportunities or define the range of actions available".

Young India is hearteningly strong on agency, constantly buzzing with plans of what to do now and next, but sadly coming up against the harshness of structure. Some survive and are resilient, others give up and are dispirited, and a few decide to work at making the structure better.

The writer is a business advisor in the area of customer-based business strategy. Her latest book is titled Lilliput Land: How Small is Driving India's Mega Consumption Story. www.ramabijapurkar.com

The paradise parable



BOOK REVIEW

SAURABH SHARMA

Most people would find it difficult to think of the Maldives, which recently held parliamentary elections, beyond its image as a go-to travel destination for honeymooners. Who, anyway, would like to imagine the archipelagic paradise as home to limited freedom of expression, frequent murders and kidnappings of journalists, police crackdowns, and coups and coerced resignations by politicians? Additionally, problematise the situation by these facts — more than 80 per cent of its 1,200-plus coral islands stand "less than 1 metre above sea level"; overall, Maldives sits "perilously close to the ocean's surface". It's, therefore, clear that the island nation's existence is increasingly under threat because of

multifarious reasons, ranging from internal, manageable to external, out-of-hand factors.

All these elements about this most "dispersed of nations" rarely get accounted for, but British journalist Daniel Bosley's *Descent into Paradise: A Journalist's Memoir of the Untold Maldives* is one such attempt. It is an accessible, immersive and searing book.

Before deep-diving into the complicated affairs of the island state, Mr Bosley offers a timeline, beginning with the "earliest settlement of the Maldivian archipelago according to historical evidence" in the 1500-500 BCE and ending at the 2023 presidential election in the region, to underline crucial historical milestones. The 21 chapters that follow this crisp prologue — which begins as if it's attempting yet another "sunny side of life" narrative of the island state but ends up offering a grim reality facing the country — engages readers' attention as the author hyper-focuses on an array of issues facing the country.

Most chapters begin with epigraphs by "disobedient writer" and "occasional satirist" Yameen Rasheed, who used to

run *Daily Panic* "to poke fun at [Maldivian] politicians" and was brutally murdered in 2017. The first one in the first chapter, "Going South", achieves what any satirist must — a deeply hurtful truth that makes one chuckle: "Truth is, most of the world can't even locate Maldives on a map." A case in point is the author himself, who didn't even know whether the Maldives "was a country" until he applied for an internship opportunity with the Maldives High Commission in London in 2011.

It didn't take long for this perennially curious bloke from Crewe, Cheshire (England) to understand that much of life in the island nation was like living in a "genuine dictatorship". To witness it first-hand, he landed in Malé — the Maldives' capital city — in 2012 as a newly appointed intern at *Minivan News*, a (now-defunct) Maldivian news website, to which Mr Bosley had applied for lack of a job back home and to assuage his curiosity. The year 2012 was a baffling time for the Maldives. The country's first elected president Mohamed Nasheed had resigned, and in a year, former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's half-brother Abdulla Yameen had won the country's second multiparty presidential election. India's infrastructure major GMR, which was

awarded the contract to modernise the operation of Malé's Ibrahim Nasir International Airport (INIA), was asked to leave, courtesy a "GMR Go Home" campaign. It didn't help that despite working with meagre resources, *Minivan* was doing its job without succumbing to the pressures of those in power.

As Mr Bosley begins recounting his experiences from here on, the book gains literary momentum. Juxtaposing facts with first-hand findings, the author offers multiple observations. Sample a few. First, "In addition to rising seas and diminishing democracy, an increasingly deadly politico-religious network had emerged: a twenty-first-century sea monster, summoned into being by hyped-up Salafists, high-stakes politics and disaffected young men, who were often just high." Second, "[...] a codependent relationship between gangs and politicians in which money and legal protection were exchanged for participation in protests, suppressing political opponents and

diverting media attention." And finally, "The country's impressive development figures say nothing of wealth distribution across this most dispersed of nations, and the transition from feudal sultanate to developed democracy was far from simple."

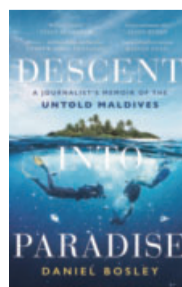
The last observation offers a cue to understanding the island nation — that nothing can easily explain its everyday arithmetic. From witnessing his colleagues disappearing and being murdered to facing issues marrying a local woman, Mr Bosley recounts everything with empathy. This part-memoir, part-politico-

history of the island-nation, and part-elegy to a form of journalism that is now dead vividly outlines what's plaguing the island nation — hyper-nationalism, religious intolerance, xenophobia, insecurity in corridors of power, journalism crisis, a failure of local organising, and climate change. Mr Bosley's self-aware and playful writing adds to the charm of the narrative.

For Indian readers, *Descent into Paradise* should serve as a meaningful resource to stray away from the polarising and diverging monster that social media has become. Earlier this year, India's Prime Minister visited Lakshadweep on vacation, inviting a host of gratuitously disparaging comments from a Maldivian politician. The backlash on Indian social media was immediate and furious; immediately, tourist bookings to the Maldives dipped as Indians cancelled their tours. All this naturally impacted the Indo-Maldivian diplomatic ties. People were soon reminded of the "India First" and "India Out" campaigns in the Maldives under different regimes. It didn't help that the Maldives is an Islamic nation, and its current president (Mohamed Muizzu) is a pro-Chinese leader.

But a close reading of the situation and the book would render this key takeaway — no matter how wildly different, the Maldives and India are increasingly converging when it comes to the weakening ethos of democracy as they are headed towards a shared future that hardly resembles a holiday destination.

The reviewer is a Delhi-based writer and freelance journalist. On Instagram: [@writerly_life](https://www.instagram.com/writerly_life)



DESCENT INTO PARADISE: A JOURNALIST'S MEMOIR OF THE UNTOLD MALDIVES
Author: Daniel Bosley
Publisher: Macmillan, an imprint of Pan Macmillan
Pages: 410
Price: ₹699

Good Times for Merchants of Death

Buyers' market splinters as sellers consolidate

The global defence manufacturing industry is evolving quickly to the surge in geopolitical tension. Defence budgets have risen across the board on the one hand, while on the other hand, traditional exporters such as Russia are struggling to feed their own consumption. New exporting nations like South Korea and Türkiye are products of their proximity to, or denial of, US defence technology. Large importers like India and Pakistan, too, have reworked their buying plans, the former away from Russia, and the latter decidedly in favour of China. India's efforts at self-sufficiency in defence procurement remains work in progress. Even there, it has to rely on US hardware and technology to make the transition.

Broadly, heightened geopolitical risks have benefited US defence manufacturers through higher spending as well as by creating pathways to new markets via sanctions. Manufacturers in the US enjoy an overwhelming dominance in providing equipment for aerial combat, both manned and unmanned, and their position grows stronger the longer Russia remains embroiled in conflict with Ukraine. Buyers of Russian arms are starved for parts vital to local production contracts. China's arms exports do not appear to be moving far beyond Pakistan. Türkiye and South Korea are small players with big ambitions. Nato members rarely have had it so good to flog their military hardware abroad.

Which makes for an interesting chessboard of armies facing off with pretty much the same weapons supplied to both sides by a small set of producers. It's a good time for the military-industrial complex, but not so much for peace around the world. Lack of effective competition and the US record of being an unreliable ally turns countries to bulk up local production, setting off mini arms races all over. With large economies like China and India seeking autarky in defence production, the buyers' market splinters as sellers consolidate. This makes the international weapons market more lopsided and, hence, unstable. A web of sanctions distorts the arms manufacture and trade further. Whoever will be winning or losing wars, the weapons merchants are certainly laughing their way to the bank.



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How to Deal with Unrequited Love

The clear majority for incumbent Maldivian president Mohamed Muizzu and his People's National Congress in Sunday's parliamentary election will see that country move even closer to China than before. Beijing's growing influence is a concern. But New Delhi mustn't sulk at the prospect of unrequited affection, but act with creativity—leveraging old cultural ties, building partnerships to address shared challenges, and furthering a rules-based order to guard against a shift in the balance of power and ensure that the region remains democratic. Sending Muizzu a congratulatory message can be a first step.

Geopolitics, domestic preoccupations and conflicts in Ukraine and West Asia has left the coast virtually clear for China to increase its influence in the region. While the Maldives gets cosier with Beijing and Pakistan remains China's client state, other countries will continue to weigh options, shopping for the best deal. India's actions during Sri Lanka's economic crisis and its engagement with Bangladesh provide a template. Such engagements don't foreclose China's influence. But it gives India a foothold as a reliable, non-threatening partner.

Trade and defence are important pillars, but India must build on collaborations in climate-change mitigation, energy transition and access, disaster resilience, connectivity, health and education. It must also leverage intergovernmental bodies such as the International Solar Alliance and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, as well as partnerships such as Quad to keep the faith of growth for all in the neighbourhood.



JUST IN JEST
Right skill set allows one to manufacture demand and pass it off as popular will

'Public Sentiment', a Politician's Pvt Unltd

'Public sentiment' is an instrument that's flashed about by politicians as a badge. 'Why have you decided to build a flyover to nowhere?' Standard response from neta: 'It's public sentiment.' 'Why do we have to wear polka dots on Wednesdays?' 'Public sentiment.' PS has its source in supply-demand—the Big Man supplying what is supposedly in demand. Except, brandishing the 'public sentiment' card can manufacture demand that didn't really exist. Also known by its more formal term, 'mandate', the politician's 'public sentiment' has become the standard model for telling the consumer-citizen what he or she thinks and wants. With the right tone and pitch, the herd really believes that this is, indeed, what it desires. Practices such as self-immolation and systems such as feudalism are thought to have stemmed from this very same unverifiable phenomenon of 'public sentiment'.

In business and entertainment, while public sentiment has been the SOP of supplying a demand, innovation is marked by veering away from the sentiment of the masses and telling the public to, say, 'Think Different', and then making it a must-have Apple product. In politics, of course, quantity has a quality of its own. Say it enough times that the world is flat 'because flatness is what the public believes in', and—voilà!—you have a flat Earth to be happily peddled.

SWAMISPEAK Instead of following the Fed, RBI can lead central banks in lowering rates

Guy, Be a Cut Above the Rest



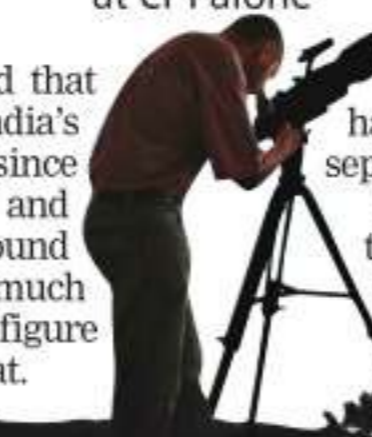
Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar

I've long been sceptical of the ability of central banks, especially RBI, to fine-tune interest rates to check inflation. The entire theoretical basis of inflation-targeting is suspect. The US Federal Reserve has persistently failed to check inflation despite projecting a substantial fall, leading some analysts to expect up to six interest-rate cuts in 2024. When it became clear that the Fed was off target, analysts cut their prediction to three rate cuts. Now, some wonder if rates will fall at all.

In India and the world over, interest rates are too high. The Fed has not cut its interest rate, and emerging markets are hesitant to move in a different direction, fearing market accusations of loose monetary policy and an outflow of dollars.

They should take the advice of Krishna Srinivasan, head of Asia and Pacific department of IMF. He said last week, 'We recommend Asian central banks to focus on domestic inflation, and avoid making their policy decisions overly dependent on anticipated moves by the Federal Reserve.'

It would be wrong to say that RBI blindly follows the US Fed. But it targets CPI, and that can lead to errors. India's WPI has changed little since late 2022, moving up and down in a 4% band around 150.0. But CPI has risen much more, and that is the figure Shaktikanta Das looks at.



We cannot expect Shaktikanta Das to abandon inflation-targeting. But we can hope he will not look at CPI alone

Is that the right index? In India, food and fuel account for a big weightage in CPI. And monetary theory tells us that these are the commodities whose price is least likely to be affected by changes in the interest rate. Besides, CPI has a poor coverage of services.

Arguably the best index to use is GDP deflator, the most comprehensive one typically falling between WPI and CPI. GDP deflator has, of late, been exceptionally low—some estimate it at just 1.5%. In which case, RBI's repo rate of 6.5% is surely much too high.

The low GDP deflator is one reason real GDP growth has boomed this year, exceeding 8% in the first three quarters. Does it make sense to use GDP deflator to boast about fast GDP growth, and then use a totally contrary index to argue that prices are too high and justify high interest rates?

In any event, the example of US Fed inspires little confidence in inflation-targeting. After the Great Recession of 2008, the Fed often worried about deflation rather than inflation, and tried in vain to get inflation up from 1% to 2%. Theories abounded about a new era in which massive fiscal and monetary stimulus would not cause inflation.

But just as that theory began to gain ground, Covid and Ukraine struck, and inflation skyrocketed. The Fed initially dismissed this as a temporary spike, but had to eat crow when inflation crossed 8%, four times the target. It then raised interest rates steeply and repeatedly. But inflation remained around 6%.

Then the Fed, in 2023, predicted the end of inflation and presented a rosy picture of coming interest-rate cuts. Events have forced it to backtrack. Its performance as a predictor of inflation has been castigated by WSJ's Joseph Sternberg.

The common thread running through the Fed's failure to predict accelerating inflation in 2021 and to track disinflation accurately now is the central



Thrust and parry, no more tarry

bank's model of the economy... The primary model, known as FRBUS, is impressive. Central-bank staff can plug some 500 variables into about 170 equations to try to understand and how changes to the unemployment rate, household incomes, mortgage rates or myriad other factors might influence economic growth and inflation.'

Alas, all those fancy equations do not guarantee accuracy. 'FRBUS doesn't adequately account for the effects of fiscal policy, such as the \$10 trillion in cumulative deficit spending since the start of 2020... The model didn't predict the inflationary consumption explosion of that era... The model chronically mis-estimates the labour market and overestimates the effect of a tight labour market on inflation.'

That is quite an indictment. But the problem actually lies deeper in the very

notion that central banks can accurately target inflation. FT's Brendan Grealey has castigated attempts Fed and other central banks to explain away their failures citing 'long and variable lags'.

Monetary measures can take 12-18 months for full impact. And, in such a long period, so many other factors change that nobody can accurately estimate the contribution of monetary measures. Greeley says that the phrase 'long and variable lags' is a technical-sounding way of saying, 'We don't know, and we don't know when we will know.'

We cannot expect Shaktikanta Das to abandon inflation-targeting. But we can hope he will not look at CPI alone and will pay some heed to GDP deflator and start cutting high interest rates. Among central bankers, he can be a leader, rather than a follower, in cutting rates.



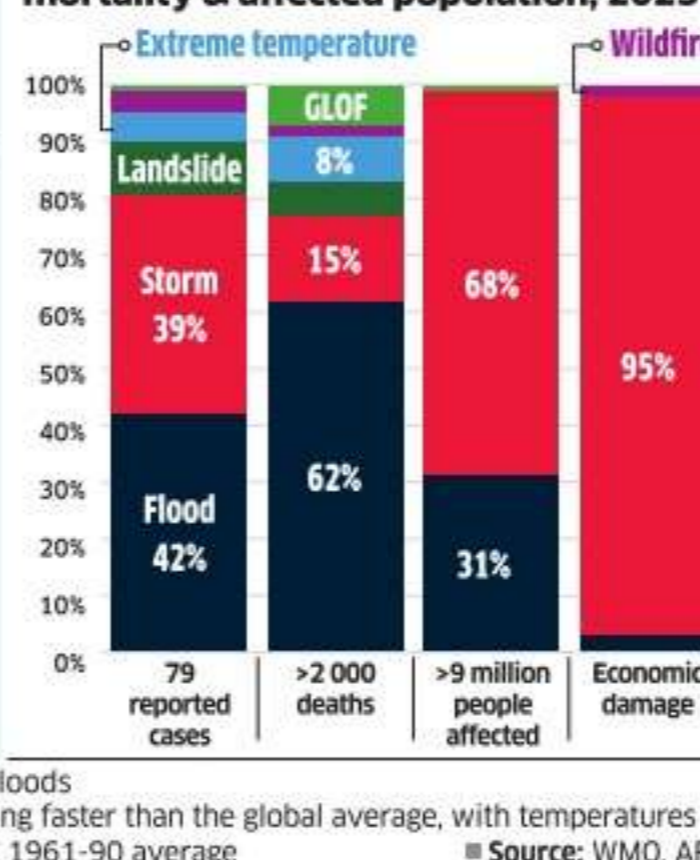
Does it make sense to use GDP deflator to boast about fast GDP growth, and then use a totally contrary index, CPI, to argue that prices are too high and justify high interest rates?

ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY
In government, there was quite a fuss,
When Elon dodged their grand bandobast.
They sighed and they moaned,
Their plans were postponed,
Now, they don't want to miss the Musk bus.

Asia: Extreme Weather

Asia was the world's most disaster-hit region from climate and weather hazards in 2023, with floods and storms the chief cause of casualties and economic losses, according to a new report from the World Meteorological Organisation. Last year, 79 disasters associated with water-related weather hazards were reported in Asia. Of those, more than 80% were floods and storms, with more than 2,000 deaths and nine million people directly affected...

Climate-related impacts and risks, mortality & affected population, 2023



GLOF: Glacial Lake Outburst Floods
The WMO said Asia was warming faster than the global average, with temperatures last year nearly 2°C above the 1961-90 average

Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



Cruising At a Good Speed

PEAS IN A PODCAST



Seema Sirohi

The India-US partnership is moving along despite election hungama in both countries, two ongoing wars and multiple crises brewing in West Asia. Conversations among top officials are regular and substantive. Nattering nabobs of negativism notwithstanding, important business is getting done because the strategic alignment remains strong.

The war of words between official spokesmen is a sideshow generated because questions must be answered. Note that the State Department hasn't tweeted or made a statement of its own volition for a while.

That said, consider substantive developments.
► Last week, the Indian Navy carried out its first drug interdiction as a member of the US-led Combined Maritime Forces since joining the 43-nation group in November.

► India is increasingly inclined to participate in multinational operations without a UN flag and get the job done.

► India and the US are gearing up for the 20th iteration of Yudh Abhyas, the joint army exercise scheduled for September. It will be followed by the 28th edition of the Malabar naval exercise comprising the US, Indian, Australian and Japanese navies. None of this suggests a dip in relations.

Not only will this Yudh Abhyas be larger with double the number of troops—600 each from both—but the US Army is likely to bring the Stryker armoured vehicle so it can be tested at high altitude before talks on co-production get serious. A key Indian Army requirement is for the Stryker to perform on Himalayan heights for deployment along the border with China.

India is keen on the Stryker and if all goes well, a formal letter of request is expected after the Indian elections. The agreement will consist of an outright purchase of a certain number upfront,

followed by co-production of more. The Stryker deal will help India's military modernisation as envisaged in the June 2023 roadmap for joint defence industrial cooperation.

Officials stress that those who see the second postponement of NSA Jake Sullivan and deputy secretary of state Kurt Campbell's trip to India as a sign of 'trouble' are mistaken. Critics are overreading the moment.

Incidentally, Sullivan talks regularly with his counterpart, Ajiit Doval, to discuss bilateral and regional issues. It's surprising how much can get done on the good old telephone.

Think counterintuitively: a postponed visit doesn't mean trouble because India is a partner, not a problem; it's in the cohort, not competition. And, to be fair, Sullivan's plate is overflowing. Here's a short list:

- Russia-Ukraine war and depleting domestic support for Kyiv.
- Israel-Hamas conflict and growing outrage against US policy.
- Iran-Israel conflagration and the need to prevent a full-blown outbreak.
- Management of multiple regional players with conflicting stakes and China fishing in troubled waters.

In all the above, Indian and US interests are broadly aligned, from preventing a large-scale regional war to advocating for a two-state solution.



Tall-tale signs

Foreign secretary Vinay Kwatra was here for a series of high-level meetings to discuss geopolitical play and take stock of the bilateral agenda. He met top officials, including Campbell, deputy NSA Jon Finer and deputy secretary of defence Kathleen Hicks. He also met US business leaders to pitch India as a manufacturing hub and a trusted partner for new supply chains.

As expected, China figured prominently in official discussions. The two sides understand the value of working together, yet, doubts about intentions occasionally surface. Some in India continue to worry about a US-China rapprochement (G2) in light of the Biden Administration's beeline to Beijing.

Over the past 10 months, secretaries of state, treasury and commerce and the climate envoy have gone to China, some of them twice, to seek cooperation, and Blinken is currently in Beijing. US officials reassured the Indian side that visits to China are about crisis prevention, nothing more.

The agenda is minimal—ensuring mil-to-mil communication, getting China to curb deadly fentanyl precursors and establishing rules for the responsible use of AI. New Delhi needn't worry about a US-China reset. That Washington feels the need to reassure others is a commentary on its past with Beijing and the present.

On other fronts, India and the US have progressed in the tough arena of climate financing, where the talk is always big and the delivery small. The partnership to encourage the use of electric buses by creating a fund of \$380 mn (US: \$150 mn, India: \$240 mn) to help India's struggling state transportation companies reduce their carbon footprint is moving along after some tough conversations. The fund, announced last June with the goal to deploy 10,000 e-buses across India, aims to reduce financial risk to lenders.

All said, the far-reaching June joint statement is being methodically implemented.

Recharge Your Battery Wisdom

We're a curious species. As kids, we negotiate with the world through questions like 'Why?' 'How?' and 'When?' so much that they become part of our staple diet. However, as we age, many of us hit a learning plateau. And some unlucky ones truly believe that they are know-it-alls. But if you're among the lucky few still brimming with curiosity and want to know more about things around you—and not just 'the news'—then the 'Everything Everywhere Daily' podcast's 16-min episode on Batteries is for you.

Hosted by Gary Arndt, listeners embark on a journey through the evolution of batteries, tracing their origins back to hundreds of years but thousands long before the concept of electricity was even understood. Through Arndt's engaging narration, we gain insights into the workings of this ubiquitous source of electric power and their pivotal role in powering technologies that drive societies forward.

As the demand for more efficient and advanced batteries escalates with the proliferation of electronic devices, buckle up to learn about the promising future of that entity that quietly buzzes inside our devices from laptops and cars, to smoke detectors and smartphones.

When the PM said that the Congress wishes a minority community to have the first right to resources, and then went on to say that the party will dole out monies to those who have more children and who have entered the country illegally, it was a troublesome stance and choice of words by him. Similarly, the Opposition is saying that the saffron party wishes to change the Constitution if it wins a third term, that these would be the last elections, and that reservations based on caste would be amended out of legal sanction. It is as wrong to create fear among people as hate.

The Lakshman rekha must be drawn at being civil. Lawmakers owe it to our democracy and people. And it starts with the speech.

N SADHASIVA REDDY
Bengaluru

Letters to the editor may be addressed to editet@timesgroup.com



THE SPEAKING TREE

The Appeal Of a Book

SUMIT PAUL

Decades ago, the famous Urdu poet and justice Anand Narain Mulla suggested that the inmates of all the prisons in India must be exposed to reading to curb the violent streak in them. Got to say, a very sagacious and far-sighted suggestion. Psychologists and sociologists have also found that reading dilutes our violent inclinations and intentions. Books also help us retain our sanity in extreme solitude.

French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte retained his mental equilibrium at St Helena as he spent time reading books. Nelson Mandela told his biographer that he remained sane because he had the company of books at Robben Island where he was incarcerated for 27 long years.

Adolf Hitler didn't read a single book in his entire lifetime. Italian autocrat Benito Mussolini hated newspapers and books. Stalin considered reading to be an idler's pastime. If only these people did read, the story and history of the modern world would have been different. Books have a humanising influence on the reader. Urdu poet Ravish Siddiqi aptly said, 'Kitabein sabaq sikhati hain, khamoshi aur pyar se/Haath mein un ke chhadhi hoti nahin kabhi'—books teach lessons, albeit silently and lovingly without ever brandishing a cane. Books are our silent, affable and non-interfering companions.

Though reading habit is fast on the wane, due to social media, those who genuinely love books will continue to read and ponder.

Chat Room

Gukesh King Of the Board

Apropos the news report, 'Gukesh Tops Board' (ET Sport, Apr 23), D Gukesh has shown that not only has he exceptional talent but also a mature head on his shoulders. In the four months of 2024, the positions of India's top-ranked players have switched among Viswanathan Anand, Gukesh, R Praggnanandhaa, Arjun Erigaisi and Vidit Gujrathi, which is testimony to the depth of chess talent in the country. Though Gukesh tops the rankings, women players Koneru Humpy and R Vaishali aren't too far behind. India's chess ecosystem is flourishing with young players from tier-2 and -3 cities learning the ropes from the best players.

BAL GOVIND
Noida

Speech Wounds All Heals

This refers to the Edit, 'EC, Mind Their Poll Double Entendres' (Apr 23). It is not clear whether we are witnessing the festival of democracy in action or a war to finish each other in the battle. It is, indeed, sad that the PM, who has already asked the bureaucrats to be ready with a plan for

100 days for him to start the work for the next five years and even a faraway 2047, should have dragged a particular community whose

women voters he has claimed in Aligarh are happy. Many among this community pay their taxes; why use them to target the sinking Congress? On a day the PM's party won a walkover seat in his home state, his remarks are uncalled for. This is appeasement of the majority community voters.

NNAGARAJAN
Secunderabad

When the PM said that the Congress wishes a minority community to have the first right to resources, and then went on to say that the party will dole out monies to those who have more children and who have entered the country illegally, it was a troublesome stance and choice of words by him. Similarly, the Opposition is saying that the saffron party wishes to change the Constitution if it wins a third term, that these would be the last elections, and that reservations based on caste would be amended out of legal sanction. It is as wrong to create fear among people as hate.

N SADHASIVA REDDY
Bengaluru

Opinion

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 24, 2024



AI NOT A THREAT
Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg

“Current models (including Meta’s models) do not reach the level of sophistication necessary to raise existential concerns and [we] shouldn’t be concerned about this”

The burden of legacy

The response to its FPO is a huge trust vote for Vi; govt should lend more support if the need arises

THE IRONY COULD not have been starker. On the day Vodafone Idea’s ₹18,000-crore follow-on public offer was subscribed over six times with strong demand from global institutional investors, the government moved the Supreme Court seeking modification of its 2012 verdict. It wants the court to clarify that spectrum in certain minuscule cases can be allotted through an administrative process. As much of the woes of the telecom sector in general and Vodafone Idea in particular has to do with auctions — the adjusted gross revenue (AGR) issue got added later — it seems the wheel has turned full circle. The government’s September 2021 package tried to clear the mess that was created with the apex court’s October 2019 order in the matter of AGR. The apex court concurred with the government’s definition of AGR, thereby leaving the industry to clear dues worth ₹1.47 trillion. Vodafone Idea’s dues were the highest at around ₹58,254 crore. Add to this its deferred installments for spectrum acquired in various auctions, the total dues to the government stand at ₹1.96 trillion — 98% of its total debt of ₹2 trillion. Bank debt is a small ₹4,400 crore.

The recent mop-up of around ₹20,000 crore — ₹18,000 crore through the FPO and ₹2,075 crore from the Aditya Birla Group on a preferential basis — clearly shows that promoters as well as investors have faith in the company. This will certainly help it raise another ₹25,000 crore via debt. The question, however, is whether ₹45,000 crore would be enough to take care of its requirements once the current moratorium provided by the government, on payment of AGR and spectrum dues, ends in September 2025. The answer is a clear no, and Vodafone Idea’s CEO Akshaya Moondra was frank enough to admit this in an interview with this newspaper last week.

The math is simple: once the moratorium ends in September 2025, the company will need to pay ₹29,100 crore by the end of March 2026 to the government and ₹43,000 crore annually from FY27 onwards till FY31. This won’t be possible even in the best-case scenario of tariff hikes and fund infusion. So what’s the way forward? As Moondra told this newspaper, when the time comes, the company will once again urge the government to either provide a further deferral on the payments or convert the dues into equity. It’s up to the government to take a call on the matter as per the 2021 telecom package.

Then the next logical question is what purpose will the fund raise serve. Moondra is once again clear in stating that it will provide the company the opportunity to participate in industry growth. It also puts at rest all speculation about whether the company can survive or raise funds. Investments in 4G coverage and 5G roll-out will be its priority but the company is sober enough to accept that it’s not in a competitive race with peers Bharti Airtel and Reliance Jio. There’s room for a third private operator and the government has been clear all along that it will do all that is required to ensure that there are three operators in the market. The Telecom Act has cleaned up the regulatory mess. It’s only the legacy burden which continues to weigh on Vodafone Idea. The government should take care of it if the need arises.

CORPORATE LESSON

THE CENTRALISED GOVERNANCE MODEL IS AT ODDS WITH A FRAGMENTED WORLD

Hierarchy vs network

GLOBAL BUSINESSES ARE learning a harsh lesson. Their centralised governance model where headquarters make key decisions like investments, new products, and new capabilities is increasingly at odds with a fragmented world and digitisation. A model perfected for efficient execution of central decisions across markets in a more integrated world where markets evolved slowly (in relative terms), where data/information access was asymmetrical (i.e. customers had limited access), and communication between customers and markets was minimum.

This world has dramatically changed. We all know the divisiveness of today’s geopolitics fragmenting global markets. The longer-term inexorable transformation of the integrated ‘one’ marketplace is being driven by the growth of digitisation in two ways. First, the growth of internet and mobile has democratised data/information access (further fed by fakes and deepfakes). Second, it offers digital ‘tools’ to organise around common interests quickly and cost-effectively. Together they have given ‘voice’ to customers with unmet needs and shared aspirations, creating demand for ‘micro-markets’. There has been a power shift from manufacturers to customers. *The global marketplace is becoming a fragmented ‘local’ one.*

Many global firms with their centralised decision-making are unable to compete in this fast-changing local marketplace. Unable or unwilling to change, they are losing share to local, nimble competitors, and many have even withdrawn.

The winners are the likes of US consumer goods company P&G, Chinese appliances major Haier, streaming giant Spotify, and, closer home, Bajaj Finance, all of whom have pioneered a new governance model that reduces the ‘control’ role of the centre and gives power to customer-facing teams. Haier calls its model ‘rendanheyi’ or ‘zero distance from the customer’ by breaking up the business into customer-focused micro-enterprises. Bajaj has followed a ‘break to grow’ strategy where they systematically set up

ARINDAM BHATTACHARYA

Senior advisor, Boston Consulting Group. Views are personal



empowered teams who ‘own’ customer value pools. Conceptually, they are building ‘bottom-up’ into a more decentralised network like team-based structure, as opposed to a top-down hierarchical organisation. Local speed and innovation of such a *network* drives its competitiveness, rather than the global scale and execution efficiency of a centralised *hierarchy*.

The well-known British historian Niall Ferguson backs this corporate thesis on governance based on his research on how societies have evolved. In *The Square and the Tower*, he remarks that through history centralised hierarchy (and control by the ruling elite) has been the most prevalent governance model. The only time this was challenged was in the early 1400s when a new innovation disrupted one of the central pillars of governance — controlling access to information. Johannes Gutenberg had invented the printing press and suddenly all kinds of data, information, knowledge, all earlier controlled by the elites (and the church in medieval Europe), became easily accessible to common people via articles, books, pamphlets and posters. For the first time a new ‘technology’ had empowered the masses. They were able to organise themselves into loose networks of interest groups, ‘voice’ their dissatisfaction with the status quo, and share aspirations. There was a clear power shift from the elite hierarchies to people networks in society.

Translating this into management speak, a new technology had transformed the demand structure of the marketplace

and altered the balance of power between the company (hierarchy) and the customer (demand networks). According to Ferguson, for only the second time in history after the Gutenberg press, a similar phenomenon is underway with the development of another new technology — internet, now enhanced by digital tools and generative AI. As he points out, these informal networks were able to put pressure on the ruling elite in Europe to bring about deep social and political reforms at the onset of the industrial age.

This raises an important question. Can political governance in today’s societal

Decentralising means giving away power, and only a visionary leader will do it after building some consensus in the leadership team

marketplace, facing a similar fragmentation around the world into ‘micro-markets’ of local/regional, ethnic, and cultural groups (and aspirations), learn from these companies? But unlike decentralisation in companies, many countries are seeing the opposite with increased centralisation under nationalist leaders,

which can deepen the fault lines. There are two major challenges in adopting the corporate lessons for political governance. First are sceptics who raise the spectre of structural anarchy with greater decentralisation. To them, only the discipline of central hierarchy can maintain alignment with the overall goals of the country and ensure efficient execution. Second and perhaps more difficult to overcome is the controlling power of the centralised hierarchy. Decentralising means giving away power, and only a visionary leader will do it after building some degree of consensus in the leadership team. Unless forced by ‘market’ pressure as some of these com-

panies faced.

On the first challenge, paradoxically, digitisation, which has been a force for a more localised marketplace, also provides the answer to how to balance local autonomy with central (or global) alignment and overall objectives. The leading companies have built (or are building) a digital stack/platform as the spine that connects all the local teams. Such a platform supports a highly metricised operating model by enabling real-time sharing of data/analysis with all stakeholders and transparent performance management. It operationalises the ‘rules of the game’ within a value framework (or aligned purpose) for all internal transactions, and also can be leveraged for external two-way engagement with customers. By doing this, as a leader of one of these companies says, market complexity can be an opportunity to create advantage!

India, with its complexity and diversity, offers a petri dish for transformational governance. The theses of cooperative federalism articulated by Prime Minister Modi is a powerful political analogy of corporate decentralised (and network-oriented) model of governance as it has the power to balance local autonomy with central priorities. It is building a cutting-edge ‘digital stack’, akin to the digital platform in companies, which can over time perform all the roles of the latter including sharing data and measuring performance and outcomes. It has pioneered ‘local’ teams to address the lowest level of ‘micro-markets’, ranging from cooperatives to self-help groups.

There is one more lesson learned by global firms — ‘trust’ is central to success. Trust of all stakeholders in the fairness of the ‘system’, and that doesn’t happen on its own. It needs to be built proactively and metricised as companies like Amazon with millions of stakeholders have done with policies in transparent pricing, recall policies, customer reviews, etc.

Complexity, diversity, and fragmentation need not be a life-threatening challenge to the existing order, but an opportunity to build a better and more competitive future.

A dreamer at 10, champion at 17

D Gukesh stands out in a sport where every fourth grandmaster is a teen prodigy, writes Amit Kamath

RIGHT ABOUT THE time that 17-year-old D Gukesh made his move to win the prestigious Candidates chess tournament, a video clip of an interview from 2017 went viral. In it, Gukesh, who is not yet a grandmaster, is asked what he wants to become when he grows up. The baby-faced, 11-year-old can hardly contain his smile as he says: “I want to be the youngest world chess champion!”

Seven years since that interview with *Chessbase India*, Gukesh has bounded up the steps towards becoming the world champion, crossing important markers with breakneck speed that is dizzying even in chess, a sport where every fourth grandmaster is a teenage prodigy.

The boy from Chennai became India’s youngest grandmaster ever at the age of 12 years, seven months, 17 days, missing the tag of the world’s youngest by a mere 17 days in 2019. Last year, he overtook five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand as the country’s top ranked player in FIDE’s monthly published list for the first time after 36 years. Now, he has another feat: becoming the youngest ever Candidates winner, which will also make him the youngest World Chess Championship contender, when he will battle Ding Liren at the World Championship later this year.

Just to contextualise how impressive Gukesh’s feat is, factor in this: the legendary Garry Kasparov was 20 when he won a shot at challenging for the world champion’s crown. Magnus Carlsen and Mikhail Tal were 22. Viswanathan Anand, a man who’s an inspiration and a mentor for the teenager, was 25.

At the high-stakes Candidates tournament, as he chased the title in a field of battle-hardened veterans and first-timers like fellow Chennai teenager Praggnandhaa and Vidit Gujrathi, the aspect which has stood out the most about Gukesh is how unflappable he remained through high-pressure situations.

One of the most decisive moments for Gukesh came just before the halfway stage of the Candidates, when he was handed a morale-crushing defeat by Alireza Firouzja in Round 7.

Gukesh had held a winning position all through the game, but suddenly found himself in trouble on the clock and erred at the end to lose. Had he won that battle, he would have gone on to become the sole leader in the standings at the halfway point, a definite psychological boost.

“Gukesh just took that defeat in his stride and got on with the next game,” Anand told *The Indian Express* just before Gukesh’s title was sealed. “I would describe Gukesh at the Candidates as steady and focussed. He appreciates the occasion and the chance he’s got. But he’s steady because he plays one game at a time and gives the impression of keeping his concentration on the game ahead of him. He’s happy and excited at the chance he’s got. But generally, he’s quite level-headed about his tournament situation, which has been very impressive from the beginning. I would say he gives the impression of (being in) control.”

After his Candidates title was confirmed, Gukesh revisited the moment which could have been a banana peel for his chances. While the rest of the world saw him react, and thought that he had missed his shot, there was a tiny voice within him that told him differently.

“If I had to pinpoint when I really felt this could be my moment it was probably after I lost to Firouzja. I was actually quite upset but during the rest day I already felt so good. Even though I just had a painful loss, I was feeling at my absolute best. I don’t know, maybe that loss gave me so much motivation,” said Gukesh.

No Indian has sat on the throne of the world champion since 2013, when Anand lost the crown to Carlsen. A teenager from the land of Anand, who dreamt of being a world champion at the tender age of 10 and carries the air of nonchalance at stressful situations, just might change that and break a handful of more records along the way.

Whither *atmanirbhar* payments?



JAIJIT BHATTACHARYA

President, Centre for Digital Economy Policy Research

It is critical that we attain resilience in the payments ecosystem with Indian alternatives, should foreign players decide to stop providing services or if duopolies exert their dominance

PAYMENTS ARE THE lifeblood of any economy. To that effect, India, led by the RBI, made huge strides in developing its alternative digital payments as it digitalised rapidly. Had India not developed the entire UPI stack, including RuPay, for enabling digital payments, India would have been exploited by large western economies as e-commerce expanded.

At around the same time, we saw the Wikileaks founder, Julian Assange, being choked of funds as the US directed all its payment entities — Mastercard, Visa, American Express, Paypal, GPay, and more — to ensure that they block his funds. The US has the power to invoke the Patriot Act, under which it can direct any US entity to stop providing its services to any other entity or geography. Such a provision becomes the proverbial sword of Damocles on any economy overtly dependent on US companies. This is also what happened to India during the Kargil War, when it was denied access to mapping software procured from the US. Such actions were also taken against Iran and, more recently, Russia.

India’s alternative UPI stack is superior to anything that exists today, and we have also started exporting the same to the rest of the world. However, within this endeavour, a large crack has developed in our payment systems armou-

India developed the foundation for payments through the UPI stack, and then very cleverly ensured that there is competition and continuous innovation in by leaving the last mile of payment systems to the private sector. This strategy worked very well initially, with a plethora of payment companies popping up, including MobiKwik, Paytm, BharatPe, PhonePe and Gpay.

However, very soon, this list has narrowed down to a duopoly of PhonePe and GPay. Walmart-owned PhonePe and Alphabet-backed Google Pay jointly command over 90% of the total UPI transactions, as reported in data from December 2023 by the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI). The closest competitor to PhonePe and Google in the UPI space was Paytm. However, its market share rapidly dropped to a mere 9% after the RBI ordered the shuttering of Paytm Payments bank. Given the ability of the US-backed companies to pump in virtually unlimited amount of capital, it propels PhonePe and GPay into a position of absolute market dominance.

A duopoly in any industry of strategic

importance is worrisome. However, what is even more worrisome is that neither of these companies are Indian. This makes the situation very alarming, given the umpteen precedents of the US instructing its companies to stop providing services to specific countries. Even though such a possibility may seem to be in the realm of hypothetical postulations, given that the US and India are improving their strategic ties, positions have changed quickly in the past. Moreover, a nation that is poised to become the third-largest economy in the world and has 16% of the world’s population cannot let itself be exposed to a strategic fault line in its payment systems.

The issue becomes even more alarming when one looks into the details of the US Patriot Act. This Act mandates US financial entities to monitor accounts on grounds of national security. The reporting contains customer data relevant to any kind of alleged suspicious activity. Given that PhonePe and Google Pay are owned by US-based corporations, there are valid concerns about the extent to which sensitive financial data of Indian consumers might be subject to scrutiny under such regulations. It also means that

the US has access to the transactions being made by the families of our military personnel and of our top political leaders. Such information can actually impact India’s security.

This situation also diminishes the exalted work done by India and by the NPCI and the RBI specifically, degrading the financial sovereignty achieved through their efforts. Clearly, urgent steps are required to ensure that India has a resilient payment ecosystem. In November 2020, the NPCI had rolled out a notification stipulating that third-party apps, such as PhonePe and GPay, need to have a 30% volume cap, allowing other players to blossom. However, it was later decided to postpone the enforcement of this rule until December 2024.

It is critical that we strive to ensure resilience in the entire payments ecosystem with Indian alternatives, should foreign players decide to stop providing services or if duopolies exert their dominance to distort market dynamics. We saw this happening with Google Play Store, where Google used its market dominance to charge a usurious 30% of all revenues made by start-ups, as opposed to 2-3% that payment gateways usually charge. India cannot afford to be caught in such a situation in its payments ecosystem.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

EC must not remain mute spectator

About a month ago, while speaking to his colleagues before the election campaign, Prime Minister Narendra Modi advised them to exercise restraint in their speeches. Contrary to this, on Sunday, Modi himself allegedly accused the Congress manifesto of “surveying” and “attaching” citizens’ properties and intending to distribute them among Muslims, who have more

children. It is highly unfortunate that such divisive and baseless speeches are being made by a person holding the high office of Prime Minister. The Election Commission needs to immediately take cognisance and take steps to curb the violations of the model code of conduct and apply the law of the land impartially, regardless of the stature of the person involved, to prevent a more vitiated election atmosphere. —SK Khosla, Chandigarh

Gukesh’s historic triumph

Marking a historic achievement at just 17 years of age, D Gukesh won the 2024 Chess Candidates Tournament, becoming the youngest ever to do so. His victory in Toronto has earned him the right to challenge the current champion, Ding Liren, for the world title later this year. Gukesh’s journey throughout the tournament was marked by preparation and a

remarkable comeback after a loss in the seventh round. His win is not only a personal triumph but also a significant moment in chess history. Ding, the reigning world champion from China, will be a formidable opponent. The summit clash between Gukesh and Ding is highly anticipated and will be a thrilling encounter in the world of chess. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com



Insuring the future

While broadening eligibility, health insurance must be made affordable

The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI), the apex regulator of insurance products, has asked companies to enable a wide demographic of citizens to benefit from health insurance. Most significantly, it directs insurance providers to make health insurance available to senior citizens, as those above 65 are currently barred from issuing new policies for themselves. This is clearly an acknowledgement of demographic changes underway in India. Though India's population figures have not been officially accounted for since 2011, estimates from the UN Population Fund and experts suggest that India's is nearly level with China and may have surpassed it sometime in 2023. The India Ageing Report, 2023, which draws from UN projections, estimates that India's cohort of seniors – those above 60 – will increase from about 10% of the population (149 million in 2022) to 30% (347 million) by 2050. That is more than the current population of the U.S. Several of the most developed countries already have their senior demographic (65-plus) ranging from 16% to 28%. That is already precipitating considerable worry within these populations on access to health care, affordable medicine and appropriate care-giving infrastructure to support them. Some of these economically developed countries have government-funded public health systems and others are entirely dependent on private health care, with cost being a significant determinant in access to quality care. In many of these countries, there is no entry barrier to health insurance policies, though, following principles of actuarial economics from centuries ago, health insurance gets progressively, and sometimes exponentially, more expensive as age advances.

Already the small, single-digit percentage of India's economic elite can afford the equivalent of "family floater" plans that take care of individuals and their parents at a cost lower than what individual senior-citizen health insurance would cost. If the only effect of the IRDA's recent circular is to provide many more unaffordable health insurance policies, it would be equivalent to admiring the icing on an inedible cake. Much has been made of the next two decades being critical to India's future, on the reasoning that this is the time that India must reap its 'demographic dividend'. This is premised on a large proportion of the workforce moving out of agriculture and inevitably followed by a breakdown of the traditional care-giving structure for the aged. The experience in several southern Indian States is telling. Thus, broadening the eligibility of health insurance should be accompanied by a massive upgradation of affordable health care.

Excessive restrictions

Petition against poll-time curbs raises questions about public participation

Election time prohibitory orders are seldom questioned, even if they amount to blanket restrictions that curb all gatherings. The clamping of prohibitory orders to prevent unauthorised meetings and processions in the run-up to the ongoing general election has been challenged in the Supreme Court of India by activists Aruna Roy and Nikhil Dey. While it is quite normal for political parties to approach the police or the executive magistrate concerned for permission to hold rallies, public meetings and road shows, it appears that civil society organisations and groups find that their applications are met with no response at all. Citing examples of such blanket orders, issued under Section 144 of the CrPC, from Rajasthan, Gujarat and Delhi, the petitioners have highlighted the fact that the practice appears to prevail in other States too. It is not difficult to guess that the police and revenue officers vested with magisterial powers do not want any disturbance to public order in the midst of election campaigns, but a legitimate question arises whether the passing of blanket prohibitory orders and studied inaction on applications for any gathering are constitutionally valid. In the petitioners' case, they were unable to hold any public programmes aimed at creating awareness among voters about the election, the candidates and the disclosures they have made in their affidavits and nomination papers.

There are several Court judgments that limit the power under Section 144, which is essentially a power to direct anyone to act or refrain from acting in a particular way. Orders under these provisions typically restrict any assembly of people beyond a small number and require those seeking to hold any public activity to apply for permission. It is difficult to disagree with the argument that such restrictions ought not to apply to activities aimed at educating voters, as the ultimate consequence is that it limits public participation in the democratic process. The Bench that heard the submissions rightly raised the question how such blanket orders could be passed. Its interim order directs executive magistrates to decide applications for public meetings and *yatras* within three days. The case raises a legitimate concern whether an election, by itself, can provide sufficient reason for blanket restrictions on public participation and make it dependent on discretionary powers. It is true that the authorities can cite the fact that they are effectively under the superintendence and control of the Election Commission of India (ECI) during elections, but it also gives rise to yet another question whether the election body favours such a clamp-down and whether statutory powers can be shifted from the designated authority to the ECI.

Toss out the junk food, bring back the healthy food plate

India, like in many other countries, is undergoing a major "nutrition transition". In what characterises rapidly changing dietary patterns, there is a significant shift away from traditional diets, which were high in fibre and comprised mostly whole foods, to more western-style diets, which are processed and high in calories. This change has coincided with rapid economic progress and urbanisation along with a surge in the consumption of packaged and processed foods (popularly called "junk foods"). These foods are nutritionally low in vitamins, minerals, fibre but are high in calories, fats, salt, sugar, and innumerable preservatives. Categorised as high in fats, salts and sugars (HFSS) foods, scientific evidence shows how junk food has been medically found to weaken the body's defences against infection, increase blood pressure, lead to a spike in blood sugar, cause weight gain, and also contribute to increased risk of cancer. Often packaged as comfort foods in India, examples of such junk or HFSS foods include cookies, cakes, chips, *namkeen*, instant noodles, sugary drinks, frozen meals, canned fruits, Indian sweets, and bakery products. It should come as no surprise that India is experiencing an explosion of lifestyle diseases, with unhealthy diets being one of the single largest contributing factors. To put the magnitude of the health burden into perspective, an Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) study published in 2023 estimates that in India the prevalence of metabolic disorders is glaringly high where 11% has diabetes, 35% is hypertensive and almost 40% are suffering from abdominal obesity.

A significant factor to consider while analysing the evolving dietary habits of Indians is the influence of aggressive advertising to promote "tasty" and "affordable" comfort foods, particularly aimed at younger consumers. According to a pan India survey conducted by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), 93% of children ate food that was packaged, 68% drank packaged sweetened beverages more than once a week, and 53% ate these foods at least once a day. At the same time, the ultra-processed food industry in India has expanded at a compound annual growth rate of 13.37% between 2011 and 2021. Moreover, India's food processing industry is predicted to be worth \$535 billion by 2025-26.

Court's concern

Coming to the steps that have been taken to protect consumers from unhealthy foods, a ruling by the Supreme Court of India, in 2013, offers a constitutionally sound place to begin. The Court



Ananya Awasthi

is a public policy researcher and founder-director at Anuvaad Solutions, an accelerator for translating scientific evidence to inform policy action on India's nutrition agenda



Apoorva Kalra

is a public health nutrition expert and manager at Anuvaad Solutions

There needs to be a people's movement, backed by sincere policy interventions, to promote healthy and nutritionally diverse diets and ensure informed food choices

said, "We may emphasize that any food article which is hazardous or injurious to public health is a potential danger to the fundamental right to life guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution of India." Recognising the need to promote people's health and well-being, the Government of India has prioritised the promotion of healthy foods and an active lifestyle through its initiatives such as Eat Right India, the Fit India Movement, and Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nutrition (Poshan) 2.0.

As children are more exposed to the advertising of unhealthy foods, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) released the Food Safety and Standards (Safe food and balanced diets for children in school) Regulations, 2020, restricting the sale of HFSS in school canteens/mess premises/hostel kitchens, or within 50 metres of the school campus. Recently, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights also issued notice to a health drink giant to evaluate and withdraw all misleading advertisements, packaging and labels that brand the product as a "health drink", citing the product's high sugar content that can adversely impact the health of children.

Despite a policy intention to provide a safe food environment, there is still much work that needs to be done in ensuring effective implementation of interventions that can have an impact on the consumption of junk foods. Here are four strategies that hold the key to translating policy intention into meaningful change on the ground.

Formulate a clear definition

First, a good starting point for the government is to protect growing children from the harmful impact of junk foods. While the FSSAI has released regulations for restricting the consumption of HFSS foods, currently, there is no way to "define" or "identify" which foods fall into the category of HFSS foods. Thus, it is imperative that as the next step, the FSSAI goes ahead and "defines" what exactly constitutes HFSS foods in the Indian context which can enable better implementation of food safety regulations. Moreover, institutions such as the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights can play an instrumental role in ensuring stricter compliance of school food regulations.

Second, Front-of-Pack Labelling (FOPL) appears to be a low-hanging fruit which can enable consumers to make informed choices about what foods they choose to eat. Currently, we have access to a mathematical nutrition table in small print on the back of food packets which most of us neither notice nor comprehend. For

instance, the next time you open a package of chips, are you going to sit and calculate how much salt are you consuming in a packet when the label states that there are xx micrograms of sodium per 100 grams?

As an alternative, a "warning label" that states "high in salt" on the front might make more sense, particularly if you are a hypertensive patient. The latter example is an illustration of a front of package nutrition labelling practice that draws one's attention with clear and understandable signals that can help you make an informed food choice.

The Indian Nutrition Rating (INR), where packaged food products would be given a star rating based on the overall nutritional profile of the product, is in fact included in the most recent draft of the Food Safety and Standards (Labelling & Display) Amendment Regulations, 2022. However, there are a number of concerns here. Above all, star ratings will give producers a clear escape route: they may add one or two healthy components to raise the overall star rating while still selling unhealthy foods that are dangerously high in fat, sugar, and salt. Moreover, regulations are voluntary until a period of four years from the date of final notification of the regulations.

Have subsidies for healthy foods

Third, policies can also be developed to facilitate the positive subsidies for healthy foods such as whole foods, millets, fruits and vegetables that will improve their availability, affordability, and thus greater consumption in rural and urban areas. The question for policymakers is how to make a fruit more affordable than a ₹5 high salt chips packet and ₹2 high sugar biscuits.

Fourth, in addition to the policies, a behavioural change campaign targeting children and young adults alike can play a critical role in helping youth adopt healthy dietary habits and mindful eating practices. This can include multimedia messaging on the health impacts of junk foods; campaigns building on "vocal for local" which promotes local and seasonal fruits and vegetables and traditional foods such as millets; and interactive discussions on balanced diets and tapping into social media influencers to mainstream conversations about the health risks of junk foods.

It is critical to acknowledge the urgency of switching to healthier diets and creating public demand, or, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi calls it, a "Jan Andolan" or people's movement, for healthy and nutritionally diverse diets. These efforts must be accompanied by sincere policy interventions that help Indians exercise their right to make informed food choices.

Reversing the global democratic recession

India is in the midst of its most significant electoral exercise and it might be worthwhile to scrutinise people's changing perceptions about their political ecosystems in both the largest democracy and other smaller democratic spaces elsewhere. Such an exercise may help us understand the prevailing global situation and work on the future course of action.

Survey shows a disenchantment

A Pew Research Center's global survey reveals the evolving state of democracies across 24 countries. Conducted between February 20 and May 22, 2023, this survey of 30,861 respondents delves into the complex fabric of democratic ideals, revealing both global trends and nuanced regional variations.

The results highlight a global shift underway, signalling a discernible erosion of trust in democratic systems. Here, 77% of the respondents expressed optimism about representative democracy. But, their receptivity to alternative governance models is worrisome, of an unambiguous disenchantment with democracy. The diminishing support for representative democracy since 2017 becomes even more pronounced when contrasted with the robust 70% endorsement of direct democracy, wherein officials directly influence major decisions, circumventing elected leaders.

Clearly, a perilous transformation has unfolded across these countries from 2017 to 2023, marked by an increased inclination towards rule by experts (58%) and a growing acceptance of authoritarian government models (26%). The rationale behind this shift lies in the perception that democracies, with their need for discussions and consensus-building, lead to delays, while concentrated power facilitates prompt decision-making and quicker economic development.

As expected, respondents from countries with lower incomes and less education tend to endorse such 'strong' leaders. A noteworthy segment (15%) also supports military rule, particularly in middle-income countries. Evidently, such preferences shed light on the intricate interplay of factors shaping the evolving perceptions of governance globally.

How do Indians perceive democracy? In 2017,



John J. Kennedy

is Professor and Dean, Christ (deemed to be university), Bengaluru

Despite the disillusionment, for a variety of reasons, the need to fortify democratic foundations has to be ongoing and collaborative

44% of Indians favoured representative democracy, which has since decreased to 36% in 2023. Conversely, the inclination towards a powerful leader with significant authority rose from 55% in 2017 to 67% in 2023. Similarly, support for rule by experts exhibits an upward trajectory, soaring from 65% to an impressive 82%.

Notably, the most striking shift is evident in the overwhelmingly positive response from Indians towards military rule or governance by an authoritarian leader, with a staggering 85% preferring it. This upward trend resonates in nations such as Argentina, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico and South Africa. However, it faces resistance in countries such as Canada, Europe, the Scandinavian nations and the United States.

Many argue that these findings align with on-the-ground realities and corroborate agency reports and surveys. Democracy-monitoring organisations characterise contemporary India as a "hybrid regime", ranging from "free to partly free" to "electoral autocracy," and even termed it a "flawed democracy". The recent *Democracy Report 2024* by the Gothenburg-based V-Dem Institute downgrades India across multiple metrics compared to its assessment in 2018, further confirming these notions. While some accept these reports, others approach them cautiously or dismiss them outright. Nevertheless, there is a growing global perception of a decline in India's democracy.

The need to strengthen foundations

In all democracies, instability, diverse voices, and deliberative processes are inevitable traits and essential tenets, and not weaknesses. Despite the current disillusionment due to corruption, eroded trust, unemployment, inefficiency, electoral doubts, civil liberty violations, and economic disparities, fortifying democratic foundations is paramount.

Toward this objective, two seminal works centred on building a strong democracy may help. *In Strengthening Democracy by Design: Challenges and Opportunities*, Nancy L. Thomas and J. Kyle Upchurch (2018) describe a robust democracy characterised by four pillars: participatory, free and equal, educated and informed, and accountable and justly governed.

Incorporating these fundamental attributes into governance is imperative for any democracy to truly function as such, not merely to be labelled as one. This requires concerted efforts and well-thought-out measures by all citizens, including those in authority.

Another inspiring and much-needed work for our times is *The Civic Bargain - How Democracy Survives* by Brook Manville and Josiah Ober (2023). The authors argue that a robust 'civic bargain system' can help democracy thrive. After all, democracy entails collective self-governance where citizens assume responsibility for their government, collaborating in a shared endeavour while acknowledging the diversity of interests and the significance of common goods. According to them, a civic bargain comprises a set of norms facilitating cooperation among individuals with differing objectives, along with rules delineating decision-making procedures. When coupled with civic friendship – treating all participants with respect within the shared endeavour – hope for democracy endures. Democracy embodies a commitment to fellow citizens, entailing responsibility towards each other, symbolising good citizenship, and fostering neighbourliness with an open mind. Under such a framework, all actions and decision-making processes are transparent and accountable. An informed citizenry is central to a democracy.

Dialogue is essential

In addition, governance should prioritise inclusivity and unity while tackling political polarisation and addressing diverse societal needs such as economic inequality, social justice, and environmental sustainability. Special focus on enhancing education is crucial, with investments in critical thinking, media literacy, and conflict resolution training. Integrating the study of the Constitution into curricula can foster transformative perspectives. Promoting dialogue and negotiation strengthens democracy's foundation. Fostering faith in democracy is an ongoing and collaborative effort that demands unwavering commitment from citizens and governments. It revolves around creating an inclusive space where everyone feels their voice is acknowledged and actively heard, and their concerns addressed.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Speech, hate, no action

It is extremely unfortunate for Indian democracy that the Election Commission of India initially "declined to comment" on the Prime Minister's speech in Rajasthan (April 23). Why is it not surprising! Almost every institution in

this country has been diminished under this government. The people of India now look up to the Supreme Court of India to save the nation. Mr. Modi has proved time and again that he is capable of inflicting attacks on

India's secular and democratic fabric. Such a sharp campaign will only alienate Muslims. Distrust has been kindled in the minds of other minority communities. Words of hate are best avoided. **Unnikrishnan S. Menon,** Puthenchira, Thrissur, Kerala

The speech clearly constitutes an act prejudicial to the

maintenance of peace and harmony between different religious groups. It is most

Corrections & Clarifications

In the Data Point story, "A fact-check on Modi's controversial speech in Rajasthan" (April 23, 2024, Opinion page), the sentence, "A fact-check using government data shows that the claim that Muslims give birth to more children is erroneous", should read as: "A fact-check using government data shows that the gap between the fertility rate of Muslims and that of other religions is narrowing."

unfortunate that the process of 'hate preaching' has undermined the self-respect and self-confidence of the minorities. The dissemination of hate is changing India. **R. Sivakumar,** Chennai



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

OUR TAKE

The importance of Karnataka

Election outcome in this state will have a bearing on the fortunes of BJP and Congress

Karnataka is seen as an outlier in the political map of South India for its willingness to back the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In all of 130 Lok Sabha seats in the states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, and Kerala and the Union territory of Puducherry, it is the 28 constituencies in Karnataka that the BJP banks on to prevent a washout in the South: In the 2019 general elections, the BJP won 25 of these 28 seats and its tally from rest of the region was a mere four seats, all from Telangana. On Friday, 14 of the Karnataka constituencies, among them the urban seats of Bengaluru and Mysuru, will vote; the outcome will be crucial to the BJP's pursuit to win a third consecutive term with an enhanced majority.

On paper, the BJP is on a formidable wicket in these seats for two reasons: One, urban centres, as well as the coastal seats in the state have historically backed the BJP; and two, the party has an alliance with the Janata Dal (Secular), which retains pockets of influence in the region. However, the party lost office last year, and the Congress may be riding high on its success in the assembly polls and the popularity of the welfare schemes implemented since by the Siddaramaiah government. The general elections, clearly, will see a face-off between two sets of welfare guarantees piloted by two popular leaders, Siddaramaiah and Narendra Modi. For Siddaramaiah — and DK Shivakumar — the two pillars of the Karnataka Congress, this phase is a battle to guard their home turf. On the other side, the political relevance of the Deve Gowda clan, which has fielded three family members, is on test: The Old Mysuru region, which votes on Friday, is Gowda ground and dominated by the Vokkaliga community, which now has an alternative to the Gowdas in the leadership of Shivakumar and his brother, DK Suresh, the only Congress winner from the state in 2019.

The assembly elections were a wake-up call for the BJP as its high-voltage Hindutva campaign with a pronounced anti-Muslim edge turned out to be disastrous — the Congress won 135 of the 224 assembly seats. It appears to have gone back to the communitarian politics pioneered by its tallest state leader, BS Yediyurappa and even denied seats to some of the Hindutva poster boys. On test are the tactical skills of Yediyurappa, the cadre base of the JD(S) and the popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. For the Congress, Karnataka, the home state of its chief Mallikarjun Kharge, is a vehicle of hope: A good show here will help the party increase its numbers in the Lok Sabha.

A champion plots his moves on the board

In an interview conducted by the organisers of the traditional open tournament in Gibraltar in 2019, D Gukesh, now 17, proudly proclaimed that he wanted to become the world champion, and that if Magnus Carlsen was the defending champion, then, he would like to beat him — he was 12 at the time. His words might have been dismissed by many as the aspirational ramblings of a child, but they were delivered with a calmness and maturity that has since become his trademark.

The fact that Gukesh is now the candidate to challenge the world title shouldn't surprise anyone. But the pace at which he has developed has even shocked Carlsen. At the start of 2022, the youngster had an Elo rating of 2614 and his progress till then had been along expected lines. But he found a higher level that year — winning four open tournaments in a row in Spain and also putting together a streak of eight consecutive wins at the Chess Olympiad. His ambition didn't allow him to rest easy; his Elo rating went past 2750 and a very focussed push has now seen him outscore experienced pros Fabiano Caruana, Hikaru Nakamura and Ian Nepomniachtchi by half a point to win the Candidates and earn himself a shot at the world champion.

Gukesh's low-key approach and love for the grind have allowed him to make rapid strides and when one considers that he is still a teenager and in an early stage of evolution, the sky is truly the limit. Come the end of the year, Gukesh will have the opportunity to be spoken about not as the youngest winner of the Candidates but as the youngest world champion ever.

If nothing else, one knows he'll be prepared.

The tactically silent Indian Muslim voter

Young Muslims need to develop a new politics of solidarity that does not rely on shared identity but enables coalitions that can cut across identities based on political empathy

Uttar Pradesh has just finished its first phase of Lok Sabha elections and several recent reports have shown that Muslims have observed a "tactical silence" in this election. This includes maintaining silence in the face of provocation to prevent polarisation, voting strategically according to local candidature to defeat the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) seat-by-seat, and voting in large numbers with as much coherence as possible. This phenomenon should concern the democratic world at large. First, it tells us that Muslim voters have accepted the fact that their political participation is only limited to staying safe from majoritarian politics. Muslims will vote for candidates who appear to be able challengers to the BJP. The vote of a Muslim, therefore, is hostage to a threat and carries no political currency. Muslims cannot trade their vote for development promises, they can only exchange it for silent neglect.

Second, it shows that Muslims have

developed a double consciousness where they feel that they contribute to the polarisation of Indian society — hence the belief that their silence will mitigate polarisation. The truth is polarisation is targeted at, benefits from, and accepted and rewarded by the majority. Muslims are victims of polarisation and the violence that it begets. For the Muslim community to have assimilated this double consciousness of being an element of causality while also being the victim, signals a disturbing shift in the larger political psyche of the community. It also indicates a moral downfall for the majority and its failure to take responsibility for the fissures that India has experienced in the last decade.

Third, the silence tells us that Muslims fear visible political participation. This is hardly surprising. Over the last decade, Muslim political action has met with State brutality and social ostracisation. While it is arguable that the Indian State has shown general disapproval of dissent, its response to protests by Muslims has been exceptionally oppressive. Police action during the CAA-NRC protests, house demolitions after the protests to Nupur Sharma's remarks, and the legislative assault on Muslim rights have confirmed the State's intolerance and society's disdain for any Muslim political mobilisation. Barring a few instances, Muslim rights is not an election issue.

In the face of this silence and politi-

cal neglect, young Muslims need to develop a new language of politics. First, we must reject historical essentialisation — a view of the community that assumes a special historical continuity between the Muslim monarchs of India and Muslims in India today. This view of the community, constructed by the Sangh Parivar, first demonises the Muslim monarchs of India as external invaders and then characterises Muslims in India today as their flag bearers — pushing Muslims into a corner where the sole purpose of debate is the community's othering. Muslims should reject this trap and claim the truth that historical continuities of Muslim monarchs are as much theirs as they belong to the Hindus. Muslim rule in India has contributed to and shaped Indian culture in general. These continuities are Indian, not just Muslim. For instance, Urdu is a regional language of India, for example, and not a language of Muslims alone; Mughal architecture is Indian heritage, not just Islamic.

Second, Muslim politics must articulate a claim for equal belongingness to the modern nation today. The ethno-nationalist politics of the Sangh premises superiority of Hindus in modern India on the claim of original inhabitation and presents Muslims as an aberration to Indian-ness. In this narrative, if a Muslim accepts their "Hindu ancestry", they are the deviant and must embrace "ghar wapsi"; if



Fahad Zuberi



A new language of Muslim politics must reject the ethno-nationalist premise and lay equal claim to the modern nation-state in the present AFP

they reject their Hindu ancestry, then they are the alien whose forefathers invaded Hindus. Either way, Muslims are denied belongingness to the Indian nation.

A new language of Muslim politics must reject the ethno-nationalist premise and lay equal claim to the modern nation-state in the present. History must be killed in this new language and a claim to rights must be rooted in the contemporary. Gyanvapi mosque must not be demolished, for example, regardless of whether a temple existed at its site because it is a Muslim's right to pray in the mosque today — the mosque that was standing where it is on August 15, 1947, the day when we enacted a break from the past.

Third, a new language must cultivate a politics of solidarity and move beyond the politics of identity. While a monolithic view of the "Muslim vote" has been criticised by scholars, new research has revealed that Muslims have voted in a more unified manner against the BJP since the 2019 general elections. This political direction must translate to a social consciousness that is based on solidarity among those who suffer at the hands of majoritarian coalitions and can help intra- and inter-communal coalitions. Ambedkar's idea of *maitri*, Kan-

shi Ram's language of the *bahujan* in UP and Madhavsinh Solanki's politics of Koli Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi and Muslim (KHAM) in Gujarat are good instances of inspiration.

A politics of solidarity does not rely on shared identity but enables coalitions that can cut across identities based on political empathy. Here, it does not require for one to know what it means to be the other for a coalition to emerge. A Muslim does not have to be a Christian to feel solidarity when a church in Chhattisgarh is attacked, for example. Empathy for a desecrated place of worship can generate political propulsion against majoritarian coalitions.

As one of the largest Muslim populations of the world votes this election season, its historical othering, social exclusion, and violent suppression has pushed it into this "tactical silence". But the vacuum created by this neglect can provide possibilities for new thinking, the emergence of a new kind of Muslim politics, and a re-articulation of what it means to be an Indian Muslim in a majoritarian India.

Fahad Zuberi is Indira Gandhi Radhakrishnan Scholar of South Asia at University of Oxford. The views expressed are personal

Asean, neighbours can break Myanmar impasse

On April 17, a spokesperson of the Myanmar military government stated that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's most popular leader, and former president U Win Myint were moved from prison to house arrest. As part of the Thingyan festival celebrations, over 30,000 political prisoners have also been granted amnesty and were being released.

But these developments, though welcome, do not conceal the fact that, three years after the coup, the political and security situation in Myanmar has markedly deteriorated. Peaceful agitation against the coup gave way to a countrywide outbreak of armed clashes with police and army personnel. The junta responded with aerial bombardment of villages and towns by the air force. October 2023 opened a new era of a string of defeats of the army by the Resistance comprising ethnic armed groups and people's militia units. The fall, one by one, of Laukkaing in the north, Paletwa in the west, Ramree in the south, and Myawaddy in the east to the Opposition forces represents a truly dark chapter in the history of the Tatmadaw.

Fighting continues unabated in several parts of the country, especially in the sensitive and strategically important Rakhine state. All eyes are now set on the port town of Sittwe. If it falls, it could be a serious blow to the military government. New Delhi's recent decision to withdraw its consulate from there and relocate it to Yangon which hosts the diplomatic corps is an indicator of the grave situation. "Myanmar will no longer be the same as it was before 2021 as the ethnic armed organisations are changing the internal configuration of Myanmar," said Soe Myint, editor-in-chief of *Mizzima News*. These organisations control most of the country's international borders with China, India, Bangladesh, and Thailand.

Dispatches from the battle fronts reveal a consistent story of an ascending Resistance and a weakening military. Before the coup, the Myanmar military personnel numbered, according to experts, some 370,000. Three years of fighting with its people has depleted the military's strength, firepower and morale. Troops now number about 150,000 of which "roughly 70,000 are combat soldiers," according to Ye Myo Hein of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). This explains the junta's latest decision to impose conscription, compelling young people — both men and women — to join the Army. It has triggered a huge exodus of the youth to foreign lands. For this author who spent years working and travelling in Myanmar, it is heartbreaking to see the nation crumbling from the inside.

What are the prospects of the raging con-

BEFORE THE COUP, THE MYANMAR MILITARY PERSONNEL NUMBERED, ACCORDING TO EXPERTS, SOME 370,000. THREE YEARS OF FIGHTING WITH ITS PEOPLE HAS DEPLETED THE MILITARY'S STRENGTH, FIREPOWER AND MORALE.

lict giving way to conciliation in the coming months? As the country stands virtually divided today into two parts, namely the regions still controlled by the Army and those areas where the Resistance is in charge, neither side considers a peaceful settlement through dialogue an option. At the same time, neither side seems confident of a total victory over the other soon.

This implies that one of the three scenarios, or a mixture of sorts, may come about. First, a protracted conflict and civil war that results in more bloodshed, displacement of people, their untold suffering, and further damage to the economy. Second, another major defeat for the Army, such as the loss of a big town like Mandalay, could be a game-changer. Third, a radical decision by the junta to effect a change in leadership or release Aung San Suu Kyi, which results in a dramatic reshuffling of cards in the political game.

Myanmar's internal challenges can be addressed and resolved only by its people. But they cannot do it alone, without external assistance. Endeavours by the UN Security Council, the UN Secretary General's special envoy, Japan's special envoy

Yohei Sasakawa, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have all failed to deliver. The Five Point Consensus (FPC), crafted by the ASEAN three years ago, raised hopes but it could not achieve any success because of the wide chasm between the junta and the Opposition.

Only one country — China — seems active in mediatory efforts now. After a few hiccups, it succeeded in helping the warring sides to agree to a ceasefire in the Shan state along the Myanmar-China border. The new Thai government desires to undertake a similar effort on the Myanmar-Thailand border region.

Prudence demands that a studied engagement of a few select ASEAN States and all five neighbours of Myanmar as potential mediators or facilitators may be given a chance. They should first agree among themselves on a broad approach to resolving major differences on key political issues. Thereafter, they could attempt to offer their vision to the regime and the Resistance. Issues on the agenda should include the cessation of fighting, delivery of humanitarian assistance, re-building of the economy, and launch of a national dialogue. It must encompass an agreement on the vision of "a new Myanmar", a nation with a federal democracy where the Army withdraws, within a short time frame, from the domain of governance.

To assist the government of select ASEAN States and five neighbours, reputed experts on Myanmar from the region bear a special responsibility. Their reading of Burmese history and the national character of the Myanmar people, and their expertise in comprehending the diversities, challenges and potential of this remarkable nation, should be put to effective use. Let the experts come up with a "peace proposal" first, and then the concerned governments can pick up the baton and run with it.

Rajiv Bhatia is Distinguished Fellow, Gateway House, former ambassador to Myanmar and author of *India-Myanmar Relations: Changing contours*. The views expressed are personal

{ CELESTE SAULO } SECRETARY-GENERAL OF WMO

Climate change exacerbated the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, profoundly impacting societies, and, most importantly, human lives



The neo-colonialism of global reports, rankings

Just before the 18th Lok Sabha elections, several reports authored by international agencies appeared, running down the country on various parameters. Without a doubt, most of them are agenda-driven, reeking of neo-colonialism. Sadly, such reports are used by politicians, quoted by commentators, and circulated by the media without checking their veracity and the credibility of the organisations proffering them. In most cases, the methodology is opaque and rarely scrutinised.

The latest such report doing the rounds is sired by the World Inequality Lab, which claims that the present-day "golden era of Indian billionaires has produced soaring income inequality in India — now among the highest in the world". Prior to this report, there were several others whose findings, on the very face, were ludicrous, to say the least.

According to the World Happiness Report 2024, India is currently positioned at 126 among 143 countries, trailing behind nations such as Libya (66), Iraq (92), Palestine (103), Ukraine (105), Pakistan (108) and Niger (109).

In the Global Hunger Index 2023 rankings, India was placed at 111 among 125 countries. The index placed Pakistan at 102, Bangladesh at 81, Nepal at 69, and Sri Lanka at 60, far ahead of India. Yet another one by the Thomson Reuters Foundation (2018) declared India as "the world's most dangerous country for women". This survey was based on feedback from just 550 respondents.

These absurd findings aren't a result of some innocent miscalculations from the scholars undertaking such studies. There is a method to this madness. Obviously, statistics, data and facts are suitably tailored to support predetermined conclusions to further set agendas.

The World Inequality Report's political bias became apparent when it said that inequality has been particularly pronounced since the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) first came to power in 2014. Over the last decade, major political and economic reforms have led to "an authoritarian government with centralisation of decision-making power, coupled with a growing nexus between big business and government".

Contrary to what the report would have us believe, poverty in India is declining — a fact repeatedly recognised by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. According to informed studies, abject poverty has declined sharply from 29.17% in 2013-14 to 11.28% in 2022-23, resulting in 24.82 crore individuals escaping destitution during the nine-year

period. It translates into 2.75 crore people escaping multidimensional poverty every year. Colonies may be passé. Soldiers are now seldom used by powerful nations to meet their predatory objectives. The new instruments to further imperial interests include the use of manufactured narratives on cultural, ethnic, social, religious and economic issues, along with market influences, to control and subjugate the target nations.

Colonialism has shapeshifted into a new avatar — neo-colonialism. Various European countries and the United States continue to harbour hegemonic ambitions. China is a new emerging colonial power. Its tentacles are spread all over the globe — from India's immediate neighbours such as Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, to a host of African nations. It has used its financial muscle and shyster deals to ensnare smaller nations into debt traps and suck them bone dry. The country doesn't hesitate to use its army to browbeat its neighbours.

According to a recent report, South Korea and the United States (US) tech giant Microsoft have warned that China was likely to deploy Artificial Intelligence-generated content via social media to sway public opinion to boost its geopolitical interests during elections in India.

The US and its western allies continue with their nuanced efforts to dominate the rest of the world. Left to themselves, the Americans would like to micromanage the rest of the world to suit their strategic, ideological and commercial interests. The US and Germany's remarks over Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's arrest is an extension of a neo-colonial mindset. But then, we have Indians, who suffer from a colonised psyche, seeking Uncle Sam's intervention and expecting him to take sides in what are essentially India's domestic problems.

The neo-colonialists — whether the US or China — succeed in achieving their imperialistic objectives to the extent the citizens of the target country fall for their manufactured narratives and start working for them, knowingly or innocently. At the Bandung Conference of non-aligned States in April 1955, the then Indonesian president, Ahmed Sukarno, said that colonialism "has also its modern dress, in the form of economic control, intellectual control... by a small but alien community within a nation". Sukarno's words are relevant even today, in the Indian context.

Balbir Punj is the author of *Tryst with Ayodhya: Decolonisation of India*. The views expressed are personal



The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

After phase one

Lack of national issues, low voter turnout have confused political parties and analysts



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

BRINGING UP A CHILD

SC ruling on child care leave as constitutional entitlement is important. But for even playing field, lot more needs to be done

UNDERSCORING THE CENTRALITY of the provision of child care leave (CCL) to women's participation in the workforce, the Supreme Court bench of Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud and J B Pardiwala delivered a judgment that has significant implications for female employment in the country. The Court was hearing a plea by an assistant professor in a government college in Himachal Pradesh who had been denied CCL — introduced by the sixth CPC for central government employees in 2008 — to tend to her child suffering from a rare genetic disorder because the state government has no such provision and she had exhausted her leave quota. The SC has asked the state chief secretary to form a committee to initiate policy changes and noted, "Participation of women in the workforce is a matter not just of privilege but a constitutional entitlement protected by Article 15. The state as a model employer cannot be oblivious to the special concerns which arise in the case of women who are part of the workforce."

The Periodic Labour Force Survey Report 2022-23 shows that the female labour force participation rate jumped to 37 per cent, a significant increase of 4.2 percentage points compared to the previous year. Yet, in a country that hopes to capitalise on its "nari shakti", there are not enough provisions to ensure that this passage is smooth. It is no secret that women, whether employed or otherwise, carry a disproportionate burden of care responsibilities at home and outside of it. According to a study undertaken by Karmannaya Counsel, CII and Nikore Associates in partnership with the Ministry of Women and Child Development and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to address the lacuna in the system, women in India perform over eight times the amount of unpaid work, valued at 15 per cent to 17 per cent of GDP notionally. Motherhood is exacting, but so is housekeeping and elderly care, demanding, necessarily, the ability to be everything everywhere all at once. It often means that women drop out of the workforce mid-career or take a hit in their professional growth.

While progressive legislation is essential to plug the gaps, other aspects need to be addressed as well. By 2050, the share of senior citizens in India is expected to rise to 20.8 per cent of the population. Investing in infrastructure that will ensure ease of access to affordable and specialised child and elder care is crucial to meet the challenges. There is also the important task of fostering a gender-neutral approach to care work, including and not limited to child care, that is integral to dismantling stereotypes and taking into account the changing nature of families. The extension of CCL to all employees, irrespective of gender, would be a step forward.

THE CHALLENGER

D Gukesh's victory in the Candidates tournament is a testament to India's thriving chess ecosystem

IT TOOK LONGER than what was ideal for Indian chess to move on from Viswanathan Anand. But when the replacements to India's No 1 and a global legend for more than 30 years arrived, they weren't just pretenders. They came in droves. Dommaraju Gukesh, 17, secured the right to challenge Chinese Ding Liren for the World Championship later this year, as the Candidates tournament was taken by storm owing to the presence of five Indians out of 16, including three in the open category. The high tide had been surging for a couple of years with the emergence of teen sensations restless to leave the prodigy tags behind and fight the big boys. Ultimately, it was Gukesh, India's youngest GM at 12, who breezed through the field which boasted the three big names, Fabiano Caruana, Ian Nepomniachtchi and Hikaru Nakamura.

Gukesh would triumph in the battle of the next generation, leaping past the adventurous and entertaining but unstable game of fellow Indian, R Praggnanandha and the brittle battling of Iranian-French Alireza. He surprised even the king who casually tossed aside his crown, Magnus Carlsen, with his composure. Carlsen would later grudgingly admit that he had underestimated how strong and stable Gukesh could be while chasing down his goal of earning a world's seat. Praise poured in from the world, including the next man in Gukesh's sights, Ding, who said that the challenger has maturity not matching his age and unique positional understanding. It's the start of a delicious India-China face-off.

The internet has been abuzz with how India is brimming with young chess talent, waiting to burst out of the wings. Former players have assumed the roles of mentors and coaches. Gukesh himself was steered by GM Prasanna who has kept his ward fresh by rationing his exposure to chess engines as machine programs can wear out competitive drive through their sterile algorithms and screen tedium. Gukesh's progress through books and human-nurtured critical thinking, keeps him creative and strangely unanticipated, though going forward it poses risks. It was a hurriedly organised Super Grandmaster tournament in December by the Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu that allowed the third youngest to 2700, to reach the Candidates. The Indian ecosystem is reminiscent of the Soviet surge of the last century. Gary Kasparov has dubbed the teenagers as "Children of Vishy on the loose." Praggnanandha did his bit to stall Nepomniachtchi, allowing Gukesh to rise. Carlsen remains the ultimate Goliath to be slayed by Gukesh, though he was the youngest to beat him in classical chess. Ding Liren will not be resting easy knowing what's coming for him — a calm 17-year-old who cannot be second-guessed through memorising of computers.

JUST A NUMBER

Threshold for 'old age' seems to be expanding. At a time when adulthood is so delayed, it's only natural

MINOR ANNOYANCE often mars birthdays that mark milestones — 30, 40, 50 years on the planet. Friends and family try to console the centre of attention with phrases like "30 is the new 20" or "age is just a number" and worse still, as the birthday person nurses a hangover, "you are as old as you feel". As it turns out, these trite remarks may be right and the perception of when old age begins is as far more malleable than the measure of mortality known as a calendar. A study published in the journal *Psychology and Aging* titled 'Postponing old age: Evidence for historical change toward a later perceived onset of old age' has found that over time, the threshold for being considered "old" has moved forward. In addition, the older people get, the farther away they think old age is.

One (awfully cynical) way of looking at these changing goalposts is that people are either in denial or vain or both. In cultures — most of them, in fact, in the age of social media — that fetishise youth and confuse it with vigour and beauty, this is probably a major factor. But there's also the more understanding and human explanation. To a teenager, a 40-year-old is over the hill. But when she reaches that age, if well-being and health are not an issue, the fourth decade may well be a peak. In fact, people feeling young for longer is something to be welcomed. For better or worse — for all the talk of "golden years" — old age is associated with ends rather than beginnings.

The problem perhaps, is with beginnings. Several research papers over the last decade have shown that young people are going through an extended adolescence. More gig work, increasingly expensive housing and less social security mean that the independence associated with being an adult is now coming much later. So, if people aren't grown up till their middle age, why shouldn't they be old later?

THE CURRENT GENERAL election, at least until phase one, has been characterised by an odd ennui and silence. This is partly reflected in the decreasing voter turnout. One should not over-interpret this. The BJP remains a front runner, with overwhelming odds in its favour. You could argue that the listlessness is a consequence of a foregone conclusion. But the contests in many seats are narrow. And for a party expecting 400 seats, the joyous surge is missing. Narendra Modi will, in all likelihood, win convincingly. But the sense of riding to victory on a crescendo of acclamation is not coming easy. Compare this to the mood after the *pran pratishtha* at Ayodhya: The sense of euphoria is missing. For the Opposition, as well, one hoping for anti-incumbency, a surge of visible anger, enthusiasm for its leaders, or uptake for its ideology, is absent. It is this mildly enigmatic silence that is giving the Opposition some slivers of hope, confusing analysts and making the ruling BJP a little more nervous than a party poised for total domination might seem.

Authoritarian regimes like to produce silence; but they also quietly fear it. This is the sound of silence that the Prime Minister's speech in Banswara seeks to break. In some ways, there was nothing surprising about the speech. It contains the standard themes of the BJP's view of the world: Conjuring the fear of minority appeasement, crudely associating minorities with both a demographic threat and infiltration. These themes are not strategic. They have become the DNA of the party. The only interesting question arises from the need to foreground it with a crudeness unbecoming of a Prime Minister.

The biggest challenge the BJP faces this election is not the Opposition, but the listlessness of its own support base. The mobilisation energy of the party comes from the fact that for much of the party base, the BJP is not just a political instrument: It is an identity. It is this fervour of identification that has given the BJP the edge in the last few years. But the sense of identity has been diluted for a number of reasons. First, the sheer expansion of the party, taking on board large swathes of opportunists from

the Opposition parties, dilutes its sense of identity and diminishes the privilege of its base. If any newly-arrived Congressman can acquire this identity or worse, get a ticket, the status-conferring effects of an identity-based party get diluted. It is also harder to project its distinctiveness. The thick crust of opportunism becomes all too visible, when you give tickets to a significant number of recent turncoats.

Second, in states like Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, where the BJP has done well in the past, it has forgotten some of the preconditions of its own success. There is no doubt that Modi is central to the BJP's campaign, both as a person and as an idea. But the BJP always combines it with deft local social engineering, artfully balancing local social equations. In these states, it also always had local leaders like Vasundhara Raje and Shivraj Singh Chouhan who had some identity of their own. It is also not an accident that the one state where there seems to be almost no contest is Uttar Pradesh, where the BJP has a local leader in Yogi Adityanath. The drastic changes the BJP has introduced in the leaderships in states like Rajasthan has unsettled many local caste and other equations. These unsettled equations won't be enough to unseat the BJP, but they create enough uncertainty for the ruling party to be nervous. It is harder to be sure whether the political calls it has made are, indeed, the correct ones.

Third, in politics, never underestimate the power of boredom. There is still immense enthusiasm for Modi. But the ability of the BJP to offer anything new by way of themes and memes is drastically diminished. The BJP's economic performance is middling: Not bad enough to generate widespread anger, not good enough to ensure that there are no significant pockets of discontent left. While Modi still seems immune to charges of corruption, the claim that India is in a less corrupt system is just that much harder to sell.

Democracy is often maintained, not by a commitment to democratic or liberal values, but by an instinctive rebellion against hubris. The conditions where "democracy is

in danger" arguments have resonance simply do not exist. Most citizens are not experiencing Indian democracy in this way; the democracy-in-danger arguments usually have to piggyback on a wave of serious economic discontent; and there has to be a focal point for resistance. But the resistance to hubris is much more instinctive. The jailing of Opposition leaders, and the presumptuousness of the claim to 400 seats, reek of just such hubris.

The BJP's challenge is that it has been very successful in normalising Hindutva to the point that it has become widespread common sense in large parts of the electorate. But then, it becomes just a matter of fact about us, not an ideological project around which you can generate passion. Even with a listless Opposition, the BJP becomes a little more unsure of exactly what will generate enthusiasm amongst the voters. It is hard to read the tepidness of this election: It may, in the end, amount to nothing. But it is exactly that hard-to-read lack of enthusiasm that may cause a sense of nervousness. The BJP's biggest fear is that the palpable lack of national issues makes this a normal election: An amalgam of messy local equations, caste and subcaste politics, organisational rivalries, and opportunistic alliances.

The listlessness of the first phase can also have self-fulfilling effects. The very fact that there is no crescendo of triumphal enthusiasm, at best a sullen acceptance of the BJP, can open up more cracks in later phases. Hence, it is no surprise that the BJP is foregrounding its ideological project once again. The only way in which it can energise its cadres and nationalise the elections is to constantly remind voters that the Hindutva project has not won yet. While it might be fearing the possibility of an instinctive revolt against hubris, it wants to compensate for it with an instinctive strain of sympathy for communal arguments. Modi will win in the end. But only by appealing to the ugliest depths of who we are, not the best we can be.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

A CALCULATED STEP

Why it makes sense for Mayawati and BSP to not join NDA or INDIA



BADRI NARAYAN

THE POLITICS OF the Bahujan Samaj Party and Mayawati remains a mystery to many political analysts and journalists. At times, they over-simplify her actions relying on rumours and assumptions to fill in gaps. Mayawati's political stand might appear unusual in the current context: Alliances have firmed up for the general elections but the BSP has chosen to go it alone.

Behen ji, as Mayawati is known among her supporters, is neither with the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) or the INDIA group. Why did she take such a stand when it would have been easy to join an alliance, ensure some tickets for her party members and even perhaps, a respectable accommodation in the next government?

To answer this question, we must first stop imposing our expectations on the BSP and instead look at the political requirements of Mayawati and the party.

Joining either alliance may well have been politically fatal for Mayawati for two reasons. First, given the diminished stature of the BSP, politically and electorally, she would have had little bargaining power and been given too small a piece of the pie. Second, there may well be a genuine fear in the BSP leadership of losing their core vote base in an alliance. The transfer of such votes

to alliance partners could do more harm than good in the long run.

Clearly, the BSP's strategy in this election is to protect its voteshare and project its value as a result in the future. If Mayawati succeeds in doing so, she may enhance her position in the near future.

Also, enhancing of the BSP's negotiating power through these elections is not centred around its own winnability. Rather, it is ensuring the defeat of others.

Another reason for Mayawati's hesitation in joining an alliance in which the Samajwadi Party is dominant in UP is the socio-economic situation on the ground. The clash here is between the emerging OBC landed gentry and landless Dalit labourers who work on their land. Multiple studies have shown how the largest proportion of land transfers in independent India have been in favour of dominant OBC groups.

This economic scenario creates a constant tension between Dalit-led and OBC-led political groups. It is also the reason for the distance between the SP and BSP, despite the cordial personal relationship between Akhilesh Yadav and Mayawati. The dynamic in UP shapes, for the BSP, its national outlook, including in Rajasthan, MP, Chhattisgarh, etc.

For the BSP and its leader, this general

election may well be an existential one. If the party's vote base is further fragmented, Mayawati will be one step closer to political and electoral irrelevance. Hence, the attempt is to emerge as a third force in UP, where the party still commands considerable influence.

In my recent fieldwork, I have not heard any apprehension among rural Dalit voters about the BSP's decision not to join an alliance. Many BSP local leaders explained to me that candidate selection was being done after consultation with the party cadre and that Behenji is keeping the social and political profile of the BSP candidates in mind during selection, based on feedback from the ground.

The major challenge for Mayawati in this election is "Brand Modi", which has developed into a major force over the last decade, even in Dalit hamlets in UP. Another challenge for BSP and Mayawati is to engage with "conscious beneficiaries" who have come about as a result of the various schemes of the BJP and address the rising aspirations of Dalit communities. She will also need to respond to the more social justice-oriented plank of the Congress and SP.

The writer is director, G B Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad

APRIL 24, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

JKLF ATTACKS GANJOO

THE SO-CALLED JAMMU and Kashmir Liberation Front claimed responsibility for throwing an explosive device at the residence of a retired session judge, Nilakanth Ganjoo in Srinagar. A person who styled himself as an activist of the front informed UNI that the front was responsible for the explosion. The caller did not disclose his name.

STATE OF TURMOIL

SIX TERRORISTS WERE killed and an equal number of people injured when CRPF jawans opened fire in Ferozepur, one Air Force offi-

cer was hacked to death and a bank robbed in Amritsar district, while an abortive attempt was made on the life of a Congress (I) leader at Bhatinda. The incident at Ferozepur occurred at the bus stand near Shaheed Udham Singh Chowk.

PROTEST OVER BORDER

MORE THAN 500 members and supporters of the National Democratic Party marched along the main streets in Dhaka in a demonstration protesting the shooting at Bangladesh security personnel by Indian troops along the India-Bangladesh border. The party staged a similar demonstration de-

manding the removal of a multimillion-dollar border fence under construction by India.

INDIA BACKS MEXICO

INDIA SHARED MEXICO'S concern over the crisis in Central America and strongly came out against "interference and intervention" by superpowers anywhere in the world. President Zail Singh said the superpowers could not use the need for their security as a plank for interference elsewhere. Singh reiterated India's wholehearted support for the Contadora Initiative which aimed at the resolution of the crisis through peaceful negotiations without outside interference.



A war, an abyss

The conflict with Hamas has drained Israeli economy. Adminstrating a territory with 2.3 million hostile Palestinians could tax Israel and its allies for years



ANJU GUPTA

SIX MONTHS AFTER the October 7 attack, Israel's war to eliminate Hamas has resulted in the near-complete destruction of Gaza and a dire humanitarian crisis with the area on the verge of famine. Iran and its allies have militarily united behind the Palestinian cause and expanded the confrontation to other parts of the region.

However, the dynamics of war have drastically changed following the massive Iranian drone and missile attacks on military targets in Israel on April 14. This was in retaliation to Israeli aerial strikes on an Iranian diplomatic compound in Damascus on April 1 in which top Iranian generals were killed. Israel has not seen direct attacks by a state on its soil since 1991 when Saddam Hussein fired 42 Scud missiles.

On April 19, some Western and pro-Israel media claimed that Israel struck Iranian nuclear facilities in Isfahan. Dismissing the claim, Iran asserted that its air defence system had been activated across cities in response to the presence of "three mini drones" over Isfahan, which were shot down. Officially, Israel has not claimed the attack, while the US Secretary of State referred to them as "reported events".

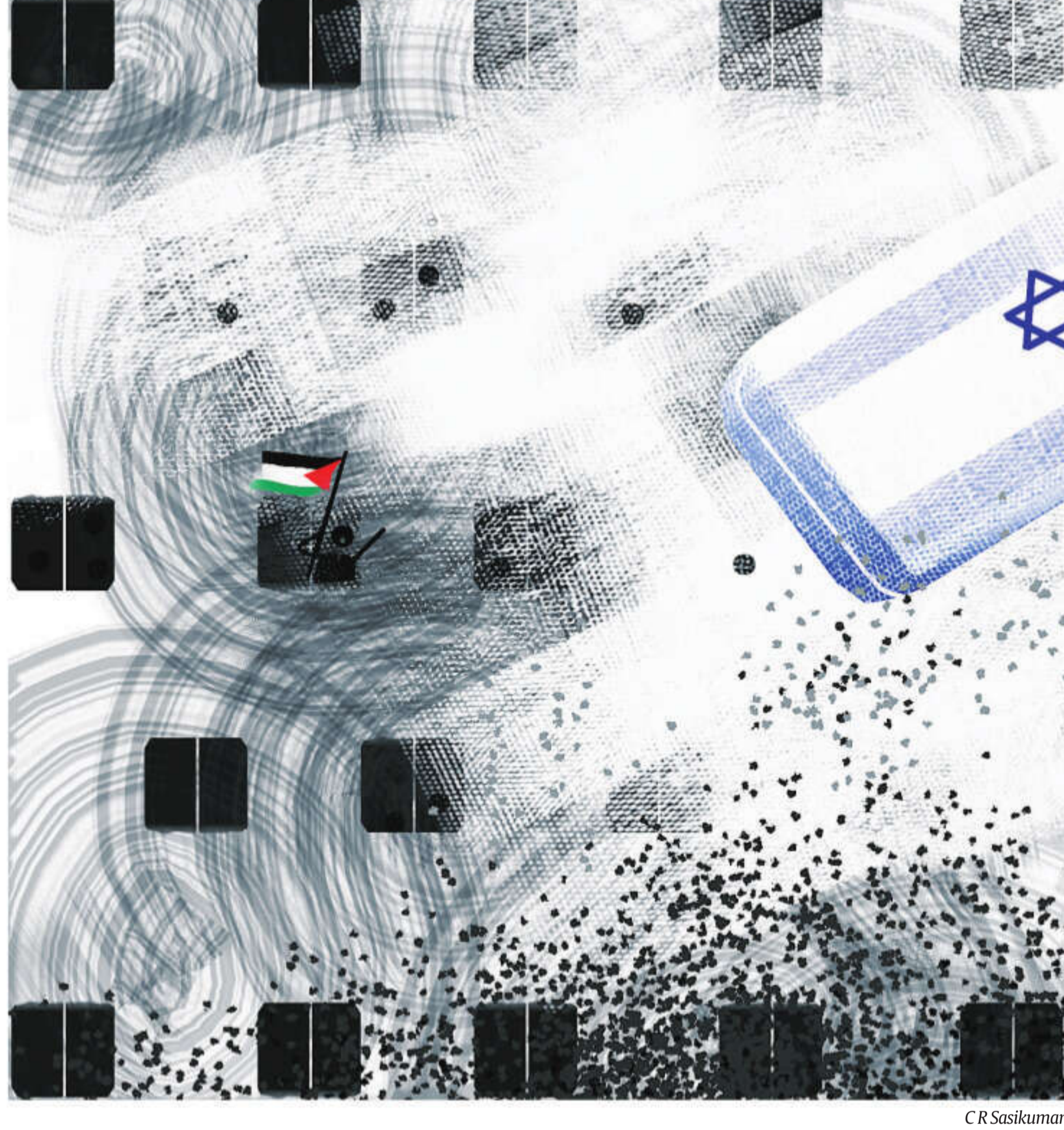
However, the propaganda around this "symbolic message" to Iran, seems to suggest that for now, the escalating situation has been "controlled" more with a "media war of narrative" to avoid further escalation by both sides. The US seems to have played a key role in defusing the situation by announcing early on that, though it stood committed to Israel's defence, it would not take part in any offensive against Iran.

At this juncture, what remains to be seen, is how soon talks between Hamas and Israel, nudged by the US and mediated by Qatar and Egypt, can be revived to negotiate a prolonged ceasefire, more humanitarian assistance to Gaza and the release of the remaining Israeli hostages. The international community appears united on these issues, but the latest round of the Israel-Iran confrontation is likely to obstruct these efforts.

The geopolitics of the region has already undergone a sea change since October 7 in four substantive ways.

First, thawing of the hitherto icy Shia-Sunni relationship, with Hezbollah, Houthis and Iran (all Shia entities) extending open support to "Sunni" Palestinians, presenting regional unity via the Axis of Resistance, opposing US-Israel domination. The first signs of the Resistance surfaced early on in the war, with conflict with Hezbollah in northern Israel leading to the displacement of thousands of Israeli civilians who are yet to return. This active front is likely to simmer.

Second, the war has expanded across the region, pushing the US to become the fulcrum of efforts to contain expansion and making it a primary target. Various affiliates of the Axis have mounted hundreds of rocket and drone attacks on US bases across Syria, Iraq and Jordan since October 7, with US forces targeting sources of such attacks across Iraq and Syria. However, in early February, Iran finally restrained the majority of the Axis militia from attacking US targets, which resulted in the latter curtailing retaliatory aerial strikes. Over these six months, the US and Iran have calibrated their actions and successfully avoided direct military confrontation. However, the situation remains fragile due to multiple non-state and state actors all of whom cannot al-



CR Sasikumar

ways be restrained by either Iran or the US. The Israeli strike in Damascus on April 1 and reports of "still unverified" aerial attacks on US bases in Syria on April 22 are such examples.

Third, the Saudi-aligned Sunni Arab States have adopted the political and diplomatic route, advocating a ceasefire, supporting humanitarian assistance, and calling for a two-state solution while remaining in line with US-led initiatives. Quite early on, Saudi Arabia announced a cessation of normalisation of ties with Israel but it took four months for it to categorically state that there would be no diplomatic relations with Israel unless an independent Palestinian state is recognised with borders as in 1967 and with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Fourth, the Yemen-based Houthis — a non-state actor devoid of a navy — have managed to successfully disrupt a critical sea lane of communication for five months, impairing trade substantially. It has done so using drones, missiles and unmanned attack drone boats. Coupled with drought conditions in the Panama Canal and the resultant drop in traffic, highly time-sensitive global supply chains have had to make expensive adjustments to routes and schedules, with insurers upping premiums to levels approaching, but not close to, those in the Black Sea.

The expansion of the war has already caused economic distress to the Israeli economy beyond direct costs, which, as early as October last year, were estimated to be over a quarter of a billion dollars a day. The Israeli economy has reportedly shrunk by 20 per cent

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"It is difficult to ignore the rigging claims, which also dominated the Feb 8 polls. They indicate that the electoral victory is not as clear as the ruling party is portraying. There is much time between now and the 2029 elections."

— DAWN, PAKISTAN

Time to heal

The government has the upper hand vis a vis Left-wing insurgency. It is the right time to initiate peace dialogue with the Naxal leadership



PRAKASH SINGH

SECURITY FORCES DEALT a decisive blow to the Maoists on April 14 in Kanker district, Chhattisgarh, near the Maharashtra border. A joint force of the BSF and district reserve guard engaged a division of Maoists on the periphery of Abujmah in Binagunda and Koronar forests, and killed 29 of them, including three senior commanders. A significant quantity of arms and ammunition, including three light machine guns, seven AK-47s and some SLR and Insas rifles, were also recovered. This was the highest number of casualties that the Maoists have suffered in a single operation in Bastar.

The Maoist movement, it may be recalled, had touched a peak in 2010 when 223 districts across 20 states were affected by violence to some degree. Then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described Left-wing extremism (LWE) as the gravest internal security threat to the country. Heavy deployment of central armed police forces, however, gradually contained the geographical spread of Maoist influence.

Minister of State for Home Affairs Nityananda Rai, in a statement made in the Rajya Sabha on February 7, claimed that the implementation of the "national policy and action plan" had resulted in a consistent decline in violence and constriction of the geographical spread of LWE influence. Violence and the resultant deaths have declined by 73 per cent from a high in 2010. Rai added that the number of police stations reporting LWE-related violence had reduced from 465 police stations across 96 districts in 2010 to 171 across 42 districts in 2023. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, sustained pressure on Naxalites has also resulted in a large number of surrenders over the past few years. It is estimated that 16,780 Naxalites surrendered between March 6, 2000 and April 7, 2024.

In a statement made in 2019, Home Minister Amit Shah said that "we will bury Naxals 20 feet under the earth". He also claimed in October 2023 that the Naxals would be finished within the next two years. Interestingly, P Chidambaram (as then Home Minister) said in 2010 that the Naxal problem would be overcome within the next three years. Rajnath Singh was also optimistic that the problem would be rooted out by 2023.

The problem, however, refuses to die down even though there has been considerable attrition in the Naxal ranks and a substantial reduction in the strength of the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army. The hard fact is that the Maoists still have adequate strength and firepower to launch lethal attacks on security forces and create significant law and order problems.

There are, in fact, major flaws in the gov-

ernment's approach to tackling the Naxal problem. There is no overall strategic plan and the states have been tackling the challenge as per their perception and the political appreciation of its gravity. One party takes a comparatively soft line; there is a change in government and we find a more aggressive approach. This is what we are witnessing in Chhattisgarh today.

States, unfortunately, consider LWE a national problem. They find it convenient to pass the buck to Delhi. The problem will not be conclusively dealt with until state forces take the lead in anti-Naxal operations and the central armed police forces play a subsidiary role only. This was a great lesson from the Punjab insurgency where the state police was always at the vanguard of all operations.

The whole-of-government approach is also missing on the ground. The security forces can deliver only up to a point. They can clear an area of Naxals but, thereafter, the administration has to step in and establish infrastructure. This is not happening, with the result that an area cleared yesterday is re-occupied by Maoists tomorrow.

There are fundamental problems that are adding fuel to the Naxal fire. India's forest cover is being gradually denuded. It is estimated that since 2008-2009, a total of 3,06,001 hectares of forest land was diverted for non-forestry use. Tribals inhabiting these forest areas were displaced in the process. Deprived of their land and any regular means of livelihood, many of them gravitated towards the Naxals. The government passed a Forest Conservation Act, but its amendment in 2023 leaves the very definition of the term "forest" ambiguous. According to many experts, this could benefit the real estate and mining lobbies.

Yet another disturbing feature of our economy underlined by the World Inequality Lab (WIL) is the extreme levels of inequality. The WIL paper titled 'Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj' revealed that the share of wealth with the top 1 per cent of the population was 40.1 per cent in 2022-2023. "The Billionaire Raj headed by India's modern bourgeoisie is now more unequal than the British Raj headed by the colonialist forces", the paper says. WIL's findings have been questioned by Indian experts who consider it biased. In any case, WIL's claims warrant a deeper and unbiased examination.

There has been much bloodletting on the Naxal front. Now that the government has the upper hand, it is the right time to initiate peace dialogue with the Naxal leadership. It would not be taken as a sign of weakness. In fact, it would be considered magnanimous.

The Government of India has been having peace talks with several insurgent groups in the Northeast. There should be no hesitation in taking a similar initiative in Central India. It is time to heal, time to mainstream the tribals. We must not try to "defeat" or "conquer" our fellow citizens.

The writer is former Director General, BSF and author of The Naxalite Movement in India

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A DIVISIVE SPEECH

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'No, Prime Minister' (IE, April 23). Prime Minister Narendra Modi's poll rhetoric of stereotyping the entire Muslim community by misrepresenting then-PM Manmohan Singh's 2006 remark is polarising. This is evident from the juxtaposing of Muslims as "infiltrators" with the "mangalsutra" of Hindu women. This is at odds with PM Modi's reference to the 140 crore Indians as his family. It also contradicts his stance on distancing from the British legacy of divisiveness, and negates BJP's Pasmanda Muslim outreach. "Urban Naxal" has become a fig leaf to despise all those who disagree.

LR Murmu, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'No, Prime Minister' (IE, April 23). PM Modi's speech in Rajasthan was inappropriate and has been widely seen as communal and divisive. The Election Commission (EC) should enforce the model code of conduct and take action on it. It has taken action against others for far less. The PM said the Congress would collect all the country's wealth and give it all to Muslims. The EC should act to uphold the Constitution and demonstrate the independence of constitutional institutions. The world is watching.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

QUALITY CHECKS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Check the sugar' (IE, April 22). This is not the first that the multinational food conglomerate Nestlé has found itself in the dock for ingredients of impermissible quality and quantity in its food items. A more disturbing fact is Nestlé's double standards

for its markets in developed and developing countries. The controversy highlights FSSAI's lackadaisical approach in putting a suo motu check on quality and nutritive value of foods, especially for sensitive segments like infants. Given concerns of rampant adulteration and prohibited additives in labelled food products, FSSAI must strengthen its regulatory oversight and be proactive.

Sagar Borade, Mumbai

EDUCATE VOTERS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The cost of voter apathy' (IE, April 22). It is distressing to learn that despite repeated calls made to the public, less than 40 per cent of the first time voters for the Lok Sabha elections got registered and a lesser percentage of such voters cast their votes in the first phase of elections this year. This paints a dismal picture about our democracy and people's faith in it and this voters' apathy does not bode well for our democracy. Voter education and compulsory voting are two imperatives the government should seriously consider for the sake of a functional, robust and dynamic democracy.

Ravi Mathur, Noida

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The cost of voter apathy' (IE, April 22). A diminishing voter turnout among the youth has consequences beyond just governance-outcomes. It can, if not addressed, signal a disillusionment with the broader political system. That, in turn, can lead to a hollowing out of democracy — creating, in essence, a vicious circle of apathy. Perhaps one way to enthuse the young voter will be to ensure that the election is fair and seen to be so.

Mrityunjay Chatterjee, via email

The editorial Express didn't write

It's important to hold Opposition to account for its divisiveness



SATNAM SINGH SANDHU

IN ITS PENCHANT for taking the moral high ground and in issuing calls to action *The Indian Express* has historically proven to be second to none. But alas, there is much that it has failed to take note of and much more that it failed to call out. Below is an attempt at an editorial that never made it to newsprint at *The Indian Express*:

In a democracy as vast and diverse as India, the role of Opposition parties is as crucial as those in government. It is the Opposition that often lights the path to accountability, ensuring that the government does not stray from its commitments to the nation. However, recent events, highlighted by statements from various Opposition leaders, have raised questions about the quality and direction of this crucial role. The need for responsible dialogue and constructive criticism has never been more urgent.

One cannot help but be concerned by the remarks made by Mamata Banerjee, Chief Minister of West Bengal, whose statements have stirred considerable controversy. Her comments communalise the atmosphere, suggest violence and undermine the democratic ethos we hold dear. At a time when the

nation needs unity, suggesting that a particular political party would incite riots and manipulate agencies like the NIA sows distrust and fear among the electorate.

Equally troubling are the comments from TMC leader Pijush Panda who not only disparages the Prime Minister's background but also questions the religious and social integrity of key cultural ceremonies, such as the inauguration of the Ram Mandir. Such remarks do not merely border on the personal, they are an affront to the inclusive spirit of our national identity, pitting communities against each other on the basis of caste and creed.

The Congress party, with its storied legacy of leading the nation, also finds itself mired in controversy due to its leaders' statements. Rahul Gandhi's assertion regarding the exclusion of the President of India from the Ram Mandir inauguration, solely based on her tribal identity, requires scrutiny and calls for a higher standard of evidence and discourse. Additionally, leaders like Shama Mohamed and Supriya Shrinate have made remarks that could potentially fan the flames of division, by fear-mongering about religious buildings and extending political narratives to sensitive

areas like anti-insurgency operations.

These instances of irresponsible dialogue do a disservice not only to the reputations of the leaders involved but also the people they aim to represent. When political discourse descends into personal attacks, misinformation, and incitement, the first casualty is the truth. The second, tragically, is the public's trust in the democratic process.

It is imperative for the Opposition to critique the government; it is how democracies mature and course-correct. However, there is an unbridgeable difference between criticism and calumny. The Opposition must remember that its primary role is not to obstruct blindly but to offer constructive criticism that holds the government accountable, while also proposing viable alternatives that look to uplift the populace rather than dividing it.

In these tumultuous times, the call for responsible leadership is louder than ever. Opposition leaders across the political spectrum must elevate the quality of public discourse. They must eschew divisive and inflammatory rhetoric in favour of dialogue that is based on facts, fosters mutual respect, and seeks to unify rather than divide.

India's strength is in its diversity. Every Opposition leader has a duty to reinforce this strength through their words and actions. As the nation stands at the crossroads of numerous challenges, from economic trials to social upheavals, the need for a discourse that is constructive and inclusive cannot be overstated.

The path forward must be paved with dialogue that respects the dignity of every Indian and acknowledges the multifaceted nature of our societal fabric. We call upon the political leaders of the Opposition to rise to this occasion. Let them lead by example, showing that even in disagreement, there can be dignity; even in opposition, there can be unity. After all, the strength of India's democracy will always be measured by the integrity of its discourse.

While this editorial remains unwritten, much vitriol from leading lights of the Opposition continues to flow in the stream of Indian politics even as India's leading newspaper is busy delivering unsolicited sermons to the Prime Minister ('No, Prime Minister, IE, April 23).

The writer is a Member of the Rajya Sabha


OUR VIEW


Reliance should lead a dividend payout boom

The company's size achievements stand out but its small dividends are a reminder of the low yields of Indian equity in general. Could India's biggest business help effect a big reversal?

The quarterly results of Reliance Industries Ltd have made news for a bottom-line dip, although its top-line rose. Its net profit for the final quarter of 2023-24 fell 1.8% from a year earlier to ₹18,951 crore, while revenues saw an 11% increase to over ₹2.4 trillion. Its core oil-to-chemicals business faced a few headwinds downstream, while a surge in offshore-gas output shored up hydrocarbons upstream, where oil was subject to global flux, even as Reliance Retail and telecom under Jio fared fairly well, turning in double- or near-double-digit growth on both counts. As far as numbers go, the annual results drew wider attention—as usual, for a whole new proportion of operations achieved over the year. In fiscal 2023-24, India's single largest company took its revenues past the ₹10 trillion level and pre-tax profit above the ₹1 trillion mark. As no Indian enterprise has recorded so many digits ever before, this deserves applause in its own right. The rise of our economy has begun to show more prominently than ever in the magnitude of our top businesses, with trillions starting to take the place of billions. Even in India, we can look at the top league's corporate sales as a slice of national output: Reliance's figure is about 3.4% of our nominal GDP.

The story of Reliance has been one of relentless growth, with large sums invested over time in diversification. From synthetics, it went in for vertical integration upwards into oil-and-gas and downwards into polymers, while its horizontal extensions addressed the retail and telecom sectors, the latter setting the stage for a big digital play, even as it began investing heavily in clean energy. Impressively, its strategic pursuit of expansion has rarely got in the way of its

financial performance. From here onwards, its prospects look stable. While oil volatility tends to impact a huge chunk of its finances, with input cost spikes often offset by gains in output value, both its retail and telecom operations look steady. As for capital allocations, investors have been tracking its energy-storage and green hydrogen ambitions, where it aims for a cost breakthrough, as well as its recent moves in the media space, where its assets are set to merge with Disney's in India, giving the new combine an edge in the TV broadcast arena. As such new projects could secure a sustainable future for Reliance by reducing its dependence on hard-to-abate industries in a carbon context, they will surely hog resources.

Reliance's investors, however, cannot be faulted for wondering why its annual dividends remain relatively low. On Monday, it proposed a payout of ₹10 per share, adding to the ₹9 it paid in August. Together, they spell a dividend yield of less than 1% (on a stock that closed above ₹2,919 on Tuesday). In general, firms that aren't in mature markets are not expected to award too big a slice of profits to shareholders, as they can put the retained portion to good use. Yet, Indian blue chips are generally seen to pay less than those in markets where shareholder pressure plays a bigger role. More generous payouts would remind investors of the basic rationale of investing—to get a part of enlarging profits. A dividend boom across India Inc would not only enthrall more Indians, it can also amplify a key message: As stock ownership is open to all, wealth creation has a sharing mechanism that everyone is welcome to join. Those who buy into this idea shouldn't need to offload shares to reap its rewards. As India's largest company, Reliance is best placed to lead such a campaign.

THEIR VIEW

Ukraine has got another lifeline but it may be clutching at straws

A new US aid package for Kyiv can't mask the fact that its American support has been wearing out


HARSH V. PANT

is professor of international relations, King's College London, and vice president for studies at Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi.

Finally, the United States' polity has found the resolve to pass a much-delayed aid package for Ukraine after wrangling over it for months, even as the situation for Ukraine has been going from bad to worse on the battlefield against Russia. This much-needed \$61 billion package, which includes air defence systems, mid- to long-range missiles and artillery shells, along with more than \$9 billion of economic assistance, got the approval of the US House of Representatives last week by 311 votes to 112. Though this support looks strong, it obscures a bitter divide within the Republican party.

American President Joe Biden commended the bipartisan effort to "answer history's call" and asked the Senate to approve it quickly, "so that I can sign it into law and we can quickly send weapons and equipment to Ukraine to meet their urgent battlefield needs." But the Republican opposition to the legislation is striking, as more Republicans voted by 112 to 101 against the bill than in its support. Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson managed to push the bill, but now it is his survival as speaker that's at stake with several members of his party calling for his ouster. Johnson argued that a failure to secure the aid lifeline to Ukraine would bolster the emerging *de facto* axis of totalitarianism between

Russia, Iran and China. But in so doing, he challenged the dominant strain of foreign policy thinking in today's Republican Party that doesn't view support for Ukraine as a vital national interest of the United States.

There is no doubt that fatigue is setting in within the US electorate over the Ukraine war and a sharp ideological divide has been emerging. Recent US opinion polls have shown that Republican voters are increasingly resistant to sending any additional aid to Ukraine, even as Democrats and independents are more favourably inclined.

Former US president and presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump has also been a vocal critic of continuing aid to Ukraine. But in recent days, he has signalled that he is open to considering a loan to Ukraine, and that also may have helped Johnson in going for broke. However, for many Republicans, the US-Mexico border crisis is of greater concern than the Ukrainians being shelled by Russian forces.

It has been clear for months that Ukraine, which is heavily dependent on Western armaments, urgently requires assistance as it faces a formidable Russian power that has been gaining consistently in recent weeks. The Ukrainian military has lately been warning that its situation on the eastern front has been getting worse, with Russian assaults increasing in intensity and potency. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky has been repeatedly underscoring the urgency of US aid, arguing that swift provision of appropriate weaponry could significantly alter the dynamics on the front-line. Other Western nations have not been able to fill the void left by the American inability to make adequate provisions to sustain Ukrainian war efforts.

Ukraine's challenges on the battlefield are not only a function of Russia's superior military capabilities, including advanced weaponry and extensive

resources. It lacks consistent support, so the resultant limits on its access to modern equipment and supplies are also a constraint. Without robust US support, Ukraine has found itself increasingly isolated, which has emboldened Russia to escalate its military actions, leading to further loss of Ukrainian territory.

But there are costs for the US as well, since its global credibility is under threat. Insufficiently strong American support has the potential to undermine the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (Nato) credibility and cohesion. Ukraine's desire for closer ties with the West has been a point of contention between Nato and Russia, and wavering support from the US could weaken Nato's ability to deter further Russian aggression in eastern Europe. Central and east European nations have been the most vocal supporters of Ukraine and the need for the US to do most of the heavy lifting. A diminished US commitment to Ukraine could strain relations between the US and its European allies that have also provided support to Ukraine and view Russian aggression in eastern Europe as a threat to regional stability.

Domestic politics in America, however, is rapidly evolving and the internationalist segment of the Republican Party is increasingly finding itself in a minority. On the ascendant, it would seem, is a 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) foreign policy, promoted by Donald Trump during his presidency and which prioritized an 'America first' approach.

The latest effort by the US Congress to channel billions of dollars in new aid to Ukrainian war efforts may be adequate for the immediate future, but a change of guard in the White House or a Republican majority in the US Congress in upcoming elections would make the continuance of US support unlikely. Both Ukraine and the wider West will need to prepare for that eventuality as well.

10 YEARS AGO

JUST A THOUGHT

Only the dead have seen the end of war.

PLATO

THEIR VIEW

Our space sector ambitions: Market forces are with us

SRINATH SRIDHARAN



is a policy researcher and corporate advisor. @ssmbai

The Indian startup ecosystem within the space sector stands out as a remarkable success story, where technology innovators harness their expertise to craft solutions aimed at not only fostering self-sufficiency, but also positioning India as a global front-runner. From ambitious ventures to celestial bodies like the Moon and Mars, and even to an observation post for the Sun, India's space endeavours have renewed enthusiasm among aspiring spacefarers. With notable achievements like the Chandrayaan-3 mission, India has consolidated its status as a major space explorer.

India, now recognized globally as an economic powerhouse, is poised to reap substantial rewards from the space technology industry. With the sector's value projected to exceed \$360 billion by 2025, its scope has expanded far beyond space exploration, encompassing satellite communication, earth observation and an array of innovative applications. India currently commands just about 2% (\$7 billion) of this lucrative market.

In the Indian context, the necessity for adept geopolitical strategies and astute management of space-tech investments and innovation arises from an acknowledgment of the space economy as a pivotal industrial frontier for the 21st century.

Beyond scientific exploration, space technology increasingly underpins economic competitiveness and national security through satellite communications, navigation systems and remote sensing capabilities. Hence, the judicious steering of space investments is vital to capitalize on opportunities while deftly addressing geopolitical challenges to safeguard India's interests and underscore its standing as a significant player in the global space sector.

Despite having only modest resources at its disposal, the Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) has meticulously crafted a well-rounded space programme ecosystem. Over the past six decades, India's space efforts have played an impressive role in tackling pressing challenges. Even Indian welfare programmes draw upon our space capabilities, whether it's the need to disseminate crucial information to farmers on optimal farming practices aligned with climatic conditions, or implementing measures for disaster relief and prediction.

Traditionally, the space industry has concentrated on establishing systems and infrastructure meant for exploration. Historically dominated by affluent nations and wealthy entrepreneurs, the post-launch space economy is now undergoing reinvention, offering opportunities for wide participation. The sector is expected to grow at a remarkable compounded annual rate of 48% in the next five years, reaching a substantial value of \$50 billion within the country.

In recent years, the Indian private sector, including space-tech startups, has been granted access to Isro facilities and other strategic assets, enhancing their capabilities significantly. This has fostered innovation in a sector previously deemed shut for many, generating employment opportunities and facilitating skill enhancement. The goal for India's space startups is integration with the global space ecosystem by harnessing a vast pool of Indian engineering talent.

In the last three years, the Indian space

startup sector has witnessed substantial funding, propelled by growing demand for space-based solutions and efficient satellite production, coupled with lower launch expenses and advancements in complementary technologies like AI and 3D printing. Public-private partnerships are playing a pivotal role in boosting

growth within the space sector. Government policies, including its encouragement of startups and GST-exemption offers, have further incentivized private space ventures. However, limited investor enthusiasm for later development stages is a concern.

Government reforms in this sector include a relaxation of foreign direct investment (FDI) regulations. The Centre has permitted FDI under the automatic route in the space sector up to 74% for satellite making, 49% for launch vehicles and 100% for manufacturing components and systems. These relaxed rules will empower Indian space startups to tap global capital. Consequently, Indian space startups can now explore inno-

native business models. Moreover, there is a pressing need to bridge the gap between space technology and practical applications. We also need to acknowledge the strategic significance of dual-use capabilities that require a judicious balance of their commercial potential with their implications for our national security.

The Indian space technology industry offers Indian companies an opportunity to excel on the global stage. However, as they venture into the international arena, they would become vulnerable to geopolitics and market fluctuations. In a world characterized by the convergence of technology and geopolitics, with international sanctions, trade disputes and diplomatic tensions refusing to ease, India's space endeavours must not end up susceptible to adversities brought on by the broader geopolitical landscape. As a space gold rush gets underway, countries will focus on their own interests.

Sustained government emphasis, coupled with enhanced geopolitical influence, would bolster the Indian space economy. India has the potential to not only elevate its standing, but also contribute significantly to the advancement of the global space economy. There's no better way to foster collaboration on an international scale.



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

State-level school boards ought to prioritize educational equity

Aligning standards with the National Curriculum Framework under NEP 2020 will help bridge gaps in learning outcomes



BIBEK DEBROY, SANJAY KUMAR & ADITYA SINHA

are, respectively, chairman of the EAC-PM, secretary of the department of school education & literacy at the ministry of education, and officer on special duty at EAC-PM.

Mission drift, a phenomenon wherein an organization starts focusing on activities that do not align with its foundational mission, has severe consequences for organizations. In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins highlights how companies can falter by straying from their core values and missions, a concept linked to Aristotle's idea of "telos," or an entity's ultimate purpose. Aristotle believed that losing sight of this purpose leads to dysfunction and unrealized potential, mirroring the effects of mission drift seen in modern organizations.

This issue is notably problematic within public sector institutions such as state-level school boards in India. Established initially to set educational standards, develop curricula and oversee school administration, these boards have increasingly focused on conducting examinations. Such a narrow focus can overshadow broader educational goals like encouraging critical thinking, creativity and holistic development, relegating the original mission of enhancing the educational experience to a secondary role.

Ironically, this examination-centric approach dates back to colonial times, stemming from the Sadler Commission report of 1919, which advocated a board of secondary and intermediate education to manage and conduct examinations. While the Commission also emphasized the need to oversee educational quality, over the years, mission drift has led many state boards to primarily function as exam holders in practice, moving away from their foundational educational objectives. This drift impacts the overall quality of education, reducing its scope to standardized testing.

There used to be 50 boards in the country, including the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in 2012. This has now increased to 60. New additions include the Kerala Board of Vocational Higher Secondary, Sanskrit boards in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh (MP), Uttarakhand and Delhi, All-India Muslim University Board of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education, Uttar Pradesh (UP) Dayalbagh Education Institute, Open Board for Punjab and Hyderabad and Veda Board Ujjain. While the diversity of educational boards across India may seem beneficial, celebrating a variety of approaches and specializations, it unfortunately poses major challenges.

First, as these boards lack a uniform timeline and syllabus, students do not get a level playing field, which poses significant barriers at the national level. Students from different boards find themselves at varying stages of preparedness, leading to stark disparities in the average learning outcomes achieved in similar grades.

Second, the existence of separate boards for secondary and higher secondary levels in eight states



creates disparities in student performance within the same state. Each board has its own focus and priorities, which directly influence the teaching methodologies and experiences offered in their schools. This divergence affects educational consistency and the quality of education that students receive, leading to varied academic outcomes within the same state.

Third, significant variability in curriculum standards and educational approaches across different boards makes it challenging for students to move seamlessly between them. Such barriers impede educational progression, force students to repeat or miss critical coursework, and ultimately compromise their academic and career opportunities.

Fourth, significant disparities exist in pass rates across various boards: For secondary education, Assam has a low of 59%, while Kerala achieves 100%. Other states like Manipur, Karnataka, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh (AP), Telangana, and Odisha range from 76% to 98%. In higher secondary education, the variation continues, with Assam at 85%, while states like Manipur, Karnataka, West Bengal and Kerala show rates of 75% to 95%. Punjab, Tripura and Maharashtra have higher pass rates of up to 98%, illustrating regional differences in outcomes that highlight systemic inequities in need of resolution for nationwide educational equity.

Fifth, diverse curriculums and standards lead to a competitive imbalance at national-level examinations. India does not have a national-level school exit exam. If one looks at the proportion of students who appeared to pass national-level exams such as the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) 2023, this imbalance is starkly visible. 69.3% of all CBSE students who appeared for NEET passed. The national average is 54.9%. Only CBSE and Council for Indian School Certificate Examination (CISCE) students and those of the Gujarat, AP and Telangana boards are above the

national average. The value is significantly lower for boards such as MP (39.4%), Tripura (36.3%), UP (35.7%), Uttarakhand (35.6%) and Chhattisgarh (34.6%). This systemic discrepancy effectively penalizes students from state boards, not based on merit or aptitude, but because of the curriculum they are taught, which is out of step with the national benchmark. This is relevant in the context of educational equity. Diverse standards across boards create an uneven playing field.

Sixth, the pressure from these competitive exams, which often determine the trajectory of a student's academic and professional future, makes many turn to supplementary education to bridge gaps left by their formal schooling. This is worsened by the varying quality of educational resources across boards and an urban-rural divide in educational infrastructure, pushing even more students towards shadow education, especially those who are studying under state boards.

To effectively address these disparities, state boards need to prioritize updating their curriculums, enhancing teacher training and focusing on capacity building to improve the quality of education in their affiliated schools.

Rather than standardizing the syllabus across all boards nationally, a feasible approach would involve establishing a consensus on foundational standards. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) developed under the aegis of the National Education Policy, 2020, provides an excellent starting point. State-level curriculums should align with the NCF while incorporating state-specific elements, ensuring that all students receive a robust educational foundation that satisfies national standards and suits local contexts. This strategy would bridge the gaps in educational outcomes and foster a more cohesive educational system.

These are the authors' personal views.

A century of bad choices could haunt Earth for 100 millennia

The role of humanity justifies calling this 'the Anthropocene era'



FAYE D. FLAM is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering science.



We must recognize the mark left by our species on the planet

One of the many things to appreciate about our home planet is that buried in its layers of rock is a kind of time machine. These strata tell us about our tumultuous history of glaciers, volcanoes and asteroid impacts, as well as the plants and animals that lived, evolved and died over aeons. There's no doubt that future scientists will find much to study in the layer being laid down right now— weird materials from plastic to plutonium and dramatic changes in the nature of fossilized plants and animals. And yet, a group of scientists rejected a proposal to give this epoch a new name: the Anthropocene, derived from the Greek word for human. That's too bad. It's a fitting name but seems to have been dismissed over technicalities.

The approach of dividing deep time into segments began before we knew how old our planet was. Geologists in the late 1700s and early 1800s saw layers of rock with different materials and fossils. These sometimes changed at abrupt boundaries. They began to consider that the Earth might be millions of years old, but it wasn't until the 1950s that researchers established that our planet's age is around 4.5 billion years.

By the early 1800s, we had time frames. The biggest units were aeons, within which were eras, periods and epochs. Thanks to our love of dinosaur movies, some people are familiar with the Jurassic and Cretaceous periods, each spanning tens of millions of years, the latter ending with a catastrophic asteroid impact. Our current period is called the Quaternary, and within that are two epochs—the Pleistocene, which started 2.5 million years ago, and is known for periodic ice ages, and the Holocene, which started just 11,700 years ago and is known as a relatively stable and mild period that let humanity go global.

Many of the previous periods are named after geographic locations where rock formations or fossils were identified. The name Anthropocene was proposed in 2000 by chemist Paul Crutzen, who won a Nobel Prize for his part in the discovery that human activities were threatening Earth's protective ozone layer. In 2009, a team of known as the Anthropocene Working Group set out to pick a date when the Holocene ended and the Anthropocene began. Should it start with the lead pollution of the Roman Empire, captured in ice sheets? The colonization of the Americas and Australia, which changed those continents' biota? They settled on 1952, when humanity added plutonium and other detectable by-products of atomic bomb testing to our planet's surface.

The recency of that date seemed to be a sticking point for the scientists who rejected the Anthropocene concept. Some also argued that what we're calling the Anthropocene is not so much an epoch as an event—a rapid environmental change that might or might not kick off a new epoch. Some also thought it sounded too negative. Stephen Lezak, a professor at Cambridge and Oxford, argues that the name sends a pessimistic message that we're defining the era by "human-caused environmental disaster" and that "we won't be getting out of this mess any time soon."

But our influence doesn't have to be seen as purely destructive. It's downright optimistic to expect someone doing science millennia in the future looking to study what we left behind. A future scientist could be someone like Richard Alley, a professor at Penn State University and author of *The Two Mile Time Machine*, about drilling into Earth's ice caps to understand the planet's past. Alley says that since the Anthropocene just got started and represents only a sliver on the Earth's top crust, geologists don't need it for mapping purposes. But if you appreciate that the lines the early geologists drew through different eras represented upheavals, then what's going on easily qualifies. "The Anthropocene very clearly is another one," he said.

Barring some spectacular technological intervention, the carbon dioxide that's come from burning fossil fuels could take 100,000 to 500,000 years to be re-absorbed by Earth, said Alley. In the meantime, the resulting glacier loss and sea level rise will affect people for thousands of years. So however long our species lasts, the influence of recent decades will reverberate through time.

Historically, people have had trouble believing we could change something as powerful and vast as Earth's climate. And human beings couldn't have known, at first, that they were changing the planet's atmosphere. Of course, we now know that humanity is leaving a big mark in the strata. What we don't know is how future scientists will judge us. Naming this era the Anthropocene could be seen as a positive statement about our species—that we had the foresight and self-awareness to recognize our growing impact on our vast but limited Earth.

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MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

Asset tokenization can revolutionize financial systems

RAHUL MATTHAN



is a partner at Trilegal and also has a podcast by the name Ex Machina. His Twitter handle is @matthan

Last week, the Bank for International Settlements published a paper that proposed the establishment of 'the Finternet'—a brand new digital framework that uses modern technology protocols to re-imagine how the financial system might work. If implemented, this will change the global financial system in ways the world has not witnessed since the Medicis of Europe.

All commercial transactions—the buying and selling of goods and services, making of investments, taking of loans, etc.—operate within distinct regulatory environments that clearly specify what can and cannot be done in relation to those transactions. These environs are distinct from each other, overlapping only when a payment needs to be made or a transaction recorded. In almost every instance, they are designed so that the financial assets they regulate (the land title registries, the record of customer deposits with a bank, etc) remain distinct from the rules that govern them. While this system has served us well for centuries, as commercial

transactions have grown more complex, the inefficiencies in its original design have slowed down operations, increased costs and restricted competition and innovation. The Finternet seeks to address these shortcomings using protocols and technologies similar to those that underpin the modern internet to connect these different ecosystems to each other. Rather than relying on traditional clearing systems and messaging chains, it proposes the tokenization of financial assets, allowing them to transact seamlessly over digital ledgers that are designed so that they unify these different domains.

At the core of the proposal is the notion of tokenisation—the representation of financial and real assets in a digital form. A tokenized asset contains not just information pertaining to that financial asset, but also the rules that define what transactions can be performed on it and how. By unifying the asset and its governance rules, the Finternet would enable a range of transactions that were not previously possible.

Tokenized asset transactions are expected to take place on a unified ledger, a shared programmable system on which various different financial asset markets—central bank money, commercial bank deposits, company shares, government bonds and real

estate assets, for example—can be managed and exchanged. The unified ledger is not a single centralized system, but rather an interoperability framework that is capable of connecting all digital ledgers that conform to the unified inter-ledger protocol. This would ensure the integrity of transactions and consistency across different ledgers, providing finality through strong technical guarantees. A transaction completed anywhere on the unified ledger would become irreversible everywhere.

Since users could open accounts on one ledger and perform transactions on another, tokens could be traded directly among holders without the messaging systems and intermediary institutions that are currently required. This opens up new settlement possibilities with reduced counterparty risk and no collateral requirements. As a result, registered assets can be immediately transferred with little or no reliance on external verification processes. Since tokens are programmable, operations

and obligations can be embedded directly into financial asset. Since they are composable, it is possible for multiple transactions to be bundled into a single executable package. Streamlined in this manner, financial transactions will become cheaper, faster and safer. Complex financial agreements can be automated and executed directly without intermediaries. Atomic settlement will allow different legs of a complex transaction to settle simultaneously with no counterparty risk. This will allow for the development of a range of new financial instruments (cross-border trades and multi-party asset swaps) as well as new investment products (tokenized portfolios and fractional ownership rights in real estate).

Imagine a common ledger for all assets that embeds the rules and assures us high system integrity

That said, various challenges remain to be overcome. While it is easy to see how this sort of system will work in the case of easily dematerializable financial assets, such as money (central bank currency and private bank deposits) and shares (which we already transact in dematerialized form), it will be

much harder to operationalize for real world assets (like a piece of jewellery).

In the first place, we will need to find an effective way to tokenize such assets so that they cannot be sold simultaneously on the unified ledger as well as in traditional offline markets for cash. Unless we find a way to solve this, the unified ledger will fail to adequately address the double-spending problem that blockchain technology was partly designed to address.

Where the law requires transfers to be registered, this is easy enough to do. All it will take is a statutory amendment to convert government registers (such as those that need to be maintained in relation to real estate transactions) into tokenized ledgers. All transactions, whether completed online or offline, will thereafter have to be recorded on that ledger, ensuring that it remains the single source of truth in respect of the title and interest in that property.

What is that much harder to do, however, is to make this system work for movable assets. Consider priceless works of art and other such tangible moveable property for which no public registries exist. Comprehensive tokenization will be hard to implement, but we have to make every effort to make it work.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Weather vagaries

It is as bad as predicted: Extreme events of 2023 were triggered by a much warmer climate

The year past us was characterised by a slew of extreme weather events. Now, a new study has shed light on a disquieting correlation: Many of these occurrences were in line with predictions of a warmer world due to climate change. The study, by a team of atmospheric scientists, analysed the unprecedented frequency and intensity of extreme weather phenomena across the globe in 2023: From devastating wildfires to record-breaking heatwaves, and from erratic precipitation patterns leading to floods and droughts to powerful tropical storms. One of the key findings is the undeniable alignment between these extreme events and the long-standing predictions made by climate scientists. As greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, Earth's climate system is being pushed to its limits. While it has long been established that a warming climate exacerbates the intensity and frequency of such events, the empirical evidence underscores the urgency of addressing climate change mitigation. Also, the ramifications of these events extend far beyond environmental concerns, encompassing socio-economic, humanitarian and geopolitical dimensions. Vulnerable communities bear most of the brunt, and disruption of essential infrastructure and supply chains amplifies the challenges. In the face of these sobering revelations, concerted action is imperative to mitigate the impacts of climate change. This entails not only reducing greenhouse gas emissions through transitioning to renewable energy sources and implementing sustainable land-use practices, but also investing in adaptation strategies to cope with the unavoidable effects of a changing climate.



One such initiative is the issuance of tailored advisories by meteorological agencies to assist farmers in mitigating the impacts of climate variability on agricultural productivity. In this regard, the IMD has taken proactive steps, leveraging advanced forecasting techniques and agronomic expertise. By harnessing data-driven insights and employing localised approaches, these advisories offer valuable guidance to farmers regarding optimal planting schedules, irrigation management, pest and disease control and crop selection. The IMD's initiative exemplifies the importance of integrating scientific knowledge with practical solutions to address the multifaceted challenges posed by climate change. By empowering farmers with actionable information and tools, such initiatives not only enhance agricultural resilience but also contribute to sustainable livelihoods and food security. As we navigate the complexities of a changing climate and its far-reaching implications, collaboration and innovation emerge as indispensable pillars for building a more resilient and sustainable future. By heeding the warnings conveyed by atmospheric science studies and embracing proactive measures at local, national and global levels, we can strive for a world where the impacts of extreme weather events are mitigated, and communities are empowered to thrive in harmony with nature.

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PICTALK



Devotees arrive at Jakhu temple to offer prayers on the occasion of 'Hanuman Jayanti', in Shimla

PTI

The rising power of nano influencers

Unlike their macro and celebrity counterparts, they embody the authenticity of everyday people, fostering genuine connections with their audience

In the ever-changing world of social media marketing, nano influencers are becoming a significant presence, giving brands a different way to connect with consumers that focuses on being genuine and establishing personal relationships. Nano influencers, who usually have between 1,000 and 10,000 followers, provide a unique mix of community-focused influence and relatability that sets them apart from larger accounts like macro and celebrity influencers. Nano influencers are similar to regular people — they are our friends, family and colleagues who share their lives and interests on social media without the polished image usually seen in professional influencer marketing. This authentic form of influence relies on real connections and trust, characteristics that are becoming more important in a crowded marketplace filled with advertisements and endorsements from celebrities. Authenticity and Engagement is at the core of Nano Influencers. Nano influencers are successful because of their gen-



uine relationships with their followers, who see them as peers rather than distant celebrities. This authenticity makes their product recommendations more effective and trustworthy. By leveraging personal connections, nano influencers can have a significant impact on their audience. Why are Brands Leaning Towards Nano Influencers? Smaller brands are starting to see the benefits of working with nano influencers for a few reasons. To start, nano influencers tend to have much higher engagement rates compared to influencers with bigger audiences. This shows that nano influencers have real and personal relationships with their followers. On top of that, collaborating with nano influencers is usually more affordable, which means brands can get more out of their marketing bud-

gets while still connecting with their target audience. The Pros
1. Hyper-Targeted Marketing: Small-scale influencers typically concentrate on particular niches, enabling brands to reach individuals with specific interests, resulting in more impactful marketing initiatives.
2. Cost-Effectiveness: With reduced hopes for payment, companies have the opportunity to collaborate with numerous nano influencers using the same amount of money they would typically spend on just one macro or celebrity influencer.
3. Higher Quality of Engagement: Nano influencers tend to spark more genuine engagement, resulting in increased levels of interaction such as comments, likes and shares.
4. Authentic Product Endorsements: Recommendations from nano influencers hold the same weight as recommendations from friends and can greatly influence buying choices.
5. Increased Brand Visibility and Community Building: Nano influencers play a cru-

cial role in connecting brands with tightly-knit communities, increasing brand exposure and building a strong sense of connection with potential customers. The Challenges
Although there are many benefits to working with nano influencers, there are also some challenges to consider. It is important to find influencers who truly connect with the brand's values and message. Additionally, brands will need to deal with the logistics of working with a larger group of influencers to reach their target audience effectively. Brands are always looking for more genuine ways to connect with consumers and nano influencers are becoming a popular choice. These influencers focus on building real relationships and trust with their followers, creating a more authentic connection. This approach is resonating with consumers who are growing tired of traditional advertising and celebrity endorsements.

(The writer is the founder and CEO of iCubesWire; views are personal)



SAHIL CHOPRA

The legal hearings, whether in the court at Varanasi or the Supreme Court, over the past many months regarding the worship at Gyan Vapi, carry ethical interest. The statures of the lawyers of both sides in these courts appear to be comparable. It has occurred to neither lawyers nor laymen that one side argues in defence of their clients' rights of worship; the puja in the tehekhan, whereas the opposing side also has argued that they have been the owners of the edifice in question. Also, it has not occurred to the judges, leaders and clients; in fact, no one else that the property is an acquisition by dacoity; i.e., loot in whatever sense. There was no mosque in that vicinity at all, until 17th century Mughal emperor Aurangzeb via a firman (a royal decree) had the Kashi Vishwanath Temple destroyed, except for the western side, which still unmistakably bears the evidence of the structure being originally a temple, in the form of its carved walls. The fervent followers of the Mughal emperor are not embarrassed that the Hindu devotees of Kashi Vishwanath since the mid-17th century and even in independent India, have to worship in a small temple, because of lack of any more space. For over three centuries then, an illegitimate structure stands, welcoming the followers of Aurangzeb's bigoted ideology. The judges in this case should soon begin trials. It should be declared that this is a trial over a place of worship that was robbed and desecrated, not a dispute between two equals. The law of adverse possession cannot apply here. "The Europeans should clearly understand that this spirit of Mohammedanism is unchangeable and that, if by any mischance, India should again come into the possession of men of this creed, all the churches and colleges and all the Mission institutions, would not be worth a week's purchase". So wrote Reverend Mathew Atmore Sherring, an English official. The Muslims did not harm the Christians of British India. But he was so upset at the vandalism he saw in Banaras that he could not help speaking out.

Historic legal battle unfolds over Gyanvapi

Amidst the legal wrangling, a deeper narrative emerges, one of contested ownership, religious desecration and the enduring scars of history



PRAFULL GORADIA



Reverend Sherring was a devout, maybe slightly bigoted evangelist member of the London Missionary Society, dead against idol worship. And yet he said it would not be difficult to find twenty temples in all Banaras of the age of Aurangzeb (1658-1707). This is the case throughout the whole of northern India. His description of the desecration of temples by the thousand and their blatant conversion into mosques, mausoleums, dargahs, palaces or pleasure houses has to be seen to be believed. In his view, if there is one thing about the Mohammedan period that Hindus remember better than another, it is the insulting pride of the Muslims (sic), the outrages that they perpetrated upon Hindu religious convictions and the extensive spoliation of their temples and shrines. "When we endeavour to ascertain what the Mohammedans have left to the Hindus of their ancient buildings in Banaras, we are startled at the result of our investigations. Although the city is strewn with temples, it is unlikely that there are many which are old". Reverend Sherring continued, that the diminutive size



HERRING WRITES THAT JUST AS MUSLIMS YEARN TO VISIT MECCA AND CHRISTIANS YEARN TO VISIT JERUSALEM, THE HINDU HEART GOES OUT TO BANARAS. IF THE HINDUS REFER TO ANY ONE CITY AS THEIR HOLIEST, IT IS BANARAS

of nearly all the temples in India — except for the south — that exist is another testimony to the stringency of the Mohammedan rule. It seems clear that Mughal emperors forbade the Hindus to build spacious temples and forced them to erect only small structures, of the size of cages, for their idols and those of no pretensions to beauty. The consequence is that the Hindus of the present day, blindly following the example of their predecessors of two centuries ago, commonly build their religious edifices of the same dwarfish size as formerly. These observations speak volumes about the trauma that the Hindu psyche has suffered as a result of the impact of Islam. Sherring writes that just as Muslims yearn to visit Mecca and the Christians, Jerusalem, the Hindu heart goes out to Banaras. If the Hindus refer to any one city as their holiest, it is Banaras. Aurangzeb tried to change its name to 'Muhammadabad'. The temple of Bisheshwar, regarded as the god of all gods, was systematically demolished by Aurangzeb during the 17th century. The new temple was built at the behest of Rani

Ahilyabai Holkar long after Aurangzeb's desecration. As already explained, all the temples built during the Mohammedan rule in Banaras had to be diminutive in size. It transpires that the demolition of temples was inspired not only by a hatred for idolatry or greed for loot but also by a desire to humiliate the Hindus. Or, else, how does one explain that the masjid built by Aurangzeb is bang next to the Gyan Vapi or the well of knowledge? Sherring has also referred to Al Baruni, an important source of Indian history of the medieval period. He came to India with Mahmud of Ghazni. Although Sherring casts doubts on Al Baruni's contention, nevertheless, he mentions that Ghazni reached as far as Banaras during his ninth incursion into India. In 1194 AD, Shahabuddin, better known as Muhammad Ghor, after defeating the Kannauj monarch, Jaichand, marched to Banaras where he is reported to have destroyed a thousand Hindu temples. (The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WEATHER WOES

Madam — Apropos the news article, "India grapples with erratic weather", published on April 22, this is my response. The recent weather fluctuations across India present a stark reminder of our vulnerability to nature's whims. While Delhi anticipates relief from the scorching heat, Odisha and Himachal Pradesh face contrasting challenges. Odisha grapples with a relentless heatwave, prompting necessary precautions, including school closures. Conversely, Himachal Pradesh reels under heavy rain and snow, causing infrastructure havoc. These extreme conditions underscore the urgency of climate resilience measures. Moreover, the IMD's forecast of above — normal monsoon rainfall signifies hope amid uncertainties. However, the spectre of increasing extreme weather events, as highlighted by recent research, casts a shadow over the future. Regions like the Indus and Ganges plains are particularly at risk, threatening millions of lives. This serves as a clarion call for proactive measures, from robust disaster management strategies to sustainable practices. As citizens, it's imperative to heed warnings, adapt to changing climates and advocate for broader environmental stewardship to mitigate future crises.

Rahul Kapoor | Delhi

POWER PRICING PREDICAMENT

Madam — Apropos the news article, "With power freebies, debt comes calling", published on April 22, this is my response. RK Singh's stance on power pricing echoes a common-sense truth: electricity isn't free. His call for States to bear the financial burden of free power initiatives highlights a critical issue plaguing the sector. The practice of offering free electricity distorts the market, undermines the financial health of distribution companies and ultimately hampers economic growth. The complex dynamics of tariff setting, with subsidies for certain consumer segments, exacerbates the problem. While political parties may win favour with vot-

Kejriwal's health report



Apropos the news article, "Kejriwal stopped taking insulin months back: Tihar", published on April 21, this is my response. The revelations about Arvind Kejriwal's health present a perplexing narrative. On one hand, the Tihar jail administration claims he ceased insulin under a Telangana doctor's advice, contradict-

ing his court Statements. The tug-of-war between AAP and BJP adds political spice. Amidst allegations of a "conspiracy," one wonders about the truth's cloak. If Kejriwal indeed stopped insulin, was it wise? The report's assertion of no alarming sugar levels suggests a balanced picture, yet doubts linger. The stringent dietary restrictions, though, raise eyebrows. Are they necessary or punitive? The bureaucratic tangle over hospital referrals muddles clarity. Amidst these complexities, Kejriwal's medical saga becomes a microcosm of larger political battles. As a concerned citizen, one hopes for transparency and genuine concern for his health above political theatrics. The saga demands more than just a casual glance; it beckons scrutiny and empathy amidst the whirlpool of accusations and counterclaims.

Aisha Khan | Chennai

ers through such measures, the long-term repercussions are dire. Delays and partial reimbursements only deepen the financial woes of discoms, leading to a vicious cycle of debt and inefficiency. The solution lies in structural reforms, freeing discoms from undue State control and allowing market forces to determine pricing. Direct financial support to targeted beneficiaries would ensure transparency and sustainability. Such reforms are essential for fostering a resilient and competitive electricity sector, benefiting both consumers and the economy at large.

Vivek Rao | Mumbai

MENTAL HEALTH DISPARITIES

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Brain Wellness", published on April 22, this is my response. The staggering statistics on childhood development and the economic ramifications underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions. The formation of the National Task Force on Brain Health, spearheaded by esteemed professionals, marks a significant step towards bridging critical health-

care gaps. Dr RK Dhamija's insights illuminate the task force's holistic approach, emphasising inclusive healthcare from grassroots to tertiary levels. The task force's focus on equitable access and awareness aligns with global initiatives, acknowledging the profound impact of neurological disorders on society. By evaluating existing infrastructure and policies, the panel aims to catalyse transformative change, recognising the intertwined complexities of brain health and socioeconomic factors. India's healthcare landscape mirrors global challenges, with disparities magnified in rural areas. The task force's mandate to submit actionable recommendations reflects a commitment to prompt action. However, sustained efforts beyond policy formulation are crucial to translating vision into tangible improvements, ensuring every individual has access to quality brain healthcare.

Natasha Reddy | Vijayawada

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Caste Dynamics

Caste dynamics often play a pivotal role, especially in a state as politically significant as Uttar Pradesh. The recent revelations regarding the caste-wise distribution of candidates for the Lok Sabha elections in the state underscore a compelling shift in the traditional power dynamics. At the forefront of this shift is the Samajwadi Party (SP)-led INDIA bloc, which has strategically chosen to field a higher number of candidates from backward castes and Dalit communities compared to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This is not merely a tactical manoeuvre but a bold statement challenging the BJP's hegemony among marginalised Hindu communities. We cannot overlook the significance of caste arithmetic in Uttar Pradesh, where OBCs and Dalits collectively constitute a substantial portion of the population. By prioritising the representation of these communities in candidate selection, the opposition parties aim to dismantle the BJP's unchecked dominance and appeal to the critical backward class vote. However, the strategic calculus behind this move is not devoid of complexities. While the Samajwadi Party (SP) aims to counter the BJP's narrative of appealing only certain caste groups, it falls short in adequately representing Muslims, who form a significant demographic in the state. The disparity between the SP's slogan of 'Pichda, Dalit, Alpsankhyak' and its actual candidate selection raises questions about the party's commitment to inclusive representation. Nevertheless, the SP's decision to increase the representation of non-Yadav OBCs and Dalits marks a significant departure from its traditional stronghold on Yadav-centric politics. By diversifying its candidate pool, the party seeks to broaden its appeal beyond its traditional base and challenge the BJP's narrative of catering solely to dominant Hindu communities. On the other hand, the BJP's caste breakdown reveals a nuanced approach aimed at consolidating support from various caste groups. While the party nominates candidates from dominant Hindu communities like Brahmins and Thakurs, it also strategically includes representatives from other backward castes to maintain its broad-based appeal. However, the BJP's failure to field a single Muslim candidate is telling, and it is such exclusion that continues to alienate minority communities. Despite its claims of representing OBCs and Dalits, the party's candidate selection reflects a disproportionate focus on dominant caste groups, further exacerbating existing caste-based inequalities.

As Uttar Pradesh braces for yet another electoral showdown, the caste dynamics at play signal a potential paradigm shift in the state's political landscape. The SP-led INDIA bloc's emphasis on inclusive representation challenges the BJP's narrative of exclusivity, offering a glimmer of hope for marginalised communities seeking greater political agency. Ultimately, the outcome of the elections will hinge on multiple factors, including issues of Hindutva, Hindu polarisation, resource allocation and developmental initiatives of the incumbent state government. However, by prioritising the representation of OBCs and Dalits, the opposition parties have taken a step towards fostering a more inclusive and equitable political environment in Uttar Pradesh.

Still unexplained

The hunt for the origins of Covid-19 has for the past four years been a tangled web of politics, power struggles, and international finger-pointing. What began as a scientific inquiry into the source of a deadly virus quickly morphed into a battleground of conflicting interests and hidden agendas. The revelations of political interference, both within China and on the global stage, paint a troubling picture of how the pursuit of knowledge can be derailed by geopolitical tensions. From the early days of the outbreak, when Chinese authorities closed labs and barred researchers from investigating, to the present day, where international collaborations are shattered and scientists are silenced, the search for the origins of Covid-19 has been marred by obstruction and secrecy. At the heart of the matter lies a fundamental question: did the virus emerge naturally from an animal reservoir, or was it the result of a laboratory accident? Unfortunately, the answer remains elusive, clouded by a fog of misinformation and mistrust. While some speculate about a cover-up, others point fingers at foreign governments, further fuelling the flames of suspicion and distrust. What is clear is that the politicisation of the source of a pandemic that brought the world to its knees has far-reaching consequences. Not only does it hinder our understanding of how the virus emerged and spread, but it also undermines efforts to prevent future pandemics. As long as the truth remains buried beneath layers of political manoeuvring, the world will remain vulnerable to another outbreak.

But amid the chaos and confusion, there is still hope for transparency and collaboration. The lessons learned from past epidemics, such as SARS, remind us that cooperation between nations and openness to scientific inquiry are essential in combating infectious diseases. If we are to prevent future pandemics, we must prioritise truth over politics and work together to uncover the origins of the virus. In the end, the search for Covid-19 origins is not just a scientific endeavour. It is a moral imperative. The millions of lives lost and the devastating impact on economies and societies demand nothing less than a full and impartial investigation. Amid the turmoil of political manoeuvring, it is essential to remember the human cost of this pandemic. Behind every statistic lies a story of loss, grief, and hardship. Families torn apart, livelihoods destroyed, and communities ravaged by illness deserve answers and closure. Only by acknowledging the human toll of the crisis can we truly honour the lives that have been lost and work towards a future where such devastation is prevented. In the face of political pressure and obstruction, it is easy to lose sight of the ultimate goal: to understand how Covid-19 emerged and ensure that it never happens again. As long as there are those who are willing to speak out and demand accountability, there is still hope that the truth will prevail.

Holocene vs. Anthropocene

Scientific quibbles aside, it cannot be denied that human activities have made planet earth inhospitable for humans. Six leading international datasets used for monitoring global temperatures, consolidated by World Meteorological Organization (WMO) show that the annual average global temperature was 1.45 ± 0.12 C above pre-industrial levels (1850-1900) in 2023. Global temperatures in every month between June and December set new monthly records, with July and August being the two hottest months in recorded history

Recently, the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) refused to recognise the current geological time as the Anthropocene (Human) Epoch because adding an Anthropocene Epoch - and terminating the Holocene Epoch - was not supported by geological standards used to define epochs. This decision was unpalatable to many scientists and laymen, because undeniably humans are now the dominant geologic force on the earth's surface. However, the IUGS did recognise that the term Anthropocene described a distinct and definite time. The IUGS said: "Despite its rejection as a formal unit of the geologic timescale, the Anthropocene will remain ... an invaluable descriptor of human impact on the Earth system."

This alternative view is more persuasive because human activities of digging mines, construction of dams, expansion of cities and clearing of forests for agriculture and urbanisation - will all be visible in the geological record. Also, associated phenomena of pollution, global warming, climate change, and habitat destruction, leading to mass extinction of plant and animal species are definitely an 'event' - an informal term geologists use for profound changes to the earth system.

Scientific quibbles aside, it cannot be denied that human activities have made planet earth inhospitable for humans. Six leading international datasets used for monitoring global temperatures, consolidated by World Meteorological Organization (WMO) show that the annual average global temperature was 1.45 ± 0.12 C above pre-industrial levels (1850-1900) in 2023. Global temperatures in every month between June and December set new monthly records, with July and August being the two hottest months in recorded history. This trend has continued; global temperatures rose to 1.66 C above average during January 2024, making it the hottest January on record.

Recently, a number of extreme climate events were noticed: * Temperatures are rising worldwide, because increasing greenhouse gas emissions trap more heat in the atmosphere. According to the World Meteorological Organisation, the last eight years have been the hottest on record. After widespread heatwaves in 2022, April 2023 again saw heatwaves impacting all of Asia, including India and China. According to Scientific American, July 2023 was the hottest month in the last 120,000 years, with heatwaves in Europe, North America, North Africa, China and Japan.

* Recognising that globally droughts are becoming longer and more extreme, the UN marked 17 June 2023 as 'Desertification and Drought Day'.

* Tropical storms are becoming more severe due to higher ocean water temperatures. Eighty-eight storms occurred across the globe in 2022, of which 40 reached tropical cyclone strength (=119 kmph), and 17 reached major tropical cyclone strength (=178 kmph).



* Sea ice in the Arctic Ocean around the North Pole is melting faster with the warmer temperatures.

* As temperatures rise, there is less snowpack in mountain ranges and polar areas, and the snow melts faster.

* Glaciers are melting at a faster rate. According to a report from International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Kathmandu, glaciers in the Hindu Kush and Himalayan Mountain ranges melted 65 per cent faster between 2010-2019 than in the previous decade. The Ministry of Earth Sciences found that mean retreat rate of Hindu Kush Himalayan glaciers was 14.9-15.1 meters per year, 12.7-13.2 meters per year in Indus, 15.5-14.4 meters per year in Ganga, and 20.2-19.7 meters per year in Brahmaputra river basins. The European Alps experienced a record amount of ice mass lost (State of the Climate in Europe, 2022).

* Permafrost is melting, releasing methane, a powerful greenhouse gas, into the atmosphere. * Sea levels are rising at double the pace of 1993-2002, threatening coastal communities and estuarine ecosystems. In a mad rush for 'progress,' national leaders often ignore environmental concerns. Recent floods in the United Arab Emirates, speculated to be caused by cloud seeding, killed at least 21 people, caused massive traffic jams, power outages and a closure of Dubai Airport. Such events are being replicated the world over. Last year, damage caused by torrential rains in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand was accentuated by construction debris from road building and tunnelling being dumped randomly in rivers. Roads constructed unscientifically, after indiscriminate mountain blasting, subsided in the rains, causing huge landslides.

Frightening videos, showing rows of houses disappearing in swirling rivers, landslides obliterating miles of highways, and people trapped under tonnes of mud, captured the horrifying

results of climate-unfriendly activities. Many lost their loved ones, their houses, and their means of livelihood; roads, railways and other infrastructure projects, built at humongous cost, simply disappeared.

Ruthless exploitation of natural resources has led to the massive floods of 2013 and 2021 - two environmental tragedies in Uttarakhand in the last decade. Environmentalists termed the floods as "disasters waiting to happen" because tunnelling and blasting for 70 hydro-electric projects had fractured many aquifers and restricted river flows, upsetting the fragile ecological balance of the area. More recently, cave-ins were noticed throughout the State. It appears that ill-executed tunnelling activities had caused aquifers to burst, leading to outflow of subsurface water, creating a void below the earth's surface

which resulted in land subsidence. Before the Government of India issued a gag order, ISRO reported a subsidence of 5.4 centimetres in just 12 days. A human tragedy followed, particularly in Joshimath; most residents became homeless as their houses developed huge cracks, making them uninhabitable. The townspeople's woes were magnified manifold by harsh winter rains and snowfall, as also a perpetually leaking aquifer. However, NTPC, that had drilled the tunnels, consistently denied any link between land subsidence and tunnel drilling. The Power Minister, in a press conference, unambiguously reiterated NTPC's stance.

The official view could be gathered from the response of the Uttarakhand Chief Minister, who informed media persons: "People sitting at different places in the country are talking about Uttarakhand, which is not right because 65 to 70 per cent of the people living there are leading their lives normally. In nearby Auli, which is a tourist attraction, everything is going on normally... Char Dham Yatra will start in the next four months."

This head-in-the-sand ap-



DEVENDRA SAKSHENA
The writer is a retired Principal Chief Commissioner of Income-Tax

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Students woes'

SIR, This has reference to your report "WBSSC to move apex court challenging HC order" published today. The Calcutta High Court ordered cancellation of all the appointments of teachers, Group-C and D employees made through the recruitment process of the State Level Selection Test-2016. The bench also directed the WBSSC to initiate a fresh recruitment process whereas WBSSC is also involved in the scam.

Moreover, if a total of 25,753 teachers and non-teaching staff need to leave in one stroke, there will be a major crisis of teachers and non-teaching staff in the schools for which the students will have to suffer. So, a fresh recruitment process should start by an independent authority appointed by the Hon'ble Court

as soon as possible to cope with the situation. Those who are involved in the scam should be punished severely. In fact, the scam has eroded public trust in the education system in West Bengal. Parents are now less likely to send their children to government schools, which could lead to a decline in the quality of education in these schools.

Yours, etc.,
Deba Prasad Bhattacharya,
Kolkata, 23 April.

DRAW A LINE

SIR, This refers to today's report, "Congress lodges complaint with EC against PM Modi". When PM Narendra Modi said that the Congress wishes minorities have the first right to resources, and then went on to say the Grand Old Party under Rahul Gandhi will dole out monies to those who have more children and to those who have entered the country illegally,

it was a troublesome stance and choice of words by the PM. Given the stature of the leader, it was best avoidable. Similarly, the Opposition is constantly targeting Mr Modi and his party that the saffron party wishes to change the Constitution if it wins a third term, that these would be the last elections or that reservations based on caste would be amended out of legal sanction, despite several disclaimers and denials. This too is wrong. It is as wrong to try to create fear amongst people as hate is. The 'Lakshman rekha' must be drawn. Let all parties play it fair. You owe it to India, our democracy, and our people. And it starts with your speech.

Yours, etc., N Sadhasiva Reddy,
Bengaluru, 23 April.

LENIN'S MESSAGE

SIR, I refer to the article "Rethinking Lenin" (The Statesman, April 20) where the author adeptly illu-

minates the relevance of Lenin and his legacy to the readers. Amidst the rise of right-wing rhetoric, the importance of Leninism is gradually fading away from the socio-political landscape.

Undoubtedly, the legacy of Lenin empowers people from different social strata to get their voice of protest. It is disheartening that Leninism is used as an ominous tool to provoke people for electoral gains. Mostly, a

handful of political leaders exploit the marginalized people and the bright students with the distorted version of Leninism to fulfill their unscrupulous agenda.

The true ideology and legacy of Lenin can only be inculcated to the young generation as well as posterity with the authentic practice of thorough studies and research.

Yours, etc., Kushal Bose,
Kolkata, 23 April.

"There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,

There is a rapture on the lonely shore,

There is society, where none intrudes,

By the deep sea, and music in its roar:

I love not man the less, but Nature more."

(Childe Harold's Pilgrimage)

A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

ASIAN VOICES

The politics of sedition

Long afflicted with foot-in-mouth syndrome, Davao del Norte Rep. Pantaleon Alvarez kicked a hornets' nest two Sundays ago by asking the military and police to withdraw their support from President Marcos to force him to abdicate the presidency.

Unfortunately for the Mindanao lawmaker, a one-time Speaker, his call was greeted with brickbats instead of bouquets. The Department of Justice (DOJ) has launched an investigation on Alvarez's possibly seditious words, while the Department of National Defense eyes a parallel inquiry.

By turns defiant and apologetic, Alvarez has tried to walk back his comments by invoking free speech, while the Duterte family, the likely beneficiary of his incendiary proposal, sit grimly on the sidelines, protected by a political alliance that teeters on the edge of collapse. Speaking at the April 14 rally in Tagum City in support of former president Rodrigo Duterte, his long-time ally, Alvarez had warned that the administration's stance on China was pushing the country to the brink of war.

"When trouble breaks out in the West Philippine Sea, there will be countless dead bodies. There would be unimaginable destruction, famine, hunger," he said, addressing the troops. "If you withdraw support from him, he will have nothing else to do but step down." Right on cue, Mr. Marcos' allies came running to his defense. Justice Secretary Jesus Crispin Remulla said the DOJ would determine

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

"whether [Alvarez's call] has risen to the level of sedition, inciting to sedition or even rebellion."

Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro Jr. warned that such a call "will not amount to anything but a possible criminal investigation." A House inquiry is in the works, and there is talk that Alvarez, a Marine reservist, might be stripped of his rank. Last Tuesday, Alvarez said he had been overcome by emotion at the prospect of "being dragged to war by Malacañang."

"I love the Philippines, especially Mindanao. How could I keep quiet?" he said, arguing that his speech was not seditious at all, "because it is protected by the freedom of speech clause of the 1987 Constitution."

That is rich coming from someone who spent his entire term as Speaker trying to revise the Constitution, and doubly so, from the one who threatened to oust the sitting vice president in 2017 for the crime of criticizing the drug war before a United Nations body.

At the time, Alvarez had blustered on television: "Yes, it's true she (Leni Robredo) is entitled to freedom of speech. But it does not exempt any official from an irresponsible act."

In a breathtaking display of karmic retribution, the Davao lawmaker's own words have come back to haunt him, this time, under a government that's not as keen to coddle him as the last one. The Revised Penal Code defines inciting to sedition as an offense committed by "any person who, without taking any direct part in the crime of sedition, should incite others to the accomplishment of any of the acts which constitute sedition, by means of speeches, proclamations, writings ... or other representations."

At face value, it would appear Alvarez's comments are a textbook example of this, although, of course, such a determination could only be made by state prosecutors, and ultimately, the judiciary.

That said, other people have been taken to court for less. Former senator Antonio Trillanes IV, a constant target of similar complaints, was indicted on an inciting-to-sedition charge six years ago for telling the military and police in September 2018, that "Duterte will not be there for long; please do not do anything illegal or unconstitutional."

WELCOME

SIR, I fully endorse the views expressed by Avinash Godbole on the number of letters published in *The Statesman*. The editorial team must be congratulated at the decision to increase the space given to the opinions of its readers. One only hopes this trend will continue in the future and the space not limited to just one or two at the max. Not to say that the long well thought letters will not be missed, if only short and concise letters are going to find space in the space dedicated to the readers view.

Yours, etc., Anthony Henriques, Mumbai, 23 April.