

DECCAN Chronicle

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Self-ruled Palestine can bring peace to Mideast

On the roadmap to peace in a region marked by decades of conflicts is a full-fledged state of Palestine encompassing at least the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as part of a “two-state solution”. That most of the world agrees on this being the best way forward is further emphasised in the three European nations — Ireland, Norway and Spain — becoming all set to recognise a Palestine state.

As many as 80 countries, including India, have had Palestinian embassies coexisting with those of Israel for some years now. It reflects how Israel is losing international support for its counter-strike against Hamas and the way in which it has conducted the Gaza war. European nations, too, are now moving on, convinced that the only way to achieve peace is a state of Palestine with the principle of self-rule to be established.

The “two-state solution” is not a novel proposal as it has been in the air since the early 1990s when it was the bedrock of the US-backed peace efforts under the 1993 Oslo Accords, signed by Palestine Liberation Organisation and Israel. Why the idea is finding renewed acceptance internationally is because it appears to be the only way to draw the lines afresh once the Gaza war comes to an end.

Israel, now busily engaged in scaling up military operations by the day in Rafah with the one tactical change of trying to inflict lesser civilian fatalities, remains the principal roadblock. Beyond the war, Israel has little idea of how Gaza is to be handled except that it will not give up its security role there easily now that it is an occupier once again after having left the Gaza Strip in 2005.

After waging war for seven months and scoring a few victories over Hamas but nowhere near wiping out the militant wing of the group, Israel sees only hard options now on top of its disproportionate response in reducing most of Gaza to rubble and putting millions of its people on the brink of starvation.

Not deterred, Hamas has regrouped in certain areas and is till attacking Israeli settlements. The idea of Israel maintaining security control while delegating civil administration to local Palestinians who are not affiliated with Hamas or the Palestinian Authority is not suited to convincing the world that the “two-state” principle can be addressed.

The United States, Israel’s most powerful and staunchest ally, would have to take the lead in promoting the idea of a Palestine state, but while conferring Palestinian self-determination it should not pose an existential threat to Israel. The starting point for all negotiations can only be the end of the war, which is entirely in the hands of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his war cabinet.

There are myriad issues of highly contentious nature — boundaries that have shifted substantially since the Green Line of 1949, East Jerusalem, Golan Heights, Hamas-Palestinian Authority differences — that must be tackled in pursuit of an idealistic “two-state” principle. The war must stop first before any peace plan can become a new reference point for negotiations on a Palestine state without a role for the likes of Hamas in it.

RBI’s booster shot to economy

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) transferred a whopping amount of ₹2.1 lakh crores to the Central government as a dividend payout, giving a booster shot to volatile stock markets. The current payout is 141 per cent higher than the ₹87,416 crores that the RBI had given the Central government last year and is ₹1.1 lakh crores more than the amount the Central government expected to receive from the RBI this year.

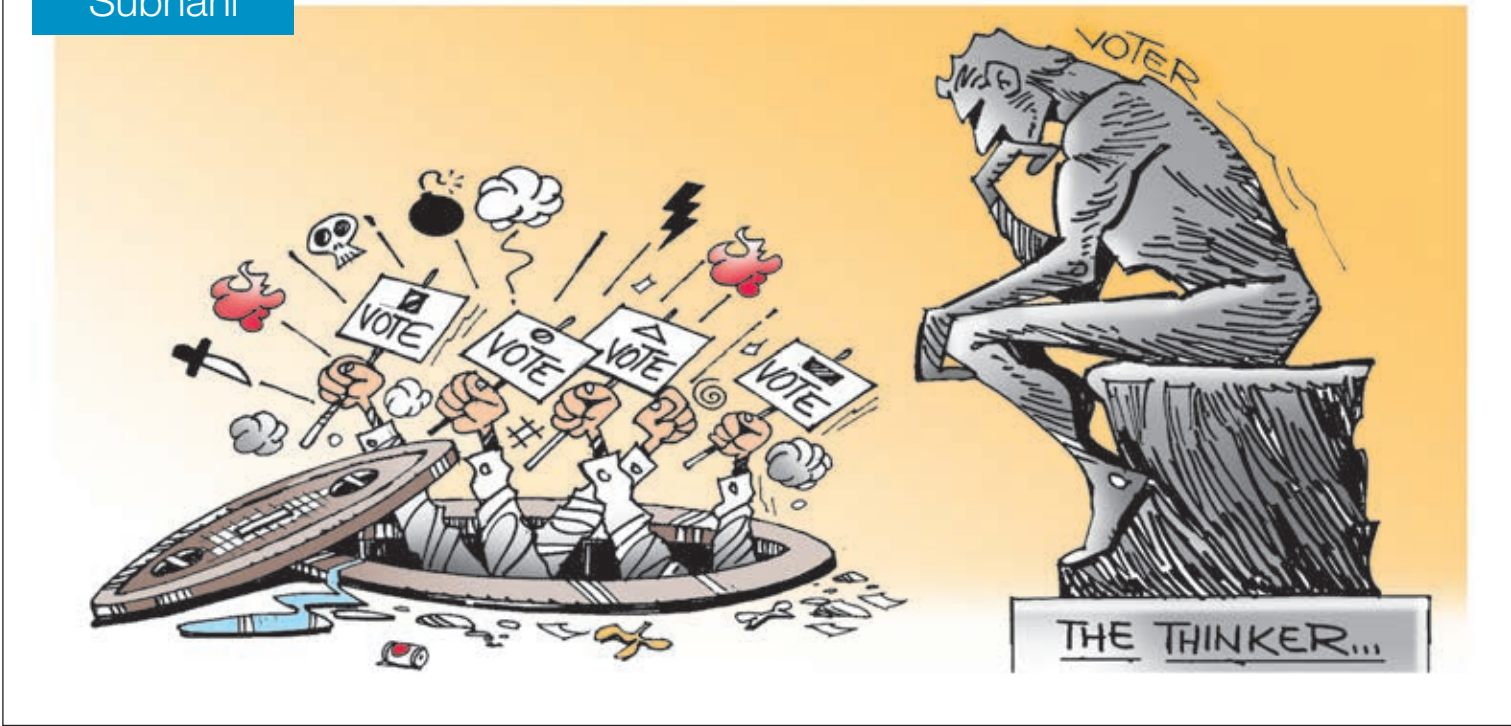
The RBI earns money from its operations in financial markets, when it intervenes to buy or sell foreign exchange. It also earns income from government securities it holds and as returns from its foreign currency assets, commission from state and Central governments for handling their borrowings, among other avenues. After providing for its statutory reserves and other contingencies, RBI transfers surplus money every year to the government in the form of dividend.

The current year’s higher dividend is expected to allow the Central government to meet its fiscal deficit target of 5.1 per cent that was envisaged in the interim budget of 2024. It will also give an elbow room to the next finance minister when he or she presents the full-fledged budget in July. The higher dividend from the RBI will offset any dip in the government’s expected revenue from disinvestment.

The news of the RBI bonanza set off celebrations on Dalal Street, boosting the Sensex and the Nifty to all-time highs. A lower fiscal deficit means lower government borrowing, which makes bank credit available for the corporate world and the general public. This translates into greater consumption levels, setting off a virtuous cycle in the economy.

As the higher payout was made after increasing its contingency risk buffer by 50 basis points (more than ₹30,000 crores) from six per cent to 6.5 per cent of its balance-sheet, it remains to be seen how the RBI’s surplus income has gone up so much and if a dividend of this magnitude is a one-off or can be seen as a regular annual contribution.

Subhani



Hype and reality in India: Let’s focus on the present



Patralekha Chatterjee

Dev 360

Narendra Modi’s India may have done away with Five-Year Plans. But a 1,000-year vision is a recurring theme. Last year, on Independence Day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said: “We will take decisions one after the other, and the golden history of the country for the next 1,000 years is going to emerge from it. The events taking place in this period are going to impact the next 1,000 years... We are at the milestone between 1,000 years of slavery and 1,000 years of a grand future that is about to come. We are at this crossroads and hence we cannot stop, nor shall we live in a dilemma anymore.”

Earlier in the speech, Mr Modi had talked about “a thousand years of subjugation” and India being “ensnared in slavery”.

As India’s long drawn-out general election reaches the final stretch, talk of the 1,000-year plan has surfaced again. “What’s happening now will take India towards a brighter future for the coming 1,000 years. In my mind, this is our time. This is Bharat’s time, and we must not lose the opportunity,” Mr Modi recently told a TV channel.

How does one interpret a 1,000-year blueprint for a country in these hugely unpredictable times when climate change, artificial intelligence, economic distress, simultaneous wars, uncertainties and interlocking catastrophic events are turning the best-laid plans upside down? Does one smile?

Or does one see it as part of a package — the persistent refrain about 1,000 years of foreign rule, interpreted by many political commentators as conscious referencing of India’s history when it was under Muslim rule and framing it as invasion, subjugation, and slavery, juxtaposed with Modi’s India, the start of “Amrit Kaal” and

Hindutva, with Mr Modi as its principal narrator.

In hyper-polarised India, how you react to the idea of a 1,000-year framework — whether in the context of the past or the future — depends on your political orientation. But one thing is clear — constant talk about centuries gone by, and centuries ahead hugely distracts from what we need to be doing to cope with the extremely challenging present and the near-future.

Arguably, politicians routinely tap into a nation’s desire to be great and powerful. In 2016, Donald Trump sledgehammered MAGA (Make America Great Again). Chinese President Xi Jinping envisions China to be a modernised, innovation-driven country by 2035 and a modern “strong power” by 2050. In the age of strongman politics, catchphrases pivoting around national pride and national rejuvenation are common.

No Indian has any quarrel with acknowledging progress or the desire for a brighter future for India or with the idea of seizing opportunities that come our way. But ordinary Indians can’t escape the pressing problems of today, and they have to prepare for tomorrow. They deserve a grounded assessment of their country and specifics of plans to improve their everyday lives in the days ahead.

In a country with a dominantly young population, the present tense must be the priority — education, skills, jobs, health, social cohesion, the environment. But in the phantasmagorical packaging of India, many critical gaps related to these critical issues get glossed over.

Countries where ordinary people have a high quality of life have invested not only in physical infrastructure — ports, airports, bridges, etc., — but also human capital. Many parts of India still trail woefully when it comes to the latter.

Millions of young Indians entering the labour market every year continue to be underemployed or engaged in low-paid, precarious work. India remains a grossly unequal country.

India’s economy is growing but millions of young Indians entering the labour market every year continue to be underemployed or engaged in low-paid, precarious work. Economists have drawn attention to the persistence of unemployment even among college graduates. India remains a grossly unequal country and the staggering inequality is a roadblock to the country realising its full potential.

Rich or relatively affluent Indians can access excellent education and healthcare. That is not the case for those without money. India’s female voters are often referenced through the prism of welfare schemes, but what about jobs? Female work participation rate in India continues to be extremely low.

“Building a new Singapore is achievable if we apply ourselves,” Mr Modi said recently. India has around 1,300 islands, including many uninhabited ones. Some are nearly the size of Singapore. But building an economic success story like Singapore is not merely a construction project. The multi-racial, multi-religious city-state, which has one of the most diverse populations in Asia, has assiduously worked at social cohesion, social trust. None of this happened purely by accident. As Keshia Naurana Badalge, a writer from Singapore, pointed out in an essay: “It is, in part, the product of a strong central government that dictates certain aspects of everyday life — and sees racial harmony between its people as too important to be left to chance.” A unique feature of Singaporean housing, she points out, is its remarkable racial diversity, and that is due to government intervention and as part of Singapore’s Ethnic Integration Policy

(EIP), introduced to counter the emergence of ethnic enclaves.

In his recent TV interview, Mr Modi also talked about global standards. Every Cabinet note related to a bill now comes with a global standards report so that the legislation can be aligned to the best practices worldwide, he said.

That is good news. But ordinary Indians must know how a law is aligned to global best practices as well as how it is implemented on the ground. Is India following global standards in every sphere? What about recent reports about Indian food products failing basic safety standards? If India’s food regulator was doing its job meticulously, would two popular Indian spice brands be flagged as unsafe in Hong Kong and Singapore? The European Union has also raised concerns about contamination in Indian chili peppers.

In addition to everything else, there is climate change. Climate change is no longer future shock. It is happening now.

As I write, many parts of India are facing excruciating heat stress. “Some countries, like India, have comprehensive heat action plans in place. Yet, to protect some of the most vulnerable people, these must be expanded with mandatory regulations. Workplace interventions for all workers to address heat stress, such as scheduled rest breaks, fixed work hours, and rest-shade-rehydrate programmes (RSH), are necessary but have yet to become part of worker protection guidelines in the affected regions,” says a recent study by the World Weather Attribution, an international group of scientists that studies the effects of climate change on extreme weather events.

These are just a few issues where ordinary Indians deserve an honest response and a grounded conversation which differentiates between hyperbole and genuine seeds of hope, between efforts to create an alternate reality and reality.

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LETTERS

ECI ACTED TOO LATE

You have not hesitated to call a spade a spade in editorial “EC has acted but isn’t it too little, too late”, especially in pointing out PM Modi’s speech to his audience in Uttar Pradesh that INDIA bloc leaders in the South speak ill of UP. His talking about the Congress bulldozing the Ram temple if it came to power and Rahul Gandhi saying BJP would abolish the Constitution of India if voted to power for a third time could also have been mentioned. Campaigning based on caste, community, language and religion are against norms. The ECI has woken up when there are two laps to go for the final polling. Had it come out with severe warnings in the beginning, the campaigning may not have gone to this extent.

Rajakumar Arulanandham Palayamkottai

MARRD BY PERSONAL ATTACKS

The elections have been marked by personal attacks, mud-slinging and provocative speeches by leaders cutting across party lines against their adversaries thereby throwing political decency and decorum to winds. They would be remembered as the most bitterly contested elections. The war of words and repeated barbs traded by political leaders including the Prime Minister, has brought the standards of election campaigning to its nadir. It is a matter of regret that despite boasting of being the world’s largest democracy, elections in our country continue to be fought on caste and communal lines with candidates resorting to personal slugfest and sectarian agenda rather than debating and discussing bread-and-butter issues relating to growth and development, relevant for the common man.

B. Suresh Kumar Coimbatore

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“The sea’s dark green yet its foam is white! Such are the tricks of refracted light” A dead fish on the sand — the gulls take it apart. Nailed to a cross in a gallery — people think it’s art The worst Narcissistic conceit of humankind? That God has an inventive, creative mind!”

— From Who Was Allowed In? by Bachchoo

The general election in Britain has been called for July 4 by Prime Minister Hedgie Soongone. He probably made the announcement with fingers crossed and puja lamps lit after inflation in the UK fell to 2.5 per cent, calculating that this may turn back the tide of unpopularity sweeping his government.

It won’t. The Labour Party is still 20 per cent ahead in the opinion polls, though the media are looking for ways in which it could lose support. One of these is the fact that very many of Labour’s potential supporters are not just disappointed but outraged at the Labour Party leadership’s pro-Israeli stance and deliberate fence-sitting on calling for a ceasefire and an end to the genocide in Gaza. Several Muslim Labour councillors have quit the party and have even stood against the party in the local elections and won.

On the same issue, friends of mine have said they won’t vote for Labour.

Will I? However critical I am of Labour leader Sir

Keir Starmer and his shadow cabinet’s stances, I can see no feasible alternative to rid this country of the likes of Hedgie, Cruella Braverman, Priti Patel and all the rest. It’s even possible that Labour in power will be pressured by its own membership to go further than calling, as it has now been pushed to do, for an immediate ceasefire and humanitarian relief in Gaza. Of course, with their pro-capital stance, they won’t cut arms sales to Israel.

One issue that rankles with me and made me think of joining the abstainers is the continued suspension from the party of MP Diane Abbot. Who is she? The first black woman MP to enter Parliament. She represents Hackney, a London constituency. In April she wrote a letter to The Observer in response to a debate in the papers about racism.

Her letter said: “It is true that many types of white people with points of difference, such as redheads, can experience this prejudice. But they are not all their lives subject to racism. In pre-civil rights America, Irish people, Jewish people and Travellers were not required to sit at the back of the bus. In apartheid South Africa, these groups were allowed to vote. And at the height of slavery, there were no white-seeming people manacled on the slave ships.”

The Jewish Board of Deputies labelled the letter anti-Semitic and even though Diane protested that it wasn’t the draft that she intended to have printed and apologised, the Labour Party said it was deeply

offensive and withdrew the whip.

She hasn’t, having devoted her entire adult life to the party, been, to date, reinstated. (As far as I know the Redheads Against Nasty Descriptivity (RANDY) haven’t complained about Diane’s anti-hairshade-ism).

Both Diane in her letter and the Labour Party in its response seem to subscribe to a preoccupation of our times: an assessment of degrees of victimisation.

To my mind, it’s a futile preoccupation.

Yes, one recognises the fact that the Jews were enslaved by Babylon until they were freed by the Persian-Zoroastrian Emperor Cyrus and that Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt; that Africans were enslaved in the Atlantic trade in the “New World” is one of the tragic foundations of the modern world; that colonialism treated people badly; that discrimination against “untouchable” castes was imposed on Hindu populations for thousands of years; that homophobia is still rife in under-civilised human states and minds; that Travellers are characterised in negative ways; that certain nationalities or religions are the constant butt of jokes; that everywhere there is prevalent sexism, sizeism, ageism, class — snobbery... (We’re cutting it here. — Ed. Too much other examples, year... — fd.)

But is there any measure, any scale, of historical prejudice, ill-treatment, racism etc?

Diane is obviously right when she says that being

mocked for having Donald Trump hair is not as hurtful as being chained to a slave ship, whipped and starved. I could add that the “insult, injury and unsafe feeling” caused to delicate sensibilities on a campus through some faculty inviting a lecturer who doesn’t believe that transwomen are really women, are in any sense comparable to that lecturer losing her job as a consequence?

The latest case of comparative suffering through prejudice is that of “asexual people”. They call themselves “Aces” and in America, and now in the UK, organised groups of people who, for one reason or another, don’t practise sex, and want to be included in the LGBTQ+ categories. Some activists already in these initialled groups vehemently deny the Aces a space in this categorisation. They don’t want the collective expanded into LGBTQ+A! They don’t believe that the “Aces” face the same degree of prejudice as Ls or Gs or indeed Bs Ts Qs or +s.

Are they right in denying the “Aces” membership? Is there really some measure of degrees of prejudice, discrimination or hurt that has determined this exclusion?

I don’t think there can be. And yet, and yet, I can see that this preoccupation in our times of measuring and exposing “isms” is a healthy civilisational phenomenon, even though ranking prejudices is rank stupidity.

Reinstate Diane Now!

Bowlers' graveyard

IPL 2024 has been entertaining but a takeaway is to have a more even contest between bat and ball

THE 2024 EDITION of the Indian Premier League (IPL) draws to a close on Sunday after providing exciting contests between 10 city-based franchise teams, each of which included some of the world's best cricketers. Since March 22, cricket lovers have been treated to displays of aggressive batting that pulverised the bowling attacks, sending the ball sailing into the stands more than 1,000 times for the third season in a row. The number of sixes per match rose to 17.2 this year, sharply up from 14.3 sixes in 2022. Records have tumbled for the highest team scores, including 100-plus scores during the first six overs, successful 200-plus run chases and highest batting strike rates. This dominance of bat over ball, however, is not specific to IPL 2024 but has been very much the DNA of this tournament since its inception in 2008. Look no further than the legendary exploits of the marauding West Indies batsman, Chris Gayle, who hit 357 sixes during his stints with various IPL franchises from 2009 to 2021. His highest score of 175 not out in 2013 is still unequalled.

IPL's batting slugfest no doubt stems from the desire of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), which organises this annual event, to make it more entertaining for the fans. Last year's edition introduced the impact player rule, according to which a tactical substitution can be made to beef up an IPL team's batting or bowling capability. Imagine the force multiplier for a side's batting total if the likes of a Gayle is brought in as an impact player! To its credit, the BCCI considers it as a test case and is open to reviewing it. But the more substantive changes relate to standardised, batter-friendly pitches which are overseen by BCCI's central curator. With LED boards of the sponsors being used, the size of the boundary has also come in by 10 yards, which makes it much easier for batsmen to score. IPL teams like Rajasthan Royals have also been training to hit maximums by taking a leaf out of the baseball playbook. However, all of this should not detract from the skills of batsmen who can effortlessly hit a back-of-the-length delivery off the back foot to the sight screen!

To make it more entertaining, future IPL editions must ensure a more even contest between bat and ball. Cricket is riveting not solely because of batsmen blasting for runs but also good bowling and fielding. Spectacular catches have also won matches in this year's IPL edition. It is therefore a source of comfort that some bowlers have stood tall amidst the six-hitting frenzy. Jasprit Bumrah, for instance, took 20 wickets at an economy rate of 6.48 runs an over, when most bowlers were resigned to giving away 9 to 10 runs. In the interest of a level playing field, why shackle the bowlers to only two bouncers an over?

A larger question pertains to the role of team owners. The deteriorating fortunes of a five-time champion team this year was in large part due to an infelicitous decision to change the captain who was repeatedly booed by the fan base. Another team owner berated the captain in public for losing to the record-breaking batsmanship of a southern franchise team. This is not cricket. Such behaviour demotivates players from giving off their best to entertain millions of IPL fans who throng the stadiums or watch on TV.

OpenAI is making journalism an offer it can't refuse

THE CONTENT DEALS between AI companies and top publishers are coming fast and furious. The latest, and claimed to be the biggest, was announced on Wednesday: OpenAI reached an agreement with Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., reported to be worth some \$250 million over five years.

"The pact acknowledges that there is a premium for premium journalism," News Corp. chief executive officer Robert Thomson said. No terms were officially disclosed, but assuming the *Wall Street Journal* isn't misreporting on its owner, the \$250 million figure includes "compensation in the form of cash and credits for use of OpenAI technology".

It's the latest in a flurry of partnerships announced in recent weeks. *The Financial Times* struck its own deal with OpenAI last month, followed by Dotdash Meredith, owner of titles such as *People* magazine and Investopedia, which also included some collaboration on advertising tools. Other OpenAI deals have included the *Associated Press*, Axel Springer and *Le Monde*.

Comments of people like *Le Monde* chairman Louis Dreyfus that stand out most to me. As one of the recent beneficiaries of OpenAI CEO Sam Altman's selective admiration of the journalism business, you would think Dreyfus would offer a similarly gushing tone as his News Corp. counterparts. But, speaking to the *Journal*, he said, "Without an agreement, they will use our content in a more or less rigorous and more or less clandestine manner without any benefit for us."

Dreyfus is right. Indeed, it's highly likely that OpenAI long ago ingested the content it is now paying to "get access" to as part of its rampant scraping of information in the public domain. In that sense, these deals should be thought of as settlements, the terms of which no doubt included the stipulation that publishers would not take OpenAI to court, as the *New York Times* has already done.

Face it, there is no opting out of AI. As admirable as the *Times*' lawsuit is, it has been five months since it was filed, and even a preliminary hearing is months away in a case most think will go all the way to the Supreme Court. In the interim, publishers can either take a deal or not — knowing that the machine has likely guzzled up their content regardless. Sure, OpenAI says it is creating a tool to help publishers self-report what they want to be excluded from its training models, but it won't be ready until 2025 at the earliest. OpenAI is, of course, just one company of many making large language models.

I find these deals rotten. They lack both transparency and adequate ethical scrutiny. No one who values the Fourth Estate should accept the prospect of AI companies holding what could one day, if other business models continue to crumble, be extreme control over a publication's financial health. If you want a preview of what such subservience might look like, consider the current fears over Google's recent search engine changes or Meta Platforms Inc.'s decision to no longer care about amplifying news content. Perhaps the biggest long-term problem is this: It cannot be left to people like Altman, or indeed any other individual or company, to decide which publications are deemed worthy of preferential treatment in his AI future and which are not. His company does not possess the expertise — nor the right.

A more equitable system must be created, backed by law. "Bespoke, secretive deals with the largest or most influential news outlets are not a replacement for public policy," wrote Courtney Radsch, director of the Center for Journalism and Liberty at the Open Markets Institute. Author and journalism professor Jeff Jarvis suggested one approach: create a centralised platform controlled by a publishing coalition. This could aggregate content from any opted-in publisher and make it instantly available to AI companies for a fee, based on use or some other agreed-upon metric.

The 178-year-old *Associated Press* might provide some inspiration here. The nonprofit wire service was first set up and paid for by newspapers to solve the tech challenges of its day: getting news from the Mexican-American War more quickly to readers up north. Today's problems are vastly more complex, but the solution can start with a principle that was as true today as it was in 1846: Those who create the content should control it.

FAIR GAME

DATA AND SIMULATION ALGORITHMS ARE INCREASINGLY FUELLING AI-POWERED TEAM SELECTION

AI pushing the boundaries

PERHAPS YOU CAN no longer hold the selectors responsible if you are a player who is unlucky enough to be left off of a squad, whether it be a franchise or a national team. It's possible that their complete artificial intelligence (AI)-powered team selection process is fuelled by massive amounts of data and some simulation algorithms.

It's not a fantasy any more; the England women's cricket squad is leading a technological revolution as AI has stormed into the sport. During the tense Ashes series, coach Jon Lewis made a critical move using AI technology. Charlie Dean, an off-spinner who was added to the squad following the first T20 encounter, was flagged by the software for her potential impact. And Dean's inclusion proved to be a masterstroke, because in the third T20 match, she claimed a crucial wicket that gave England momentum in the series and the Ashes!

While serving as a coach of the UP Warriorz franchise in the Indian T20 Women's Premier League, Lewis first came into contact with AI selection algorithms. Since then, he has discussed the technology, which enables coaching staff to replicate different match-ups and scenarios, with people including Steve Borthwick, the coach of the England Rugby Union. This technology is also used by Wigan Warriors, an English rugby league team, and Wigan Athletic, an English football league team.

This AI software, developed by the London-based firm PSI, enables coaches to model various squad configurations and their potential performance against different possible rival teams. "We can run simulations...to give us an idea about how those teams may match up against each other," said Lewis. The

software offers insightful analysis, analysing 250,000 possible outcomes for every team configuration.

Is it then the AI version of Moneyballisation? Yes, the first quarter of the 21st century was defined by Michael Lewis's groundbreaking 2003 book *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game*, which was adopted as a 2011 Hollywood film starring Brad Pitt. In spite of a lean budget, Billy Beane, the manager of the Oakland Athletics in the affluent Major League Baseball (MLB) in the US, achieved amazing success in building a winning team by using analytics and historical data. The "Moneyball era" was brought about by the Moneyball mentality and an abundance of data that is being generated as a result of the introduction and over-reliance on the internet and social media. To create strategies for every part of their lives and activities, including national policymaking, business, industry, sports, healthcare, and elections, people today routinely strive to churn data and analytics.

Subsequently, human civilisation underwent a revolution in recent years. The Moneyball 2.0 era has arrived because of AI. And it seems like we have entered a wonderland. AI is

now extensively employed in practically all major, lucrative sports. AI is extensively used in the National Football League, MLB, and the National Basketball Association in the US to improve player performance as well as scouting procedures.

Will there one day be no such class as human sports selectors anywhere in the world? Will several political parties select their candidates for an election

by asking an AI algorithm to determine who the most likely winners are? Are AI and data technologies the holy grail? How about human instinct? About halfway through the film *Moneyball*, baseball scouting veteran Grady praises the human aspect of the sport. "Billy, baseball isn't just numbers and science... They don't have our experience. They don't have our intuition," he says. Interestingly, England

coach Lewis underlined that AI will always be a tool to assist human decision-making, not a substitute for human selectors. He stated that although the tool was especially helpful in making decisions on borderline selection, he would always prioritise the needs of the people. Data, he says, can give "a really objective view of what could happen".

The Moneyball 2.0 era has arrived because of AI. And it seems like we have entered a wonderland. AI is now extensively employed in practically all major, lucrative sports

Sources and uses of RBI surpluses



MADAN SABNAVIS

The writer is chief economist, Bank of Baroda. Views are personal

While surpluses of up to ₹1 trillion look plausible under normal conditions, the present surplus is big. It would be the govt's prerogative to decide how to use the funds

THE HIGHER-THAN-EXPECTED DIVIDEND to be given by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to the government did shake the market positively as could be seen in the softening of bond yields. The finer details of the emergence of this dividend will be available once the accounts are worked out and the central bank brings out the annual report. Till then, there will be considerable speculation on the components that have contributed to the sum of ₹2.1 trillion.

This is the highest amount ever earned by the RBI on its books that is being transferred to the government, with the previous high being ₹1.76 trillion in FY19. Here, the higher surplus emerged as the result of a special committee being set up to study the optimal reserves to be held by the RBI. The committee had recommended certain norms in terms of contingency reserves, which led to the write-back of "other income" that increased income and hence surplus. The amount was ₹52,637 crore, which was for excess risk provisioning. But this time the ratio has been increased from 6% to 6.5% and hence there could be no such transaction on the balance sheet side. The surplus would have emanated from the operations of the RBI.

There are three sources of income which would have yielded this increase. The first is the income from liquidity operations where the system

was in a deficit since October, which meant that the variable repo rate operations would have yielded upwards of 6.5% on the amount borrowed by banks. The second would be the RBI's forex operations where the central bank was regularly in the market, buying and selling dollars to stabilise the currency. Both legs of the transaction would have yielded a revenue for the RBI depending on the price at which dollars were bought and sold. This was a large component in FY23, too, and overall operations this year was of the order of \$338 billion in FY24 as against \$399 billion in the previous year. The third source of income would have been the returns on forex reserves. Forex reserves increased by around \$60 billion last year. A sum of \$570 billion as forex reserves would have delivered a return of close to 4%. In FY23 the yield had gone up to 3.73% from 2.11% in FY22 as the Fed had raised interest rates sharply right into 2023. Therefore, a combination of these three sources of income would have contributed largely to the surplus that has been generated this time.

Clearly, even the government had not expected this amount as can be viewed from the Budget document that had looked at ₹1.02 trillion as dividend from both the RBI and PSBs

that had looked at ₹1.02 trillion as dividend from both the RBI and public sector banks (PSBs). This gives a lot of cushion to the government in formulating the main Budget for FY25 that will probably be announced in July. There are different ways in which the additional ₹1 trillion can contribute to the budget process. In fact, given that the PSBs have also been profitable and would be paying a good dividend to the government, the effective gain could be closer to ₹1.2 trillion.

The first option is to do nothing and keep the surpluses. As a proportion of expected GDP of ₹328 trillion for FY25, this would work out to around 0.3%. Hence, *ceteris paribus*, the fiscal deficit ratio would come down to 4.8%. This will also mean that the borrowing programme of ₹14.1 trillion could come down by this amount. This is probably the reason why the bond and stock markets reacted more than positively to this news.

The second option is to use the full amount or part of it for additional capex. This would be contingent on the ability of the government to execute these projects in less than nine months given that the actual allocations could start only in August. But this issue is very much on the table and can be con-

sidered on merit.

The third use of these funds would be for covering up any deficiencies that may come up during the year. The success of disinvestment has been limited in the last couple of years, and these additional funds can help cover up any slippages on this front.

The fourth alternative would be to use it to retire the government's debt which comes in the form of buybacks. The advantage is that debt is reduced and the pressure on liquidity is eased as the banks have more money to use for commercial purposes.

The last option would be to create a contingency reserve where these funds could be parked and used by the government for specific purposes. This can include exercises like capex or providing incentives for any programme like performance-linked incentive or health and education. In fact, given the deficit in social services such additional spending can fill the gaps.

Hence, assuming that the large surplus has been generated internally through central banking operations, there is reason to believe that this may not always accrue especially as central banks elsewhere will be lowering rates. While surpluses of up to ₹1 trillion look plausible under normal conditions, the present surplus is a big benefit that has accrued. It would be the prerogative of the government to decide how to use the funds. But several options are available for sure.

sustained economic growth. Reduced government borrowing also alleviates pressure on the RBI, allowing it to focus on core functions like managing inflation and financial stability. Overall, the surplus transfer allows the government to make strategic decisions that can yield enduring positive outcomes for India's economic landscape. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

Bonn talks must focus on climate finance

OVER 930 million people – around 12% of the world's population – are reportedly spending at least 10% of their household budgets to pay for health care. Climate change is aggravating the situation, and they will need to dig deep into pockets, and even take recourse to borrowing to bear the mounting costs of medicare. It is indescribable to explain the pain of the poor and those who are uninsured to pay for themselves or their dear ones to escape the clutches of disease, disability, or even death. The world must limit temperature rise to 1.5°C.

Climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns. Though they may sound natural, since 19th century, they have been largely due to human activities. Especially, the

last 10 years have been the ocean's warmest decade, and 2023 was the warmest year. Flora and fauna is bearing the brunt of deforestation, wildfires and water shortage, while human habitations are suffering heavy storms and, thereby, floods. The WHO has called climate change the biggest health threat of the 21st century. It lists many adverse effects, including respiratory and cardiovascular issues, bad sanitation, poor mental health.

Threats are without question escalating; yet, there is a palpable indifference. We should be racked with guilt. The race to stop the catastrophe is at best one step forward and two backward. The humanity needs to expeditiously push for climate change mitigation and adaptation measures.

The former means avoiding and reducing emissions of heat-trapping greenhouse gases to prevent further warming up of the planet, by opting for green technologies, while the latter requires us to alter our ways of life, managing our resources wisely. Rich countries' reluctance to help poor nations to migrate to green energy by providing both funds and technology solutions is exacerbating the situation.

Amidst such gloom, climate finance should top the agenda at the 29th Conference of Parties (CoP) to be held later this year. The Bonn climate talks are scheduled to be held from June 3 to 13 to prepare the draft for deliberations at CoP29. Developed countries must be made to feel it binding, acknowledge their responsibility for

historical emissions and discharge their duty to take the lead in mitigation and decarbonisation.

As per the UN's "The 2024 Financing for Sustainable Development Report: Financing for Development at a Crossroads" says urgent steps are needed to mobilise financing at scale to close the development financing gap, now estimated at \$4.2 trillion annually, up from \$2.5 trillion before the COVID-19 pandemic. The time is running out. Without comprehensive planning and adequate financing, we will be handing out a fractured planet to the future generations. With only six years remaining to achieve the SDGs, hard-won development gains are being reversed, particularly in the poorest countries.

If current trends continue, the

UN estimates that almost 600 million people will continue to live in extreme poverty in 2030 and beyond, more than half of them women. Poor countries already hard put to service their current debt would not be able to spend enough on climate mitigation measures. People in such countries comprise roughly 40 per cent of the global population. At the 15th Conference of Parties (COP15) of the UNFCCC in Copenhagen in 2009, developed countries committed to a collective goal of mobilising \$100 billion per year by 2020 for climate action in developing countries. But, they are yet to deliver on their commitments. There must be a new quantified goal for climate finance, a crucial step forward in mitigating the climate crisis.

'Microbe fingerprint' on clothing you wear could help solve crimes



The population of bacteria on a person's skin leaves traces on the clothes they wear and these traces last for months and can be used to uniquely identify the wearer. These microbes are specific to different parts of the body, can persist over long periods of time and can be transferred to other people and to the environment. This makes them useful to address a variety of questions in forensics.

PAOLA A MAGNI/NOEMI PROCOPIO/SARAH GINO PERTH/LANCASHIRE

WHEN you think of a criminal investigation, you might picture detectives meticulously collecting and analysing evidence found at the scene: weapons, biological fluids, footprints and fingerprints. However, this is just the beginning of an attempt to reconstruct the events and individuals involved in the crime. At the heart of the process lies the "principle of exchange" formulated by the French criminologist Edmond Locard in the early 1900s, which states that "every contact leaves a trace". The transfer of materials between the parties involved in a crime (the victim, the perpetrator, objects, the environment) forms the basis for reconstructing the events. In Locard's time, these traces were typically things you could see with a magnifying glass or microscope, such as pollen, sand and fibres. However, such evidence is limited because much of it is not directly associated with a specific individual. In our latest research, we have shown how the population of bacteria on a person's skin leaves traces on the clothes they wear – and how these traces last for months and can be used to uniquely identify the wearer.

Microbial traces: Imagine a crime scene where an investigator finds a victim and a piece of clothing that doesn't belong to them. Pollen or grains of sand might help the investigator find out where it came from, but what about identifying the owner of the clothing? Skin cells, hairs and biological fluids are good contenders. However, another thing very specific to an individual is the unique community of microorganisms on and within their body. These microbes are specific to different parts of the body, can persist over long periods of time and can be transferred to other people and to the environment. This makes them useful to address a variety of questions in forensics.

"Forensic microbiology" got its start in the early 2000s, as scientists set out to find ways to defend against bioterrorism. Today forensic microbiology is used to

identify individuals after death, understand what their health was like before they died, determine how and why people have died, how long it has been since they died, and where they came from. In a nutshell, today's update on Locard's principle is that "every contact leaves a microbiological trace".

The 'touch microbiome': While this principle has been established, we still want to know more about how much of an individual's microbiome is transferred to their surroundings. We also need to know how long it persists, and whether certain microbes may be more useful than others for identification. We also want to understand how microbial traces may be contaminated by other items or the environment, and how different receiving surfaces affect microbial populations. In 2021, two of the authors (Procopio and Gino) and colleagues at the University of Central Lancashire in the UK and the University of Eastern Piedmont in Italy first described the "touch microbiome" – the unique bacterial populations on individuals' skin. This work also studied how these bacteria could be transferred and persist for up to a month on non-porous surfaces, such as a glass slide, in uncontrolled indoor surroundings.

Learning more from clothes: Clothes at any crime scene can provide key evidence for the investigation process. They can aid in profiling individuals by revealing indicators of gender, occupation, income, social status, political, religious or cultural affiliations, and even marital status. Additionally, they can provide clues regarding the manner of death, the location of the crime, and in certain cases, even support the estimation of the time since death. Clothes play a crucial role in reconstructing events associated with the crime and establishing the identity of individuals involved. Our research shows clothing can provide even more evidence.

The discovery of unique microbiomes capable of identifying individuals from clothing marks a significant stride forward.

(The Conversation)

AP post poll violence poses grim challenge to ECI



WHEN the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh explaining why people should vote for YSRCP said that a vote for his party would help in making the state a role model for the country, it sounded music to ears. It is always nice to see a Telugu state becoming a role model for the country. But the post election scenario causes worry because no one expected that Andhra Pradesh would become a role model for the country in post poll violence.

The Lok Sabha elections 2024 are being held in seven phases from April 19 across the country and the results will be announced on June 4. The polling has been peaceful and there were no instances of re-polling anywhere and all the contestants are waiting with baited breath for the results to be announced.

But Andhra Pradesh stood out as a stand-alone state in the country because it is the only state where elections to the State Assembly and Lok Sabha were held and the only state where different forms of dance of democracy were seen.

It attained notoriety as the only state to witness violence towards evening of May 13 the day of polling in certain parts of the state like Palnadu, Anantapur and Tirupati. All leaders were ordered to be put under house arrest but interestingly Macherla MLA P Ramakrishna Reddy escaped from the house.

The situation was such that it took almost three days for normalcy to be restored and that too after the Election Commission of India took serious note of the incidents and summoned the DGP and Chief Secretary to New Delhi. Again this was the only state whose DGP and CS had to be summoned.

There was some quick action. Some SPs were transferred some suspended. There were allegations that the lower level police officials did not cooperate with the SPs who were appointed few days before the polls. Andhra Pradesh presented a clear case of failure of the administration at all levels.

Ten days later, a video in which Ramakrishna Reddy was seen destroying the EVM and VVPAT machine and the Chief Electoral Officer sent a report to the ECI which ordered the arrest of the MLA. There were several twists and turns and the police despite all technological advances failed to nab him even 48 hours after the ECI orders. Finally he approached the High Court and got anticipatory bail till June 6.

AP is also perhaps the only state where there are in-



AP is also perhaps the only state where there are intelligence reports that there could be violence on the day of counting or after the counting was over. This has made the ECI to rush additional 20 companies of central forces which would remain in the state for 10 days after the counting was over. People are keeping their fingers crossed. In short, the state has thrown a major challenge to the ECI.

telligence reports that there could be violence on the day of counting or after the counting was over. This has made the ECI to rush additional 20 companies of central forces which would remain in the state for 10 days after the counting was over.

People are keeping their fingers crossed. In short, the state has thrown a major challenge to the ECI. AP has become a ground for experiment to know how orders of a Constitutional body can be violated.

The manner in which the polls were conducted in AP challenging the authority of ECI should become a case study for the Union Government. In this case, the centre cannot say that law and order is a state subject. The trillion dollar question is, will the Modi 3.0 regime study where the state administration had failed and bring in reforms and changes in the ECI manual and make the Constitutional body really powerful and effective.

This would be biggest gift of Modi 3.0 to the country's democracy. One also hopes that all those including Rahul Gandhi who have been holding a copy of the Constitution in their hands claiming that they are the protectors of democracy play a positive role and cooperate with the government in ensuring that the democracy was really protected.

Once results are out and the new government is in place, Congress and other party leaders should put an end to rhetoric and focus attention on strengthening the constitutional bodies. The aim of electoral reforms should be to ensure that state administration strictly works as per the guidance of the ECI and the officials working under its supervision do not become subservient to the state executive. AP had virtually challenged the authority of ECI this time. This is something the centre needs to look at and take corrective measures.

The opposition INDI bloc while claiming to be protectors of democracy seem to

have gone astray and proved that for them alliances are important to come out of cases allegedly foisted on them by NDA rather than moral values. We have heard Delhi CM Kejriwal say, that cases against him would be quashed day after the alliance government comes to power.

These elections have proved that the threat to democracy is more from political parties. If some political parties do not respect systems and want to subvert and if the centre and other national parties remain mute spectators, certainly Democracy would be in danger.

Let us again take the example of Andhra Pradesh. During campaign we have seen party chiefs saying, "the contesting candidate is a gentleman. He is my friend, if voted to power he would get better position." But then on the day of polling the same "good people," indulge in destruction of the EVMs.

What's more, despite EC installing CCTVs and setting up a central control room to monitor the poll process, the incident of EVM getting destroyed was not made public for ten days. When the video went viral, the YSRCP raised doubts over its authenticity and CEO simply said that it was not released by EC. But then the basic question here is did the incident take place or not. The CEO confirmed that it did take place. Then why was it not made public? Interestingly, the FIR says some unknown persons destroyed the EVMs.

Well this is shocking. The basic question is how can unknown persons enter the polling station? What was the security staff deployed there doing? Why they were not apprehended? Does it mean that the security arrangements by EC were so weak? CCTV cameras were installed in all polling booths. Then the CEO should know who destroyed the EVM. How could he accept the FIR saying some unknown persons attacked? There was also an incident of an MLA attacking a voter

standing in queue. His only crime was to tell the MLA that he too should stand in the queue. But no visible action against the MLA has been taken.

AP also has become the first and perhaps the only state where some officials had reportedly written to the ECI to exempt them from counting duties on June 4 as they were not able to bear the pressure from the ruling party.

Such a situation is not found in any other state, not even in UP and Bihar where once gun culture used to rule the roost. Hence the poll process in Andhra Pradesh makes a perfect case study for the political parties and political scientists.

On the moral side, leaders should have the spine to call a spade a spade. In Delhi, a Rajya Sabha MP of AAP was allegedly attacked by the private secretary of the Chief Minister in the house of Kejriwal. None of the INDI bloc leaders condemned the attack but gave lectures saying it was orchestrated by BJP.

For argument sake let's agree that the MP was sent by BJP. But then the main question is was she manhandled or not? Why are alliance partners defending the CM and say incident might have taken place. They don't trust the medical reports which say that the MP was beaten and allege that it was doctored.

A reporter and a cameraman of a national news channel are attacked in the party headquarters of AAP by so called media coordinator but the bloc INDI leaders do not condemn it. Still they claim they are saviours of democracy and want the people to believe them and vote for them.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi in all his interviews which he gave during elections, a rare event once in five years said, "Modi 3.0 regime will take some major decisions". The citizens hope that strengthening EC will be the very first area on which he would focus his attention.



LETTERS

Mockery of Rule of Law

PINNELLI Ramakrishna Reddy, the incumbent ruling YSRCP legislator from Macherla and contestant from the same Assembly constituency entered the polling booth number 202 on May 13 with his stooges and broke the EVM and VVPAT machines by hitting on floor in the presence of polling staff. This video is still shown in electronic media. EC also failed to initiate immediate action. Police also could not find his whereabouts. Surprisingly, the High Court granted him interim bail ordering the police not to arrest him until June 6. How a criminal is granted bail? Is it law to leave the culprit scot-free for days together in the face of awaiting election results? What would police and court do if the criminal wins the election? I opine that there is absolutely no reason in granting bail. Escaping from his locality to an unknown place to avoid arrest is another point of crime. Maintaining utmost stoic silence by YSRCP supremo knowing his party person's rude behaviour in the polling booth and threatening others in the booth, is another criminal act under abatement.

Dr NSR Murthy, Secunderabad

DOES the directive of the AP High Court granting bail to the Macherla sitting MLA of YSR Congress Pinnelli Ramakrishna Reddy sink in its usual stride in the normal mindset of any law abiding citizen? The whole country is standing as a helpless and mute witness to the destructive acts of the EVM and VVPAT boxes by the MLA, a people's responsible public representative, as revealed by the CCTV camera footage. Perhaps, such directives by the judiciary fall beyond the normal citizens' comprehension. However, having said that, of what avail it is, if the cause of common good is in no way served at all? Long live rule of law.

Seshagiri Row Karry, Manikonda, Hyderabad

Focus on accident preventive measures

SPEED causes accidents; speed kills - it is one lesson from the Pune car crash. The teenager drove the car at breakneck speed of 160 kmph. Drunken driving is a recipe for accidents; it means myopia and lack of coordination between the brain, eyes, hands and the feet. Many youngsters mistakenly believe that driving a car at a high speed in an inebriated condition is something 'heroic'. The teenager who drove the car was too drunk to be at the wheel. The golden rule is, never get behind the wheel even if you have consumed a small amount of alcoholic drink. Anyone who drives under the influence of alcohol is a potential killer. The accident has also highlighted the danger of arrogance of wealth. In rich families children seem to be taught that if you have a lot of money or are filthy rich you can do whatever you want and rules do not apply. The one who caused the crash is a wayward minor and he drove the car without a licence. The lenience of the Juvenile Justice Board is explicable only in terms of his family's financial clout. Writing a 300-word essay on 'road accidents' was the 'punishment' awarded (or 'remorse' prescribed) to the teenager for fatally knocking down two innocent persons who had all their life in front of them. The attempt made to shift the blame to the 'family driver' was foiled, thanks to the close watch kept on the case. The fatal accident in Pune was, in a way, a failure to provide proper education to the boy, described as a 'spoilt brat' by the media. Now the focus must be on taking measures to prevent a recurrence of accidents, as in Pune, anywhere in India in the future.

G.David Milton, Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

IT is a reassuring news that the drunken juvenile delinquent who mowed down two innocents techies on a motorbike in Pune, by his Porsche which he drove at 200 kmph, was treated with a kid-glove by the Juvenile Justice Board, which granted him a bail that was rescinded, following a high level interference by the government; and the errant brat remanded to observation home till June 5. The move by JJB that had asked the culprit to write a 300-word essay on accidents and keep away from the bad company drew public outcry. The juveniles involved in such traffic violations and sex crimes have to be treated on par with adults; as the age advantage is solidly helping the offenders from escaping the law.

K V Raghuram, Wayanad

Modi Govt silent on Adani's new corruption

AFTER Hindenburg report that Adani Group is involved in high time corruption, now India's most reputed paper, Financial Express has alleged that Adani - Group passed off low-quality coal a far more expensive cleaner fuel in transactions with an Indian state power utility. It added that the Adani Group sourced the coal in Indonesia from a mining group known for its low calorie output, at the prices consistent with low grade fuel. It has delivered the coal to India's southern most for power generation fulfilling a contract that specified expensive high quality fuel. Rahul Gandhi has previously alleged that Adani Group is supplying low grade coal to the power companies and ignoring the contract to supply high grade coal. Nearly twenty lakhs people are dying due to pollution as per a data. Now Adani Group is damaging the environment by burning low quality fuel. Had any other company been involved in it then ED and CBI would have arrested them. But now the Government is maintaining stoic silence on this issue while Adani Group is playing with the health of people for gaining more profits in the business?

Zakir Hussain, Kazipet, Telangana

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Sensor to provide monsoon rain flood warning in Bengaluru

BENGALURU: The Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) has resorted to technology to deal with the floods that occur during monsoons. This year, Water Level Sensors have been installed at 124 places in the Rajakaluve to monitor the real time water level. The sensors installed by the Karnataka State Natural Disaster Management Centre (KSNDMC) will provide real-time information on the water level in drains, BBMP said. The water level information is transmitted from KSNDMC to Integrated Command Centre of BBMP. The situation is understood through the colour signals it gives on the indicator. Green and blue level indicators indicate that the water level is safe. A red indicator means danger. If it reaches the black indicator, the city will have to prepare for flooding.

BBMP said that the technology has been adopted so that the sensors are powered by solar energy. Officials are prepared to deal with rain and flood situation. Rajakaluve and drains have been cleaned.

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Market's thumbs-up

There is jubilation in economic circles, signalling positive investor sentiment in Govt fate

It is not every day that the market breaches new records just days ahead of the Lok Sabha poll results. Both Sensex and Nifty are shooting northwards, especially since the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) declared a huge dividend bonanza for the Government. The stock market has witnessed a historic surge, with the benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty hitting lifetime highs two consecutive days. With the RBI also recently announcing a record dividend for the Government, this confluence of events has fostered an atmosphere of positive investor sentiment, largely driven by optimistic expectations from election outcomes. The RBI's decision to transfer a record dividend of Rs87,416 crore to the Government has been a crucial factor in this financial upturn. This move not only bolsters the Government's fiscal position but also signals robust economic health and prudent management by the Central bank. Such a hefty dividend payout is expected to provide the Government with additional fiscal space to boost public spending, invest in



infrastructure projects and support social welfare programmes. The substantial RBI dividend is seen as a sign of economic stability and strong fundamentals, encouraging both domestic and foreign investors to pour capital into the market. Following the dividend announcement, both Sensex and Nifty have experienced unprecedented highs. Sensex soared past the 62,000-mark while Nifty breached the 18,600-level. This surge reflects investor confidence in Indian economy's resilience and growth potential. The interplay between the RBI's dividend announcement and the buoyant stock market creates a positive feedback loop. Another critical driver of this market exuberance is the

anticipation of favourable election outcomes. Investors often view political stability as a key determinant of economic policies and growth trajectories. This growth prospect attracts more investment, driving the stock markets higher and creating a cycle of optimism and financial prosperity. The prevailing sentiment suggests that the election results will lead to a continuation of pro-business and market-friendly policies. Historical trends indicate that markets typically react positively to clear and stable election results, which are seen as conducive to consistent and predictable economic governance. The interplay between the RBI's dividend announcement and the buoyant stock market creates a positive feedback loop. The additional fiscal resources enable the Government to undertake more significant developmental initiatives, which in turn stimulate economic growth. This alignment of fiscal prudence, economic strategy and political expectations bodes well for the nation's future. As the election comes to an end shortly and a new Government takes over, a positive sentiment among investors is likely to reinforce market stability and growth. However, the market does not reflect the state of the economy. The indices are more speculative and driven by positive sentiments rather than actual ground realities.



Buddhist devotees stand in a queue to light butter lamps during Buddha Jayanti, in Kathmandu

New-to-credit users drive financial inclusion

New-to-credit users have become one of the fastest-growing segments over the past three years but they also present challenges

New-to-credit (NTC) users or first-time users of credit products were one of the fastest-growing consumer segments in the lending category in the last three years, driving sustainable financial inclusion and economic growth in India. Industry data suggests that India currently has around 200 million active credit users and around 800,000 NTC consumers are being added to this pool every year. Over the last few years, these consumers driven by easy access to credit cards and short-term-personal loans (STPL) grew the retail credit category at a rapid pace. Rapid digitisation of the lending process gave a boost to the rise in NTC customers but also resulted in challenges in background checks and client's repayment capacity. It took the RBI to step in by increasing risk weightage to control the uncontrolled growth in this category. As a result, the supply has been curtailed with first-time users increasingly finding it difficult to get easy access to credit products. However, there are



some specially co-created credit cards for first-time users, helping them to build a good credit history before getting access to other credit products. In such a situation, managing debt smartly has become important for first-time consumers. For them, using a credit card responsibly is crucial for building a positive credit history and avoiding debt. Here are some financial tips: **Understand your need for a credit card:** For new users, it is very important to understand the terms and conditions of your credit card. These include interest rates, fees, grace periods and rewards programs if applicable. We often make the mistake of activating the

credit card without understanding the finer details of credit card usage. This mistake may cost you a bad debt and a bad financial history, limiting your access to credit in the future. **Start small:** There is always a temptation to overspend with a credit card, especially if you are a first-time user. So, it is advisable to begin with a low credit limit to avoid overspending and to ease into managing credit responsibly. **Always pay on time and in full:** Always pay your credit card bill on time and in full to avoid late fees and interest charges. Setting up automatic payments can help ensure you never miss a due date. **Monitor your spending:** Keep track of your credit card transactions to stay within your budget and avoid overspending. Many credit card companies offer online or mobile banking apps to help you monitor your spending in real time. Keep utilisation low: Aim to keep your credit utilisation ratio-the amount of credit you're using compared to your total credit limit-below

Ambedkar's warning on democracy rings true

India backslides on global democracy indexes and exhibits resistance to internal party democracy, starkly contrasting with the political culture of the UK

In 1936, Dr BR Ambedkar wrote an undelivered speech, Annihilation of Caste, where he forewarned, "Constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment. It has to be cultivated. We must realise that our people have yet to learn it. Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil which is essentially undemocratic." This sharp but sage observation was well before the Constitution of India was formally framed and adopted under his leadership. Eighty-eight years since the speech that was considered too controversial to be delivered, the issues of caste, constitutional impropriety and his controversial but astute insistence that "Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on India soil which is essentially undemocratic" resonates loud and clear with the proceedings (rather, regressions) in the ensuing Lok Sabha elections.

Amongst the most invoked, galvanising and feared concerns in the ongoing election pitch are still, caste and religion. Beyond the trumpeting label of 'world's largest democracy' which we proudly accept and acknowledge, is the damning backsliding on various Democracy 'indexes' - which we equally readily slam as vested, unfair, or even 'anti-national'. An unmistakably think-skinned spirit and hypersensitivity about the unflattering reportage abounds, which does not help build credentials of a mature, confident and progressive democracy. The 'mother of democracy' simply cannot be selectively entertaining of all praise and simultaneously small-spirited against criticism. However, beyond the multiple and well-known afflictions like dynastic tendencies, majoritarianism, ethnic-casteist-regional assertions, muscle power, money power et al, lies yet another serious curse of the complete lack of, or even any pretence of an 'internal democracy' in any political party, national or regional. We seem to be partaking in the exercise of democracy with a rather regrettable set of undemocratic parties. Beyond the obvious threats of the 'carrot-and-stick' nature (with murmurs of the infamous 'wash-



ing machine' phenomenon) that may have made many opposition politicians jump ships - there is yet another loud concern expressed of unapproachability, remaining essentially unheard, or even of inaccessibility attributed to political leadership that leads to members to leave political parties for greener pastures. All Indian political parties have their exclusive leadership cocooned, isolated and protected from lesser leaders - this seemingly helps build leadership aura, mystique and even fear of the respective 'high commands'. The top leadership is only for taking the 'final call' and all others must robotically comply with the same, as described in the uniquely Indian expression of subservience, 'as disciplined soldiers of the party'. Such obsequious and diktat-filled frameworks are more suggestive of autocracies rather than participative democracies. This suffocating, intolerant and illiberal normalcy of Indian political culture is in stark contrast to that of its progenitor, British Westminster politics. In the UK, there have always been divisions within party ranks (on issues), expressed ambition for top roles and public expression of dissenting positions e.g., Brexit. These individualistic or non-conformist positions do not warrant the automatic

THERE ARE NO PERMANENT GODS IN BRITISH POLITICAL PARTIES, UNLIKE IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT, WHERE A FEW INDIVIDUALS RULE THE ROOST WITHOUT GETTING SUBJECTED TO ANY INTERNAL CHALLENGE, QUESTIONING OR CHANGE

expulsion or diminishment of an individual from party ranks. The ruling Conservative Party has many active and known 'camps' that may or may not agree with the policies and decisions of their Partyman as the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak. It has always been so with divides amongst social liberals and social democrats, modernisers and traditionalists and Brexiters of various sides and shades etc., Therefore, even though the Conservative Party has ruled uninterrupted since 2010 (then by David Cameron), it has since had five different Prime Ministers i.e., David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Liz Truss and now, Rishi Sunak. Even now the jostling within the Tories continues with apparently Boris Johnson planning a comeback to David Cameron having staged a dramatic comeback as the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, under Rishi Sunak! It is the same concept of 'internal democracy' that has seen a similar leadership change in the principal opposition party i.e., the Labour Party. Since 2010 under Gordon Brown, it has seen a constant change in leadership Harriet Harman, Ed Miliband, Jeremy Corbyn to now Sir Keir Starmer. Each of these individual leaders has

reflected the topical preference of the party cadres and leaders. Now with Keir Starmer sure to get elected as the Prime Minister of the UK, he couldn't be more unlike his party predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn, both in person and policies. Starmer continues to consult both the former Labour Prime Minister i.e., Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, though neither has any outsized political relevance. In short, there are no permanent Gods in British political parties, unlike the Indian context where a few individuals rule the roost without getting subjected to any internal challenge, questioning or change. The rules and circumstances for leadership can be made to change overnight to suit certain individuals or dynasties which essentially seek to perpetuate the leadership composition, that has existed for years. As Winston Churchill once said, "The opposition occupies the benches in front of you, but the enemy sits behind you" implying in his party ranks - that such internal competition can never be a sign of weakness but of ensuring that only one with the most competitive, compelling and winning credentials leads the party. (*The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. The views expressed are personal*)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CONTROL PLASTIC USE

Madam — Although the central and State Governments have imposed a complete ban on polythene covers of thickness less than 125 microns in the State, it is not seen in practice. The viscosity of polythene bags is too high. 75-micron-thick bags, which were once banned, are still being used today. A large number of polythene covers are used in vegetable, tiffin, grocery, big shops and wholesale shops. As authorities have failed to ban polythene covers, they are seen everywhere on roads and canals. Cattle are falling sick by eating the wastes dumped in these covers in front of the houses and on the road. Criticisms are being heard that even though so many mishaps are happening, the concerned authorities are not paying attention. The authorities should clamp down on the sale of banned polythene bags which harm the environment and take strict action against those selling them. The authorities should make an effort to inform the people about the disadvantages caused by the use of banned polythene bags and to organise awareness programmes to encourage people to use eco-friendly clothing as an alternative.

Appanna Gonapa | Visakhapatnam

WORKPLACE GASLIGHTING HARMS

Madam — It refers to 'Deleterious Effects of Workplace Gaslighting' (May 23). Gaslighting within the organisational setting presents a significant threat to employee well-being and overall organisational effectiveness. This form of psychological manipulation, characterised by the deliberate undermining of an individual's perceptions, beliefs and reality, fosters a detrimental work environment with far-reaching consequences. The erosion of employee confidence and self-esteem, heightened anxiety and paranoia, social isolation and withdrawal and manifestations in physical health are some of the critical impacts of gaslighting in the workplace. Gaslighting through denial, blame-shifting and criticism erodes employees' self-worth and competence, causing isolation, stress,

Recognise Palestinian sovereignty



Propos the news article, "Norway, Ireland and Spain give recognition to Palestinian State", published on May 23, this is my response. Palestine should be treated as a sovereign country as per the partisan plan of Great Britain's Palestine in 1947. Israel has been ignoring the two-State solution as per the 1993 Oslo Accord for decades and now it has engaged in genocidal violence in response to the October 7 Hamas attack. The United Nations secretary-general António

Guterres said that the Hamas attack did not take place in a vacuum. His comment was as right as the observation that the Indian Rebellion of 1857 did not take place in a vacuum. There were acts of terrorism against British civilians like Kennedy ladies during the British Raj in India. Khudiram Bose and his friend Prafulla Chaki threw a bomb at a carriage thinking that the district magistrate of Muzaffarpur, Douglas Kingsford, was in the carriage. However, Kingsford was seated in a different carriage and the bomb killed two British women. Can such attacks on the British civilians justify the Jallianwala Bagh massacre? Had the British still been ruling India, would the world have lent moral support to the colonial regime against the freedom fighters? Gaza massacre put Jallianwala Bagh to shame. More than 35,000 Palestinians, including nearly half of them children and elderly, have been killed in Gaza.

Sujit De | Kolkata

decreased productivity and physical health issues like headaches and sleep disturbances. Address gaslighting by documenting interactions, building support, prioritising self-care, limiting exposure and seeking intervention. Organisations must cultivate a supportive work environment through awareness campaigns, clear reporting mechanisms, robust anti-bullying policies, respectful communication practices and training for managers to identify and address gaslighting. By empowering employees and fostering a supportive culture, organisations can combat gaslighting effectively and build a healthier workplace for all.

Amarjeet Kumar | Hazaribagh

MAKE STRESS YOUR FRIEND

Madam — In a world where stress is often demonised, reframing it as a friend can transform your relationship with it. Most people think that stress makes them sick; it increases the risk of everything from the common cold to cardiovascular disease. Basically, we have turned stress into our enemy. One study found that people who

experienced a lot of stress in the previous year had a 43 per cent increased risk of dying, but that was only true for people who believed that stress was harmful to their health. The researchers estimated that the people who died prematurely died not from stress but from the belief that stress was bad for them. Cultivate a mindset shift: view stress as a sign that your body is energised and ready to tackle tasks. Embrace the physiological changes, like an increased heart rate, as your body gears up for action. If you're breathing faster, there is no problem; it's getting more oxygen to your brain. Over a lifetime of stressful experiences, this one biological change could be the difference between a stress-induced heart attack at age 50 and living well into your 90's. Ultimately, by reframing stress as a friend rather than a foe, You no longer need to get rid of your stress; instead, make yourself better at it.

Harshita Dhakad | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



MANISH SHARA

FIRST COLUMN

TRUST IN THE SUPREME BEING!

The writer ponders the true nature of belief and the role of religion in our lives



SANJAY CHANDRA

I am not an atheist! But I do believe that there is a supreme power that guides us through the journey that we call life. Yet, there are questions that the rational mind refuses to subdue. One such dilemma that I have not been able to resolve is that we cannot be the only living beings in this vast universe. There have to be others. Would they also look like us?

Probably not my mother was a firm believer in the Gods of the faith that I was born in. She would make it a point to visit the nearby temples every week, accompanied by our father and the three of us children. We would watch her from outside the temple folding her hands in supplication before each God, praying for our wellbeing. I never asked my father the reason that he would stand at the entry to the temple, not accompanying his wife inside. Maybe it was to keep a watch on my mother's footwear, which had to be left outside.

Even a temple was not immune to missing slippers or sandals or shoes — others were more in need of the accessory. It also might have been because it was a little difficult to untie and then retie the laces on our shoes. As I grew up, I was intrigued by the increase in traffic at the temples, particularly at examination times. Young boys and also girls, could be seen touching the holy steps and then bowing to the deities, sometimes even putting their books reverentially at the feet of the Gods. I asked a friend, who smirked at my naiveté, before explaining that this helped in securing good marks. I also saw young unmarried women fasting and then visiting the temple on specific days of the week in the hope of getting a suitable husband.



I do not know if they lived a happily thereafter life. As I grew older, I too felt the need to visit the temple, particularly when facing a difficult time — initially when I was a student and then during my professional life. And then I realised the power of trust in a supreme being. It was this implicit faith, that the Lord above will not forsake me in my tough times, that gave me the confidence. It was a trust in my capabilities, reinforced by faith, that kept me going and kept me working. It sounds clichéd, but I also understood that my God resides within me; I do not need to visit a temple to pray to my God. I can do it wherever I am, whenever I need to. There was an interesting episode in my life recently. I got trolled on the WhatsApp group of my society by the same people who had only in the morning appreciated my writing. My fault — I had sinned opposing the construction of a temple inside the gated community. I felt there were more pressing issues to be attended. I smiled as I was called an elitist — the gentleman probably wanted to call me a pseudo-intellectual. These are the persons who have chosen, like me, to live out their lives in this complex — and hence, by default, they are the extended family. Relationships went for a toss. Which brings me to the query of the rational me. If there is a life after death and if there is life on many distant planets, then, I might be reborn in another form somewhere else. In that other life, I might pray to the supreme being in another form or shape. Then, is it really important for us to wear our religion on our sleeves or even to let it divide?

(The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)

Political messaging in Indian elections

The current election cycle witnesses a proliferation of digital misinformation campaigns, presenting new challenges for the authorities and citizens alike



A prominent film programmer and writer David Schwartz has rightly quoted, “Political commercials pretend to be like documentaries, but they use all the techniques of fiction filmmaking, including scripts, performances and music.” This could be quite apt to ponder on the current general election and political communication in India. The use of technologies including deep fakes is attempting to make this election distinct from the 2019 general election. Political communication is the production and influence of persuasive political messages, campaigns and advertisements, often involving the mass media. It is an interdisciplinary field that uses communication, journalism and political science. Political communication concerns ideas such as information flow, political influence, decision-making, news and impact on citizens. Since the advent of the World Wide Web, the amount of data to be analysed has increased and researchers are turning to computational methods to study the dynamics of political communication. This can be quite relevant in the light of Parliamentary elections, 2024 in India.

The parliamentary elections in India have started from 19 April and will continue up to 1 June in seven phases to elect all 543 members of the Lok Sabha. This is the longest election in history, surpassing the previous election of 44 days, second only to the Indian general election of 1951- 52. Approximately 970 million of the 1.4 billion people are eligible to vote, that is 70 per cent of the total population. In the States of Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha and Sikkim, parliamentary elections will be held simultaneously with general elections and by-elections to 25 constituencies in 12 legislative assemblies. The votes will be counted and the results announced on June 4. Current Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has completed his second term, is running for a third consecutive term.



THE FRAUD PULSE HAS FOUND A NEW, MORE ENTHUSIASTIC CHANNEL IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS. LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES ARE WARNING LOUDER THAN EVER THAT THE AVERAGE INDIAN VOTER IN 2024 IS MOST AT RISK OF BEING MISINFORMED ABOUT THE ELECTION

Social media in the political domain

Social media has become an increasingly important tool for political communication. For certain demographics, it is one of the main platforms where people get their news and interact with it by commenting and sharing. Social media has dramatically changed the way modern political campaigns are run. As more and more digitally native citizens vote, social media has become an important tool for politicians to establish themselves and communicate with voters.

The experience of using social media depends largely on the user, as the platform's algorithms tailor the consumer experience to each user. This leads to each person seeing more like-minded people due to increased digital social behaviour. In addition, social media changed politics because it gave politicians a direct way to inform their constituents and people to speak directly to politicians. This unofficial nature can lead to misinformation because it is not subject to the same “fact-checking processes as institutional journalism”. Moreover, social media platforms serve as democratising agents, empowering individuals to participate in political conversations irrespective of geographical or socio-economic barriers. Citizens can voice their perspectives, amplify marginalised narratives and mobilise collective action, thereby enriching the democratic fabric of society. Concurrently, social media's interactive nature engenders heightened transparency and accountability within political institutions, as public scrutiny intensifies and feedback mechanisms proliferate.

AI Deepfakes: A new era

Technological implications are increasingly becoming imperative in the current election in India about political communication. This election season, misinformation has a new face. This time, India smiles, talks and woos the voters with a wisdom that is hard to start and harder to regulate. The 2019 election was no stranger to hate and misinformation campaigns, but the technology that enables this ecosystem has changed the rate of misrepresentation. The fraud pulse has found a new, more enthusiastic channel in the last five years. Law enforcement agencies are warning louder than ever that the average Indian voter in 2024 is most at risk of being misinformed about the election. There are gaps in people's ability to distinguish between real and artificial intelligence, leaving them vulnerable to fraud and unauthorised access. Social media companies struggle to curb fake news and propaganda; The Indian Government is updating existing legislation to better address the spread of online counterfeiting. The 2019 election took place on social media. Researchers identified sophisticated campaigns that used WhatsApp messaging and massive deployment of IT bots to distribute cropped photos, post coordinated content and publish fake videos on Facebook during the 2024 general elections. The pressing question now is how digital platforms tag, identify and contextualise such media. Even in the era of generative AI, such enforcement measures were nascent or seasonal at best. Now, cheap or free tools allow even amateurs to create deep fakes without content filters to prevent fake or illegal content from

spreading. This means that technology platforms have to act stronger against criminals and break the chain of disinformation faster than they do. One of the biggest changes in social media after the 2019 elections in India is the absence of Twitter (Now X), the platform used by India's controlled politicians and Government agencies to broadcast official information to the country's media.

A way forward

In today's world, understanding politics means delving into how political actors communicate and navigate various media channels. These channels not only reflect but also shape political messages and images. Just as political systems influence media through policies and decisions, media structures profoundly impact political communication processes. Easy-to-make AI videos with near-perfect shadows and hand gestures can sometimes confuse even the digitally literate. But the risks are greater in a country where many of its 1.4 billion people are technologically challenged and where manipulated content can easily stoke sectarian tensions, especially during elections. The Election Commission of India recently warned political parties against using artificial intelligence to spread misinformation, issuing seven provisions of IT and other laws that carry up to three years in prison for offences including forgery, rumour and hostility. Looking forward to a free and fair election this time!

(The author is from Journalism and Mass Communication, Rama Devi Women's University, Bhubaneswar; views are personal)

Millennium City says ‘no development, no vote’

Frustrated by poor infrastructure despite high taxes, Gurgaon residents are shunning election candidates

This month Gurgaon has seen protests in several localities with frustrated and disillusioned residents announcing- 'Election candidates not welcome, no development, no vote'.

Gurgaon residents are piqued that despite paying taxes (the highest share in the State), they are getting a raw deal. Sensing the mood of the public, both BJP stalwart and five-time MP, Rao Inderjit Singh and Congress candidate Raj Babbar, have made development their poll plank. Interestingly though it is a national election, focus remains on local issues, especially in the absence of a central national poll theme. Gurgaon may have fancy



VINOD BEHL

tags of 'Millennium City' and 'Cyber City' but the city which has made a global mark, lacks badly on physical and social infrastructure. It presents an ugly face with city waste besides construction debris lying all over, posing a serious health hazard.

It is not just Gurgaon, even the new sectors of the city which are grappling with poorly maintained roads (leading to accidents and dust pollution), inadequate drinking water, power and sewerage infrastructure. In the absence of proper drainage. Failure of civic authorities has made matters worse.

The lack of an adequate metro network in the city has created a traffic mess on



the roads. The lack of proper parking infrastructure has only made matters worse. A lot of the city's civic woes are because of the flawed development model of real estate development preceding infrastructure

development. Moreover, unlike in neighbouring Noida where there is a single development authority, Gurgaon lacks on this front. GMDA (Gurgaon Metropolitan Development Authority) constituted to

put an end to a multiplicity of development authorities, has proved to be an eyewash with MCG (Municipal Corporation Gurgaon) and HSVP (Haryana Shahari Vikas Pradhikaran) around. Seeking vote on development, Rao Inderjit Singh takes credit for initiating the mega infrastructure and connectivity projects like KMP Expressway, Delhi-Mumbai Expressway (passing through Gurgaon), Sohna Elevated Expressway, Dwarka Expressway, Metro Expansion, Gurgaon Railway Station upgradation.

In rural and Muslim-dominated Nuh, he is telling voters about the development gains of key infrastructure projects like the Delhi-

Mumbai Expressway and Orbital Rail. Raj Babbar, on the other hand, is also playing the development card to counter Rao Inderjit, pointing to shoddy development with several civic issues plaguing the city, turning it into a slum. Long delays in metro expansion, Lack of an Inter-State Bus Terminus and the absence of a suitable Civil Hospital are among the issues he has been raking up among the voters, demanding a fair share of development. He is promising the transformation of Gurgaon.

Though Rao Inderjit Singh may be facing anti-incumbency he has an obvious advantage of a well-oiled organisation besides the Modi factor. On the other

hand, Raj Babbar faces the challenge of being an outsider. Besides he has the disadvantage of being a late starter due to a delay in announcing his nomination. The Gurgaon electorate seems to be in a mood to give another chance to the BJP, banking on the strong pro-development credentials of Modi. However, they have also shown their displeasure with the political parties. Indeed Gurgaon's infrastructure is not up to the mark and needs an immediate attention. Besides, their anger has led politicians to take notice of their woes and have now started showing interest in infrastructure upgradation.

(The writer is a senior journalist; views are personal)

Defining Battle

The 2024 Lok Sabha elections in Delhi promise to be a riveting spectacle, reflecting both the fierce political rivalries and the evolving dynamics of India's capital. The battle for Delhi's seven seats, scheduled to vote during the sixth phase of the general election today, presents a fascinating microcosm of national politics, where local issues and personalities intersect with broader ideological battles. For the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Delhi has been a fortress in the past two general elections; it swept all seats in both 2014 and 2019. However, the political landscape in 2024 is a tad different. The emergence of a united opposition under the INDIA bloc, comprising the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and Congress, poses a formidable challenge. This alliance brings together AAP's strong grassroots presence and Congress's historical legacy, creating a synergy that could potentially affect the BJP's dominance. The high stakes are heightened by the fact that each party has chosen candidates that reflect their strategic priorities, blending legacy, local leadership, and new faces to appeal to diverse voter bases. This approach underscores the importance of both personality and policy in the electoral battleground. One of the most intriguing aspects of this election is the high-profile nature of the candidates and the intensity of their campaigns. In New Delhi, BJP's Bansuri Swaraj, daughter of the late Sushma Swaraj, faces AAP's Somnath Bharti. North East Delhi features BJP's Manoj Tiwari against Congress's Kanhaiya Kumar, while in North West Delhi, BJP's Yogendra Chandolia contests against Congress's Udit Raj. Chandni Chowk sees BJP's Praveen Khandelwal against Congress's J.P. Agarwal. In South Delhi, BJP's Ramvir Singh Bidhuri faces AAP's Sahiram Pehalwan. West Delhi presents BJP's Kamaljit Sehrawat against AAP's Mahabal Mishra. A crucial element in this election is the recent arrest and subsequent release of AAP leader and Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, which has galvanised his party and injected a sense of urgency into its campaign. Mr Kejriwal will hope that his narrative of victimisation and resilience will strike a chord with many voters, potentially creating a sympathy wave that the INDIA bloc hopes to capitalise on. Their slogan, "jail ka jawab vote se" (respond to jail by vote), underscores their message of resistance against what they perceive as political vendetta. The BJP's campaign, centred round Prime Minister Narendra Modi's development agenda and allegations of corruption against Mr Kejriwal, aims to portray the opposition as untrustworthy and mired in scandal. Mr Modi's continued popularity and his narrative of a "Viksit Bharat" (Developed India) remain potent tools in the BJP's electoral arsenal. As Delhi heads to the polls, the outcome in these seven seats will not only determine its political future but also provide insights into the broader national mood. The contest is not just a battle for seats but a clash of ideologies, personalities, and visions for India's future. The stakes are high, and the results will be keenly watched as an indicator of what lies ahead for Indian democracy.

Shifting Sands

As voters in eight constituencies in Bihar and four in Jharkhand head to the polls in the sixth phase of the Lok Sabha elections today, the BJP faces significant challenges that threaten to erode its dominance in these states, particularly in Jharkhand where it won 12 of 14 seats in 2019. Widespread dissatisfaction among rural voters, driven by issues like unemployment, inflation, and inadequate development, is a key factor behind this shift. In Bihar, anger against BJP and JD(U) candidates is described as palpable. This resentment stems from what voters perceive as non-performance and absenteeism by their representatives. Rural voters are particularly disillusioned with the government's focus on urban development at the expense of rural needs. Amid massive investments in infrastructure projects like highways and flyovers, the agrarian sector remains neglected, leading to widespread frustration. Moreover, the urban-rural divide is stark. Urban residents, though critical of the government's shortcomings in areas like sewerage, education, and job creation, still see Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership as a stabilising force. They believe that the BJP has maintained a semblance of order and security, which they value highly. This sentiment, however, is not shared by rural communities, who face severe hardships such as poor access to drinking water, inadequate wages, and failing healthcare and education systems. The dissatisfaction extends to key voter demographics like Dalits and Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs). Traditionally marginalised, these groups now fear that their hard-won reservations are under threat. The BJP's perceived attempts to dismantle caste-based reservations have deepened their mistrust, pushing them towards opposition parties. Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's waning influence and erratic political alliances have further alienated these voters, creating a vacuum that the opposition is eager to fill. In Jharkhand, the BJP's challenges are equally pronounced. The Adivasi community, which makes up a significant portion of the population, feels betrayed by the government's attempts to commercialise their ancestral lands. The proposed amendments to protective land laws and the creation of a land bank for industrial use have ignited fierce opposition. The Kurmi community feels abandoned after unfulfilled promises of inclusion in the Scheduled Tribes category, leading to a shift in their political loyalties. These developments indicate a broader trend of disenchantment with the status quo among rural and marginalised communities. While the BJP still holds sway in urban areas, the erosion of support in rural regions could significantly impact its overall performance. The opposition parties, particularly the RJD in Bihar and the JMM in Jharkhand, hope to capitalise on this discontent. Their focus on local issues and promises of more inclusive development are targeted at voters who feel left behind by the current administration. The elections in Bihar and Jharkhand thus serve as a critical barometer for the BJP's standing at the national level. The party's ability to address the multifaceted grievances of rural voters and marginalised communities will be crucial in determining its future electoral success.

Aspiration and Reality

The global South lacks a leading great power in terms of defence or economy and is characterized by diversity. It also lacks strong representation in some key international institutions like the UN Security Council. It basically operates from a position of weakness, seeking opportunities to join coalitions for international order reform, driven by aspirations for development, voice, and status



First, it should be highlighted that the world of power and hegemony has undergone three transformations from the Second World War and the present. In 1952, Alfred Sauvy classified the world into three categories: First World, Second World, and Third World. However, his idea was out of date by the late 1980s when the USSR collapsed. By then the concept of 'Developing and Developed World' had become popular, signifying a wide range of interests.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century three major groups arose: the global South, represented by developing nations like Brazil and India, the global West, led by the US and Europe, and the global East, led by China and Russia. With unique histories, grievances, and leaders, each group provides narratives, solutions, and aspirations for reshaping the world order. The emergence of this 'Three Worlds' system reflects more than just shifts in global power: it reveals a deeper ideological struggle between the global East and global West.

Each superpower advocates for a distinct type of world order: the US defends a liberal international order, while China and Russia aim for one that challenges Western liberal values. According to Prof. Ikenberry this isn't just a power struggle but a clash between liberal and illiberal visions of world order, where both seek to shape global rules and institutions to secure their political systems and values. So, it is the struggle for world order which primarily involves the global West and East, each led by a superpower and a coalition of great powers.

In the post-Covid era both these superpowers – China and the United States – are aggressively moving to establish their group's primacy in the changing global order. But it is impossible for both the US and China to achieve success on their own. They require companions and allies. Bigger coalitions perform better in these competitive times than smaller ones, and these possible allies are found in the global South.

In contrast, the global South lacks a leading great power in terms of defence or economy and is characterized by diversity. It also lacks strong representation in some key international institutions like the UN Security Council. It basically operates from a position of weakness, seeking opportunities to join

coalitions for international order reform, driven by aspirations for development, voice, and status.

However, the global South is not devoid of resources. It is, after all, home to most of humankind. In this case, India, the most populous nation in the global South can function as a kind of intermediary. Both the East and the West are offering various incentives to strengthen relationships with the global South. While the US, one of the main proponents of the post-war liberal international order, offers trade, security, and foreign aid; China is marketing the developmental model. Despite being the weaker member of the 'Three Worlds', the global South possesses structural qualities that will make it a strong and significant alliance in the changing global order.

India, a pivotal state in the global South, has the power to influence broader global patterns of alliances and partnerships. It can also lead the global South by perfectly balancing the benefits of both regions, keeping in mind Turkey's and Brazil's respective positions. India can serve as a kind of third party, influencing global narratives about what constitutes appropriate and acceptable behaviour in international politics, given its position as the leader of the global South. To assume that role, India needs to focus on the following five areas with equal importance: economy, military, technology, demography, and climate change because these are the fundamental requirements for becoming a superpower. The goal of becoming a superpower can be dashed by deficiencies in any area. Is India capable of that?

Here we shouldn't be overly sentimental or romantic. We should remember that emotion is not intelligence, enthusiasm is not understanding, and to entertain high ideals is not to think. Perhaps we have enough of these, but they may not turn out to be reality until we are able to look at our abilities from close quarters. The goal of becoming a superpower is admirable, but it is important to analyse the difficulties and complications that go with it. If we focus on the economic sector, in 2023, India's economy really thrived,

with a projected GDP growth of 7.3 per cent, surpassing IMF estimates of 6.3 per cent. Government-led capital formation increased by over 10 per cent, but private sector investment declined sharply, alongside a 4 per cent drop in foreign direct investment between April-November 2023. High disinvestment rates rose by nearly 29 per cent. Inflation is forecast to rise to 5.4 per cent in 2024, with food prices escalating to 9.5 per cent in December 2023. Agriculture and allied sectors grew by less than 2 per cent in 2022-23 due to adverse weather conditions. Manufacturing is expected to grow by 6.5 per cent, but certain industries faced declines between April-November 2023.

Now let's discuss India's defence industry, which has shown progress, with a production turnover of Rs 1,087 billion (US\$13.5 billion) in 2022-23 and exports to over 85 countries involving 100 Indian firms. However, production growth hasn't met procurement demands, with a target of \$26 billion by 2025. Despite reforms, domestic

share in armed forces' capital acquisition hasn't increased significantly since 2014-15. Export targets remain unmet, with licensing manufacturing dominating at 58 per cent in defence procurement. Challenges include slow implementation of reforms and reliance on external sources due to limited technological depth in major systems and components. On the other hand, the convergence of transformative technologies like AI, blockchain, cloud computing, IoT, open source, and automation is revolutionizing the fintech landscape. Niche financial sectors lead in harnessing these innovations for application development, value creation, and competitive edge. Traditional financial institutions must adapt swiftly, leveraging their resources to navigate this wave of disruption. Embracing these trends is essential for staying relevant and competitive in the rapidly evolving financial industry, where agility and innovation are key to success amidst the changing technological landscape.

Nilekani and Carstens propose a new model called "Finternet" comprising interconnected financial ecosystems. It integrates technological advancements and governance principles,

incorporating tokenization and unified ledgers. By seizing these chances, India can assume a leading position.

Lastly, there are still two crucial topics to discuss: climate change and demography. India, contributing only 3 per cent of historical climate pollution, faces significant environmental challenges due to coal consumption and rapid development. Its carbon emissions increased by 75 per cent since 2005, with coal accounting for 14 per cent of global demand. Extreme heat threatens 600 million people, exacerbated by climate change.

Indian citizens prioritize climate action, with 85 per cent expressing concerns. The government aims for net-zero emissions by 2070, requiring a \$10 trillion investment. Political parties, including the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and opposition Indian National Congress, pledge support for renewable energy, targeting 500GW of capacity and emphasizing green energy transition. On the other hand, India's demographic landscape is shifting, with a slight decline in the proportion of young people projected over the next 15 years. Despite this, India's demographic dividend remains significant, with 12 million young individuals entering the workforce annually. Challenges include low labour participation rates and high youth unemployment. Only about one in ten young people had jobs in 2023, with just 30.2 million out of 305.3 million working-age individuals employed. Navigating this transition effectively is crucial for India's future economic and social well-being. However India's internal politics may both aid and hinder its aspirations to lead the global South. India is now facing the most critical task of safeguarding democracy amidst widespread corruption.

In this situation the United States and China are shifting from traditional alliance systems to cultivate ties with countries like India and Brazil. Both powers aim to prevent countries from aligning with the other. America's nightmare coalition is the global East and South uniting, while China fears alignment between the West and South. India has the potential to emerge as a significant leader in the global South by addressing the abovementioned key areas. From this perspective, it is preferable to acknowledge that India may not have the capacity to lead the world but can exert significant influence among global South countries.

Ugly nature of US' hijacking of human rights

A growing number of unilateral sanctions have been imposed against China by the United States since 2017, with the US increasing its pressure on Chinese technology companies with the imposition of export controls and the launch of administrative and civil charges.

These moves have been followed by further sanctions and restrictions related to and in connection with Xinjiang and Hong Kong that expand the list of targets to include key sectors of economic activity, including agriculture, construction, trade, new and green technologies, energy, finance, telecommunications and others.

The unilateral sanctions imposed by the US against China do not conform with international legal norms and cannot be justified as counter-measures under the law of international responsibility, as a UN expert has said.

The unilateral coercive measures impact people's full enjoyment of human rights as set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and are imposed as a tool to compel the targeted state to act in accordance with the demands of the US.

States such as the US should therefore lift their unilateral coercive sanctions against China, and also take strong action to curb sanction over-compliance by businesses and other actors under their jurisdiction, said Alena Douhan, UN special rapporteur

CHINADAILY

on unilateral coercive measures and human rights, at a news conference in Beijing on Friday, after an official 12-day visit to China.

"A decline in business activities and the significant loss of global markets either due to unilateral sanctions per se or due to overcompliance with such measures by foreign businesses and entities have led to job losses, with consequent disruptions in social protection schemes, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable, particularly in labor-intensive sectors, including women, older persons, and all those in informal employment," Douhan said.

The multifaceted negative impact of sanctions is also showcased in areas such as education and academic/scientific cooperation with the listing of several prominent Chinese universities and research centers, the interruption of exchange programs, scholarships and joint research projects between Chinese and foreign – mainly US and European – institutions, as well as the broader stigmatization of Chinese students and scholars, who may be denied entry visas or subjected to thorough background checks purportedly on national security grounds.

Moreover, as Douhan pointed out, access to justice and the fundamental principles of due process and the presumption of innocence are also seriously undermined by the listing and de-listing procedures. That means the designated individuals and entities are not provided with the evidence that has supposedly provided the grounds for their designation and they have extremely limited capacity to pursue administrative and judicial proceedings before the sanctioning states' court systems, whose procedures are often lengthy, costly, nontransparent and inefficient.

In other words, to protect human rights in Xinjiang or Hong Kong is just an excuse employed by the US to justify its China-targeted sanctions. In practice, these sanctions have not only caused inevitable harm to human rights in China, they may also lead to negative humanitarian consequences elsewhere in the world, as Douhan said, despite China having the capability to mitigate their negative impacts to various extents.

Message for allies

SIR, This refers to your editorial "Putin- Xi meet" published on 20 May. Russia engaged in a high-cost, long drawn out war with Ukraine, is no the superpower of the Cold-war era.

Russia feels the need for a closer friendship with China because of economic pressures mounted by the USA through the weapon of sanctions.

The huge GDP gap with USA has brought Russia closer to China as its natural ally in its war with Ukraine.

However, China's commitment towards Russia by entering into mutual partnership on issues will not be unconditional.

China will ensure that Russia reciprocate any kind of Chinese assistance in the war with Ukrai-

ne with Russian support in its future conflicts on take over of Taiwan or other fronts.

The Putin-Xi meet therefore conveys meaningful new signals to traditional allies of Russia. Such countries once considered closer to Russia must now re-adjust their external and defense strategies.

Yours, etc., Kunal Kanti Konar, Kolkata, 22 May.

NOT UNSCIENTIFIC

SIR, Apropos Anthony Henriques's letter to the editor 'Unfortunate' published on 21 May, there is nothing unscientific in astrological calculations to determine an auspicious time for filing nomination papers. Many do not know that the Nabadwip-

based Grahavipras or the astrologer class of Brahmins aka Nadia Banga Samaj were famous for their accurate predictions.

Governor-General Lord Hardinge had once arrived in Nabadwip where he met such Grahavipras. In conversation with them, Lord Hardinge said that he learnt that his wife had set sail from London but had not arrived at Calcutta although the scheduled time of arrival was past. Lord Hardinge felt that his wife was in danger.

Ramjoy Shiromani, a Nabadwip-based Grahavipra predicted after calculations that Lady Hardinge was very near Calcutta and advised Lord Hardinge to proceed towards Calcutta to meet his wife. Lord and Lady Hardinge met each other at Calcutta on the banks of the river Ganges.

Yours, etc., Anindya Ghosal, Burdwan, 21 May.

RBI DIVIDEND

SIR, Please refer to today's report "RBI approves transfer of Rs 2.11 trillion as surplus to government". The magnitude of RBI's dividend, surpassing the Union government's budgeted amount from the public sector, is a significant development.

RBI came into this windfall because of high interest rates in advanced economies, which may persist before an eventual cyclical inversion.

The strength of India's recovery from the pandemic also contributed to the RBI surplus, and monetary policy would be inclined to pursue this course by easing interest rates ahead of the pack.

With PSUs gaining market capitalisation, the dividend flow is expected to remain robust in the medium term. This could potentially influence the pace of privatisation, particularly when the ripple effects of government capex are strongly felt by PSUs.

The stability of dividends as a revenue source, compared to the market-dependent capital receipts from divestment, may also factor into the government's decision-making, potentially leading to a slower fiscal glide path.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das, Kolkata, 24 May.

India did best under coalitions'

Congress leader Shashi Tharoor is among the most popular faces of the party. The former United Nations Under-Secretary General had also served as the Minister of State for External Affairs under the UPA government headed by Manmohan Singh.

A man not new to controversies, Tharoor has received both bouquets and brickbats for his nonchalant and friendly banter, especially on social media.

Surya S Pillai of The Statesman caught up with the Thiruvananthapuram MP as he interacted with voters along the length and breadth of the country. He talked about the mood of the voters, role of media in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, the north versus south divide, and the benefits of a coalition government.

Q. You are travelling extensively convincing voters to choose INDIA bloc over the BJP. What is the mood of voters?

A. The mood is very encouraging for us. I am not suggesting a sweep for us, but there is every possibility of a better result than the NDA can aim for. The voters today are talking about their well being more than anything else. For example, everybody is mentioning unemployment. In our country today, 45 per cent unemployment is prevalent among the 19 to 25 years age bracket.

The other is inflation; the BJP can say that India's inflation is not high as per global standards, but by Indian standards, we are in troubled waters. You can imagine the condition of the country if people are unable to afford something as basic as food.

Thirdly, income levels have gone down. Forget about doubling farmers' income, there is not even a 10 per cent increase in their incomes. Reports have shown 80 per cent of the Indian population has seen a decline in their incomes in the last 10 years.

Q. The Opposition-backed INDIA bloc has often termed the 2024 Lok Sabha polls as the fight between ideologies. It has talked about how this election is all about saving the Constitution and demo-



cratic ethos. Do you think this message has percolated to the masses?

A. Among the educated class, there are some real concerns about democracy, the Constitution, weaponising of agencies, or the BJP 'washing machine' for the corrupt. I think it is also present at the macro level. At the bottom or retail level of politics, unemployment, price rise and inflation are the talking points. So both are parallel concerns without contradicting each other.

Q. Delhi is voting on May 25 where the Congress is in alliance with the beleaguered AAP. Many Congress workers have voiced their angst against this tie-up. Your comments.

A. The problem with not wanting an alliance is that in two successive elections, the BJP has swept. So we cannot afford to give them a third chance by dividing the opposition votes, which is why the logic of an

alliance makes perfect sense. All I can say is that it is better for us to put our votes together than put them apart.

In the last Lok Sabha election, we did better than the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). We got 22 per cent vote share in Delhi and the AAP got 18 per cent. We felt many people wanted us to come to power in the national capital.

Cut to 2024, we have good candidates on our side, and the AAP has a considerable hold on some quarters.

Q. You have advocated for a coalition government and how it is bereft of autocracy. Will you also address the perils associated with this kind of governance like indecisiveness or clash of opinions?

A. There is a need for collegiality and cooperation. In fact, studies have shown how the best periods of economic growth in our country have

been under coalition governments. Look at India from 1991 to 2001, those were not majority governments.

At the moment, we are seeing the opposite problem – the problem of an electoral autocracy. You have elected a leader, but he is conducting himself autocratically.

We are not in a presidential system. We are a parliamentary democracy where the prime minister is primus inter pares or the first among equals.

Q. INDIA bloc is accused of creating the north-south divide when it talked about the devolution of tax money and how south states are not effectively benefited as compared to their northern counterparts.

A. Devolution of tax money is objective numbers, it is not imaginary. We are talking about the dwindling tax revenue coming to states by the Centre. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has increasingly resorted to cesses. Cesses are not divided and shared with states, and only go to the Union government. The net result is the states are affected.

Whether it is a north-south divide, you hear similar complaints from Maharashtra. But the larger question is a political one. Politics of the north and politics of the south are incompatible. Case in point is the demonization of minorities in the north, whereas, in the south, all communities live together happily. There are major differences but there need not be a divide.

Q. Political strategist Prashant Kishor recently said if the BJP failed to get 370 seats, the stock market will turn red. What do you say about that?

A. This is plain scaremongering. As far as the stock market is concerned, similar worries were expressed in the past. When the Deve Gowda government came in 1996, the stock market plunged, but within a short while, then finance minister P Chidambaram presented the 'dream budget' and everything shot up again.

Ultimately, the stock market is governed by sentiment which keeps

fluctuating. It is silly to say vote for the BJP if you want to save the stock market.

Tomorrow, when we will have a successful and responsible government, we will automatically see good results. So investors need not worry, they should not be moved by temporary sentiments.

Q. The Congress campaigning, especially on social media, has really picked up, and is garnering a good response.

A. We are giving the BJP as good as they have given us in the past. We have become more vigorous, witty and innovative with our social media messages. As you all know I was not very popular in my party for using the virtual platform earlier as they believed it was undignified. But the Congress is waking up and using the platform extremely well.

Where the BJP is scoring above us now is the mainstream media. Those are the ones who are more vulnerable to government pressure. So this has given the saffron party an advantage in public perception. But the opposition is being able to hold its own in the digital space.

Q. You have maintained that the BJP's 'Abki baar, 400 paar' slogan is a distant dream. What are the chances of the saffron party in the south?

A. In the south, the BJP will not get a single seat in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. They might get a handful of seats in Telangana. In Andhra, they are relying heavily on (TDP chief) Chandrababu Naidu. In Karnataka, they will do worse than the last time. On the whole, it will be a net loss for the BJP in the southern belt.

Q. What is your message for the voters this election?

A. Vote in your self interest. Do not be swayed by propaganda. All this '400 paar' should not be taken seriously. There is nothing inevitable about a BJP win, and it is certainly not invincible. Vote for what you believe is good for you and the country. Vote for a government that believes in an inclusive India.

Chabahar will give India access to CAR

SMRUTI S PATTANAIK

On May 13, India signed a 10-year contract for operationalising the Shahid Beheshti Terminal of Chabahar, a port on Iran's southwestern coast that would provide India with a vital connection to Central Asian Republics (CARs), Afghanistan and further to Europe through the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). In 2003, India expressed interest in developing the port, but a formal agreement was not signed. A trilateral general cooperation framework on Chabahar between Iran, India and Afghanistan was signed only in 2016.

This route benefits India, as it will have land access to CARs and Afghanistan for its trade. Though India had already signed a short-term agreement with Iran to operationalise the port, the commercial viability of this port was a major challenge. Given the US sanctions on Iran and the short-term deal, it could not attract private capital. Moreover, the port's commercial viability could only be achieved if a robust supply chain network is implemented. That is feasible with investments made by private sectors, which would play an important role as stakeholders.

Since 1979, Iran has been facing international sanctions imposed by the US following an attack on the US Embassy during the Iranian revolution. It was further sanctioned due to its persuasion of the nuclear weapons programme. However, some of these sanctions were eased during the Barack Obama regime in 2016 to facilitate a

nuclear deal with Iran. The sanctions were re-imposed by the Donald Trump administration after he cancelled the nuclear deal.

In November 2018, the US announced that it had exempted India from sanctions for developing Chabahar Port and constructing a railway line that had emerged as an important port for accessing landlocked CARs and Afghanistan. Moreover, the US supported it as it was essential for the development and reconstruction of Afghanistan, a key foreign policy goal.

India has been cautious about its investment in Chabahar. Nevertheless, there are several speculations regarding the implementation of this project. In fact, in 2021, there were reports that India is not a part of the 628-kilometre Chabahar-Zahedan rail link. Later, it emerged that it was non-committal as Iran wanted to involve a company that belonged to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards under US sanctions. Both countries later clarified that they are still implementing the project together.

After the signing of the agreement with Iran, the US State Department warned India of the potential risk of sanctions. However, India has convinced the US about the larger implications of this project and its benefits for regional countries. Indian foreign minister said that the US should not take a 'narrow perspective' of the project.

The Taliban takeover is one reason the refinement of the port slowed down in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal in 2021. The ground situation has changed since then due to the Tal-

iban's outreach to India and India's reciprocation. As a result of the dynamics of their relationship with Pakistan, the Taliban is keen to access the port and has announced an investment of \$35 million.

As of now, India has exported 2.5m tonnes of wheat and 2,000 tonnes of pulses to Afghanistan as part of its humanitarian assistance. This export is significant as India does not have land and port access to Afghanistan through Pakistan which perceives India as its strategic rival.

Analysts also see Chabahar emerging as a rival to the Gwadar port in Pakistan, which was built by China. At one point, China also evinced an allure towards developing Chabahar as India was wary of US sanctions. In 2021, China signed a 25-year agreement to invest \$400 billion in Iran, raising concerns in India. Since 2021, India has regularly allocated a budget for the development of the port.

The port would be a significant lifeline for India for its trade with CARs. At present, India's trade with the CAR countries is worth a little more than \$2 billion. Iran's Chabahar port is a major geo-economic asset for Iran. Not only will this port enhance Iran's status as a connectivity hub to reach out to the landlocked CARs and Eurasia, but it would benefit the country economically by bringing business to the second most sanctioned country after Russia. Iran is looking for opportunities to boost its ties with countries friendly to Iran, which has also been a major energy source for many countries.

It was due to the US sanctions that India reduced its energy dependency.

But India knows Chabahar would serve its more extensive geopolitical and geo-economic interests. For example, the decision of an Indian steel conglomerate to invest in Hajigok to extract minerals from Afghanistan also highlighted the difficulties of accessing the nearest port to export which underlined the importance of Chabahar.

Iran also underlines the importance of this port's connectivity. As the then Iranian Foreign Minister Amirabdollahian said, "Signing a contract for equipping and operating Shahid Beheshti Port terminals in Chabahar and boosting cooperation in the north and south corridors are very important opportunities."

This strategic port is expected not limited to boosting trade between the two countries, as Chabahar remains an important connector to the INSTC, a 13-member organisation.

The current agreement envisages an Indian investment of \$120 million in infrastructure development and a \$250 million line of credit to Iran. Operationalised by India Ports Global Limited (IGPL) after an MoU to this effect was signed on 23 May 2016, the port is poised to boost trade between India and the CARs. As mentioned earlier, it provides alternative access to Afghanistan for its external trade.

India has operated Chabahar port since 2018. However, it is only now that both countries have agreed to international arbitration, which Iran was reluctant to accept earlier. The two countries have agreed that the matter would be referred to a three-member tribunal in Muscat in line with the Singapore Arbitration Tribunal prior to interna-

tional arbitration. Iran has also agreed to no penalty clause if the target to get a particular amount of cargo is unmet.

India's objectives are not just to reach the CARs but to connect to the INSTC. The Chabahar port will connect India through a maritime route and Chabahar by road to Bandar-e-Anzali (an Iranian port on the Caspian Sea). From Bandar-e-Anzali to Astrakhan, a Russian port in the Caspian Sea, by ship further into Europe by Russian railways. At present, India is not focusing much on the INSTC connectivity to Europe given the geopolitics of the Ukraine war; it is concentrating on its connectivity to the CARs, which is part of the INSTC corridor.

In 2022, the first India-Central Asia summit was held, followed by a meeting of the national security advisers. The two countries are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). In 2020, India announced a \$1 billion line of credit for infrastructure development. After India accessed the quadrilateral Ashgabat Agreement on International Transport and Transit Corridor in 2018, its quest for connectivity with the CARs has received a further boost. India has also proposed the inclusion of Chabahar Port as part of the INSTC to the CARs.

Connectivity has emerged as a key definer of geopolitics and access to market and trade initiatives, and through these instruments, achieving domestic economic growth is now a potent geo-economics instrument. Chabahar serves both bilateral and regional economic growth.

The Kathmandu Post/ANN

OCCASIONAL NOTE

REUTER'S message of May 15 announcing an agreement as to wages between coal-owners and miners might be more, lucid, but could not be more acceptable. Since 'de-control' and the strike of 1921, the danger of another great strike has always been present, and if the miners' conference on May 29 accepts the agreement, England will breathe freely. Until recently, wages in the industry were fixed in relation to the selling price of coal. That now seems archaic. The new method is to fix the relative shares of profits and wages a relation to the prosperity of the industry. By a coincidence, yesterday's telegrams brought news of the rejection of a private bill for nationalizing the mines. Nationalization is the miners' dream, but few outside the Labour party have yet been converted, and though the Government approved the principle, the bill was thrown out by a combination of Liberals and Conservatives.

NEWS ITEMS

Dr. Lazarus's Essence of Chiretta

At Rs. 4, 2-8 & Re. 1-8 Per bottle. Prepared from the original receipt of E. J. Lazarus, M.D. Is recommended by most eminent medical practitioners all over India, for all bilious and liver complaints. His other medicines: Essences of Papiya for indigestion. Neem (skin diseases). Moondee (brain tonic), Anantmool or Indian Sarsaparilla (blood purifier), Spleen pills. Tonic antepieriodic pills. Family Embrocation, Infantile fever powder etc., they have been in extensive use for the last 71 years Obtainable of all leading Chemists. Price list giving full directions can be had from:- E. J. LAZARUS & Co. Medical Hall Benares Cantt.

SHIP'S BOOKMAKER

UNOFFICIAL POST ON THE BIG SHIPS

PRACTICALLY every British liner of any size crossing the Atlantic includes in its complement an individual who signs on as a trimmer, "greaser," or steward, but who actually is the ship's bookmaker.

Ship's bookmakers confine their attentions to the officers and crew, for no man in the world likes to chance his luck more than a seaman, and seamen are all the same whether they be masters or deck hands.

When the ship leaves port says the Daily Mail he distributes cards which he has had printed, among his old clients. These cards contain the lists of runners in the prominent races which are to be run while the ship is at sea. Alongside the name of each horse there is marked the odds which he is prepared to give.

In the cases of the big events modern wireless news services which are picked up by ships at sea supply the names of the winners. The lucky backers are paid at once in the innermost recesses of the "glory-hole." In all other cases the men wait until the ship is back in port, when old newspapers containing the racing results can be obtained. The bookmaker meets his clients in the taproom of an inn and pays up forthwith.

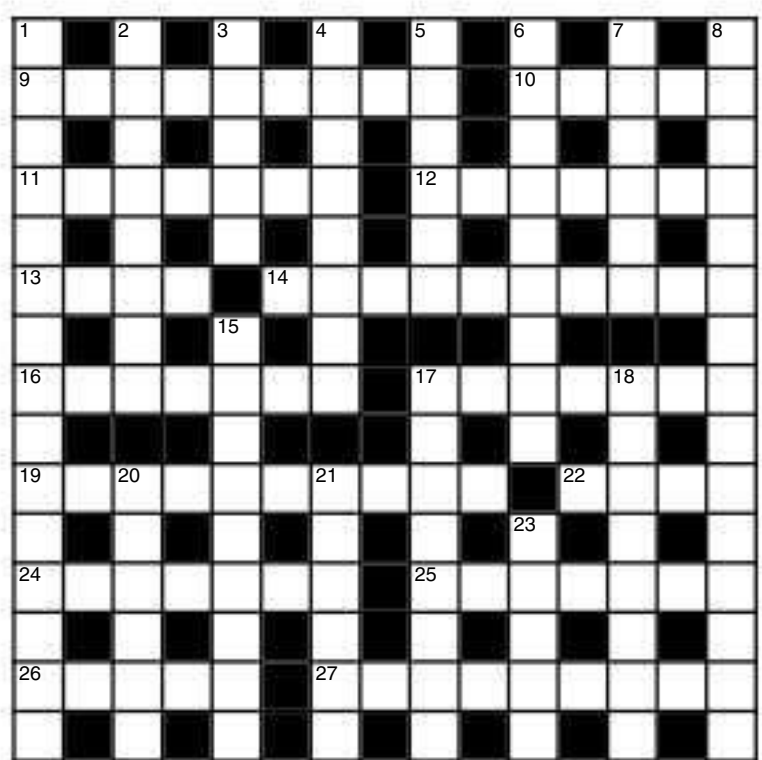
THE RE-BIRTH

I believe I said, only last week, that come snow or wind or thunder I would not again mention the weather. It seemed to me too risky. But I break through my resolution in order to tell you that we have had such an Easter as never was - not in this century, at all events. All that the poets have said or sung about Spring came true, all in a single night. The trees burst into miraculous leaf, as though they had been awaiting a signal, and where, last week we cowered over fires, we now fling our windows wide, and talk of a heat-wave! And the flowers Gardens - even the grubbiest little backyard specimens - pink with almond blossom, and the iris coming out in the squares, and daffodils a commonplace. Tulips are almost cheap to buy, and there are borders of hyacinths in bloom in many a garden. London is ablaze with flowers.

The crowds on Easter Monday were something to marvel at. The river girl came out strong, with sleeveless frock and white shoes. That many of her never entered a boat mattered not at all; the holiday aspect was the important thing. Some even managed to cultivate a layer of sunburn in that one day; although that, of course, may have been due to the "sunburn" powder that is now so fashionable. Modes in make-up change almost as quickly as modes in dress, and you may have heard that this is now the correct shade worn with a brownish shade about the eyes, and very dark red lip salve that shades to brown. I met a friend made up in this wise the other day, and she looked very nice, and much more natural than the women I saw in Paris last June, when there was a fancy for rose-pink cheeks and cherry lips.

CROSSWORD

NO-292790



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

HUSBAND AND WIFE
ONE LEWIS RAL
UNAWARE GROUCHO
ERICA LOITERING
OES G O I
FIRST MATE CANON
O E T N L R T
OSCAR PATRIARCH
M Z R E A E
MEANSTEST NONE
O R T S I T C O
NOISOME TREMOLIO
S N R N H L U T
MARKET RESEARCH

ACROSS

- 9 Hit the XO? (6,5)
10 Left in place old Disney character (5)
11 Getting back to Coleridge, rating rushed over to tell story (7)
12 On the gin, read out letters in swinging bar (7)
13 Laundry western money initially neglected (4)
14 British chatter about stray animal in stories (4,6)

- 16 Ducks missing Chandler's debut in Friends? (7)
17 Old pupil a bright one nothing escapes (7)
19 Fool about to get at chap almost drunk (3,3,4)
22 Put together power ballad? (4)
24 So much French spirit causes outburst (7)
25 Quintessential Scots girl endlessly seen in cricket club (7)

- 26 You French with craftsmanship entering Estonian city (5)
27 One bearing fruit to relieve poor (5,4)
DOWN
1 Dark horse that may be last in Derby literally? (7,8)
2 More than reasonable fare to Jupiter or Mars? (8)
3 Bark perhaps coming about the Spanish hold at sea (5)

- 4 Delicacy is mixed with forage (4,4)
5 Entertainer stumped amid derisive hoot (6)
6 Soldier dropped in wearing suitable American equipment (9)
7 Brill for each coming aboard U-boat (6)
8 It prevents rocky ground becoming really stony (7-8)
15 Mysterious clues about protagonist with roving eye (9)

- 17 An atmosphere dismissing current style is rebellious (8)
18 Transport ship in drama crossing area by Channel island (5,3)
20 Medic introduced to swimmer in wasteland (6)
21 Brexiter insulted loads empty gun with bullets (6)
23 Composer wasting time in tourism (5)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)



Telangana Today

FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL NEWS

Too little, too late

The standard of campaigning in the ongoing elections has been a fierce race to the bottom. Instead of focusing on pressing public issues like unemployment and price rise, political parties have been indulging in vile personal attacks and invoking divisive agenda to garner votes. There have been no exceptions to this ugly display of political brinkmanship. The Election Commission's directive to the major parties against the inflammatory use of religion, and caste in their campaign has come a bit late in the day. Pious advice, however well-meaning they may be, and mere advisories will not help effectively address the core problems of the campaigning. Strict action against the violators of the election code of conduct, irrespective of their position, would help restore public confidence in the impartiality of the poll body. Unfortunately, the EC has come under scrutiny in recent times for its inability to measure up to the standards that are expected of an autonomous constitutional body. When it came to addressing the complaints of code violations, the poll panel has not covered itself in glory. The opposition parties and civil society organisations have criticised it for not fulfilling its responsibilities effectively as the watchdog of elections. The integrity and the credibility of the Election Commission are central to the legitimacy of elections. Reinforcing its independence should be a priority for all stakeholders in Indian democracy, particularly political parties and the judiciary.

There is growing criticism that the EC has been reluctant to act upon complaints against the ruling party leaders including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. Instead, it has sought to make false equivalences by giving generalised directions to political parties. For instance, there was no action when the Prime Minister made some highly objectionable remarks against the Muslim community while addressing a poll rally in Rajasthan recently. It was a fit case for decisive action by the poll watchdog. But, it was not to be. Now, towards the fag end of the poll campaigning, the EC has written to the chiefs of the BJP and the Congress, asking their party leaders to refrain from raising divisive issues that may cause tensions between different castes and communities. The missive to the political parties came a day after the EC pulled up former Calcutta High Court judge and BJP candidate Abhijit Gangopadhyay for his derogatory remarks against West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and debarred him from campaigning for 24 hours. Gangopadhyay, who joined the BJP in March after resigning as a judge, too has not exactly covered himself in glory by targeting the Chief Minister. It does not behove someone of his professional background to stoop so low. The ECI has rightly reminded political leaders that their criticism of other parties should avoid all aspects of private life not connected with the public activities of the leaders.

Strict action, not mere advisories, against violators of election code, irrespective of their position, will help restore confidence in EC

Letters to the Editor

Get strict

The definition of murder and attempt/intent to murder should be broadened to incorporate drunken driving. Wilful traffic violations like overspeeding, jumping signals, triple driving etc can be done with the intent to cause accidents leading to death. If the intent is proved (which of course is difficult), the violation should be treated as "attempt to murder or even murder". A criminal case should be registered against the alleged offender. Parents and guardians should also be made accountable for the offence committed.

NR RAGHURAM, Hyderabad

Mysterious bomb threats

It is strange that ever since the elections were announced, we have heard of frequent bomb threats in different parts of the country. The latest threat reported is to the North Block in Delhi which houses the Home Ministry. As usual, this has been declared a hoax, confirming that such bomb warnings are meant only to create panic among the people, particularly the electorate. Moreover, such threats target places where electioneering is in progress. The people of Delhi are set to cast their votes to elect their seven MPs today! Though many such bomb threats have been reported, none of the culprits has been arrested so far.

THARCIUS S FERNANDO, Chennai

Write to us at letters@telanganatoday.com

Cartoon Today



India in the hotspot

■ The Japan Times

India's most dangerous divide

India's election is drawing to a close. Much attention to date has focused on how India's religious and caste divides have become political fodder. In fact, tensions between Indian states may be even more dangerous.

■ The Guardian

Meta approved ads that incited violence

Meta approved a series of AI-manipulated political adverts during India's election that spread disinformation and incited religious violence, according to a report shared exclusively with the Guardian.

■ Financial Times

'Cult of Modi' starting to lose its lustre?

When India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to Varanasi to file his candidacy for a third five-year term last week, tens of thousands of people waited patiently in scorching spring heat for a glimpse of the man.



MOHAMMAD RASOULOF
Iranian filmmaker

“ I have many more stories to tell, many more narratives to create and films to make.... My stories have to do with Iran but not Iran in a geographic sense. So I can do it anywhere



SHASHI THAROOR
Congress leader

If there is one profession that Amit Shah must never try his hands at, it is psychology. Recall the tall claims he made during the Assembly polls in West Bengal where the BJP was trounced by the TMC



MANDEEP KAUR
Asian Para Games 2023 bronze medalist

When few abled body players practise with us, they get shocked that even para players can perform like that. But in terms of looks, these players look at us in a weak manner, which is wrong **”**

Time to review juvenile law

The juvenile justice system must walk a fine line between its focus on rehabilitation and punishment for heinous offence



KUSHANK SINDHU

The recent horrific car crash in Pune and the subsequent order of the Juvenile Justice Board, Pune, has provided an opportunity for us to review the extant juvenile law in India. By most accounts, on May 19, 2024, purportedly a Porsche car driven by a 17-year-old, ran over two IT professionals in Pune resulting in their death on the spot. The driver was arrested and thereafter produced before the Juvenile Justice Board (JJB), which granted bail to the accused by imposing conditions such as writing a 300-word essay, examining the traffic rules, making a presentation to RTO authorities, working with a traffic constable and painting traffic awareness boards. The driver at the time of the accident was allegedly under the influence of alcohol.

The JJB had also reportedly rejected the prayer of the police to try the accused known as "Child in Conflict with the Law" or "CCL" in juvenile legalese, to be tried as an adult. The bail conditions sparked public outrage. Thereafter, it has been reported that the bail has been cancelled and the accused has been sent to a juvenile home.

JJ Act, 2015

Given the fact that Indian society is governed by a highly structured criminal justice system, in times like these, it is worthwhile for citizens to go back to the fundamental principles of juvenile justice and criminal jurisprudence in India, examine their legislative intent and application.

The principal legislation that operates in this domain is the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 (JJ Act, 2015). The JJ Act, 2015, repealed the erstwhile Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000. The Statement of Objects and



Reasons to the JJ Act, 2015, records that data collected by the National Crime Records Bureau establishes that crimes by children in the age group of 16-18 years have increased especially in certain categories of heinous offences. The provisions of the 2000 legislation were ill-equipped to tackle child offenders in this age group necessitating the repeal of the 2000 legislation and the introduction of the JJ Act, 2015.

The JJ Act, 2015, covers various aspects of handling children and appears to look at the issue of care of children more holistically. It provides different procedures to deal with Children in Conflict with Law and Children in Need of Care and Protection while also covering aspects such as Rehabilitation and Social Re-Integration, adoption, offences against children and so on.

The Act defines a CCL to mean a child who is alleged or found to have committed an offence and who has not completed 18 years of age on the date of commission of such offence. Once a CCL has been apprehended by the police, like the other criminal procedural enactments, the CCL must be produced before the JJB within 24 hours from the apprehension.

Pune Case

In the context of the Pune accident case, a few aspects of the functioning of the JJB must be highlighted.

The Act requires any person who is apparently a child and is alleged to have committed a bailable or non-bailable offence and who has been apprehended, to be released on bail. It is only in the case that there appear reasonable grounds for believing that the release is likely to bring that person into association with any known criminal or expose the said person to moral, physical or psychological danger or that the person's release would defeat the ends of

justice, the person should not be released. In the event the JJB decides not to release the individual, it must mandatorily record the reasons for denying the bail and the circumstances that led to the decision.

Further, the Act defines heinous offences to include the offences for which the minimum punishment under the Indian Penal Code, 1860, (IPC) or any other law for the time being in force is imprisonment for seven years or more. As per some accounts, the Pune police have imposed Sections 304 and 304A, IPC, on the CCL involved in the accident. Section 304 covers punishment for culpable homicide not amounting to murder where the punishment could be either imprisonment for life, or for a term which may extend to ten years, or a fine, depending upon the nature of the crime committed.

As per Section 304A, whoever causes the death of any person by doing any rash or negligent act not amounting to culpable homicide shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both.

Understanding the concept of "heinous offences" in the context of the JJ Act, 2015, and the nature of imprisonment that can be awarded under the two sections of the IPC above is important as the accused in the Pune accident case is allegedly a juvenile and, at pres-

One aspect that lawmakers could explore is the protection of juveniles from excessive public gaze, especially in high-profile cases

ent, being subject to the more relaxed conditions of bail or even incarceration.

However, the protection that is provided by the juvenile legal system may not be available to the accused if the JJB, upon a preliminary assessment into the "heinous offences" which the accused is being charged with committing (ie under Section 304, IPC), with regard to the accused's mental and physical capacity to commit such offence, ability to understand the consequences of the offence and the circumstances in which he allegedly committed the offence, comes to the conclusion that there is a need for a trial of the said child as an adult. In such a case, the JJB may order the transfer of the trial of the case to the Children's Court having jurisdiction to try such offences.

Crimes committed by juveniles and the consequent public outrage on the way the juveniles are dealt with by the Indian legal system are not a new phenomenon. In the gruesome Nirbhaya case as well, the juvenile was reportedly awarded imprisonment of about three years for the rape and murder of the victim, the maximum possible sentence which could be awarded by the JJB. This was interpreted by some to mean that the juvenile had been "let off". Against the backdrop of the Nirbhaya case, the Justice JS Verma Committee was set up which provided comprehensive guidelines for amendments to the criminal law in India which includes juvenile law. The committee highlighted the findings of the Supreme Court in the case of *Bachchan Bachao Andolan vs Union of India* (2011) 5 SCC 1, wherein the Supreme Court had stated that "rehabilitation will be the measure of success of the Juvenile Justice Act". The committee upon a review of scientific and legal evidence concluded that the age of 'juveniles' ought not to be reduced to 16 years.

The juvenile justice system must walk a fine line between its focus on juvenile rehabilitation and punishment for heinous offences. Sometimes, there may appear to be a mismatch between societal expectations from the Indian legal system, especially in the trial of juveniles for heinous offences and the nuanced juvenile justice and criminal jurisprudence in India. Cases such as the Pune accident case and the Nirbhaya case shake the conscience of the public.

The Pune accident case will once again bring the canons of juvenile justice and criminal jurisprudence in India into the limelight. We must analyse how the "system" responds to the public cries for justice and retribution for the gruesome incident and whether the episode highlights the need for any amendments to the law. One aspect that lawmakers could explore is the protection of juveniles from excessive public gaze which could occur especially in high-profile cases.

(The author is Advocate, Supreme Court of India)

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Modi in Punjab

Amid farmers' protests, PM plays Sikh card

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi addressed three election rallies in Punjab in two days against the backdrop of farmers' protests. His visit to the state came more than two years after the Ferozepur fiasco of January 2022, when a road blockade by protesters had forced him to turn back without addressing a rally in the run-up to the Punjab Assembly elections. The PM has had a troubled relationship with the state's farming community ever since the Centre enacted three contentious farm laws in September 2020. The legislation had triggered a year-long agitation by farmers of Punjab and other states at Delhi's borders, where they braved the elements with remarkable resilience. What peeved the protesters was the apparent indifference and apathy of the powers that be. It was only in November 2021 that the Modi government finally relented and decided to repeal the laws.

However, even this historic climbdown has failed to placate the state's farmers, whose main demand is a legal guarantee for the procurement of all crops at the minimum support price (MSP). The ruthless scuttling of the *Dilli Chalo* march in February further widened the trust deficit. Talks on the MSP issue have proved inconclusive, even as BJP candidates have been facing stiff opposition in many villages, where the saffron party is being accused of betraying farmers.

Amid such bitter resistance, PM Modi chose to play the Sikh card in Punjab, patting himself on the back for the opening of the Kartarpur Sahib corridor in 2019. He added that had he been the PM in 1971, he would have taken Kartarpur Sahib from Pakistan before releasing their 90,000-odd soldiers in the wake of the Bangladesh war. He also lauded his government for reopening files of cases related to the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. But his outreach to Sikhs may cut no ice with the irate farmers, who are in no mood to forgive the BJP for the humiliation and vilification suffered by them, especially during the 2020-21 stir.

Two-state advocacy

Three European countries recognise Palestine

A coordinated move by Ireland, Norway and Spain to recognise the Palestinian state may be largely symbolic, but it reflects growing public outrage in Europe over the devastation and civilian death toll in Gaza, as well as Israel's deepening isolation. This decision followed discussions among several European nations, rooted in the belief that a fresh thrust for a two-state solution is essential. The diplomatic move in favour of Palestinian statehood signals a significant shift in Europe against Israel's excesses in Gaza, widely condemned as genocidal. Notably, Norway, a key player in the Oslo Accords of 1993, has emphasised that recognising Palestine is crucial for peace in West Asia, asserting that a two-state solution is in Israel's best interest. Ireland and Spain have echoed this sentiment, underscoring the need to break the cycle of violence that has worsened since the October 7 attack by Hamas and the subsequent Israeli counter-assaults. Hopefully, it will inspire other Western countries to follow suit and step up international pressure for a ceasefire and meaningful negotiations. Salman Rushdie has also pitched into the already muddled debate.

India has maintained a consistent policy, advocating for direct negotiations to establish a sovereign, independent Palestine coexisting peacefully with Israel. It has reiterated its long-standing support for a two-state solution, though Prime Minister Modi's tweet condemning the initial Hamas attack was interpreted by some observers as a shift in its stance.

Meanwhile, the International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants against the Israeli PM and Defence Minister and three Hamas leaders for alleged war crimes. With the International Court of Justice hearing South Africa's appeal to stop Israel's attacks in Rafah, the global clamour for accountability and justice is growing.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, MAY 25, 1924

Gandhi on the policy of Swarajists

THE important statements issued by Mahatma Gandhi as well as CR Das and Motilal Nehru regarding their discussions on the policy of Swarajists does not, we are happy to say, create any embarrassing situation in the country as was expected from the misstatements published by certain correspondents. All that they show is that Gandhi does not approve of the policy of what is called "obstruction" adopted by Swarajists in the Councils. Mahatmaji considers that Council entry is inconsistent with non-cooperation as he conceives it, but Das and Nehru naturally are not convinced of the inconsistency of their Council policy with the Congress principle. On this point, however, both parties have agreed to differ and for all practical purposes it is useless to discuss the question further and reopen fruitless controversies. Mahatmaji realises the fact that the Swarajists' work in the Councils is a settled fact and the rest of the Congressmen should maintain strict neutrality in the matter and give full freedom to Swarajists to try their own plans. If they succeed in utilising the Councils for Congress' ends, Mahatmaji will join them. Otherwise, he expects the former to adopt the original programme. The Delhi and Coochabad resolutions have allowed Swarajists a chance of trying the method of Council entry, and this position should not be disturbed. This result of the Juhu conversations might well have been disclosed at once without keeping it a secret and thus rousing public curiosity and suspicions. There is nothing strange in such honest difference of opinion on public policy and its application.

Global headwinds bring India, US closer

Washington seems to have grudgingly accepted New Delhi's strategic autonomy



GEN DEEPAK KAPOOR (RETD)
FORMER CHIEF OF ARMY STAFF

RUSSIAN President Vladimir Putin's recent visit to China underlines the depth of the gradually developing close relationship between Moscow and Beijing. This embrace has geopolitical ramifications both at the regional and global levels. From the Indian perspective, in view of the ongoing Chinese expansionism in the Himalayas, any Russian support to this adventurism would be detrimental to India's security interests. Against this backdrop, there is a need to examine the possible trajectory of Indo-US defence cooperation after the elections in both countries.

As far as the Indian elections are concerned, the indications are that the present dispensation is likely to retain power. In such an eventuality, it would be fair to assume that the current stance of New Delhi on India-US ties would continue, leading to a steady growth in the relationship.

In the US elections—polling is due in November—it is too early to hazard a guess as to whether Joe Biden or Donald Trump will win, especially amid the latter's legal troubles. In case of a Biden victory, the current set of US policies is likely to be followed through in relations with India. However, if Trump wins, some changes can be expected. The quid-pro-quo approach vis-à-vis European members of NATO that Trump followed during his presidency could well be adopted by him while dealing with India.

Irrespective of who becomes the US President, the competi-



IMPETUS: The 2+2 dialogue between Quad partners is indicative of the growing Indo-US convergence. PTI

tiveness between an aggressive and expansionist China and the US is likely to grow, accentuating the geopolitical divide at the global level.

In the regional sphere, the Indian growth story and Chinese aggressiveness have resulted in a confrontational situation, which has defied resolution despite 21 rounds of military-level talks. At the political level, too, no headway appears to have been made.

India is the only nation in the region which has physically resisted Chinese attempts at grabbing territory along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). In the Ladakh sector, China has steadfastly refused to withdraw from several areas it occupied, resulting in an eyeball-to-eyeball deployment. Further, Sino-Pakistan collusion has raised the possibility of a two-front threat to India in the sensitive J&K region.

The commonality of perceived threats is a driver of closer Indo-US ties. It has taken the US considerable time to grudgingly accept the Indian stance of 'strategic autonomy' in view of the coinciding national interests. The grant of Tier-1 status to

Defence trade between the US and India has increased substantially in the past 15 years.

India in 2018, the signing of four key foundational agreements (the Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, the General Security of Military Information Agreement and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement) and the commencement of the 2+2 dialogue between Quad partners is indicative of the growing Indo-US convergence.

Over the past 25 years, China's defence budget has offi-

cially been 3-4 times larger than that of India. Unofficially, its budget could roughly be one-and-a-half times the official figures. This has created a huge military capability gap between the two, which is partially offset by excellent and superior fighting ability of our soldiers. So, India has to tread carefully while dealing with the Chinese. Thus, in the Quad deliberations, India has steered clear of security issues in view of the Chinese sensitivities. This aspect has been well understood by India's Quad partners.

Defence trade between the US and India has increased substantially in the past 15 years. In 2020, the US Congress authorised \$25 billion worth of defence sales to India up to 2025-26. New Delhi is keen on joint research and production with transfer of technology (TOT) in defence equipment. However, an agreement on this issue is yet to materialise.

It needs to be appreciated that technologically, the US is far ahead of India in advanced defence weaponry. Hence, any agreement in this field will entail the US sharing high-end

technology details with India. Up to what extent the US would be willing to part with such sensitive knowhow and at what price remain in the realm of negotiations.

Prolonged Indian dependence on Russia for defence equipment for modernisation is gradually reducing. However, the pace of this reduction is likely to remain slow as the Indian economy can hardly afford huge defence budgets to quickly shift to Western/Made-in-India weaponry for modernisation. Limitation of resources, therefore, is likely to delay our defence modernisation. A liberal US approach on TOT would help in a quicker transition.

Another factor that is likely to prolong the shift to Western/Made-in-India weaponry is the timeframe for its introduction, trials of the equipment in multifarious terrains and weather conditions, acceptance by the Services after due changes/modifications and finally, mass production for absorption by the Services. There is hardly much latitude in shortening this cycle, which is likely to be 15-20 years, depending on the size of the order and the manufacturing capability. In some cases, work has already commenced in the past few years.

The conflict in Ukraine has brought Russia and China much closer, with Moscow gradually delinking from Europe and depending increasingly on Beijing. This bear hug, coupled with the Chinese muscle-flexing in South and East China Seas and the Pacific and Indian Oceans, is a cause for concern, thus enhancing the need for strategic convergence between the US and India. While occasional pin-pricks between the two may continue regarding issues like human rights, treatment of minorities and continuation of ties with Russia, geopolitical compulsions at the global level are likely to bring them closer in the long run.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The only thing that will redeem mankind is cooperation. —Bertrand Russell

A narrow escape in anti-insurgency op

MP NATHANAEL

BACK in November 1974, as a Deputy Superintendent of Police, I was commanding a company of the Central Reserve Police Force in Tamenglong district of Manipur. Around midnight, my Commanding Officer (CO), Surjeet Singh Gill, told me on the phone that I was to lead an operation in Old Tamenglong village, a few kilometres away. Since I was short of personnel, additional troops were sent from the battalion headquarters, along with a detailed plan of operations.

Around 2 am, two platoons commanded by sub-inspectors arrived from the headquarters, which was about a kilometre away. While the two platoons were to plug likely escape routes, I had to lead a platoon to raid the hideout of insurgents on the periphery of the village at the break of dawn.

Having briefed all three platoons, we left for Old Tamenglong village. We had to cover the distance stealthily, avoiding the crushing of leaves lest the dogs should bark and reveal our movements, alerting the insurgents. While it was still dark, we were in our respective positions. At dawn, I advanced towards the village, with my men following me. Soon, we were near the hideout. I spotted an insurgent in a clearing. No sooner had he seen me, he fired with his Chinese SLRs (self-loading rifle). All hell broke loose. Amidst a heavy exchange of fire, I sustained bullet injuries in the legs and fell on the ground, though I continued to fire till I ran out of bullets. While I lay on the ground, firing, the insurgents continued to spray bullets from behind a wall of boulders on my right. It was just providence that I was not hit, though I could see dust flying around whenever the bullets hit the ground.

Having exhausted the bullets, I rolled back to a safer place behind a boulder, where a constable had taken position with a mortar. I directed another constable to lob grenades at the hideout. With grenades exploding, the firing ceased. The hideout was immediately cordoned off by my men and the insurgents came out with their hands raised. Their hands were tied and I was shifted to a cot.

A little later, my CO arrived with reinforcements, took stock of the situation and evacuated me to the district hospital. A huge haul of sophisticated weapons, such as Chinese SLRs, carbines and pistols, along with hundreds of rounds, were recovered. The self-styled CO of 1st Naga Battalion and four others were arrested; a corporal died in the encounter.

It was a successful operation, no doubt, but the escape of a few insurgents upset me. Having got wind of our men positioned on probable escape routes, they took a detour and fled. Since then, I have often pondered how they managed to escape. Had we arrested them, we would have had a good number of insurgents in our custody.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Agnipath scheme ill-conceived

Apropos of 'Reviewing Agnipath'; the scheme for the recruitment of soldiers in the armed forces is ill-conceived. Four years of service cannot generate the comradeship and a feeling of sacrifice for the nation in the minds of Agniveers. Pay, perks, retirement benefits and status are some aspects of the matter that need to be looked into. It is concerning that 75 per cent of the recruits will be left vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of big corporates once their service ends. Such a significant scheme that has ramifications for national security must not be implemented in haste.

WG CDR JS MINHAS (RETD), MOHALI

Opportunities await Agniveers

With reference to the editorial 'Reviewing Agnipath'; the aim of the scheme is to keep the security forces young and sturdy. After their professional training, the Agniveers will be able to handle complex situations in conflict and cyber security and tackle various other threats. Their technological know-how and the experience of serving in the armed forces will help the Agniveers develop skills to become entrepreneurs. Vast opportunities await them in public sector units and the corporate sector. They can also pursue a career in the civil services or some other field.

SUBHASH VAID, NEW DELHI

Fix justice delivery system

The Pune car crash that claimed two lives throws the spotlight on the broken justice delivery system in the country. It is obvious that if it were not for public outrage over the grant of bail to the teen, the course of the case could have been very different. It is worth noting that the cops took the accused teenager's blood sample only around eight hours after the incident, even though the alcohol level in the blood gets diluted with time. The 17-year-old should be tried as an adult for his reckless act. His parents should also be held accountable for neglect on their part.

SANJAY CHOPRA, MOHALI

Safety norms go for a toss

The blast at the chemical factory in Thane is reminiscent of the Bhopal gas tragedy. The mishap is a stark reminder of the importance of adhering to the relevant safety norms. The kin of the deceased and those who sustained injuries in the explosion must receive adequate compensation. Industrialists need to start prioritising the safety of their workers and the local residents. A thorough investigation should be conducted, and those behind the lapse must be held accountable. This tragedy should prompt the authorities concerned to take steps to ensure strict enforcement of safety regulations at factories, regular safety audits, proper maintenance of equipment and adequate measures to deal with such emergencies.

NITIKA, CHANDIGARH

Double standards of parties

Apropos of the article 'Political parties pay lip service to women's safety'; Indian society is patriarchal. Gender-based discrimination is widespread in the country. Despite a lot of progress, women continue to face the threat of violence and sexual harassment. Political parties that are supposed to protect women's rights and ensure their empowerment have failed in their duty. The double standards of political parties towards women's issues have become obvious. There ought to be zero tolerance to crimes against women. Political leaders must reaffirm their commitment to the upliftment of women and ensure that they live with honour and dignity. A change in mindset is the need of the hour.

RAVI SHARMA, DHARIWAL

Hike stipend of medicos

Most MBBS students in Punjab pay lakhs of rupees as tuition fees and study day and night to become doctors. They also work as interns for a whole year and often have to toil for 12 hours a day, looking after the patients. Yet, most of them just get paid a paltry monthly stipend of around Rs 15,000. Capable doctors are the foundation of the health system. While the state government has invested crores of rupees for the setting up of mohalla clinics and to provide residents with free medicines, the concerns of these young doctors remain unaddressed. These medical students must get paid a respectable stipend.

RAJESH GOYAL, BY MAIL

The rise of gold and the fall of dollar



PRITAM SINGH
PROFESSOR EMERITUS, OXFORD
BROOKES BUSINESS SCHOOL, UK

THE trend of rising gold prices in the last few months does not reflect the usual market fluctuations of supply and demand conditions for this 'precious' metal. But it signifies not only the uncertain global economic conditions but also, even more importantly, the changing geo-political world order afflicted by conflicts. The spot gold prices hit a record of \$2,431.29 per ounce on April 12. The rise in gold prices has become linked to three other global changes: the rise in demand for gold reserves by Central banks, the Russia-Ukraine war and the declining reserves of dollar in the foreign currency reserves by Central banks.

When Russia invaded Ukraine over two years ago, the US-led NATO military bloc did not want to participate in a direct military confrontation with Russia because of the potentially dangerous implications for Europe, and most importantly, for Germany, the largest European economy that was

critically dependent on Russian gas supplies for its energy needs. This strategy of avoidance of direct military intervention by the US is also the product of the military and political failures of past US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Biden administration, in consultation with its key European allies, decided to use the economic weapon of sanctions to cripple Russia economically and, through that, militarily. The US froze Russia's dollar reserves in the hope that — since dollar was the most accepted foreign currency in global trade — Russia will be isolated economically and that this isolation would create adverse domestic economic conditions in Russia and possible domestic unrest, forcing Putin to halt Russian aggression and eventually to surrender to a ceasefire acceptable to the US.

American economic and security strategists could not have imagined that weaponising the dollar would backfire. This weaponisation of currency alerted the policy strategists in all countries that had tense relations of one kind or another with the US that they could one day be subjected to dollar sanctions. This fear led the Central banks of several important countries to go on a gold-buying spree and reduce dependence on dollar reserves in their foreign



DOWNFALL: Though the dollar remains a strong currency, global trust in it as a reserve currency has suffered a decline. iSTOCK

currency reserves. The World Gold Council's latest report, published in April, points out that in the first quarter of 2024, the demand by Central banks to buy gold reached record highs. Four countries that were especially noted to have led the high demand were: China, India, Turkey and Kazakhstan. No official announcement from any of these countries would suggest that they are buying gold because of their concerns about possible dollar sanctions in future, but it is obvious that substantial gold reserves in an uncertain world ensure not only safety but also a sound investment.

Given the very tense

The fetish for gold will vanish if the global community were to fully grasp the shocking level of environmental degradation caused by gold mining.

relations between the US and China especially because of their clashing strategic interests in Taiwan, the Dragon has been the most aggressive buyer of gold of late. China's Central bank (The People's Bank of China) was the largest official sector buyer of gold in 2023.

According to the World Gold Council, China's net purchases of gold were 7.23 million ounces, or 224.9 metric tonnes, the highest ever purchase in a single year since at least 1977. China's continuous 18-month gold-buying spree led to the accumulation of its gold reserves equal to 72.8 million ounces of gold by the end of April. Its value is equal to a staggering

\$167.96 billion. That it's the demand by Central banks to increase their gold holdings — which has been the prime mover behind gold price rise — is also demonstrated by the fact that the demand for gold for jewellery during this period had decreased as a result of high prices.

The increasing demand for gold reserves by Central banks was accompanied by a decrease in dollar reserves. The dollar had an overwhelming dominance in global currency reserves for several decades after the Second World War. The dollar was considered the safest currency to hold. Even till the 1990s, the share of dollar in official foreign exchange reserves was 70 per cent, according to the International Monetary Fund data. This has now come down to 58 per cent of the global reserves. The attempt by US strategists to weaponise the dollar through sanctions against Russia has certainly created difficulties for some Russian citizens at home or abroad in their foreign exchange transactions, but it has failed to subdue the Russian state, which has managed to bypass these sanctions.

The India-Russia trade in rupees and roubles for the purchase of oil by India from Russia along with some aspects of Russia-China and Russia-Iran trades are some examples of bypassing the dollar. The global confidence in the dollar has been eroded,

which, in turn, has diminished one key aspect of America's source of power in the global political economy.

Though the dollar remains a strong currency, global trust in it as a reserve currency has suffered a decline. The narratives of de-dollarisation or the alternative BRICS currency floated by President Lula of Brazil — and supported enthusiastically by Russia, silently by China and hesitantly by India — along with the trend of increasing gold reserves are reflections of the declining importance of dollar as a global reserve currency and America as the most dominant global economic power.

Such epochal changes do not take place suddenly. There may even be reversals or — if Trump returns to power in the US — an acceleration of decline in America's influence because of his blinkered vision of American isolationism couched as American nationalism.

It is not difficult to imagine that if there were to be peace in the world, gold would lose the importance it has acquired in the commodified world we live in because, as Karl Marx theorised, gold had no use value, it only had exchange value. The fetish for gold will vanish if the global community were to fully grasp the shocking level of environmental degradation caused by gold mining,

Uttarakhand beset by Char Dham Yatra chaos, forest fires



RASHME SEHGAL
SENIOR JOURNALIST

THE Uttarakhand Government led by Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami is responsible for plunging the state into one disaster after another. The most recent example is the gross mishandling of the high-profile Char Dham Yatra, considered a big money-spinner. It was inaugurated on May 10, and within its first 14 days has left over 45 pilgrims dead and many injured.

In 2023, the yatra resulted in the death of over 200 pilgrims due to high-altitude sickness, landslides, etc. The administration had a good six months to prepare for the 2024 event since the doors of the four shrines were closed in early November. They could have used this time to introduce basic safety measures such as widening the pathways leading up to the shrines, ensuring basic health facilities and preparing a roadmap for the smooth flow of traffic.

Instead, on the first day

itself at the Yamunotri shrine, with a carrying capacity of around 4,500 people, there were about 45,000 tourists awaiting their turn on a narrow, unsafe pathway, holding on for dear life to a rickety bamboo railing where one false step would have seen them plunging down a deep crevice. The traffic jam to get to Yamunotri was 45 km long and yatis complained that they had to wait 10-12 hours for darshan.

The picture was no different in Kedarnath, which on the first day saw a crowd of nearly 80,000 yatis making their way up to the shrine, only to be met by heavy snow and rain; hotels were charging astronomical amounts, which the majority could ill afford. The story in Badrinath was equally chaotic. Pilgrims braved the cold to stand in long queues from 2 am, and when the temple door's finally opened, priority was given to VIP darshan. This so incensed the yatis that they broke into protests and anti-government sloganeering.

With social media flooded with videos of serpentine queues and angry devotees, the state government threatened to take legal action against those spreading fake news or videos to defame the yatra. Local residents have taken to social media, demand-



LAPSE: The Uttarakhand Government is responsible for the gross mishandling of the Char Dham Yatra. PTI

ing that the administration regulate the flow of pilgrims and vehicles entering Uttarakhand as the present revenue-driven model was creating fresh environmental challenges. Garbage disposal has emerged as one of the biggest challenges since most of this waste ends up polluting the rivers that originate from the higher Himalayas.

The yatra was preceded by forest fires, which burnt down vast tracts of deciduous and oak forests. Forest fires had started simmering across

The hill state is facing the double whammy of environmental disasters and climate change.

the state in November 2023. Lack of winter rain and the dry summer spell have seen them spread to practically every forest-covered district from Pauri Garhwal to the Kedarnath and Badrinath valleys to the Kumaon hills, including Nainital, Bhowali and Haldwani, across Bhimtal and Sattal right up to Munsiyari, which lies on the Nepal border. The fire-induced haze was so thick that it led to the cancellation of flights to the Naini-Saini airport in Pithoragarh.

According to satellite pictures, and confirmed by the Forest Survey of India, 40 per cent of Uttarakhand's once-dense forests have been burnt to cinders and yet we have a state government informing the Supreme Court that only 0.1 per cent of the forest cover has been affected. It was only when these fires reached Nainital that the Indian Air Force was asked to step in and assist in putting out these fires. Dhami and Forest Minister Subodh Uniyal returned to the state after election campaigning in Telangana and Karnataka when senior bureaucrats received a rap on their knuckles from the Supreme Court.

These fires have dried up thousands of springs, which are the only source of drinking water for the local people and have converted this once-beautiful state into a veritable gas chamber, which is impacting the health of its people. The young and elderly are complaining of irritation in the eyes and are being admitted to hospital because they are facing difficulty in breathing.

But the most shocking part of this saga is that the entire burden of controlling these fires has fallen on the shoulders of the understaffed and ill-equipped foresters, who are working 10 to 12 hours a

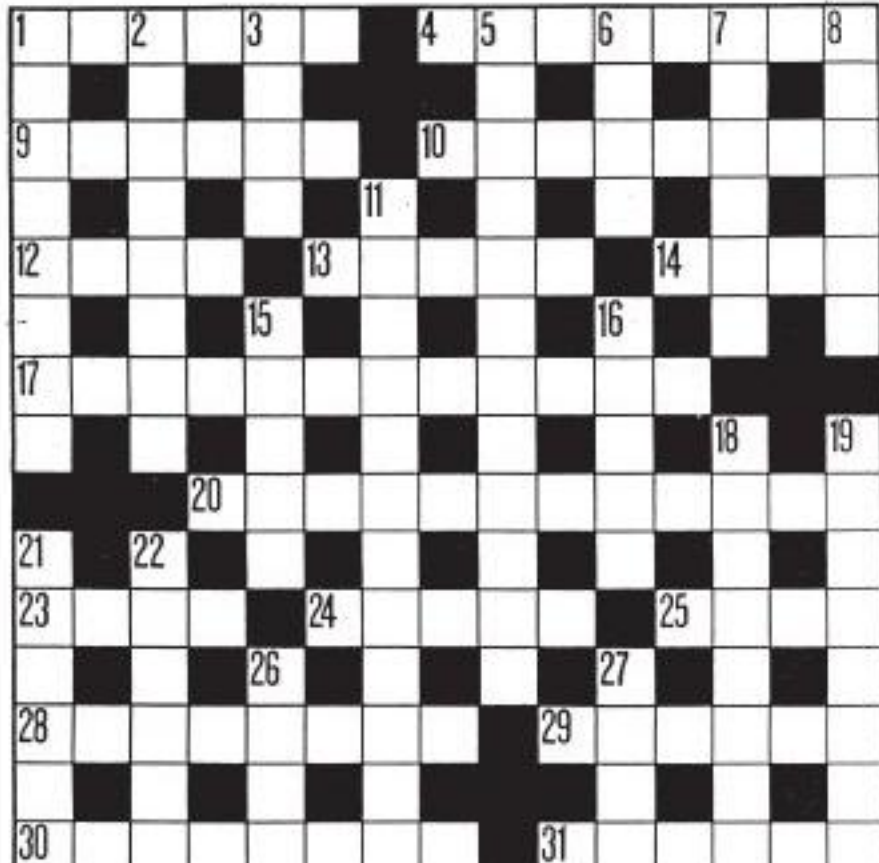
stretch, armed with little more than garden rakes and tree branches to control these fires that are racing across the mountain slopes, devouring everything in their path.

In a clear violation of an apex court order, the state government managed to secure permission from the Environment Ministry to do mining in its rivers as well as earn enormous profits from the sale of dug-up minerals, sands and stones. The rivers are drying up due to deforestation, excessive mining and pollution. During the summer months, they are little more than glorified nullahs. But the mining pits dug in these rivers are so deep that several people have drowned in them.

In February last year, the CM went to New Delhi to meet Environment Minister Bhopendra Yadav in order to get permission to continue mining in four rivers (Kosi, Gaula, Sarda and Nandaur) for 10 years. After his meeting with Yadav, he wrote on social media: "Under the leadership of the double-engine government, we are always working towards the development and prosperity of the region."

Unfortunately, Uttarakhand is facing the double whammy of climate change and unprecedented environmental disasters.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Speak indistinctly (6)

4 Limited to a small circle (8)

9 Remote technical terminology (6)

10 Belonging to earliest times (8)

12 Bias in information (4)

13 Over-sentimental (5)

14 More precisely (4)

17 Choleric (2,1,3,6)

20 No alternative (7,3,2)

23 Eager (4)

24 Take great pleasure (5)

25 Feigned (4)

28 Given to delay (8)

29 Wander idly (6)

30 Kingdom (8)

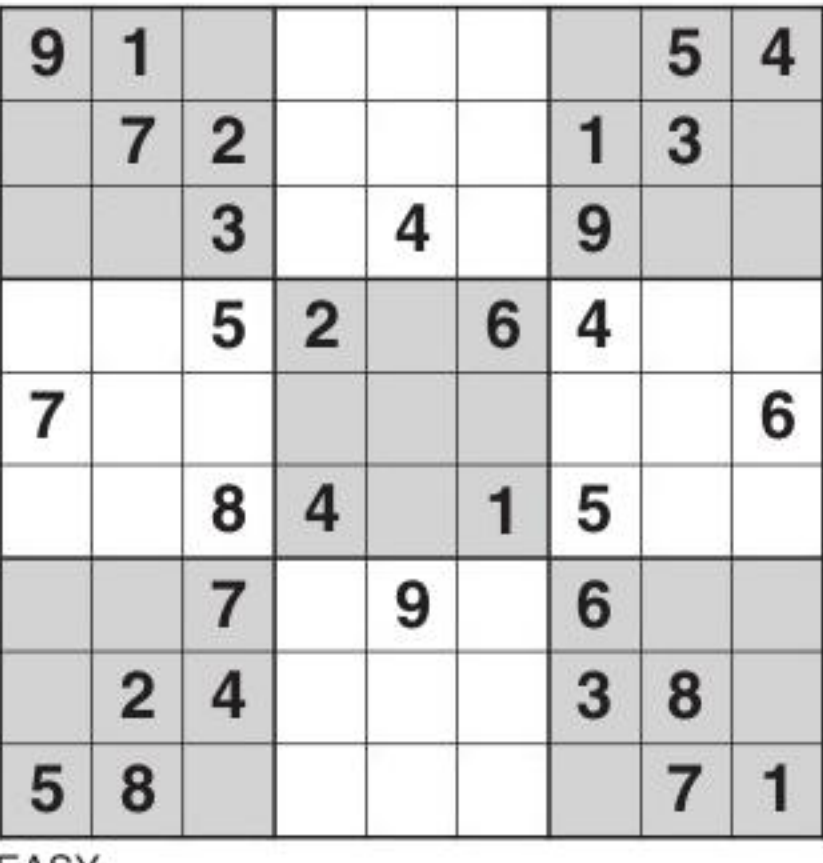
31 Casual (6)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Onset, 4 Politic, 8 Yet, 9 Ad nauseam, 10 Protege, 11 Drill, 13 Sponge, 15 Presto, 18 Stern, 19 Restful, 21 En passant, 23 Cog, 24 Finesse, 25 Proud.

Down: 1 Olympus, 2 Sotto voce, 3 Trace, 4 Ponder, 5 Launder, 6 Tie, 7 Camel, 12 Ipso facto, 14 Genesis, 16 Obligated, 17 Urbane, 18 Shelf, 20 Set up, 22 Pen.

SU DO KU



EASY

FORECAST

SUNSET:	SATURDAY	19:14 HRS
SUNRISE:	SUNDAY	05:25 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	41	31
New Delhi	44	31
Amritsar	44	30
Bathinda	45	31
Jalandhar	44	30
Ludhiana	43	31
Bhiwani	45	30
Hisar	45	30
Sirsa	46	33
Dharamsala	34	21
Manali	27	14
Shimla	26	18
Srinagar	32	15
Jammu	43	29
Kargil	27	10
Leh	23	07
Dehradun	37	25
Mussoorie	23	16

TEMPERATURE IN °C

An act of faith, now betrayed?

An 'act of faith' was how the first Chief Election Commissioner of independent India, mathematician, and bureaucrat Sukumar Sen, described the general election of 1951-52. It was a formidable task by any standard — universal adult franchise of every Indian above the age of 21, enumerating 176 million potential voters, their high illiteracy and complete unfamiliarity of the electoral process, registering political parties and assigning symbols to them, and this stupendous work to be carried out amidst the troubling remnants of the colonial rule of over 200 years and the divisive legacy of the Partition. The first free election in India was, as author and historian Ramachandra Guha noted, democracy's biggest gamble.

Sen was undoubtedly hurried by the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who wanted a free and fair election in the shortest possible time after the Constitution of India was adopted. Sen's approach and conduct set the tone for how the Election Commission of India (ECI) would eventually acquire an identity and discharge its constitutional responsibility of presiding over a political process while remaining outside the political domain, as scholars have pointed out. Looking back, democracy's biggest gamble paid off handsomely, given the encomiums that came from around the world for the massive and complex exercise that is India's general elections, even from the developed nations that had been quick to write off the 1951-52 elections. Equally important, the fairness and integrity of the electoral process was appreciated.

Fast forward to 2024 when the ballot paper is a part of history too, voters' familiarity with the process, higher literacy rates, technological advancements, and decades of experience would have made the ECI's task a lot easier. Yet, unfortunately, when the history of the ongoing election is written, there is likely to be a lot more condemnation and denunciation of the ECI than ever in the past. Based on news reports and complaints from around the country in the five phases of voting held so far, with two more to go and results to be declared on June 4, it appears that there have been inexplicable changes in the electoral process, withholding of information from voters of something as simple and basic as the total voter turnout in absolute numbers, and an unwillingness to be seen as above reproach and suspicion.

The very appointment of Election Commissioners without the participation of the Chief Justice of India made the august institution more beholden to the Narendra Modi government than the ECI has been to any government in the past. Then, at least 22 different kinds of compromises in the electoral process have been recorded so far from different parts of the country. These traverse a wide arena from allotting party symbols to breakaway factions rather than the parent parties and turning a blind eye to rival candidates dropping out of the fray to disallowing contestants to register against mighty leaders of the ruling party, voter suppression tactics which include names missing from electoral rolls to slow voting during summer heat, intimidation of voters and malfunctioning EVMs, possible vote manipulation with strongroom failures and unexplained rise in voter turnouts after a delay in declaring them. And telling the Supreme Court that this data cannot be given to people whose right it is to know. These come on the back of freezing accounts of opposition parties and similar deterring tactics.

Taken together, these constitute an attack on the heart of the electoral process and its integrity. Equally, these make for an unpardonable transgression of the voters' rights and privileges in a free and fair election. The SC does not come out smelling of roses either in preferring to give the ECI a long rope or look the other way while the manipulation, intimidation, suppression, and transgressions besmirch the process and raise questions about its credibility. The three gentlemen in the ECI will complete their term and move on but, in allowing such a massive slide in the electoral process, worse than at any time in the past, they would have damaged the institution of the Election Commission of India itself. And left a stain on the legacy of their stalwart-predecessor like Sukumar Sen.

It does not end here. The question is, given the compromises and transgressions, what sanctity the result to be declared on June 4 will hold and how much faith India's voters will continue to place in the institution in the years to come.

FPI Archives INDIA 75 YEARS AGO
MAY 25, 1949



ARAB LEGION GIVEN A NEW TASK
Amman, May 24. King Abdullah of Transjordan hinted today that he planned to use the Arab Legion to promote a united Arab State.



THOUGHT FOR THE DAY: Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to pause and reflect.

— MARK TWAIN



Two big policies to watch for after poll results

Spectrum
✦ **Madan Sabnavis**

With the elections coming to an end and the results to be announced in the first week of June, the economic thrust of the new government will be watched. The stock market has been probably the earliest indicators of the voting trends and have exhibited considerable volatility ever since the long voting process began. The period has been one of panic selling as moods swung with every round of voting, and one view was that the market was driven primarily by these sentiments. However, presently it may be said that the indices have reverted to the mean and the noise witnessed can be ignored for all practical purposes. So, what is in store for the country on the economic front?

The first major policy announcement would be the credit policy that will be announced on June 7. While some analysts may like to link the outcome to the election results, it can be said with confidence that the decision taken will be independent. The Monetary Policy Committee would be taking the decision and there is really no relation with the government in power. The role of the government ends in nominating the independent members on the Committee. Once decided there will be a well debated and informed decision taken by the members, which is what will be announced. The majority of the MPC

members are most likely to agree to a status quo position on both the repo rate and stance. This is so because the inflation situation still looks hazy even though the headline number has come within the range of less than 5% in the last few months.

The heatwave has triggered fresh increase in prices of vegetables, especially potatoes. This will continue to pressurise food prices. The water reservoir levels are also down to 25% of full capacity compared with 32% last year. Also several FMCG companies have increased the prices of several products which will get reflected in core inflation. The MPC will track the arrival of the monsoon and its progress before taking a view on potential inflation. The big comfort factor today is that growth appears to be robust across sectors and hence will not be an inhibiting factor on taking any decision on interest rates.

The second big announcement would be in the realm of the budget, and this is something which will be awaited. While manifestoes of all leading parties have common ground when it comes to expenditures, issues relating to taxation could be something which the companies would be watching closely. This can potentially be reflected in the stock index movements as there are divergent views on issues like wealth tax and inheritance tax. Industry generally prefers the status quo situation in case there is limited space available for sops.

But from the point of view of macroeconomics, there would be some issues on the table as the Budget would have to do something to spur both consumption and sav-



Growth appears to be robust across sectors and hence will not be an inhibiting factor on taking any decision on interest rates

ings, and not depend entirely on the monsoon to further rural demand. It has been seen that consumption has been lagging in the last three years especially for goods.

Demand for services has been maintained mainly due to the pent-up demand though it has been restricted more to the higher income groups. High inflation and limited income have been the two reasons for rather lukewarm demand even during festival time. In order to change this trend, tax cuts would be expected this time. The Interim Budget had clearly stayed away from any proposal on this front on grounds of prudence. Hence there would be expectations on this side and would be on both direct taxes which is individual taxes as well as GST.

High GST rates have also been partly responsible for higher inflation as there is a double whammy

when producers increase the prices of their products. As the fiscal side looks stable there would be scope for lowering income tax slabs as well as GST rates. A relook of the GST rates can lead to some kind of rationalisation that can effectively lower tax incidence.

The other area of concern for the economy has been savings where financial savings have not been increasing. This has been due to diversion to nominal consumption resulting from higher inflation. To check this tendency, there would be expectations of the government to widen the scope of tax benefits on savings and Section 80-C in particular could come up for review. In fact, ideally the limit should be indexed with inflation to ensure that real savings can be protected.

Industry on the other hand would be expecting a further fillip on investment and while the PLI has al-

ready been instituted for large industry, the SMEs could be looking for something similar. This is also required because private sector investment has been quite disappointing and restricted more to infrastructure-related industries.

Such benefits look plausible against the RBI deciding to transfer Rs 2.1 lakh crore of its surplus to the government. Other things remaining constant, this is a little more than the Rs 1 lakh crore targeted as dividend from the banking system which also includes the PSBs.

There is hence scope to speed up consumption and savings by providing some tax breaks this time.

The government may also be expected to take some affirmative action in terms of focusing on increasing exports which would mean entering into more agreements with our trading partners. This is important as the world is getting more protectionist. There is also an opportunity to take advantage of China plus 1 strategy as most developed countries are looking at other emerging market for their investment.

Hence, the agenda for the new government is quite clearly laid out where the focus has to be more on enhancing growth through the consumption-investment-exports route. This is the only way in which sustainable jobs are created, which is the need of the day. With India well placed to push the growth rate upwards to above 8%, the environment is conducive to this move.

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ECI's failure is an onslaught on democracy

Fearless Talk
✦ **Abhay Mokashi**

The functioning of the Election Commission of India (ECI), particularly the Chief Election Commissioner, as well as his two commissioner colleagues, have brought shame to the country, given their questionable behaviour.

At the outset all the millions of individuals, who have made it possible to conduct elections in the country and are still doing so, must be complimented. From the first general election held in 1952, millions of people have contributed to the conduction of elections and that too in a fair manner. Of course there have been instances of booth-capturing and seizure of ballot boxes in the past, but by and large it was due to the failure of the security personnel to stop such acts. Many polling officials have risked their lives in electoral history of the country, when they were posted in sensitive areas, including those where terrorist activities were commonplace. Even today, some of them are posted in such areas.

It is the contribution of such people that has not only kept democra-

cy alive in the country, but has made it stronger by the day. Yet, there are elements, with narrow thinking and for whom democracy is confined to the election of their leaders and parties. Such people are joined by polling officials at various levels, who, by their acts of omission or commission, weaken democracy.

As humans, we are in the continuous process of learning, which is not confined to acquiring new knowledge but also of taking lessons from our acts, which include success and failure. It has been the same with the Election Commission of India since 1952. Each election was a learning experience to improve the conduction of elections as fairly as possible and Commissioner after Commissioner contributed to improvisation of the electoral process.

However, just as experiences help improve systems, they also expose the loopholes that could be used unfairly to favour a certain political party or a leader. Crooks find ways to circumvent rules and systems, for personal gains or to make somebody a beneficiary; that is seen in the current scenario of the conduction of elections.

Doubts about the credibility of the Election Commissioners were raised in many quarters, with the method in which they were appointed. The Government vetoed

the Supreme Court opinion that the Chief Justice of India should be in the panel that would select individuals to be appointed Election Commissioners. In the absence of the Chief Justice of India and the inclusion of the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, who becomes a minority vote, with the majority vote being in favour of the Government in Office, there is enough reason to believe that officials who are willing to crawl, even when they are not told to bend, would be ap-

done, but should manifestly and undoubtedly be seen to be done." In the present case, it applies not only to the Government, but also to the Election Commission of India. The latter should not only be fair and judicious, but also seem to be so. Events during the first five phases of the elections and the attitude of the ECI is to the contrary.

It is seen that the ECI works at lightning speed in taking action against Opposition parties or their candidates, whether on complaints

Doubts about the credibility of the Election Commissioners were raised in many quarters, with the method in which they were appointed

pointed in such sensitives posts. The posts are supposed to make the foundation of democracy stronger, with the conduction of elections in a fair manner.

The Government appointing the Election Commissioners need to understand that the posts are Constitutional and those occupying the high office are not accountable to the Government, but to the people at large. Thus, the election of individuals for these posts should not only be fair, but also be seen to be so, just as Lord Chief Justice Hewart (Gordon) had said a century ago, "Justice should not only be

or suo moto, but has failed to act on complaints by the Opposition parties and their members. In case the ECI has acted on it, it has merely sent notices and that too to the party chief and not the violator of the Model Code of Conduct.

At the press conference held to announce the Lok Sabha election schedule, Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar put up a poor show, though he stated that political parties have been 'told' to adhere to the Model Code of Conduct. His tone was casual. He should have announced that his office will ensure that violators of the

Code would be dealt with strictly, irrespective of who is the violator. He was more interested in shero-shayari, which lacked literary standards.

On complaints of hate speech by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Kumar and his office behaved like a judge of the juvenile court in Pune, where the father was arrested for allowing his minor son to drive a car. Instead of taking action against Modi, who has blatantly violated the code of conduct on numerous accounts, the ECI sent a notice to Bharatiya Janata Party Chief J P Nadda. The ECI is not a juvenile court and it should remember that juveniles are not allowed to contest elections in India, even if the candidates are juvenile in their speeches and attitudes.

The failure of the ECI to announce the polling figures on time also raises doubts about its integrity, especially when it announces a significant jump in the figures of votes polled. Even the Supreme Court has taken note of it in a petition before it and has sought an explanation from ECI for the delay in giving the final figures. The ECI's failure to carry out its duties effectively may help a leader or a party, but it is an onslaught on democracy and a crime against the nation.

The author is a senior journalist and media trainer. He tweets at @a_mokashi

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Thrills of fruition

Apropos Guiding Light's 'The path of moral enlightenment' (May 16), all empty jugs will be filled at the cistern of truth flowing invisibly underground. The truth doesn't care about consequences. It doesn't care if you're liked or not. As long as you're acting in the world based on what you like or don't like, or what others like or don't like, you're not in the realm of truth. Truth insists that we not only be truthful, but that we act truthfully. It's not enough just to know the truth. You have to be it — to act it, and to do it. When you're a real devotee of truth, of the Self, automatically, your body is well taken care of. You have intuition. It comes by itself you don't even know it's intuition. You do the right things for all concerned. And it happens by

itself. There is a power that knows how to take care of everything for you, if you allow it to. You have to allow it to. You have to surrender your ego, your pride, your concepts, your opinions, your questions, your answers, everything has to be surrendered and the power works on its own volition.
Ramswarth Acharya

Cruel rituals

Widowhood rituals are horrific, adding to the misery of the widowed women. Ideally, such rituals should have no place in a modern world, but under the garb of tradition they continue in many parts of India. Therefore all plaudits to Pramod Jhinjade for trying to end these practices. Herwad village in Maharashtra is the first to pass a resolution to ban these rituals. Hopefully, this resolution will not remain on paper but will be seriously implemented. Other societies too may have the

rituals too, but let us first eradicate this insensitive customs before trying to influence other nations.
Anthony Henriques

Cliffhanger election

To the surprise of visual media, political analysts and pollsters, the complexion of the 44-day-long seven-phase 2024 general elections has changed dramatically. When the poll schedule was announced, the only shining star in the crowd was Prime Minister Narendra Modi. But the leaders, Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi at the national level, Akhilesh Yadav, Tejashwi Yadav, Uddhav Thackeray and Arvind Kejriwal at the regional level and the irrepressible Priyanka Gandhi everywhere, gained traction with the masses and transformed the election into a bipolar contest. The BJP began the 2024 poll campaign by flagging the mystical consecration of Ram Mandir, the abrogation of Article 370, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and Modi's guarantees. The slogan "Ab ke bar 400 paar" (This time 400+) reverberated. But gradually the party replaced the original themes with a Hindu-Muslim binary stoking imaginary fears of Hindu wealth being distributed to Muslims, the Supreme Court's Ram Mandir verdict being reversed, bulldozers demolishing the temple and so on. The Opposition INDIA capitalised on the saffron leaders' harangues about rewriting the Constitution with a 400+ seat strength. It depicted the 400+ claim as a deceptive assertion to end caste-based reservations. The slogans

'Save the Constitution' and 'Save Democracy' have begun to agitate people. Inflation and unemployment have morphed into significant election issues as well. The 2024 general election promises to be a cliffhanger.
Haridasan Rajan

Makes no difference

This is my response to Anupam Kher's remark about exercising our vote. Says the celebrated thespian - If you won't vote today, then you don't have any right to complain about anything related to the government for the next five years. Kher is as much of an intellectual as an actor. Yet, I disagree with his view in the context of Indian elections. All that an election does in India is to fulfil the statutory obligation to place a government in power after the term of the existing government has expired (under normal circumstances). A voter's voice matters on election day, but the voter becomes voiceless and powerless once our lawmakers are elected. Kher's logic would have held water if only those elected to power would have the inclination to serve society. Unfortunately they don't. Which is why a sense of pessimism has crept into the body of voters, and it is manifesting itself in lower voter turnouts.
Avinash Godbole, Dewas

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Welcome bounty

The RBI's transfer of surplus should help next government start confidently

The decision by the Reserve Bank of India's board to transfer a record surplus of almost ₹2.11 lakh crore to the Union Government for 2023-24 will serve as a welcome shot in the arm for the new government when it presents its Budget in July. More than double the previous year's ₹87,416 crore payout as well as the ₹1.02 lakh crore dividend-cum-surplus receipts from the banking and financial system and RBI that was pencilled into the interim Union Budget for 2024-25, the transfer should give the next Finance Minister a fair bit of elbow room when computing the spending and fiscal math. The surge in transferable surplus reflects the prudent asset management approach adopted by the Indian central bank, at a time of lingering global uncertainty and widespread policy tightening by central banks worldwide seeking to restore price stability. While the specifics of the RBI's 2023-24 balance sheet will be known in the coming days, clearly a combination of substantial gains from higher interest income earned on its holdings of overseas securities and the gains from its interventions in the foreign exchange market to smoothen volatility in the rupee's moves must have contributed in swelling the surplus. The weekly statistical supplement shows that as on March 29, total foreign exchange reserves had increased by \$67.1 billion over the course of 12 months to \$645.58 billion.

The RBI's prudence has also extended to the crucial provisioning done under the Contingent Risk Buffer (CRB), where it has raised the level of funds set aside to cover for any unforeseen contingencies and risks to the economy. By raising the level of provisioning by 50 basis points to 6.5% of its balance sheet size for 2023-24, the central bank has clearly signalled its increased confidence in the health of the domestic economy even as it strengthens the buffer against any sudden threats to stability from unexpected developments in the global financial system. For the new government that will assume office after the results of the ongoing general election are declared on June 4, the bountiful surplus transfer from the RBI will give it an opportunity to raise capital spending, especially at a time when the key engine of private consumption expenditure is still in search of sustained tailwinds. The opportunity to use some of the additional bonanza to bridge the fiscal gap can also help strengthen the government's finances and reassure investors of its commitment to the fiscal consolidation road map. The RBI has in its own quiet way paved the path for the next government to start with confidence in the resilience of the economy.

Southern sojourn

India must continue to oppose unregulated tourism in the Antarctica

Delegates from over 60 countries have convened in Kochi, Kerala to attend the 46th Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM) that is expected to go on until the month end. An annual affair, this is in essence a meeting of the 'Consultative Parties,' or the 29 countries that have a right to vote on affairs concerning the management of the continent. Other attendees are countries with a non-voting 'observer' status as well as independent experts and invited functionaries. One of the interesting points on the agenda this time relates to tourism. A group of 'like-minded' countries, that includes India, pressed for a proposal to introduce a regulatory framework governing tourism in the continent. Unlike other continents, the Antarctica does not have its own indigenous population.

With millions of hectares of untrammelled ice and its geographical isolation, it is not a tourist's everyday jamboree or the elite's regular private-jet getaway. This makes it irresistibly alluring. In this day and age, where every navigable square inch of land is up for fleeting, visual consumption, the Antarctica is the only continent that can be described as wild, its secrets buried under kilometres-thick blankets of ice. Given that the creation, capture and marketing of the 'exotic' experience is an industry that guarantees exponential returns, the Antarctica is now the 'wild south' that the wealthy traveller aspires to. A recent joint study by universities in Tasmania, the U.K. and Australia said that the number of tourists rose from 8,000 in 1993 to 1,05,000 in 2022. This does not include all the scientific expeditions and the long-term presence of scientific personnel at research stations maintained by different countries. Reports now suggest that the number of tourists exceeds scientists. To be sure, concerns about rising tourists have been expressed since 1966 at the consultative meets, with the attendant worries that more ships and more people mean more man-made pollutants and rising instances of accidents and disasters that lead to upsetting the unique biodiversity of the region. This urge to preserve the pristine purity of the continent – estimated to be the size of the United States and Mexico combined – however conceals the underlying anxiety of all nations. Will, despite the treaty's commitment to disallowing territorial claims, unexpected future circumstances effect a change in terms? Will the presence of more people from one country influence terms in their favour? Though India's Antarctica-bound tourists are minimal, this could very well change in the days to come, thanks to growing lop-sided prosperity. While a proponent of the proposal, India must be wary of any deal that could undercut future opportunities from tourism.

On May 13, 2024, India and Iran finally signed a 10-year long-term bilateral contract for the operation of Chabahar Port – it was inked between the Indian Ports Global Limited and the Port and Maritime Organisation of Iran, in the presence of India's Ports, Shipping and Waterways Minister Sarbananda Sonowal. Mr. Sonowal said that the deal and the Chabahar Port is more important than just a bridge linking India with Iran. It is a critical economic route that links India with Afghanistan and the Central Asian countries.

But before this, a similar, and equally important, connectivity project, the IMEC, or the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor, was signed on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in New Delhi on September 9, 2023 by the European Union, France, Germany, India, Italy, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United States. Designed and formulated under the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), it aims to stimulate economic development through enhanced connectivity and economic integration between Asia, the Arabian Gulf and Europe.

As a counter to the BRI

The IMEC will comprise two separate corridors – an east corridor connecting India to the Arabian Gulf and a northern corridor connecting the Arabian Gulf to Europe. In addition to existing maritime and road transport routes, it will include a railway network that aims to be a reliable and cost-effective cross-border ship-to-rail transit network for goods and services to transit. The corridor also envisages along the railway route, the laying of cable for electricity and digital connectivity and a pipeline for clean hydrogen export. In its plan, the Indian ports of Kandla, Mumbai and Mundra will be connected by sea links to Fujairah, Jebel Ali and Abu Dhabi in the UAE in the east, followed by the rail-road link through Saudi Arabia and Jordan and onwards to Europe in the west by the port of Haifa in Israel, and along with the ports in Marseille in France, Messina in Italy and Piraeus in Greece.

This 4,800 kilometre-long IMEC corridor aims to secure regional supply chains, increase trade accessibility and improve trade facilitation across regions. Currently, much of the trade between India and Europe is through the Suez Canal as there is no overland access due to Pakistan being located to India's west overland. The IMEC will thus help overcome this obstacle and also cut down on the time, distance and costs of transit of goods from India to Europe significantly. It is



Rajeev Agarwal

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Any conflict situation in the Persian Gulf poses a serious threat, but there are solutions

estimated that the time and cost of transporting goods to Europe from India will be reduced by 40% and 30%, respectively. It is also being touted as an effective counter to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the region – and, therefore, has the U.S. as one of its major stakeholders.

The shadow of the Gaza war

But even before the potential impact of this path-breaking project could be examined by experts, the war in Gaza broke out on October 7, less than a month after its announcement. As a result, the whole project was stalled. In an interview on May 12, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar acknowledged that the delay in implementation of the IMEC in view of the current situation in West Asia is a matter of "concern" and the expectation generated following firming up of the initiative in September last has to be "adjusted" a bit now. He, however, was confident that work on the project would progress well after the war.

However, the Gaza war has amply proven that the IMEC has serious missing links in its current form. During the course of this war, the Houthis in Yemen have blocked the ships of Israel and its western allies from access to the Red Sea. Despite naval deployment by the U.S. Navy and Europe, the Houthis have not been deterred and have successfully targeted those ships. As a result, Israel and its western allies have been forced to take the longer route across the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, increasing shipping time as well as insurance costs.

During the same period, Iran has repeatedly threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz in the north through which most crude oil and natural gas is shipped to other parts of the world, including India. In fact, a similar situation happened during the Persian Gulf Crisis in the summer of 2019 which was triggered by the downing of a U.S. drone by the Iranian military; the drone was over Iran. Reports suggested that the U.S. President ordered retaliatory military strikes against Iran, to be executed at dawn on June 21 before changing his mind at the last moment.

During this period, there were repeated incidents of Iran intercepting ships in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. The Indian Navy had to launch 'Operation Sankalp' in order to ensure the safe passage of Indian flagged ships through the Persian Gulf. There were armed security teams from the Indian Navy on Indian flag ships transiting the Persian Gulf.

Coming back to the Gaza war, in Israel, two of its major ports, Eilat and Haifa, have suffered

heavy losses due to disruption in trade through the Red Sea and also the targeting of these critical ports by Hamas and its allies. A consortium led by India's Adani Group purchased Haifa port in January 2023, expecting an expansion and an increase in traffic but the Gaza war has put everything on hold.

On Oman and Egypt

The IMEC envisages that the ports in the UAE such as Fujairah and Jebel Ali will form the eastern offload points for ships transiting to India. The problem here is that all the ports of the UAE are located in the Persian Gulf and are well within the Strait of Hormuz. Therefore, they will always be threatened by any conflict situation in the Persian Gulf.

What is the way out? Oman provides the perfect foil to this threat. Its ports open up into the Arabian Sea, well away from direct influence of an Iranian threat. It also offers the closest and direct link to ports in India. Traditionally too, merchants in Oman and India have traded for centuries through small boats called 'dhows' and Oman is considered India's gateway to West Asia. Oman is also an acceptable partner politically in the region as it has good relations with all stakeholders, including Israel.

Similarly, towards the West, instead of the ports of Israel, there has to be an alternate spur of the IMEC traversing through Egypt and ending at any of its major ports in the Mediterranean Sea – this will provide a safe and direct sea route to ports in Europe. Egypt is also a major player in West Asia and its inclusion will only help balance out the regional dynamics too. Like Oman, Egypt has good relations within the region and with Europe, Israel and the U.S.. In fact, Egypt had quietly voiced its displeasure on being left out of the IMEC and such an extension will not only take care of the politics but also the economics of it.

With the inclusion of Oman to the east and Egypt to the west, the IMEC can be made safe from disruptions from future conflicts and can, therefore, be considered vital to plug the critical missing links in the current structure of the IMEC.

The IMEC is a futuristic and path-breaking initiative. Building upon the wave of reconciliation within West Asia triggered by the Abraham Accords, this could be an ideal foil not only to China's BRI but also as a useful tool to better integrate the region and insulate it from threats posed to connectivity due to conflict. The missing links, highlighted by the Gaza war, can add a layer of insurance to this ambitious project.

The views expressed are personal

Reading the lower voter turnout scenario

Low polling nationwide has been a notable trend in the first few phases of the ongoing general election 2024 in India. So, would anyone in particular gain from this?

Voter turnout decreased six times in the Lok Sabha elections held between 1957 and 2019. In 10 elections with increased turnout, the incumbent was victorious six times and lost four; in six elections with decreased turnout, the incumbent won four times and lost twice. This data, when analysed, shows that there is no statistically significant bias for or against the incumbent based on changes in turnout. An examination of comprehensive voter turnout data, however, must unavoidably be multidimensional.

It is conventional wisdom that in Indian elections, higher voter turnout is bad for incumbents. Nonetheless, a wave election was noted in 2014 and 2019. This time around, would the incumbent have any disadvantage if there was no wave like then?

The belief in America

Conventional political wisdom does exist in many countries. For instance, a deeply embedded belief in American political culture is that increased voter turnout systematically benefits Democrats. Many claimed that in the 2016 elections, Donald Trump's victory may have been reversed had voter turnout been a little higher, resulting in a possible surge in Democrat votes in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin. However, Daron R. Shaw and John R. Petrocik, the writers of the book, *The Turnout Myth: Voting Rates and Partisan Outcomes in American National Elections* (2020), thought that Hillary Clinton's support hardly varied depending on the electorate's size.

How about the Indian myth? In multiple publications in 2018, Milan Vaishnav and Johnathan Guy talked about their analysis of election data from 1980 to 2012 in 18 major States



Atanu Biswas

is Professor of Statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata

An examination of comprehensive voter turnout data needs to be multi-dimensional

– voter participation “is not necessarily pro- or anti-incumbent; rather, the relationship between these two variables is likely shaped by the specific context at hand”.

Perception about party's prospects

In 2024, a number of possible explanations for decreased turnout are floating, which include extremely hot weather, the COVID-19 pandemic effect, price rise, job losses, and voter indifference. However, the belief that a particular party would win handily may sometimes be a major deterrent to voting. Bill Clinton was well ahead of Bob Dole in the opinion polls for the 1996 U.S. presidential elections. This led to the lowest polling percentage in 72 years – just 49%. In reality, 9% of likely voters told Harris, a polling organisation, just before the election that “if the opinion polls show that Bill Clinton is certain to win with a big majority”, they would be “very likely not to vote, because there is no real point in doing so”.

But what impact does this have on different political parties? According to Harris' poll, 10% of Mr. Clinton supporters and 9% of Dole supporters, apparently evenly, said they were reluctant to cast ballots due to Mr. Clinton's perceived big victory. But the study also revealed that only 14% of Dole supporters and 54% of Clinton supporters thought Mr. Clinton would “win with a big majority”. Thus, it is possible that a greater number of Mr. Clinton's supporters than Dole supporters abstained from voting.

Therefore, in general, the party whose followers hold a stronger belief in a perceived foregone conclusion will be the one more affected by it.

The traditional support base for each party differs across various socioeconomic strata, especially in a diverse society like ours. In the American context, political scientists Michael D. Martinez and Jeff Gill, in a 2005 paper in *The Journal of Politics*, presented a methodology for evaluating the potential impacts of turnout on an

election outcome using simulations based on survey data. By adjusting simulated turnout rates for five U.S. elections between 1960 and 2000, they noticed that Democratic advantages from higher turnout (and Republican advantages from lower turnout) have consistently ebbed since 1960, correlating to the erosion of class cleavages in U.S. elections.

The U.S. elections from 2010 to 2020 were then analysed by Spencer Goidel, Thiago Moreira, and Brenna Armstrong in a 2023 paper published in *American Politics Research*. Expanding upon Martinez and Gill's methodology, for instance, to “increase” turnout by 5%, one could “add” the most likely voters to the electorate from those who did not vote until the turnout rate increased by 5%. One may calculate the extent to which this five-point increase in turnout benefited or harmed either party based on the predicted likelihood of these new voters casting Democratic or Republican ballots. Democrat votes would have increased by 1.5% in 2010 with a 15% rise in turnout, according to estimates, but only by 0.4% in 2020.

In India

However, I could not find any comparable research in an Indian setting. Nonetheless, the distribution of habitual voters' voting patterns ought to differ significantly from those of difficult-to-predict non-habitual voters. Furthermore, the effects of a few percentage votes from non-habitual voters in an Indian election will almost certainly be far more nuanced than in a two-party system such as the U.S. Additionally, the effects would vary across States. So, until the electronic voting machines are counted, these non-habitual voters rushing to the polling booths put political commentators in the realm of unknown unknowns. Without these non-habitual voters, however, everything is much easier to comprehend, and the situation is a known unknown.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ECI and election

The manner in which the Election Commission of India has functioned in the general election so far is very disappointing. From not pulling up the political class, especially the top leader, for divisive speeches to other lethargic responses involving discrepancies in the voting process, one wonders whether the ECI is merely functioning as an extended arm of the ruling party. Without prompt and decisive action, doubts in

the minds of the masses are only going to linger.

Ratheesh Chandran,
Thiruvalla, Kerala

Missing MP

It evokes one's curiosity how the law-enforcing agencies in the country did not budge an inch to arrest the Janata Dal (Secular) Member of Parliament from Hassan, who is alleged to be involved in the crime of assaulting women (Page 1, May 24). What is the underlying cause for this Himalayan lethargy? Who

are those powerful persons 'taking care' of the MP? It is a disgrace that the MP was nominated to stand for election. One is at sea wondering why the Prime Minister campaigned for him. It goes without saying that some godfathers do exist. The MP deserves severe and stringent punishment that is in consonance with law.

Mani Natarajan,
Chennai

The incident of the MP escaping after committing

heinous crimes is not an isolated one. Even after months of protest by the women wrestlers of harassment, an MP who is alleged to be involved in the case still goes around free. In Manipur, no one knows how many women have suffered assault. The tall talk by political leaders about their respecting women and ensuring their safety is just part of election campaigning which is eventually forgotten.

A.G. Rajmohan,
Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh

Deficiency in service

I am an octogenarian and a consumer activist well before the Consumer Protection Act came into force in 1986. The 'Parley' topic (Opinion page, May 24) is what makes me share my experience when I had a sudden “stroke” on the eve of Republic Day, in 2012. I was to have unfurled the national flag at a function. I was taken to a hospital, but the doctor, a ‘beginner in neurology’, came from his home after three hours despite the duty nurse

explaining to him the urgency. After being in the ICU for 36 hours, he advised me to go to a “better” hospital. On consulting an expert doctor, I was told that I could have been saved had I been attended to within the ‘golden hour’. I remain paralysed. Who cares?

C.K Prem Kumar,
Palakkad, Kerala

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

GROUND ZERO



Of love and loss: Tamil women grieve at a remembrance ceremony in Mullivaikkal village in north-eastern Sri Lanka on May 18, 2024. Fifteen years ago, tens of thousands of Tamils were killed in the Sri Lankan armed forces’ final offensive against the LTTE. AFP

A poverty of hope among Lankan Tamils

Fifteen years after Sri Lanka’s civil war ended, a peaceful life still eludes Tamils living in the former battle zone across the island’s north and east. Many are relentlessly searching for their loved ones, while resisting attempts by state agencies to take over their lands. The widespread economic misery, only compounded by the financial crisis of 2022, and a fractured Tamil polity have left them further disillusioned, **Meera Srinivasan** reports

When Antony Jesurathnam Mariapushparani, 62, recalls the horrific final days of Sri Lanka’s civil war in striking detail, it is hard to believe it has been 15 years since its end. “That is where we prepared and had the *kanji* (porridge); that is where we headed to cross the Vattuvagal bridge; that is where we waited,” she says breathlessly, showing once-bloody spots in Mullivaikkal, a village in Mullaitivu district on the north-eastern coast. Many Tamil civilians had crossed the bridge in May 2009, hoping that moving into government-controlled territory on the other side would be safer. Today the village looks calm, with large, empty plots of land. Palmyra trees line the roads and the fields are lush after recent showers. “You will not know the desperation we experienced or the tears we shed here. I saw the destruction with my own eyes,” she says of the time when tens of thousands of Tamils, including women, children, and infants, were killed in the Sri Lankan armed forces’ final offensive, even in areas declared a “no fire zone”. Some in Sri Lanka and beyond have likened this bloodbath to Israel’s ongoing deadly war in Gaza. As survivor accounts like Mariapushparani’s make evident, memories don’t die. “That is where bodies were heaped,” she says finally, pointing ahead. It is the site of carnage in Mullivaikkal, where Tamil families assemble every May 18, the last day of the final battle between the Sri Lankan military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), to pay homage to relatives. After the remembrance ceremony, where those assembled lit lamps and offered flowers to photographs of their relatives, Mariapushparani sits under the lone neem tree in the barren, sandy ground, for some respite from the scorching sun. Hailing from Mullaitivu, she moved to Mullivaikkal village after the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, unaware of the next wave of destruction she would witness in barely five years. Having endured staggering losses and hardships like virtually every family in the district – her son has been missing since 2010 – she has one word to describe the current situation of Tamils: “*Varu-mai* (poverty)”. Many in the coastal village rely on fishing for a living. The catch has fallen and other jobs are scarce. “After 15 years, the plight of Tamils is poverty. That is all there is to say. Whether people are able to eat or not is the question.” Eating less or skipping a meal may not be new to a community that braved a devastating war, but that does not make it easier. “Just see the queue for the 10 kg bag of rice that is given (by the government). That is how bad things are in Mullivaikkal,” she says.

Coping with economic setbacks

The war-scarred Tamil-majority region in the north and east is home to some of the country’s poorest districts, especially Mullaitivu in the Northern Province and Batticaloa in the Eastern Province. Undeniably, Sri Lanka’s poor across the island are reeling from the 2022 economic crisis that steeply inflated the cost of essentials



After 15 years, the plight of Tamils is poverty. That is all there is to say.

ANTONY JESURATHNAM MARIAPUSHPARANI
Resident of Mullivaikkal

such as food, fuel, electricity, and water. But for Tamils, the impact of the latest crisis comes over and above their dispossession during the years of war and those after. The only post-war development they saw was skewed towards infrastructure. It neglected the people’s need for jobs to resume a normal life and for the revival of a battered local economy. Instead, it led to rural households drowning in debt as they resorted to high-interest, short-term loans for everyday survival. Sporadically available daily-wage jobs kept women and men in precarity.

With the economic crash two years ago aggravating their deprivation and misery, many veered towards migrating abroad even if it entailed arduous boat rides, detention, or financial scams. “Families are taking big loans to pay agents so young men and women in their homes can go abroad, either as domestic workers in West Asia or for jobs elsewhere. My brother-in-law is trying to go to Canada, except there is no guarantee of a job there,” says a Mullaitivu town-based community worker, requesting his name be withheld. “Despite the uncertainty, people borrow, pay up and fly out, leaving behind their families. They are that desperate.”

If leaving the country is a hard choice, staying back is not any easier. Despite different Colombo governments’ claims and efforts to resettle war-hit communities, Tamils continue to feel unsettled. Marred by pending questions and persisting conflicts, the period after the war has only prolonged their insecurity.

Enforced disappearances

The questions are primarily to do with tens of thousands of missing people, many of whom were seen surrendering to the army. Despite several presidential panels, commissions, and mechanisms, successive governments have failed to give families of the forcibly disappeared a convincing answer on their missing relatives’ whereabouts. Scores of mothers of the disappeared have been agitating at roadside protests for nearly seven years now, demanding answers.

In its latest report, the office of the United Nations Human Rights Chief has urged the government to disclose the whereabouts of those subjected to enforced disappearance over the decades and hold those responsible to account.



Hoping to heal: A woman offers a prayer at the remembrance event. AFP

It called on the government to acknowledge “the involvement of state security forces and affiliated paramilitary groups” and issue a public apology.

“My husband and my two brothers have been missing for 15 years. My children were very young then. I have tried to shield them from those bitter truths, so please don’t use my name,” says a 51-year-old woman. “The army would ask us to check with the police. The police would direct us back to the army. We ran to testify before commission after commission, but there has been no response to date.”

With no clue or closure, the mothers go about their daily lives, cooking, petitioning, cleaning, protesting, earning an income, and raising children. Their concerns over truth, accountability, justice, and economic stability intertwine as they navigate both the existential and the mundane.

Land grab

In the last few years, land has emerged a major flash point. “I would say 80% of our current problems are to do with Tamil people’s lands. They are taken by either the forest or wildlife department. And then when our people try and sow in their own land, they are detained and charged for destroying forest land,” says Sivasundarampillai Thangamma, 67, a resident of Kokkuthoduvai in Mullaitivu.

According to locals, the former Maithripala Sirisena-Ranil Wickremesinghe administration, which was in power from 2015 to 2019, returned a substantial portion of the people’s land that had been occupied by the military. Last year, President Ranil Wickremesinghe handed over deeds to 197 people in Jaffna, marking the return of over 100 acres that had been under the control of security forces. Beginning Friday (May 24, 2024), Wickremesinghe is also giving out about 15,000 freehold land deeds to residents in the Northern Province, his office said.

Meanwhile, other agencies have taken hold of agricultural, pastoral, and temple lands belonging to the Tamils, ostensibly for archaeological excavation and environmental conservation. The last few years have seen protests across the north and east by Tamils resisting land grabs by the state. The military, locals say, is still actively engaged in economic activity, such as agriculture.

Furthermore, locals flag a rapid change in the demography of the region, with Sinhalese families settling in several villages, with the support of state agencies.

“It’s happening at a fast pace,” says Thangamma. “Now we encounter Sinhalese women coming to our villages to sell vegetables that they have grown in lands that belong to us. We speak to each other, exchange pleasantries. Ordinary Sinhalese people are not the problem. They are like us, they just want to make a living,” she says, making a distinction between her southern Sinhalese counterparts and the Sri Lankan state that she accuses of pursuing a “racist project”.

A traumatic childhood

Younger Tamils, many of whom were children of the strife years, are faced with an agonising struggle. After a childhood spent in displacement and trauma, they are now encountering fresh conflicts and widespread economic despair. If a clean break from the past is impossible, a bold plunge into the future is terrifying.

Kumanan Kanapathipillai, 30, grew up in the war zone, enduring displacement from his home in Mullaitivu and later, life in an ‘IDP camp’ as shelters set up for internally displaced persons were called. “I was 15 when the war ended. We saw the worst,” he says. The years at the camps were very hard, he recalls. “The food was horrible, there were no clean toilet facilities, and everyone was falling sick,” says Kumanan. “I could not take my O-level [grade 10] exams on time. My father was injured in the shelling in our village and that meant someone else had to earn a living for our family to survive. My education, my life was just completely disrupted.” Kumanan is a freelance journalist and activist,



I would say 80% of our current problems are to do with Tamil people’s lands. They are taken by either the forest or wildlife department.

SIVASUNDARAMPILLAI THANGAMMA
Resident of Kokkuthoduvai in Mullaitivu

who diligently tracks and documents conflicts unfolding in the north and east, often braving intimidation by security forces or law enforcement authorities. Surveillance by the military is rampant in the region, and even peaceful remembrance events are not spared.

“If you look at the arrests made here after 2009, many are based on claims that there are attempts to revive the LTTE. I don’t know how that can be said. No one, no youth, is prepared for another armed struggle here. We have seen and suffered enormous consequences of the armed struggle,” he notes.

He blames the state and its security apparatus for keeping Tamils anxious and despondent but contends that Tamil political leaders on the national spectrum have failed to come up with a “road map” for the war-affected people of the north and east. “They are yet to articulate a clear vision and plan for this region. Look at the south: the Sinhalese state, the bureaucracy, and the religious [Buddhist] clergy collaborate to take forward their project to change the demographics of our areas. They have a joint vision.”

A feeling of abandonment

Fifteen years after the war the Tamils do not live in a peaceful environment. In this scenario the future “looks bleak”, says Kumanan, reflecting a poverty of hope. For the youth, who do not remember the worst of war, and are yet to see peace, the future is daunting. Thangamma, too, speaks of “being abandoned by all sides”. “If our national leaders are attacking our rights, our own Tamil political leaders remain distant, with no involvement in our issues. We are like orphans,” she says.

Their perspectives, grounded and candid, make clear that the story of Tamils in post-war Sri Lanka is one of persisting challenges and many gulfs – between the national government and Tamil community, the Tamil political class and the people, the Tamil diaspora, their select beneficiaries receiving remittances, and most others outside those networks, struggling to make ends meet.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main grouping representing Tamils of the north and east with 10 seats in Parliament, appears caught in the bickering within its chief constituent party, the Illankai Tamil Arasu Katchi (ITAK), over the party’s leadership. Sri Lanka will go to the polls this year to elect a new President, and the Tamil vote will matter. If the TNA is hardly a unified voice anymore, its rival Tamil National People’s Front (TNPF) is already calling for a boycott of the polls. Meanwhile, some Tamil groups are debating fielding a common Tamil candidate. The Tamil opposition is fragmented, and the Tamil people are politically further weakened and economically marginalised.

All the same, giving up is not an option for those who have resolved to stay back in the country. Thangamma sees an opportunity in the coming election. “It should give our country a good leader. Someone who will not see people as Sinhalese, Tamils, or Muslims,” she says. Having been through times when it “rained bombs” and there was blood all around, she says there is little hardship the Tamil people have not seen. However, she cautions against getting trapped in a politics that divides people. “Pitting Tamils and Sinhalese against each other will not help us. The diaspora should also refrain from stirring the emotions of our people here. Let’s focus on creating jobs. Let’s focus on the future, rather than on the past,” Thangamma says.

Job at hand

Rising female LFPR positive; jobs quality a concern

The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) for the January-March 2024 quarter, carried out only in urban areas, confirms the positive trends that stood out in the annual PLFS (July 2022-June 2023). If the rise in labour force participation rate (proportion of people working or seeking work in the working population) since 2019 has been driven by the entry of women into the workforce in rural India in particular, that trend seemed to have picked up in urban areas as well. Female LFPR for the 15-plus population in urban India, as per ‘current weekly status’ (or weekly recall method), was 25.6 per cent in January-March 2024, against 22.7 per cent in the corresponding period last year.



This rise betters the 2.3 percentage points rise between the first quarters of 2022 and 2023 calendar years. It should be noted that quarterly surveys are based on ‘current weekly status’ (CWS), whereas the annual PLFS is based on CWS and an annual recall period of ‘principal’ and ‘subsidiary’ activities. CWS data records higher unemployment and lower LFPR readings. The female urban unemployment rate has fallen from 9.2 per cent in January-March 2023 to 8.5 per cent in January-March 2024. Curiously enough, male urban unemployment has actually risen sequentially between the December 2023 and March 2024 quarters (5.8 per cent to 6.1 per cent), while remaining flat over the year. Feminisation of the workforce in urban India is certainly a plus. But it remains to be seen whether it is replacing male workers and bringing down wages. The lower rise in LFPR among urban males vis-a-vis females needs to be understood.

The real import of jobs is to improve well being. Here, the data are unflattering. The India Employment Report 2024 says: “The average monthly real earnings for regular salaried workers declined annually by 1.2 per cent, from ₹12,100 in 2012 to ₹11,155 in 2019, and by 0.7 per cent as of 2022, to ₹10,925. Similarly, the average real earnings of self-employed individuals declined annually by 0.8 per cent, from ₹7,017 in 2019 to ₹6,843 in 2022. The average real monthly earnings of casual workers increased by 2.4 per cent annually, from ₹3,701 in 2012 to ₹4,364 in 2019, and by 2.6 per cent annually, to ₹4,712 in 2022.”

Income trends should be seen along with changes in forms of employment. Between 2019 and 2023, the share of regular employment fell (23.8 per cent to 20.9 per cent), but that of self employed increased (52 per cent to 57.3 per cent); casual labour too fell (24.2 per cent to 21.8 per cent). It is clear that the shift away from regular employment has not helped raise incomes. Policies to lift the share of regular employment, which increased from 14.2 per cent in 2000 to 23.8 per cent in 2019, before falling, must be formulated. The job scene is positive, but there are concerns. High levels of educated unemployment reflect a skills mismatch, and stagnant income a productivity issue. Incentives for creating jobs are as important as those for capex.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

Britain’s leaders showed they were not up to the job And so, at last and unlamented, the 2019 parliament will finally be laid to rest on Friday. This parliament’s prorogation is not shamelessly illegal, as Boris Johnson’s lawless attempt to end its predecessor was five years ago. But that is just about all that can be said in its favour. In almost every respect, this has been as shoddy and as discreditable a period as British government has had to endure. There can rarely have been a parliament that comes to its end as unmournd as this one. Yet the 2019 parliament is dying as it lived, amid needless chaos and with political desperation once again taking precedence over legislative substance. Rishi Sunak’s gamble on a July election means that most of the government’s programme, which was announced in the king’s speech in November, will now never reach the statute book at all. LONDON, MAY 23

讀賣新聞

THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN AI: Face up to Risks and Restart Debate

The government seems to have finally gotten around to legal restrictions for artificial intelligence, but when it says it will “spend several years discussing the issue,” one wonders if it seriously intends to regulate AI. The government should take head-on the various risks surrounding AI. One option is to change its conventional approach from a heavy emphasis on promoting AI and restart the debate from scratch. So far, the government has been reluctant to regulate AI, and tried to let the industry self-regulate so that AI development can drive economic growth. However, there are risks with AI, such as that it will be used to create elaborate fake videos for criminal ends and that personal information will be collected without permission. TOKYO, MAY 24

CAPITAL IDEAS. RICHA MISHRA

In the last couple of years, New Delhi has maintained its own stand on the geopolitical developments when it came to India’s fossil fuel sourcing and making its presence felt in infrastructure projects. So, has India’s foreign policy undergone a change? If we look at the recent turn of events — importing oil from Russia and more recently India and Iran signing a Long Term Bilateral Contract on Chabahar Port Operations and New Delhi’s handling of US warning — what does all this convey? Let us refresh our memory. Not so long ago Iran was the third-largest supplier of crude oil for India (till 2018-19). In June 2019, the then US President Donald Trump placed fresh sanctions on Iran due to its nuclear programme and India was under pressure to bring down its imports to zero with Tehran.

WHAT HAS CHANGED NOW? “Chabahar is different. Chabahar is a bilateral project between India and Iran. It serves India strategic interest. We have been clamouring for so long for connectivity with Afghanistan and Central Asia. We have been agitating this point that Pakistan has prevented the natural,” said Talmiz Ahmad — former Indian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Oman (2003-04), and the UAE (2007-10). He was Additional Secretary for International Cooperation in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas in 2004-06. The Long Term Bilateral Contract on Chabahar Port Operation was signed between Indian Ports Global Limited (IPGL) of India and the Port & Maritime Organisation (PMO) of Iran, enabling operation of Shahid-Behesti in Chabahar Port Development Project for a period of 10 years. Earlier, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for development of Chabahar Port by India was signed in May 2015. Thereafter, the contract was executed on May 23, 2016 at Tehran (Iran) during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Iran. This agreement aims to enhance regional connectivity and facilitate trade, particularly between India, Iran and Afghanistan. The India Ports Global Chabahar Free Zone (IPGCFZ), a subsidiary of IPGL, facilitated the first consignment of exports from Afghanistan to India in 2019. According to Kabir Taneja, Fellow in the Strategic Studies Programme at the Observer Research Foundation, “Chabahar is probably, the only thing working in the India-Iran relationship, right now.” India will “work at” explaining that



Chabahar Port opens up trade opportunities with Afghanistan, Central Asia. But India needs to sidestep possible US pressure

the Chabahar port is in the region’s interest, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar was reported to have said, when responding to a query on the US government’s remarks about the “potential risk” of sanctions to companies working on the India-Iran joint venture. India has not only lost a key oil supplier in Iran, the fate of the ONGC Videsh Iran project – Farsi Block’s is still unknown. Farsi is an offshore block in Persian Gulf Iran. The ONGC Videsh-led Indian Consortium (IC) carried out exploration activities in Farsi Block under an Exploration Service Contract (ESC) signed on December 25, 2002. OVL has written to the National Iranian Oil Company regarding the project and is awaiting response from the operator.

ENERGY SECURITY How should one read this development? And what does it mean for India’s energy security?

India may seem like a late mover in the current scheme of things in the geopolitical space but it has made its voice heard.

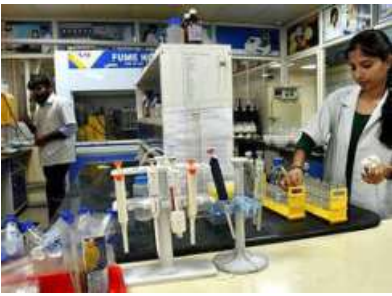
Reforms needed in agriculture research system

ICAR could turn into a nodal body funding research. Now, its research overlaps with State agriculture universities

PVS Suryakumar

The Green Revolution (GR), which began in the late 1960s, ushered in high yielding varieties of crops, irrigation facilities, fertilisers, good agronomic practices and robust agriculture extension. Credit goes to our agricultural research infrastructure (Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR), and State Agriculture Universities (SAU), Central and State Governments. Before the GR our total foodgrain production was about 50 MT; it is now about 330 MT. But the post GR-era poses new challenges. If we have to mount a second GR — to address some current issues like scarcity of natural resources, indiscriminate use of agri-chemicals and toxic residues on our food, nutrition deficiency in our staples, erratic monsoons, climate change, in the midst of global uncertainties — we need to re-look at our agri-research infrastructure. Food and nutrition security are the bedrock. Our agricultural research infrastructure comprises ICAR and SAUs. ICAR runs over 100 agriculture

research stations in all agro-climatic regions. Its budget is about ₹9,500 crore and has about 15,000 staff. In addition we have about 74 SAUs. They each run about 50 research stations based on the State’s size, geography and requirements. Their annual budgets are around Rs 300-400 crore and they have about 4,000-5,000 staff each. Typically 50 per cent of ICAR and SAU staff are scientific and technical. Staff costs take away a considerable slice of the budget for these organisations. What is expected of this elaborate system? Key performance areas could be — recruit better scientists and provide the right education; conduct research useful to farmers; develop and release crop varieties acceptable to farmers; be trusted troubleshooters and solution providers to farmers; provide useful agriculture extension, among others. Surely, the authorities use more nuanced and improvised metrics. Per a recent ICAR publication, “every rupee spent on research pays back ₹13.85”. A good reason, then, to reimagine agri-research infrastructure on a 25 year time-scale to coincide with India’s Independence centenary in 2047. Here are some key questions that need to be posed:



AGRI RESEARCH. Time for revamp NAGARA GOPAL

KEY QUESTIONS (i) ICAR funds research projects in SAUs. Should it still engage in research directly? Can’t it move into research funding, review and coordination, like US’s National Science Foundation and other such agencies in US and Europe? (ii) Aren’t there research overlaps between ICAR and SAUs since they operate in the same crops and agro-climatic regions? (iii) What percentage of research projects directly solve farmers’ needs? Why do farmers keep using the same varieties? Sona Masoori rice and Banganapalli mango have been around since time immemorial.

countries is crucial. Good relations will not only help in supply availability but also at times in getting a good price. As in case with Iran, there have been instances where China has taken advantage of the situation by not only locking the fuel supply but getting infrastructure projects as well. India had tried pitching for integrated projects, Sudan is one such example, but couldn’t succeed much with other countries. Should India opt for integrated project approach? “There is a very deep gap between their dreams and visions of officials and journalists, and what actually happened on the ground,” Ahmad said adding that it is very difficult to get all stakeholders — different ministries and sometimes different departments of the same Ministry — on the same page. According to Taneja, “As far as what India should do when it comes to integrated approaches, there are limitations and limitations stem from various factors including sanctions.” India may seem like a late mover in the current scheme of things in the geopolitical space but it has made its voice heard. But what it now also has to keep in mind is the relevance of its energy security. New Delhi will need to be consistent with its strategy and not succumb to external pressure.

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

Bonanza for government With reference to the Editorial, ‘Fiscal dividend’ (May 24), the RBI’s substantial dividend payout presents a pivotal opportunity for the central government to strategically manage its finances. By considering options like reducing market borrowing, increasing capital expenditure, and implementing targeted tax cuts, the government can effectively address revenue shortfalls while stimulating economic growth. Redirecting funds towards personal income tax cuts can bolster consumer spending, essential for revitalizing economic activity amid

sluggish consumption trends, laying the groundwork for sustained economic recovery and prosperity. Amarjeet Kumar Hazaribagh, Jharkhand The RBI’s transfer of ₹2.1-lakh crore as surplus to the central government and the decision to increase the contingency risk buffer to 6.5 per cent of the central bank’s balance sheet could be termed a fiscal bonanza for the next government. The higher than expected transfer, which may be due to an increase in interest income from the RBI’s foreign and domestic assets and forex transactions, would apparently

help the next government bring about a steeper decline in the government’s fiscal deficit and offset possible revenue shortfalls in areas such as disinvestment. Moreover, the surplus transfer of the RBI offers a wider space for the next government to improve the quality of its spending. M Jeyaram Sholavandan (TN) People’s choices The article featured in the ‘From the Viewroom’ column is a must-read for those who want to lead a peaceful life. Culture, after all, is broadening one’s

outlook. As long as we mind our own business or do not poke our noses into other people’s business, things will be fine for everyone. But, unfortunately, people around us do not realise it and this results in disharmony. It must be remembered that positive vibes are lost in the bargain. S Ramakrishnasayee Chennai On middle-class identity This refers to the article. The middle-class identity is constantly changing,’ (May 24). The middle class is shrinking due to various factors. One is the financial factor which pushes down people from the middle class to poor status. Growing consumerism, dwindling real wage and untamed inflation are already hurting them. They were identifying themselves with the upper sections all along and now with their growing economic demands and necessities is putting pressure on them. The reservation policy has also its role in causing changes in their identity. They see themselves as part of the elite but are reluctant to vote. Their crisis in their place in society is depriving them off their due share. AG Rajmohan Anantapur

The Sino-American trade war benefits China’s competitors



ARVIND SUBRAMANIAN

US President Joe Biden and his predecessor Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee in November’s presidential election, are competing to portray themselves as tough on trade and China. Mr Biden has already imposed a 100 per cent tariff on Chinese-made electric vehicles, and Mr Trump has vowed to impose a 200 per cent tariff on Chinese cars manufactured in Mexico, along with a range of other protectionist measures affecting steel, solar panels, semiconductors, and batteries. The

European Union is likely to follow suit, albeit more cautiously. Under President Xi Jinping, China is widely expected to respond with tit-for-tat tariffs rather than turn the other cheek, thus increasing the likelihood of a trade war that could significantly impede the green-energy transition and potentially lead to a broader geopolitical conflict. What is often missing from the debate about the escalating rivalry between the US and China is the perspective of other countries, especially larger developing economies. After all, these tariffs are not just protectionist but also discriminatory. If there is any truth to the joke that China is the only country in history with a comparative advantage in every industry, then targeting the world’s most efficient exporter and supplier with protectionist measures could create lucrative opportunities for its competitors. In analysing these developments, it is instructive to consider the free-trade agreements of the postwar period. These FTAs were a mirror image of today’s discrim-

inatory measures: While they reduced tariffs on imports from partner countries, effectively diverting trade away from third-country suppliers, today’s tariffs are being imposed on imports from perceived adversaries like China, redirecting economic activity toward third-country suppliers considered allies. The Biden administration’s China trade policy, which US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan likened to “a small yard and a high fence” in 2023, could further weaken Chinese manufacturing. In fact, the higher the tariffs, the greater the competitive advantage third-country suppliers will gain over Chinese firms, particularly in large markets like the US and Europe. To be sure, these gains will depend on the extent of US protectionism. If Mr Sullivan’s “small yard” grows larger, with US tariffs imposed not only on imported goods from China but also on goods from third countries that either use components produced in China or by Chinese firms located in these countries — the benefits to these third-coun-

try suppliers will be reduced. In the first wave of discriminatory protectionism unleashed by Mr Trump, the scope of protectionism was limited to direct imports from China. As a result, as documented by Aaditya Mattoo and others at the World Bank, third countries like Vietnam benefited significantly. This time, given bipartisan support in Washington for anti-China legislation, the scenario of a growing yard cannot be ruled out. Broadly speaking, the countries affected by Western protectionism can be divided into two groups: Those integrated into the Chinese supply chain, such as Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and South Korea, and those less dependent on it, like Mexico, India, Turkey, Brazil, Poland, and Hungary. The second group stands to gain more from US trade policies. India offers a prime example. It has successfully attracted several Western firms exiting China since launching its “China Plus One” strategy in 2014. Notably, Apple has significantly expanded its iPhone manufacturing operations in India,

and Tesla reportedly may follow suit. By increasing the returns on investing in India, current US trade policy could complement its own industrial policy. If India can establish a supply chain that is largely independent of China — a trend that is slowly underway in the electronics sector — it could gain a competitive advantage over China and countries linked to it. Solar panels are a case in point. I recently visited an American-owned factory just outside of Chennai that produces solar panels for export to the US. This operation owes its success to Trump’s tariffs on imported solar panels from China, which the Biden administration has maintained. Without these measures, Chinese manufacturers’ efficiency and scale — helped by massive government subsidies — would have rendered India an unattractive investment destination. But India was able to seize the opportunity and increase its solar-panel exports. More broadly, the greater the overlap between America’s strategic interests and

third countries’ capabilities and comparative advantages, the more likely that discriminatory protectionism will be long-lasting and provide certainty to investors seeking to diversify away from a ruthlessly efficient China. But China’s competitors should curb their enthusiasm. Discriminatory protectionism is currently confined to relatively sophisticated industries and is unlikely to extend to labour-intensive sectors like apparel and footwear, where poorer countries have a stronger comparative advantage. More importantly, US and EU discriminatory protectionism is beneficial only in moderation. Should today’s trade war escalate into a full-scale geopolitical conflict, any potential advantages would be negated by a broader economic downturn and increased uncertainty, which could have a chilling effect on global trade and investment. In this scenario, everyone would lose.

The writer is former chief economic advisor, Government of India. ©Project Syndicate, 2024

Maharashtra’s crucial role



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

There’s hardly any difference of opinion on this: That Maharashtra, with 48 seats of the 545 in the Lok Sabha, is going to hold the balance in government formation after June 4, the day the results of the general elections are out. Polls in Maharashtra concluded on May 20. Reports from the ground about the elections past are interesting. In the 2014 and 2019 parliamentary elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party-led (BJP-led) National Democratic Alliance (NDA) swept Maharashtra, bagging 42 seats in 2014 and 41 in 2019. Prime Minister Narendra Modi held nine public meetings in the state in 2019. This year he held 17 and many roadshows. He had two night halts in the state, which is unusual in itself. Between 2019 and 2024, abandoned by traditional allies, the BJP was forced to find new friends. It contested as an alliance partner of the undivided Shiv Sena, led by Uddhav Thackeray, in the general elections in May 2019. In October that year after the Assembly elections, Mr Thackeray dumped it and shifted to the Opposition Congress-Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) grouping. Sharad Pawar was thought to be the architect of the breakup. Humiliated, the BJP vowed internally that it would get even with Mr Pawar. It did, when it split both the Shiv Sena and the NCP and helped install Eknath Shinde as chief minister.

“When Supriya Tai (Supriya Sule, Pawar’s daughter and member of Parliament from Baramati) says our only target is Sharad Pawar, she is quite right. Sharad Pawar broke our alliance — so we broke his,” said Sanjay Fanje, secretary to the BJP’s Vidarbha region unit, with quiet satisfaction. Ajit Pawar, Sharad’s nephew and the functional head of the NCP, also walked out of his uncle’s shadow into the BJP. The result is an upheaval in Maharashtra politics, the reverberations of which will continue to be felt in the Assembly elections, due later this year. Many voters see the Shinde-Ajit Pawar move as betrayal. But others see it as the natural end of one era and the beginning of another. The depth of the “*dharma sankat*” (as one voter described it) was such that Baramati, where Ms Sule and Ajit Pawar’s wife are locked in a faceoff, saw its lowest ever voter turnout this time. Of the six Assembly segments in Baramati, two are controlled by the Congress. Four are loyal to the Ajit Pawar faction of the NCP. Sharad Pawar, however, is not giving up and is telling voters how he has been robbed. At 82, despite serious health problems, he has campaigned in every one of the 48 constituencies: Not just for the candidates of his own party but others too. People seem to attend his meetings just to see him. In regional terms, Vidarbha-Marathwada and Western Maharashtra are reeling from a water crisis: And people want to punish somebody for their predicament. The BJP says it was the Congress government that delayed hydro projects and dams. But for several years, it was Ajit Pawar as deputy chief minister who had water as one of his portfolios. The same Ajit Pawar is with the BJP alliance now.

The politics of agrarian commodities is a political factor on the ground. The Congress has been reminding voters that while the government lifted the ban on export of white onions (grown primarily in Gujarat) the ban on export of red onions (grown primarily in Maharashtra) continued. That is not all. Manoj Jarange-Patil is a celebrated figure in the region. The Marathas are the dominant caste in Maharashtra, constituting nearly 35 per cent of the state’s population. Mr Jarange-Patil has been leading a movement for reservations for the Marathas. Faced with an agrarian and livelihood crisis, government jobs are the only employment solution: And the current state government has been equivocating on this promise. Of all states, in Maharashtra Mr Modi spoke most on the issue of changes in the Constitution and pledged to never dilute reservations for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes, charging the Opposition with trying to divert a part of this quota to the Muslims. Not everyone is convinced. The Congress is expecting the Opposition front to win anything between 32 and 39 seats as a result of strategic alliances (party president Mallikarjun Kharge set the figure at 46, which even the Congress concedes is not realistic). Union Home Minister Amit Shah set the bar high at a public rally: “The people of Maharashtra gave the Bharatiya Janata Party (and its ally Shiv Sena) more than 41 out of the 48 Lok Sabha seats in 2014 and 2019. I want more than 45 Lok Sabha seats this time.” After Uttar Pradesh with its 80 seats, it is Maharashtra that counts the highest with 48. And winning the western front is crucial for all parties.

Writings on the Valley wall

Reading the writings on the wall in poll-bound Kashmir, we find change for the better, aspiration, a quiet celebration of peace, but don't confuse it for closure

WritingsOnTheWall is a metaphor that has emerged through about three decades of travel, mostly in poll-bound India. This instalment comes to you from the Kashmir Valley. It is also my first experience of watching an election in so sensitive, vital, and fascinating a region. First, what is WritingsOnTheWall? It means literally looking at the walls to see what’s changing and what isn’t, what the people want and what they absolutely don’t. The walls also tell us what the people are buying (branded underwear, Nitish’s Bihar, 2010), or if they are too broke to be buying anything at all (Lalu’s Bihar, 2005). That gives a quick peek into the state of an economy, and change, in this case, for the better. In the Kashmir Valley, where two of the three constituencies (Srinagar and Baramulla) have already voted and Anantnag votes this Saturday, three things stand out. Or let’s say, three de-hyphenations stand out, although you can read only one of these straight off the walls. For the other two, you have to step inside them. Here are the three de-hyphenations: First, the youth, who constitute a significant portion of Kashmiris, have de-hyphenated their minds, at least for now, from the politics of radicalism, separatism, anger and grievance. Don’t be deluded into believing that it is all over. It sits there and comes out when young people think they can trust you enough and talk. The priority for now is education, and competition. Second, there is a new-complete de-hyphenation with Pakistan. It also comes from the simultaneous phenomenon of the catastrophic decline in Pakistani national power and the rise in India’s. And the third, at the tactical and ground level, is the security agencies’ success in de-hyphenating weapons and the people. Everybody knows there are plenty of weapons in the Valley, and still many who are trained and motivated to use them. But that chord has been cut for now, or de-hyphenated. You can safely say that in most parts of India,



WRITINGS ON THE WALL SHEKHAR GUPTA

except probably some states in the north — especially Punjab, where immigration/visas/IELTS dominates — the walls are generally filled with hoardings and posters of competition academies. I do not think, however, that they are as prominent anywhere as in the Kashmir Valley. Allen Career Institute, Chanakya IAS Academy, Elite IAS, Emerge Institute of Coaching, The Commencians, Vedantu, Nucleus Institute of Excellence — literally scores of brands fills the walls, trees, uni-poles, just about any place you could hang or stick anything onto. Everybody wants to crack UPSC, NEET, JEE, all the things young people across the country covet. So many of these hoardings have portraits of their successful students. This is the post-stone-throwing generation of Kashmiris. They are also the Valley’s new future. I messaged my old friend and colleague Uday Shankar — yes, formerly of Star-Disney, now a formidable entrepreneur — to tell him I see so many hoardings of his new coaching academy venture, Allen, that perhaps the place should be renamed the Valley of Allen or Allenistan. He told me with pride how many young Kashmiris are cracking these exams to become doctors, engineers and so on. If you were one of those still nostalgic about the heyday of militancy and separatism, you might call it a great distraction. Even if so, there couldn’t be a more virtuous distraction. If tens of thousands of boys — and girls — want to compete with the best and look for careers outside the Valley, it’s the kind of change not even a doubling of defence budgets, or laws three times tougher than UAPA could bring about. The walls also give us the starkest evidence of what hasn’t changed, and the tensions that lie within. Walk along Gupkar Road, where the mightiest in Kashmir live. That’s why the alliance the key Valley parties once formed was called the Gupkar Alliance.

Cinematic churn

EYE CULTURE

VISHAL MENON

Naseeruddin Shah was overwhelmed with a complex swirl of emotions as he walked the red carpet at the 77th Cannes Film Festival earlier this week. The veteran actor, known for his sharp acerbic wit and stoic demeanour, admitted that he could barely hold back his tears during the world premiere of *Manthan*, a 1976 film directed by celebrated auteur Shyam Benegal, at the picturesque resort town situated on the French Riviera. Loosely based on the milk cooperative movement in Gujarat pioneered by Verghese Kurien, this film was entirely crowdfunded by 5,00,000 farmers who donated ₹2 each. *Manthan* boasts of a stellar cast that included Girish Karnad, Amrish Puri, Smriti Patil, and Mr Shah, who incidentally learnt how to milk buffaloes during the making of this film. This timeless classic that portrayed the power of the collective might was screened at this edition’s Cannes Classics Sidebar. Mr Shah called *Manthan* the Kohinoor diamond in his star-studded filmography. “It is the most important film that I have done,” he had remarked. *Manthan*, India’s first crowd-funded film, was not made to fill the coffers of the producers. It was made to empower the marginalised. Nearly five decades after its release, the film stands out for its nuanced narrative, knockout performances, and enduring appeal. Mr Benegal made this film at a crucial juncture in India’s history. The country

had just emerged from the throes of the Emergency. Unemployment was rampant, and the economy had come to a grinding halt. In the midst of this widespread gloom, the masses sought refuge in the commercial potboilers dished out by Amitabh Bachchan, Rajesh Khanna, and Dharmendra. Mr Benegal was not swayed by such commercial implications. He, along with Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Kasaravalli, Govind Nihalani, and KG George, was more inclined towards providing an alternative to mainstream commercial cinema. In essence, they were the champions of the Parallel cinema movement, the seeds of which were sown in the 1950s by acclaimed Bengali filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, and Mrinal Sen. Parallel cinema hit its apogee in the 1970s, with *Manthan*, and the movement continued well into the next decade. It went downhill in the 1990s. Limited box office appeal and the lack of institutional support led to the proliferation of more of the same: Films with the usual song and dance routines, mindless fight sequences and cringe-worthy college romances. At the turn of the century, filmmakers, however, garnered a fair bit of courage to experiment with middle-of-the-road offerings. Notably, filmmakers like Vishal Bhardwaj, Tigmanshu Dhulia, Navdeep Singh and Hansal Mehta appeared on the horizon. Abhay Deol, an actor who refused to conform to the dictates of mainstream Bollywood, also ushered in some interesting films in this period. *Manorama Six Feet Under*, *Oye Lucky*, *Lucky Oye*, *DevDm* and *The Road* are the case in point. But the flame flickered only for a brief period, as reigning Bollywood

stars like Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan, Aamir Khan, and Hrithik Roshan tantalised audiences with their loud, over-the-top performances in lavishly mounted big-budget films. A film’s success was no longer gauged by its storytelling, performances or aesthetic appeal. The ₹100 crore club became the official tag to judge a film’s success. The pandemic led to an explosion in over-the-top (OTT) subscriptions due to its affordable rates, and hassle-free internet access. This opened the doors to pristine gems from regional cinema, masterpieces from world cinema, and documentaries from a treasure trove of offerings. Binge-watching has become the watchword for consuming entertainment. Thanks to the OTT boom, Malayalam cinema has enthralled audiences from across the country, so much so that people are breaking the one-inch subtitle barrier and queuing up in front of theatres. Take the case of *Manjummel Boys*, a gripping survival thriller, made on a modest budget of ₹18 crore has raked in over ₹240 crore at the box office globally. The roaring success of *Manjummel Boys* offers hope for content-driven films. Perhaps, mainstream Hindi filmmakers can take a cue. Mr Shah, however, is not impressed. “It really disappoints me that we take pride in saying Hindi cinema is 100 years old, we have been making the same films. I have stopped watching Hindi films, I don’t like them at all,” the 74-year-old told *PTI*. “Hindustani food is loved everywhere because it has substance. What substance do Hindi films have?” he added. After the gala premiere at Cannes, the restored version of *Manthan* is poised for a theatrical re-release in 100 cinemas across India next month. Will it captivate the new-age audience?

Diljit Dosanjh: India’s Taylor Swift?



YES, BUT... SANDEEP GOYAL

In 2023, the 34-year-old pop superstar Taylor Swift embarked on an ambitious 21-month-long world tour, spanning 151 shows across five continents. Swift’s tour is set to conclude in December 2024. It has collected over \$1 billion — breaking the record for the highest-grossing tour of all time, according to *Guinness World Records*. The tour’s last concert was a sold-out show at the 55,000-seat National Stadium in Singapore (many of my Indian friends flew out to attend it) on March 9. Swift has been taking an extended break before her next concerts — all in Paris in May. But this piece is not about her music. It is about Swift being named the “biggest celebrity CO2 polluter” in the world (followed by Floyd Mayweather and Jay-Z) after the social media account Celebrity Jets trailed many stars, including Kylie Jenner, Steven Spielberg and Drake.

Taylor Swift’s private jet flights apparently produced 77,834 tonnes of carbon dioxide between December 25 and January 30 alone. And that has ignited a huge global debate. Top carbon-emitting celebrities emit about 3,376 tonnes of CO2 each for their flights, compared to an average person’s total CO2 footprint of 7 tonnes per year. A London-to-Delhi private jet flight is 11 times more polluting than a regular commercial aircraft, 35 times more than a train, and a staggering 52 times more than a bus. While 90 minutes of flying in a typical private jet produces 3,583.38 kg of CO2 per passenger, a flight on a commercial airliner with 90 minutes of flying time produces 78.93 kg of CO2 per passenger. That’s the difference. Swift owns two different private jets: A Dassault Falcon 7X and 900LX — one of which is for her concerts, and the other stays as a reserve at her base in Nashville. A study from Greenly provides data on her usage of the Falcon 900LX, her preferred private jet for long-distance travel. During the American leg of her tour lasting nearly a year, Swift travelled nearly 37,053 miles, generating 77.5 tonnes of CO2e over almost 113 flight hours. For her South American leg, the celebrated artist is believed to have emitted 61.6 tCO2e, having travelled 29,431 miles. Therefore, the Eras Tour has

emitted 139 tonnes in CO2e emissions for 66,484 miles worth of travel for the North American and South American legs alone. Swift has also flown to Asia and Australia for her world tour and still has the European leg to go. Swift also travelled 20,000 miles during the week-end of the Super Bowl to watch boyfriend Travis Kelce play. She made two round trips across the Pacific Ocean for the Japan and Australian legs of the Eras Tour. These staggering numbers are likely to continue this summer as the tour arrives in Europe. Much of the controversy over Swift’s private jet usage is due to what people deem as unnecessary travel. Boxing legend Floyd Mayweather had a carbon footprint of 7,076.8 tonnes of CO2 from his private jet — 1,011 times that of any ordinary Joe. Television host Oprah Winfrey emitted 3,493.17 tonnes of CO2 from the 68 flights she took — 499 times more than an average person’s annual emissions. Elon Musk flies private jets more than any other businessman-billionaire — releasing over 2,000 tonnes of carbon emissions in his wake. Other biggies are not far behind. There is not much data in the public domain on the carbon footprint of celebrity private jet owners in India. But India is starting to inch its way upwards on the carbon nasties list. Jamnagar’s tiny airport, which usually caters to about five civilian aircraft a day, handled about 600 flights during the five-day pre-wedding celebrations of Anant Ambani. India had never before witnessed such an extravaganza where the number of private jets at the event far exceeded all expectations and estimates. The sheer emissions triggered by the visiting celebrity guests would have been pretty mind-blowing. There is a growing list of Indian celebrities who now own private jets (or so media reports would have us believe) — Ajay Devgn, Priyanka Chopra, Shah Rukh Khan, Shilpa Shetty Kundra, Amitabh Bachchan, Akshay Kumar, Madhuri Dixit Nene, Hrithik Roshan, Saif Ali Khan, Salman Khan, Anil Kapoor, and a host of Southern stars — Ram Charan, Akkineni Nagarjuna, Allu Arjun. Pawan Kalyan and Junior NTR. And, of course, Virat Kohli, Sachin Tendulkar, MS Dhoni, Hardik Pandya and Kapil Dev also reportedly own jets. But it is songster Diljit Dosanjh (first singer to own a private jet) who is perhaps best positioned in India to challenge Taylor Swift’s carbon record with a *Balle Balle* world Tour. Touché.

The writer is chairman of Rediffusion



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
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{ OUR TAKE }

In Delhi battle, national echoes

The campaign in the national Capital has been high on drama, and reflected the themes that have resonated across India in this election

Elections in the national capital territory (NCT) of Delhi are a prestigious battle even though it sends only seven MPs to the Lok Sabha. This is understandable since, as a seat of power, it attracts national attention. The electorate here is a slice of India, with many having migrated to the city in search of employment or education, and the outcomes tend to reflect the national trend: The winning party at the Centre is known to bag maximum seats in NCT.

What has distinguished the contest in Delhi this time is the theatre injected into the campaign ahead of nominations and thereafter. The preparations in Delhi for the polls started in the backdrop of the arrest of chief minister Arvind Kejriwal in the 2020-21 excise policy case. In response, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) set the tone with its “*jail ka jawab vote se* (respond to jail with your vote)” campaign. The Opposition INDIA bloc rallied for Kejriwal at the Ram Lila Maidan in April, which also saw his wife, Sunita, making a political pitch. Later, the Supreme Court’s decision to allow bail to Kejriwal to campaign spiced up the electoral arena.

A complaint by AAP MP Swati Maliwal that she was assaulted by the CM’s aide at Kejriwal’s residence, complicated the campaign in its final hours, but, by and large, the narrative has revolved around the BJP’s chorus for Brand Modi and the Opposition’s pitch that shifted between hyper-local issues and allegations that democracy and federalism were in danger. Top leaders added heft to the campaign that battled both heat and voter disinterest. The demographic transitions and polarisation in the electorate also influenced the choice of candidates. The growing Purvanchali vote, for instance, has over the years prompted parties to field candidates whose origins are in that region.

Politically, the battle in Delhi is interesting for multiple reasons. The contest has turned bipolar for the first time since the 2009 general elections. The AAP and Congress, bitter rivals in the past, have a common goal of defeating the BJP. Delhi was swept by the BJP in the last two general elections. Now, can a bipolar contest tilt the scales?

The 2019 vote percentages offer a sobering picture for the INDIA bloc: The BJP, which comfortably crossed the halfway mark in terms of vote share, had a mammoth 16 percentage point lead over the combined vote shares of the AAP and Congress. Should that comfort the BJP, which changed six of its seven sitting MPs over fear of anti-incumbency?

The Delhi electorate is known to back horses for courses as the results of the past few Parliament, assembly and local body polls show — the BJP/Modi at the Centre and the AAP for state and local government. The preferences are so clear cut that the electorate which gave a thumping majority to the AAP in the 2015 assembly polls (67 out of 70 seats) elected only BJP MPs and gave the party 56.6% of the total votes polled in 2019. A year later, the AAP near-swept the assembly elections with 62 seats. With no wave in sight, the question now is if it will be a 7-0 scoreline for the winner, or a split verdict, as was common in the 1990s.

The voter’s primary duty, however, is to make sure that she casts her vote. Turnout in Delhi has seen swings — 51.86% in 2009 to 65.10% in 2014 to 60% in 2019. Voter apathy undermines democracy. Delhi’s voters, hopefully, will not let that happen but brave the heat and queue up to shape the destiny of the nation. Nothing less is expected of India’s Capital.

How the Centre should spend the bonanza from RBI

The new government would be wise to prioritise reducing fiscal deficit with the surplus dividend from the central bank. Spending, if any, from this amount should be on capex

Suppose you got a sudden inflow of money. A bonus at work, a tax refund or an inheritance that gives you a one-time boost. As an individual, you have three decisions in front of you — spend it, pay off your debts, or invest it. Smart people would use a mix of the three options, prioritising the paying off of debt. Governments, too, have the same choices when faced with a sudden money boost. The extra trillion of surplus that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has transferred to the government will allow the government, formed after the elections, to decide what path it wants to tread. A fiscal-prudence-plus-investment road is good for the long-term health of the country, a populist spending splurge or redistribution urge will be as harmful as a rich dad buying a Porsche and allowing an underage kid to drink and drive.

RBI recently created headlines as it announced a transfer of ₹2.11 trillion to the government, almost double the amount estimated in the 2024 interim budget. How did RBI get this extra money? While RBI has not given a reason in its May 22 press release, in which it announced the decision taken at the 608th board meeting to transfer the higher-than-anticipated amount, we can make some guesses. The biggest reason could be the rise in interest rates on United States (US) treasuries. RBI holds a mix of US government bonds and dollars as a “reserve” or safety money. The World Economic Forum lists seven reasons why countries keep foreign (mainly US) currency and bonds as reserve, including having

liquidity for international transactions, as a hedge against any domestic economic crisis, and to reassure foreign investors. This reserve is mainly held both as dollars and as US government or US treasury bonds.

As on March 31, RBI held ₹4.74 trillion of foreign currency assets. RBI’s earnings from its US treasury holdings must be up on the back of rising interest rates in the US. These rates have gone up from a low of 0.52% on August 4, 2020, on the 10-year US treasury, to 4.20% on March 22, 2024, resulting in a big hike in interest income for bondholders. There has been some speculation that the government “arm-twisted” RBI into this higher transfer or forced it to take too much risk. A retired senior official of RBI rejected the idea outright and agreed with the higher-interest income line of thought.

Whatever the reason, the extra trillion of cash gives the government that comes to power in June options to spend, invest or pay off its debts — choices similar to what we face as individuals. The first impulse when faced with a sudden inflow of money is to spend. And had this infusion come a year earlier, the temptation for a freebie splurge in a pre-election year might have been high. But whichever government comes into power in June, it need not splurge this windfall for political benefit as elections will be half a decade away.

The second option will be spending on capi-

A FISCAL-PRUDENCE-PLUS-INVESTMENT ROAD IS GOOD FOR THE LONG-TERM HEALTH OF THE COUNTRY, A POPULIST SPENDING SPLURGE WILL BE AS HARMFUL AS A RICH DAD BUYING A PORSCHE AND ALLOWING AN UNDERAGE KID TO DRINK AND DRIVE



Monika Halan

‘Knife’ cuts through the debate on free speech

To thine own self be true. And that’s the essence and ironically, messianic message of Salman Rushdie’s oeuvre and life. *Knife*, his latest is a sharp work of literature that cuts the flab of Joseph Anton and presents Rushdie as barebones.

But that’s not why this slim book is one of the most important pieces of writing of our times. Rushdie’s easiest work is probably the most difficult one for any reader with a conscience. As he lay recovering, half-blinded and handicapped, from an assassination attempt, the world around Rushdie busied itself with examining and re-examining the limits to free speech. What is hate speech? What is defamatory speech? Who ascertains what is worthy of “punishment”? Governments? Assassins? Radicalised mobs? Civil society?

With India in the throes of the general elections, these questions are more relevant than ever. Each time people exercise their right to vote, in India or elsewhere, they rally behind an idea. An idea that gets articulated in both speech and action. Like religion, politics is also a matter of faith. And as many of us end up realising, it can be equally one-sided. Devotion stays unrequited. Like love. Religion, politics, devotion, and love — they all require expression for sustenance. Yet, the respective expression to each of these categories attempts to preclude or, worse,

penalise expressions for all the others.

Some of the staunchest believers in the freedom of speech and expression sometimes advocate for setting limits. For the greater good. Even peace and harmony, the mirage. But let this be said, this qualified freedom is no freedom. The right to offend, the right to punch up and down through words, the right to be vulgar and hateful, are as important as “speaking truth to power”.

It is time to resurrect 19th-century British political philosopher John Stuart Mill’s near absolutism and 20th century American educationist and free-speech advocate Alexander Micklejohn’s principles of absolutism. Free speech does not promote democracy, it is democracy. Meiklejohnian absolutism puts the burden of proof on the challenger, not the speaker, that any speech is harmful or causes imminent danger to life or property. And this is what irks most liberals. Because hate speech has led to countless acts of violence, even the believers in free speech squirm at absolutism. But this is where Rushdie emerges as the first among equals. Freedom of speech has no twilight zone, no in-between space. It’s either there or not. And a half-blind Rushdie, a victim of Imam YouTube’s words and the actions of A (assassin), still upholds the freedom principle, like his compatriot Kenan Malik, the British philosopher.

Words are violence — both liberals and con-



Nishtha Gautam



The first impulse when faced with a sudden inflow of money is to spend. And had this infusion come a year earlier, the temptation for a freebie splurge might have been high SHUTTERSTOCK

tal expenditure — or building assets that give future revenue. This will be like you buying a flat in the anticipation of future rental income or investing in business that yields income and profit. The government has pushed the envelope on capital spends in the last few budgets and the benefits are beginning to be seen in the growth numbers. We could see some small boost to the capital spending over what was budgeted in the 2024 interim budget.

The last, and most favoured, option is to reduce the fiscal deficit (the excess of spending over income of the government) that has been projected to fall from 5.8% to 5.1% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in FY25 over the previous year. Think about it from the point of view of your own finances — a large loan makes your personal finances precarious and a sudden job loss or emergency can derail your life. While the government can always print more money and sell assets to bridge the gap, a lower deficit number has a number of positive reactions in the economy.

One, it reduces the amount that the government has to borrow putting pressure on interest rates to fall. Lower interest rates boost borrowing by both individuals and firms to fund investment. Which, in turn, is positive for growth.

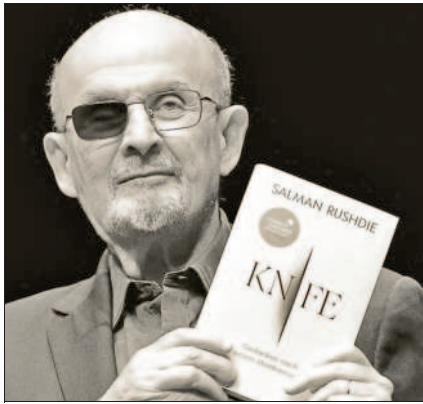
Two, lower government borrowing also leaves more aggregate savings to be available for the private sector for investments. The private investment cycle is yet to take off in India and a lower interest rate regime plus availability of savings are important factors in this journey.

Three, it gives a good signal to the foreign rating agencies on fiscal prudence. India’s global investment ratings are important as they affect the flow of money from foreign investors into the country. Foreign money is important as it bridges the savings gap.

Four, a lower deficit is also a dampener on inflation as the government borrows less and does not need to print money to bridge the deficit.

Of course, the spend will need to consider that this is a one-time boost and not build in recurrent expenses on the back of this infusion. The full Budget announcement in July will show us the path that the newly elected government will take. We can only hope that the road of fiscal prudence is followed rather than a short spin in a fast car.

Monika Halan is the author of the best-selling book *Let’s Talk Money*. The views expressed are personal



‘Knife’ presents Rushdie as barebones REUTERS

servatives want to argue the same. It’s high time this obfuscation ends. Words are words and acts of violence are acts. Yes, words can cause damage even when not followed up by action. But is it not worth noting that damaging words almost always invoke tangible acts of violence, in the past, present or future? Either it’s a memory or a threat that words derive their power from. One doesn’t need to delve into Derrida’s *La Voix et La Phenomene* to grasp that words, by and in themselves, are meaningless unless they signify something that the listener understands. Hence, expletives in a foreign language do not hit as hard as those in the mother tongue.

But is all speech innocent? Absolutely not. Unexamined statements made from pulpits of political and religious power have been wreaking havoc since the dawn of time. The damage, however, has been caused by actions that those words have demanded and entailed. A safe and successful society ought to restrict these actions.

Because it cannot do so, the doubling down on speech happens. Restrict speech, banish poets, incarcerate the satirist, damn the obscene, kill the blasphemer, but say nothing about acts. In fact, words are often employed to justify acts of violence. Both liberals and conservatives are guilty of condoning, or at least staying silent about, acts of violence that are committed in the name of disrespect to ideology — political, social, or religious.

If an ideologue can go on with deception, the fault lies in the calling-out and accountability mechanisms. To strengthen those, we need more freedom and not less. If we demand restrictions of any kind to “protect” any group, we are weakening the said mechanisms. Freedoms do not suit any institution or belief system, however liberal. All belief systems — even the most liberal or welfareist ones — are, at best, a few steps away from becoming a dogma. There cannot be any caveats or contexts to freedom of speech. If there’s incitement to violence, the latter must be checked, punished, and made an example of. Through expression, people and ideologies expose themselves. Speech, however objectionable, therefore, is useful. When we restrict it, we plunge into speculations. Nothing good comes out of speculating, personally, politically, or phenomenologically.

Coming back to Rushdie, his championing of free speech encompasses his public and personal selves. He is as articulate about his politics as he’s uninhibited about his love for Eliza, his fifth and current wife. We express therefore we are. We are lovers when we express love, and liars when our words are lies. Let the actions that follow them decide the rest.

Nishtha Gautam is an author, academic and journalist. The views expressed are personal

Engaging with Africa calls for new thinking

The new government will have its own foreign policy priorities, within which Africa must get due attention. Here are five suggestions for pursuing a “Priority Africa” agenda.

First, establish an India-African Union track 1.5 dialogue to engage on all issues of importance, including on the points regarding the Global South in the G20 communicate released by the Indian presidency of the G20, which saw the African Union (AU) inducted into the grouping. This should be at the macro level, ending the pursuit of bilateral talks with African countries.

Through this, the capacity of the AU Commission (AUC) to effectively participate in G20 meetings could be augmented. As African priorities are identified through the India-Africa

dialogue, experts should be deputed with Indian funding to partner the AUC in the pursuit of its own developmental agenda, including Agenda 2063.

Second, with the fourth India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS IV) delayed, it is time now to reformulate the tenets of this partnership in view of the post-pandemic situation and the impact of the Ukraine and West Asian crisis.

The AUC is up for electing a new chairman and commissioners in February 2025 for a four-year term and would thus be hamstrung by campaigning and election processes. Since IAFS IV is already delayed, it is better to engage with the AUC after February 2025. The IAFS IV should revert to the Banjul format of 15 countries plus the AUC. This makes it manageable and practical. India’s successful



Gurjit Singh

Africa policy does not need a massive show of strength or geographical spread. Since it is Africa’s turn to host the IAFS IV, it is best to hold it in Addis Ababa, the seat of the AUC rather than seek a partner country that shares the burden of hosting the summit.

Third, the functioning regional economic communities (RECs) need to be consulted through a meeting — this was done before earlier summits — to map African priorities against Indian capabilities. A joint REC-AUC tour of India’s development successes must be conducted.

Fourth, India should adopt a private sector investment-led approach towards Africa, targeting strategically important countries and those to which Indian businesses wish to go.

India should support its entrepreneurs and banks by providing them low-cost credit, through a revolving fund. This can be lent locally to reduce the costs of expensive borrowing. India can help with feasibility studies and detailed project reports to create bankable projects that seek funding from a variety of sources rather than just India.

India’s support for grant projects should be meshed with its strategic and business interests. The lines of credit (LOCs) played a useful

role earlier, but with many countries seeking debt relief and restructuring now, this has to be reconsidered. Last year, most of the LOCs approved by EXIM bank were rollovers of unpaid interest rather than new projects.

Fifth, rupee-based LOCs must replace dollar-based ones to reduce forex risk. It is important to strengthen Indian banks in Africa: allowing them to implement LOCs will strengthen their position in the African markets.

The Union government has done a lot to bring Africa into focus. It is time for more autonomous participation by Indian businesses, academic institutions and hospitals. The first Indian Institute of Technology in Africa (in Zanzibar) shows that there is a demand for high-quality Indian education, and some African countries are ready to pay for this, with Indian management. This won’t cost the Union government much but will go a long way towards bringing cost-effective engagement with Africa.

Gurjit Singh is former Indian ambassador to Germany, Indonesia, Ethiopia, ASEAN and the African Union and honorary professor, IIT Indore. The views expressed are personal

{ EDITOR’S PICK }

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

BUILDING AI RESPONSIBLY

The similarity between Sky, OpenAI’s “voice” iteration of its Artificial Intelligence (AI) powered chatbot, ChatGPT, and the natural voice of Hollywood actress Scarlett Johansson, raises questions of ethics in AI development. Some of these have been raised by Johansson herself, concerning the ethics of use of creatives’ work for AI development, deepfakes, and the erosion of identity and ownership.

Even as allegations and counters fly, it is perhaps instructive to read *Rebooting AI: Building Artificial Intelligence We Can Trust* (2019), by New York University professors Gary Marcus and Ernest Davis. Marcus and Ernest argue for a fundamental shift, if not a reset, in AI development if trustworthy systems are to be developed. A reliance on mere deep learning will lead to a fraught system; a hybrid system that incorporates reasoning, causal understanding and contextual knowledge building is needed, they argue — a Lifelong Learning system, in their words. This way, the very human problems that creep into development can perhaps be offset.



Rebooting AI: Gary Marcus, Ernest Davis
Year: 2019



THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

ONE ADVANTAGE IN KEEPING A DIARY IS THAT YOU BECOME AWARE OF THE CHANGES WHICH YOU CONSTANTLY SUFFER. — FRANZ KAFKA

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

AFTER THE BLAZE

Explosion in Thane chemical unit should draw attention to frequent industrial accidents, need to plug regulatory deficits

THE MAHARASHTRA GOVERNMENT has ordered an investigation into Thursday's chemical factory blaze which killed at least 11 people in an industrial complex in Thane and injured more than 60 others. By all accounts, the food colouring factory used highly reactive chemicals. Maharashtra's Industry and Labour Department has said that the unit's boiler was not registered under the Indian Boiler Act, 1950. Chief Minister Eknath Shinde has promised "strict action" against those at fault. Culpability for the incident should, of course, be fixed. But safety-related concerns about the Thane industrial complex are not new. In 2016, a fire accident at the complex claimed five lives. Explosions have been reported from the area in 2018, 2020 and 2023 as well. CM Shinde has said that the highly hazardous units would either be shut down or "given the option to shift to another location". That's a knee-jerk reaction. Shutting down industries or re-locating them causes economic disruption and livelihood losses. The Maharashtra government should nudge these factories to follow industrial safety and environmental rules.

India is among the top six chemical manufacturing countries in the world. Diverse industries — pharmaceuticals, pesticides, fertilisers, paints and petrochemicals — collectively account for more than 70,000 of the products that are made from chemicals. The sector contributes about 11 per cent of India's exports and employs more than two million people. Although the country has 15 Acts and 19 rules governing different aspects of the chemical industry, none of them deals exclusively with the sector. At the same time, the overlapping jurisdictions of different ministries work to the detriment of effective regulation. Monitoring and inspection are weak and most often, these exercises involve imposing fines on erring units — which, by all accounts, breeds corruption. The NDMA website shines a light on the chemical industry's regulatory deficits. The industry, it says, comprises "1,861 major accident hazard (MAH) units" and "thousands of registered hazardous factories (below the MAH criteria)". The agency's figures do not include factories in the unorganised sector.

NDMA estimates that the country reported 130 chemical accidents in the last decade, which claimed more than 250 lives. It, however, gives no details of these accidents. Studies with smaller sample sizes — such as that conducted by scientists from IIT Kanpur's Department of Industrial and Management Engineering in 2023 — conclude that industrial accidents result from inadequate regulation, a lack of awareness of how to act when a mishap occurs and poor investment in worker safety. However, the country lacks a comprehensive database of chemicals used by industry and the risks associated with them. The horrors of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy in 1984 did lead to a rethinking on industrial safety, but accidents have not been followed by serious stock-taking — these include the Jaipur oil depot fire of 2009, Thane explosion of 2016, Visakhapatnam gas leak of 2020 and the blaze at a natural gas well in Tinsukia in 2020. A rapidly-industrialising country cannot afford such a knowledge deficit.

POWER PLAY IN THE SEA

China's military exercises around Taiwan are about power projection. Those with stakes in region must watch the space

ON THE FACE of it, the message from China's military exercise — which included units from the People's Liberation Army, the PLA-Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard — is unambiguous. According to China's defence ministry, the drills around Taiwan's main island are meant to test the military's ability to "seize power" in key areas — in essence, facilitate an annexation. The drills, which began suddenly on Thursday, also conducted mock missile strikes targeting key offshore islands as well as strategically and commercially important sea lanes. The provocation is the election of Lai Ching Te — who assumed office on May 20 — as President of Taiwan. Lai is from the pro-sovereignty Democratic Progressive Party, which Beijing considers a "separatist" group.

It is easy to view the current exercise as a part of the uneasy equilibrium around Taiwan. In fact, similar drills were conducted by China in 2022 and 2023. Beijing keeps rattling the cage to intimidate the significant section of Taiwan's leadership that is, at least in principle, committed to independence. Taiwan's leadership has stopped short of forcing a change in the status quo as well. After all, it has functional de facto autonomy even though China keeps making a de jure claim to its territory. In fact, the military escalation that would inevitably follow any attempt at annexation is bound to inform Beijing's strategic calculus. Two factors in the current moment, however, complicate this picture and are cause for caution.

It may be that China's power projection is not merely about intimidation. President Xi Jinping has repeated on numerous occasions that the "re-unification" of China and Taiwan is on his agenda, a likely component of his legacy. He has also refused to rule out the use of force. Even if such a maximalist position is political rhetoric, meant as much for domestic audiences as Taipei and Western capitals, it does not bode well. Second, military drills and Chinese navy and coast guard patrols do not just project power, they try to assert it. There is little doubt that an expansionist China has been "slicing" territory from its neighbours and trying to expand its zone of influence in the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific as a whole. This has caused much alarm in littoral states, many of which have deep economic ties with the aggressor. It is in this context of intimidation and expansion that the drills are taking place. Great and middle powers with stakes in the region must keep a close watch.

AND KAFKA LAUGHED

A new exhibition seeks to give context to the writer's darkness, display his hidden humorous side

FOR ENTIRE GENERATIONS, Gregor Samsa has put the Kafkaesque into existential dread. The protagonist in Franz Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis*, who wakes up to find that he has been transformed into a giant insect, has been the biggest advocate of his creator's predilection for urban angst. But turns out, Kafka might not have been as given to solemnity as his writings make him out to be. A new exhibition, "Kafka: Making of an Icon", that opens at Oxford's Bodleian Library on May 30 to mark the Austrian writer's death centenary in 2024, hopes to give his image a makeover by showing that there's more to Kafka than gloom and doom. And that, for someone who died at 40 and suffered from a debilitating bout of tuberculosis in the last few years, a degree of pessimism was not entirely out of place.

A touch of the earnest marks Kafka's humour: Among the papers that will go on display, there is a letter to his superior at the insurance company where he worked around 1912. It is an application for a sick leave, only Kafka had not been gallivanting in the time he played truant — he had pulled an all-nighter working on his story, "The Judgment". In another document, his friend and literary executor Max Brod writes of a man given to bouts of hysterical laughter during reading sessions. It is an intimate picture of one of the 20th century's most influential writers as an individual — he had left explicit instructions to Brod to destroy all his papers after his death, Brod overrode the request.

Later-day readings of Kafka have contended that the nightmarish tenor of alienation that has come to characterise his works might possibly have been a matter of overinterpretation. Perhaps there is some truth to it. After all, who can deny the thread of absurdity that comes from a man giving in to self-pity and imagining himself to have turned into a "monstrous vermin"?



SAGARIKA GHOSE

WHEN A LEADER is a woman, entrenched big-wigs are deeply threatened. When she is powerful, patriarchs shriek in outrage. Mamata Banerjee is the self-made leader of a political start-up, the All-India Trinamool Congress. She's a three-time chief minister, four-time Union minister and seven-time Member of Parliament. She's never baulked in the face of the relentless abuse which has been hurled at her all through her public life.

In a rare and rather belated act of censuring misogyny, the Election Commission has acted against the latest politician to abuse Banerjee. The EC has barred Abhijit Ganguly, the BJP's Tamluk candidate and former judge of the Calcutta High Court from campaigning for 24 hours for his foul language about India's only woman chief minister.

In a campaign speech on May 15, Ganguly sneered: "Mamata Banerjee, what is your price? Is she (Banerjee) even a woman?" Pronouncing the ban on Ganguly, the EC observed: "Ganguly has brought damage and disrespect to Bengal which has a distinguished tradition of respect for women."

Ganguly, a former "jurist", was recently seen on TV, infamously weighing moral options between Mahatma Gandhi and his murderer Nathuram Godse, apparently undecided about who, the Father of the Nation or his hate-filled assassin, offered a better ideological choice. That Ganguly thinks it acceptable to ask a senior woman leader what-is-your-price in public, is not surprising. After all, a woman politician like Banerjee, who has never needed to be propped up by family or a male mentor, sets off seismic shocks of wrath and envy not only among politicians but also in the media. Whether caricaturing Mayawati's choice of clothes or directing racist slurs at Sonia Gandhi's background or deriding Banerjee's speeches, India's chauvinist media takes delicious pleasure in treating women politicians with satirical disdain.

Hypocrisy about women lies at the heart of the ruling BJP. Its slogans of "Nari Shakti" are meaningless. Saffron traditionalists are cast into shuddering fury by modern exceptional women. Visible women upset the power balance. The BJP despises them. During Bengal's 2021 polls, Narendra Modi cat-called Mamata Banerjee with his "Didi oh Didi" taunt drawn out in insulting tones. He likened

EC took action against Abhijit Ganguly for his comments on Mamata Banerjee. But that's not enough

Visible women upset the power balance. The BJP despises them. During Bengal's 2021 polls, Narendra Modi cat-called Mamata Banerjee with his 'Didi oh Didi' taunt drawn out in insulting tones. He likened Congress leader Renuka Chowdhury's laugh to a demon's cackle. As Gujarat CM, Modi said Sonia Gandhi was a 'jersey cow', and 'pasta-ben'. The BJP's Bengal leader Dilip Ghosh has questioned Banerjee's parentage. 'Decide who is your father,' he heckled Mamata Banerjee in public. Ghosh's remarks only received a mild rap from the EC. Modi has never been censured.



ALOK THAKAR

I WATCH THE Indian Premier League (IPL) every few days — especially to follow the fortunes of the Delhi Capitals. What strikes me is what happens between overs. The IPL has a huge viewership. The advertisements can be afforded only by firms and products with a pan-India reach and high sales. They are dominated by either gambling apps or "elaichi" and "masala" products. What does that say about our consumption patterns?

Gambling apps are at least followed by a rapid, half-understood disclaimer. The entertainment and sporting icons who glamourise the use of elaichi/masala pouches do not need a similar disclaimer because they are supposedly advertising a non-harmful and non-addictive substance. But is it not obvious that this is a form of surrogate advertisement for oral tobacco? It may be legal, but is it ethical?

Much of the conversation on tobacco has focused on smoking and, recently, on "vapes". But tobacco consumption in India is mainly through smokeless tobacco (oral tobacco). The Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS 2017) revealed that 29 per cent of people over 15 in India consume tobacco. There are twice as many oral tobacco consumers (21 per cent) as those who smoke tobacco (10.7 per cent).

We are global leaders in oral tobacco consumption and the only region with prevalence rates exceeding 20 per cent. Is it any surprise that we are also the region with the highest prevalence of mouth cancer? The rates of

BETWEEN IPL OVERS, A MESSAGE

Surrogate advertisement for oral tobacco may be legal. Is it ethical?

Tobacco cannot be eradicated by bans. Nicotine, one of the active alkaloids in it, is among the most addictive products consumed. Once addicted, people need to feed their cravings. The GATS survey informs us that 92 per cent of consumers of tobacco are well informed of its harmful effects. Many wish to discontinue — but cannot. Once consumed regularly for a few months, nicotine dependence necessitates further consumption.

these cancers are estimated to be increasing at a compound annual growth rate of 23 per cent. This increase has paralleled the rising use of pouched tobacco.

The Indian state has proactively moved against tobacco. The ban on smoking in public spaces and regular increases in the price of cigarettes did decrease smoking — but led to the shift of the consumer towards oral tobacco. Since 2011, a ban on the production and sale of gutka (masala mixed with tobacco) has been legislated by most Indian states. These bans are, however, not easily enforced and have also been challenged in court — with occasional success.

Tobacco cannot be eradicated by bans. Nicotine, one of the active alkaloids in it, is among the most addictive products. Once addicted, people need to feed their cravings. The GATS survey informs us that 92 per cent of consumers of tobacco are well informed of its harmful effects. Many wish to discontinue — but cannot. Once consumed regularly for a few months, nicotine dependence necessitates further consumption. At the level of the street corner retailer, it is usual for the masala/flavoured mouth freshener to be sold with a small quantity of low-priced or free oral tobacco (colloquially called "chhotu").

Victims of tobacco continue to invite heart disease, strokes, lung disease, oral cancer, lung cancer, bladder cancer, esophageal and gastric cancer. Their chemical dependence on

nicotine makes it difficult for them to quit tobacco even if they wish to.

The real hope for reducing tobacco use lies in education and prevention of nicotine addiction. There has been a modest decrease in tobacco consumption in India between the two GATS surveys of 2010 and 2017. The percentage of the adult population consuming tobacco has decreased from 34.6 per cent to 28.6 per cent. This decrease is very marked in the younger ages (15–17 years), but minimal in older age groups. This further confirms that moving people already dependent on nicotine away from it is difficult. It is easier to dissuade the young from adopting tobacco. Education is key. The endorsement of masala by our icons flies in the face of these efforts.

Tobacco devastates families and consumers. Fifty per cent of users die of a tobacco-related illness. It can decrease lifespans by a decade. In India, tobacco-related cancers represent 42 per cent of male and 18 per cent of female cancer deaths at ages 30–69 years. It is the largest contributor to premature death.

We cannot let the next generation follow the previous ones. Our idols need to join us to spread the very opposite message — that tobacco is addictive and the greatest long-term threat to young people's health.

The writer is Professor, Head-Neck Oncology & Head of the National Cancer Institute at AIIMS, New Delhi



MAY 25, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

SIKKIM MLAS QUIT

IN A DRAMATIC development, 15 Sikkim MLAs, led by the former chief minister, Nar Bahadur Bhandari, quit the Congress (I) and announced the formation of a new regional party, the Sikkim Sangram Parishad. With Bhandari and his sympathisers' exit, the fortnight-old government of B B Gurung is reduced to a minority.

ZIA'S PEACE OFFENSIVE

THE PAKISTAN PRESIDENT, Gen Ziaul Haq, has said that establishing lasting peace and friendship between India and Pakistan will

be "peanuts", given the political will on both sides. "If there is political will which, it seems, is there on both sides, I am sure we will be able to achieve much better results in the forthcoming months", Gen Zia said. "We are going all out with the peace offensive, taking all measures on the media, on the television, greater exchange of delegations, journalists, intellectuals, educationists."

8 KILLED IN PUNJAB

TERRORISTS SHOT DEAD at least eight persons travelling in a car near Tehri village in Ludhiana district in Punjab. Official reports said that the car was stopped by three

unidentified persons on a motorcycle who sprayed bullets on the passengers. Of the nine occupants seven died on the spot while the eighth succumbed to injuries in a hospital. The ninth occupant is seriously injured. The victims were commission agents.

PM ON AKALI THREAT

PRIME MINISTER INDIRA Gandhi said that the Akali threat of grain blockade far from helping to solve the Punjab problem will complicate it. Mrs Gandhi said that it was the duty of every citizen to isolate the terrorists. She added that the morale of the police was now high and they were capturing the terrorists.

THE IDEAS PAGE

Uber-cool Girish, glowing Smita

That night I could reach out and touch them again. For me, the high point of Cannes festival was seeing ‘Manthan’ again in a theatre after decades



NASEERUDDIN SHAH

SEVERAL MONTHS HAD elapsed since Shyam Benegal's *Nishant* (1975, my first film as an actor) had been released to widespread acclaim and success which had touched everyone in it — Shabana's standing as a star got consolidated, Smita (Patil) went into orbit, Girish (Karnad) started playing lead parts in commercial movies, Amrish (Puri) became the much loved Heavy, Kulbhushan (Kharbanda), Mohan Agashe all benefitted. All, that is, except yours truly!

During that seemingly endless phase, on one of the many visits I made to Shyam's office in the historic Jyoti Studio to seek consolation, Dayal Nihalani gave me the news that a new film was being planned. He showed me a file titled “GCMMF” which sounded like an exclamation from Don Martin comics. I was told nothing else, and the file remained closed but I would have been blind not to see the look of “I know something you don't know bro” in Dayal's eyes. This epiphany occurred at a time when I was somewhat low and beginning to feel that my patience was being too sorely tested. Shyam wasn't in that day, but in my jubilation, I bought a first-class ticket on the local back from Grant Road to Khar where I lived then.

In good time, I learnt that the unpronounceable title stood for “Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation” which was going to sponsor this film and I was to be in it! Shyam later confirmed what I had fervently hoped for, narrated the part to me, told me how much I would be paid, told me to stop shaving and be “full of beans!” So, with some money in my pocket, unshaven and full of beans, I left with the others by air to Rajkot — only the second time I was flying.

The next day was the costume trial and I didn't change the kedia-chorna I put on that day through the 30-odd days of shooting. There is a canard doing the rounds that Shyam instructed us all not to bathe — pure conjecture, bathing or not was left to us and I can't speak for anyone else, but I must confess I bathed considerably less than I usually do. Luckily, the film was not being made in Smell-O-Rama! I learnt, not too well, how to tie a turban and attempted in vain to make the Bharwads' magnificent body language my own. Singed as my pride was after the seeming universal rejection of my work in *Nishant*, I decided to throw everything, including the kitchen sink, into my performance this time. Compared to the namby-pamby I played in *Nishant*, this was a bravura part and I finally saw some light at the end of my career tunnel. At some point early on, Shyam remarked that my face had the aggression needed for the part but my eyes were too mild. I was determined to set that right and perhaps went too far in that direction, but Shyam's observation shone a light on how important the eyes are in performance.



CR Sasikumar

The shooting went by in a blur for me and before I knew it, the film was done leaving me with a lingering sense of incompleteness because of the one fly in the ointment — the penultimate scene where I berate my fellow Dalits for coming back to the villainous Mishra (good old Amrish). My performance that day was haywire and I wasted several yards of precious celluloid messing up take after take (18, if I remember right). Finally, a still patient Shyam called for a wrap and said we'd do the scene the next day. I spent that night in a fever of guilt and nervousness, completely at a loss as to what was going wrong. Next morning, Shyam took me aside just before the shoot and held my shoulders reassuringly, “You're trying too hard, just take it easy. Relax! Don't be so concerned with giving a brilliant performance, just try and get across to the people you're talking to in the scene.” The wisdom of this advice kicked in several years later, but at that time, I was in a fervour of excitement and couldn't really deliver except in transmitting the uncontrollable energy I felt. I did manage the scene finally, but not to my complete satisfaction, nor, I still suspect, to Shyam's.

On the third day of its release, nervous curiosity took me to Gemini in Bandra to see it. I bought a ticket expecting to see a half empty house. The film had started and as I entered, I heard a roar of laughter. It was a laughter of acceptance not mockery, and as

On the third day of its release, I bought a ticket expecting to see a half empty house. As I entered, I heard a roar of laughter. It was a laughter of acceptance not mockery, and as I sat through the film among an approving audience, all the predictions of the naysayers, ‘Who's going to see this film?’ ‘Who is interested in doodhwalas, yaar?’ ‘It won't run for a day’ etc. kept playing in my head. I must say, I gloated.

I sat through the film among an approving audience, with no one recognising me, all the predictions of the naysayers, “Who's going to see this film?” “Who is interested in *doodhwalas, yaar?*” “It won't run for a day”, etc. kept playing in my head. I must say, I gloated.

For me, at Cannes, the red carpet and the attendant glitz and the non-stop smiling into cameras tested my patience a tad. Deeply affected as I was by the passion and love for movies of the several thousand cine goers there, I must say I felt a bit out of place. I'm not a great fan of film festivals, I don't enjoy running from one theatre to another, and though I like to watch a film which I know nothing about, I need time to digest the one I have just seen. So, for me, the absolute high point of the festival was seeing *Manthan* again in a theatre after decades. It was like revisiting that day in Gemini except that the gloating had been replaced by fond nostalgia. The Grim Reaper may have taken away many who made the film possible but that night I could reach out and touch them all again. Uber-cool Girish, glowing, gorgeous, bronze Smita, formidable but highly huggable Amrish, Sadhu Meher, Mandeep, Kalpana — so many. Their presence was palpable and shall remain. Three cheers for Shyam and Govind Nihalani will be far from enough.

Shah is an actor, playwright, poet and author



RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

The kite-flying about RSS

It is committed to nation building. Why drag it into electoral politics?

BUDDHISTS AND HINDUS recently celebrated Buddha Purnima, the birth anniversary of the spiritual leader and social reformer born some three millennia ago. “Imagine there were a man struck by an arrow that was smeared thickly with poison,” said Buddha, “the man might not say ‘I will not draw out this arrow so long as I do not know whether the man by whom I was struck was a Brahmin or a Kshatriya or a Vaishya or a Shudra, or whether he was black, brown or light-skinned’. Buddha was making the point that when in a battle for a higher cause, such enquiries are superfluous and not relevant “to the spiritual life”.

When there is a higher purpose in life, smaller questions become irrelevant. That is how an average RSS activist reacts when confronted with the kind of debates happening today. It is customary for political parties and media in the country and abroad to drag the RSS into irrelevant debates every time elections occur. A new myth has now been brought into circulation in this election that not all is well between the BJP and the RSS. “Sangh aur BJP me ghamasan,” a video post on social media declared. “BJP decided to cut its umbilical cord,” said an article in an online publication.

All this gossip and kite-flying may be a part of political expediency. But the RSS decided long ago, after prudent consideration, that, as an organisation committed to building social unity, it should keep a distance from the day-to-day, and especially from, electoral politics. Article 4 (B) of the consti-

tution of the RSS categorically states that “the Sangh, as such, has no politics”. It does allow swayamsevaks to join any political party “except such parties as believe in or resort to violent or secret methods”.

There were occasions in the past when efforts were made from within and without to pull the RSS into active politics. First such attempt was made by Sardar Patel in the wake of the controversy over Mahatma Gandhi's murder. In a letter to the RSS chief MS Golwalkar on September 11, 1948, Patel suggested that “in the delicate hour, there is no place for party conflicts and old quarrels. I am thoroughly convinced that the RSS men can carry on their patriotic endeavour only by joining the Congress”. When Golwalkar did not yield, he was arrested on November 15 and flown to a jail in Nagpur.

Patel continued his efforts and the Congress Working Committee ruled on October 7, 1949, that the RSS members will be permitted to join the Congress Party. Incensed, Jawahar Lal Nehru got it amended to state that the RSS members can enter Congress only upon relinquishing their membership of the organisation. As the RSS influence grew, there was a worry in Congress that it might either don a political avatar or support another party.

But the RSS had never felt the need to deviate from its constitutional position of staying away from active politics. Not that there was no debate over it within, especially after the illegitimate efforts to oppress it using Gandhi's murder as an excuse.

Golwalkar himself had alluded to it once, saying that “swayamsevaks can, if they like, convert the Sangh into a political body. That is the democratic way. I am not a dictator. Personally, I am outside politics”.

When some RSS members like Balraj Madhok encouraged Shyama Prasad Mookerjee to start the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1951, Golwalkar agreed to send some 200 members of the organisation to work in that party, but insisted on keeping the RSS independent of it. In the early days, the RSS and Jana Sangh used to be compared to the two rails of a railway track that will never meet, but can never go apart either.

For more than seven decades now, this relationship has seen multiple phases. There are occasional disagreements, like when Gandhian socialism became the leitmotif of the BJP, with some in the RSS insisting that the organisation was “not wedded to any political party”. But, largely, the RSS stayed away from active politics.

There were exceptions twice though. The first was in 1977 when democracy was to be saved from the draconian dictatorship of Indira Gandhi during the Emergency. The RSS too faced a ban for the second time. The RSS cadre actively canvassed for the newly formed Janata Party. After that historic responsibility was delivered, the RSS returned to its normal chores and didn't bother to turn political. This is in spite of the fact that the BJP was formed in 1980 solely because some Janata Party leaders objected to others like A B Vajpayee and L K Advani continuing their

association with the RSS. Its aloofness prompted some to speculate that the RSS had supported Congress in the 1984 elections resulting in a disastrous performance by the BJP. While the speculation was wrong, it was a fact that the organisation didn't entertain any idea of active participation during that election.

The second exception was in 2014 when the RSS leadership felt the need to play an active role in ensuring the defeat of forces that were destroying the national fabric through corruption and blatant minority-ism. In the process, they even sought to create a false terror equivalent, inventing the bogey of “Hindu terror”. Once those forces were defeated, the RSS returned to its nation-building activities.

It may also be pertinent to point out that the RSS doesn't consider politics as unimportant or untouchable. It views politics as an integral part of the social life of this nation. It believes that the imperative for a good society is to have good politics. Motivating people towards building good politics and good governance using electoral and other means is thus very much a part of the RSS work.

“But why should people drag us into politics? We are happy with them as politicians and ourselves as swayamsevaks,” Golwalkar once said, summing up the RSS's sentimental reticence for politics.

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

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“Since 2019, they [Tories] as individuals and the government system that they created around themselves have been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Good riddance to them all. But Britain deserves so much better.”

— THE GUARDIAN

Election in the time of deep fakes

Battle for integrity of electoral systems has now been taken into the digital world



OPENING ARGUMENT
BY MENAKA GURUSWAMY

WHAT DO PRIME Minister Narendra Modi, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi, singer Taylor Swift and actor Anil Kapoor have in common? They have all been victims of “deep fake” videos, generated using artificial intelligence (AI).

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a “deep fake” as an image or recording that has been convincingly altered and manipulated to misrepresent someone as doing or saying something that was not actually done or said. And real life has already begun to mimic art when it comes to AI. Recently, the actor Scarlett Johansson alleged that her voice from the 2013 film *Her* was used without her consent by Open AI for the voice known as ‘Sky’ in its chatbot. *Her*'s protagonist falls in love with his phone's AI, voiced by Johansson. In 2024, fiction has transformed into reality, with some changes to the plot line. When it comes to artistes and deep fakes, the causes and consequences in law revolve around the ownership of proprietary material — one's reputation, fame, voice and person being used without permission or for malicious reasons.

However, given that this is election season in India and Delhi goes to the polls today, I would like to focus on the consequences — or lack thereof — of “deep fakes” for elections. The security and integrity of the electoral process has traditionally been premised on the integrity of the ballot box, the independence of the Election Commission of India (ECI) and accurate counting of every vote cast. Since 1951-52, when India held its first general election, this has been the focus of efforts to keep the process pristine. Now there is an additional challenge — the use of AI to influence the outcome. One facet of the use of AI is this phenomenon of “deep fakes”.

On May 6, the ECI issued an advisory to political parties on the “responsible and ethical use of social media in election campaigning”. It asked political parties to remove fake content within three hours of it coming to their notice.

The legal provisions available to address such deployment of deep fakes includes the Information Technology Act, 2000, the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021 and the Indian Penal Code, 1860.

Let us start with the oldest of these legal instruments — The Indian Penal Code, which provides three traditional remedies. One is Section 468, which deals with the forgery of a document or electronic record for the purposes of cheating. Another is Section 505, pertaining to the making, publishing and circulation of any statement, rumour or report with the intent to cause fear or alarm to the public. Both provisions were used to deal with

alleged deep fakes purporting to be the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath. Further, Section 416 of the Code criminalises cheating by personation, such as when an individual pretends to be some other person or knowingly substitutes one person for another or represents that he or any other person is a person other than who he is.

The Information Technology Act, 2000 has the potential to provide some redressal against deep fakes. Section 66 (c) provides that the sending of any electronic mail or message for the purpose of causing annoyance or deceiving or misleading the recipient will be punished with a term of up to three years in prison. Further, the Act, via sections 66 and 67, also punishes cheating by personation, the violation of privacy and the transmission of visual images or publication of images of a “private area” with imprisonment of up to three years. These legal provisions, while useful, do not necessarily provide comprehensive protection against the use of AI to generate misinformation, including deep fakes.

The existing legal regime also provides no remedy for attempts by hostile countries to influence electoral outcomes. In 2024, over half the planet is going to polls, including major democracies like India, the US and the UK. *The Independent* reports that British Home Secretary James Cleverly had warned in February that adversaries like Iran or Russia could generate content to sway voters in the elections that are scheduled to be held later in this year in Britain. He said that “increasingly, the battle of ideas and policies takes place in the ever changing and expanding digital sphere... The landscape it is inserted into needs its rules, transparency and safeguards for its users.”

In April, just before the commencement of the Indian general elections, the Microsoft Threat Analysis Centre (MTAC) had warned that China will “at a minimum, create, and amplify AI-generated content to benefit its interests” in elections in India, South Korea and the US. Last week, Forbes reported that Russia is looking to influence US opinion against Ukraine and NATO. It relies on MTAC analysis that found “at least 70 Russian actors using both traditional media and social media to spread Ukraine-related disinformation over the last two months” as a prelude to the upcoming presidential elections in the US. This AI-related campaign includes the use of deep fake videos.

The battle for the integrity of electoral systems and the formulation of informed public opinion has now been taken into the “virtual” world. This will necessarily entail a new legal understanding of what amounts to impersonation and misinformation. Europe's Artificial Intelligence Act, 2024, which will come into force in June (discussed earlier in ‘A penal code for AI’, IE, March 16), offers some ideas on how to think about a new legal regime to address offences that include the generation of deep fakes whose goal is to “manipulate human behaviour”. Law reformers in India need to use the existing legal regime as a foundation to thoughtfully craft new laws that will address AI and deep fakes that look to influence electoral outcomes.

The writer is a Senior Advocate at the Supreme Court

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

LITTLE TOO LATE

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Model code and context’ (IE, May 24). The ECI asking political parties, in particular the two national parties, to desist from raising divisive issues has come a bit too late. With the election winding down, the important guideline would not meet its true objective and purpose. Most politicians and parties are seasoned campaigners, the MCC notwithstanding, but one wonders whether this has been adhered to this time. There has been mudslinging and blame games, with each side believing itself to be a paragon. It is unfortunate that courts are stepping in to do the EC's job as it fails in even egregious cases.

SS Paul, Nadia

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Model code and context’ (IE, May 24). Even though the Model Code of Conduct is a non-partisan document, parties often renege from it. Unlike Yudhishthir's sophistication, today's leaders are rather brazen to mislead the electorates in the election battle which has the potential to disturb communal harmony. Unless this is nipped in the bud, it will disrupt the level playing field and negatively impact free and fair elections. Unfortunately, ECI's post facto warnings lack the deterrence to prevent the brazen violations of MCC.

L R Murmu, New Delhi

A BROKEN SYSTEM

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Crime in Pune’ (IE, May 24). Across India, there's sufficient evidence that the criminal justice system — police, judiciary, legal aid and prisons, is all but broken. If the process followed by the police is infirm, it will weaken prosecution. The biggest error is that it took the police eight hours to collect the blood sample of the minor driving the car. There are two challenges the criminal justice system faces. One, manpower shortage. Two, the credibility problem. If not for public outrage, the course of the Pune Porsche case could have been different.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

RBI AND THE STATE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘A wind-fall gain’ (IE, May 24). The magnitude of the RBI's dividend surpassing the Union government's budgeted amount from the public sector, is a significant development. RBI came into this windfall because of high interest rates in advanced economies, which may persist before an eventual cyclical inversion. The strength of India's recovery from the pandemic also contributed to the RBI surplus, and monetary policy would be inclined to pursue this course by easing interest rates ahead of the pack.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

Poll Predictions Not Weather Forecasts

Before exit polls, it's more art than science

Voting is fundamentally a strategy game. Every voter who turns up to cast her vote knows that her individual choice cannot be pivotal in an election to, say, the Indian Parliament. But she also knows that her individual vote in relation to the rest of the votes cast affects the electoral outcome. A voter expecting the majority to vote with her has a reason to show up at the polling station. Another voter anticipating to be in a minority might as well stay at home. A third could wait for more clarity before making a choice. Individual expectation of collective behaviour is not visible to outsiders in secret ballots, except in outcomes. Which makes predicting elections so complex.

That is not to say election managers need a functional familiarity with Nash equilibria. They can, and do, focus their energies on manipulating individual expectations of collective behaviour till campaigning comes to a close. Electioneering is designed to shape the narrative to inform both personal and group choices. This adds another layer of complexity to predicting outcomes before ballots are cast. The entire process is dynamic till polling ends. This narrows the window for effective forecasting from the time the last vote is cast till the time official results are declared. Exit polls, thus, have a higher probability of getting it right than most pre-election forecasts.

Of course, the usual caveats on methodology apply. Samples have to be randomised for individuals and groups. Statistical modelling needs to incorporate the major strands of the electoral narratives. Error margins must allow pollsters to make calls that are not too close. Designed well, exit polls offer the first glimpse of collective behaviour, and do serve a purpose as an advance indicator. Before this stage, most political forecasting is more art than science, and best left to practising politicians who have their ear to the ground and ambitions in the air. The process of manufacturing consent is pretty well-established, and can lead to fairly predictable political outcomes.

More Women Must Let Off STEAM

India's STEM education landscape is uneven. Despite having the highest number of STEM graduates globally, women constitute 42.3% of undergraduate, postgraduate, MPhil and PhD STEM students. This imbalance extends to faculty positions also. Research by scientists Shruti Muralidhar and Vaishnavi Ananthanarayanan found that only 16.6% of STEM faculty in 100 Indian universities are women. Even in the top eight STEM institutes ranked by National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), including IITs and IISc, in 2022, female faculty members were just 10%. Additionally, women are under-represented, under-mentored and overlooked for awards, grants and other career-advancing opportunities.

In this challenging backdrop, IIT Delhi's STEM Mentorship Programme for 100 female students of classes 9 and 11 from government and private schools is an important intervention. Equal access and participation in STEM for women and girls is crucial not just to navigate a technology-driven world, achieve sustainable and inclusive growth, and enhance social well-being, but also for achieving SDG 4 (inclusive and equitable quality education) and 5 (gender equality) for 2030.

While the focus on STEM is welcome, it must not be restricted to it. For its prowess in 'good old IT' to be upgraded to becoming a 21st c. AI, digital humanities, LLM, ML and AV/VR-powered powerhouse, India needs people with technical, creative and innovative skills that humanities provide. Additionally, it is crucial for scientists and engineers to understand the broader social, economic and cultural contexts that underlie innovation and technological progress. Only by embracing a multidisciplinary approach can India harness its potential and lead in the global techcreative landscape.

JUST IN JEST

Beauty may lie in the eye of the beholder, but it's getting visible in boomer daadis

Hot Grandmas, Not Just Looking Younger

Greek mythology, unlike, say, Indian mythology, revels in its HGs. And by HGs, we don't mean hot gods and goddesses alone but, specifically, hot grandmas. But, of late, things have been also warming up at the foothills of Mount Olympus — mortal territories. Human grandmas are getting hotter. This climate change can be attributed to better lifestyles, better diets, better Zeenats effortlessly having their 60-70-plus game faces on, not to look just 'graceful' — or other descriptors that are GLD-worthy (good-looking daadi-worthy) — but out and out attractive.

Umberto Eco had written a wry faux-essay in his 1963 collection, *Diario Minimo*, translated into English in 1993 as *Misreadings*, titled 'Granita'. Flipping Vladimir Nabokov's iconic novel on generational asymmetry, Lolita, Eco starts his piece with, 'Granita. Flower of my adolescence, torment of my nights.' But Eco's paean to chronologically-curated beauty is about an aesthetic-hormonal taste for 'faces furrowed by volcanic wrinkles' and 'proudly gnarled hands'. HGs of the here and now are different — they are head-turners by our usual measures of head-turnability. HGs, however, aren't simple age-defiers — they carry their oomph within the matrix of age. In fact, theirs is a *je ne sais quoi* quality that has gorgeous sit pretty — nay, sit bewitching — with the seductive mark of experience.

AI-enabled innovation can fulfil the worth of a talent pool currently underused in mere messaging

Artificial, Quite Naturally



Shivaji Dasgupta

So, Scarlett Johansson has put OpenAI's Sam Altman in the spot by announcing that she was 'shocked, angered and in disbelief' that Mr [Sam] Altman would pursue a voice that sounded so eerily similar to mine' for the new ChatGPT-4 Omni (ChatGPT-4o) AI assistant, Sky. This, after she had refused — reportedly twice — to lend her voice to the chatbot.

But going past the genuine ethical conundrum that AI poses regarding non-consensual mimicry and replication and other perceived sleights of hand, as a technology, ChatGPT-4o is already playing Disruptor Rex. DuoLingo and Alphabet are already in the firing line. A day after ChatGPT-4o was launched on May 13, both tech companies suffered huge dips in their market valuation — by over \$340 mn for the popular language-learning platform, and by over \$50 bn for the Google-owning behemoth. Both companies recovered slightly, but the message was clear: a front-runner in AI is a front-runner in Big Tech.

For the brand communications industry, these are crazy times. As AI gains steam, the prognosis can seem dire. Network clients, the global darlings for top agencies, may feel the brunt earliest. Foundation models will calmly interpret, say, laundry motivations in Argentina or current cuisine preferences at the Hamptons for Indian audiences, factoring in regional nuances and protocols. Human intervention seems seriously at stake.

Annual social media calendars will be fulfilled comfortably by AI agents. Festive and topical cameos will appear like preset alarms. Expansion of the central idea will be clinical-

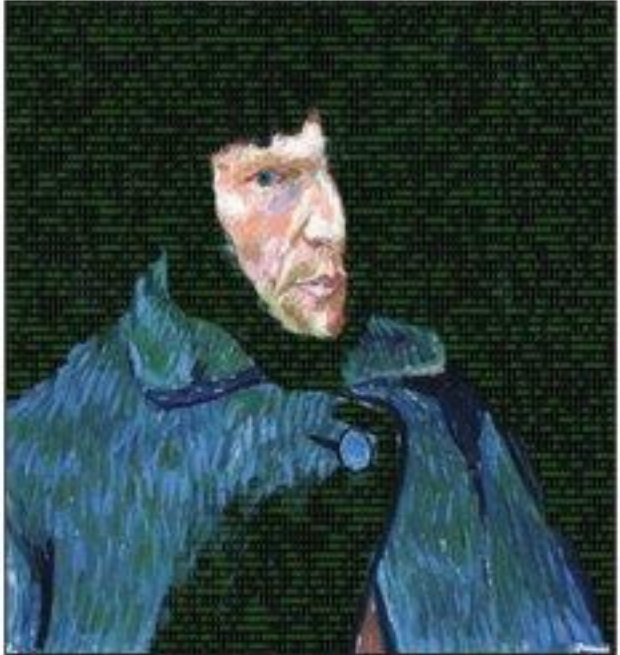
ly guaranteed. Elementary policing will ensure that KFC Germany's 2022 Kristallnacht fiasco — when the fast-food chain had to apologise after bringing out a special menu commemorating the start of Nazi Germany's anti-Jewish pogrom in 1938 — is not repeated.

Voice-over artists are already seeking alternate careers. Copywriters, art directors and editors are feeling the squeeze. Integrated accounts being assigned to an AI-unmanned agency on the cards. The profitable media-planning and -buying cadre, thriving on clinical analysis, must prepare for both the trenches and benches.

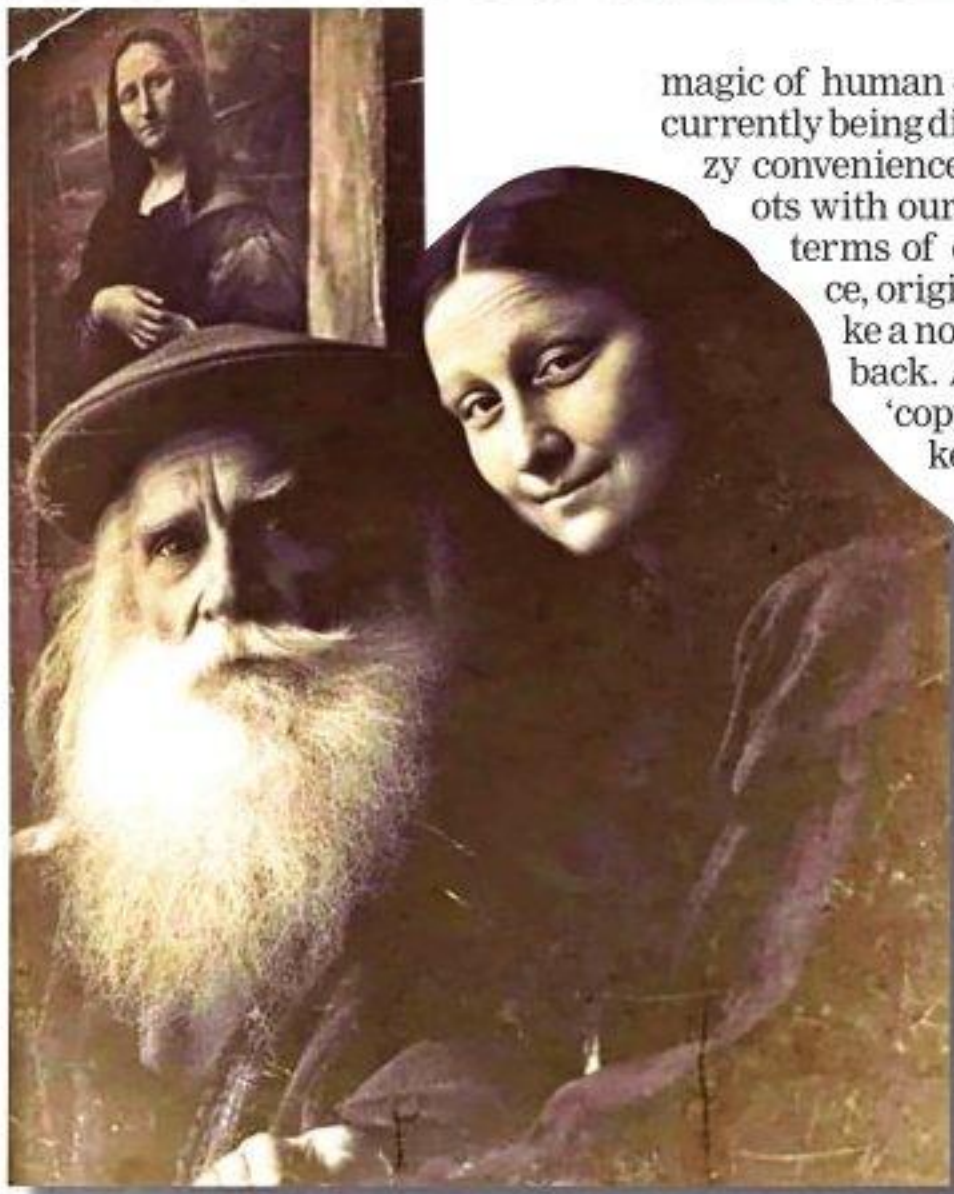
Building a man-machine equilibrium has been the pursuit of civilisations across industrial eras. From Henry Ford's automobile assembly line to the PC, and now AI. In each case, the solution was forged intuitively, with a little help from policy.

In the 1990s, the advertising industry faced a comparable crisis — the digital revolution. At legacy agencies, skilled people broke bread with the Apple Mac, enhancing both outcomes and careers. Photographers and filmmakers cannily upgraded their billability by hawking a higher aura of human acumen.

From being a potential human talent-stomping Godzilla, the 'digital



We must reinvest in the magic of human creativity, currently being diminished by lazy conveniences of tech and jugaad



Let it be your muse

age' turned out to be a merry Viagra. Smartphones today unleash indigenous creators with much abandon. TikTokisation of content creation is enabled by easy access. Post-Covid-enhanced, tech-enabled productivity are reaching unprecedented levels. Geography truly has become history; the only question being who acknowledges it and who still is in denial about it.

AI, though, is a different beast. Like the 'giant rat of Sumatra' that Sherlock Holmes refers to in *The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire*, AI's 'a story for which the world is not yet prepared'. University of New South Wales AI Institute's chief scientist Toby Walsh, in his new book, *Faking It: Artificial Intelligence in a Human World*, makes the point that AI today is like computing in the early 1990s — we ain't seen nothing yet.

But lessons from the past can help build a sustainable peace treaty between AI and humans. And, for this, we must reinvest in the inimitable

magic of human creativity, which is currently being diminished by the lazy conveniences of tech, in cahoots with our love for jugaad. In terms of culture and practice, originality needs to make a non-negotiable comeback. And, in the case of 'copy-paste' India, make an appearance.

AI is going to be increasingly brilliant at replication and elaboration — as highlighted by ChatGPT Sky's Johansson imitation. But if the brand idea is as fresh as the daily catch, precedence can't catch up quickly. When most of the US' software contracts were being

'Bangalored', AI Gore succinctly pointed out that this would free up talent for genuine creative outcomes in America.

There is, of course, the dark side of AI will instigate the next global energy crisis, as graphics processing units (GPUs) — AI's backbone — are power guzzlers. And then there is the clear and present dangers of deepfakes.

But in all this AI yin and yang, creativity will need to upgrade its worth constantly. Therein lies a blockbuster opportunity: upgrading the role of creative communications professionals to brand experience creators. This will be far more remunerative, and way more purposeful, than just playing catch-up with supple AI models.

AI-enabled innovation can fulfil the worth of a talent pool currently underused in mere messaging. As long as we embrace the fickle artificial with the ingenious natural ingenuity:

The writer is an autonomous brand consultant

How Safe are Doctors, Patients?



Swapnil Kothari

A few months ago, Indian Medical Association (IMA) praised GoI for bringing about criminal reforms that absolved the medical fraternity from being liable under Section 304(a) of IPC, now Section 26 of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (death by a rash or negligent act). As per the amendment, 'If such an act is done by a registered medical practitioner while performing a medical procedure, he shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to two years, and shall also be liable to a fine.'

Essentially, there can be a debate on whether a registered medical practitioner had *mens rea* — intention or knowledge of wrongdoing — to cause harm. In its 2005 'Jacob Mathew vs State of Punjab' judgment, the Supreme Court had to balance the need to protect doctors from frivolous criminal prosecutions and the need for accountability in cases

of genuine medical negligence. The court laid down guidelines to differentiate between genuine errors and acts of negligence.

Indian Medical Council Act 1956 regulates the conduct of doctors by setting ethical standards a medical professional has to follow. Under the Act, Medical Council of India (MCI) has been constituted along with state medical councils through which the Act is enforced.

Apart from the criminal legislation, aggrieved parties also have access to the consumer forum. Consumer Protection Act 2019 empowers the victim to file a complaint for 'deficiency of services', simply because the doctor renders 'medical services' to the patient. Wrong diagnosis, over-medication, under-medication and deliberate surgeries not required, all fall under this category, or attract criminal liability if it falls under gross negligence or breach of duty of care resulting in harm.

But, recently, while holding that lawyers don't fall within the ambit of the Act as they do not render 'services' as defined, the Supreme Court also observed that similar professions, especially doctors, should also be exempted from the Act's provisions. An example of breach of 'duty of care' is the 1968



For everyone's protection

'Dr Laxman Balkrishna Joshi v. Dr Trimbak Bapu Godbole' case, where a patient who suffered from a fractured femur underwent surgery. The accused doctor, while encasing the leg in plaster, used manual traction with excessive force (usually conducted under general anaesthesia). The patient suffered shock causing his death. The apex court ordered the doctor to pay damages to the patient's parents.

This case illustrates that 'expert evidence' is of probative value in medical negligence cases. Medical practice, especially surgery, is a specialised skill, and unless you put the 'expert' in a witness box — basically in the same shoe as that of the accused — a fair decision won't come about.

Where does India stand in comparison to medical negligence in developed countries? According to one

study, negligence leads to more than 251,000 deaths annually in the US. Around 85,000 lawsuits are filed on an average every year, and the payout is roughly \$679,000.

Britain sees around 237 mn cases every year. Over a thousand of them lead to death. Administrative negligence tops the list at 54%, followed by wrong prescription at 21%, and defective dispensation at 16%. National Health Service statistics show medical negligence increasing at an alarming rate. Australia is another country where diagnostic errors reach about 140,000 every year. Of that, 21,000 cases are serious, causing 2,000-4,000 fatalities.

Doctors need to be protected from bogus lawsuits. At the same time, they need to face the law should they be negligent. India has an adequate set of laws to tackle such negligence. The real issue is when and where to pin that liability.

It becomes imperative to ensure that medical service personnel are free, like any other professionals, to render the best services they can, as healthcare is a broad umbrella that includes medical insurance, basic medication and ambulance services.

The writer is president, Council for Fair Business Practices

Gotta Fix Those Inequality Gaps



Rajesh Shukla

Tracing the trajectory of income inequality in India since Independence reveals a nuanced landscape shaped by diverse economic policies, demographic changes and political shifts. To determine whether income inequality has intensified over the past decade, it's crucial to scrutinise data and research from dependable data sources. Scientifically conducted household income surveys such as NCAER and People Research on India's Consumer Economy (PRICE), spanning from 1967-68 to 2022-23, provide a robust foundation for understanding long-term trends and recent shifts in India's income distribution and income inequality.

Since 1947, India has seen substantial economic growth, yet the benefits of this growth have been unevenly distributed. The period of economic liberalisation introduced new opportunities and wealth. But it also led to a rise in inequality, a trend only exacerbated by recent economic disruptions, including the pandemic (see chart).

► The share of total national income of the top 10% of the population was 36.49% in 1967-68.

► It decreased to 32.86% in 1994-95, and further declined to 27.88% in 2015-16, indicating a trend toward greater income equality.

► This trend reversed dramatically,

and by 2020-21, the share of the top 10% surged to 38.6%, the highest level recorded, before dipping slightly to 30.27% in 2022-23.

► The bottom 10% of the population has consistently held between 1.8% and 2.7% of total income over this period, except during 2020-21 (Covid), when their share plummeted to 1.09%.

How has income inequality evolved over this period?

► In the first 20 years since Independence, India's Gini index stood at 0.463. It reached its lowest point at 0.367 in 2015-16, indicating a more

equitable income distribution.

► Between 2016 and 2021, there was a sharp reversal, with Gini index increasing by 32%, moving from 0.367 to 0.506, highlighting a significant growth in income disparity, exacerbated by Covid.

► The most recent data from 2021 to 2023 show a notable improvement, with Gini index decreasing by 23%, from 0.506 to 0.390. This reduction suggests a move towards reversing the previous increase in inequality, potentially influenced by post-pandemic economic recovery measures and interventions aimed at redistributing income more fairly.

Overall, while the trajectory of income inequality has seen periods of both improvement and deterioration, the recent decrease offers a hopeful sign that efforts to manage and mitigate income disparities are having a positive impact. However, continued vigilance and policy adjustments are necessary to maintain and further this progress.

Income inequality can decrease for various reasons. Survey findings show real average household income increased 12.3% to ₹3.62 lakh from 2021 to 2023. The bottom 50% of households, encompassing informal blue-collar workers, petty traders, small business owners, and small and marginal farmers, have seen a significant recovery, witnessing their share of total household income rise from 15.84% in 2020-21 to 22.04% in 2022-23.

The findings also paint a comprehensive picture of how income inequality has changed



Levels of Income Inequality: 1968-2023

Survey period	Share in household disposable income (%) Bottom 10% population (B10)	Top 10% population (T10)	Ratio (T10/B10)	Gini Coefficient
1967-68	1.81	36.49	20.3	0.46
1975-76	2.27	33.88	14.9	0.42
1994-95	2.33	32.86	14.1	0.43
2004-05	1.93	35.75	18.5	0.47
2013-14	2.15	30.78	14.3	0.40
2015-16	2.48	27.88	11.2	0.37
2020-21	1.09	38.60	35.4	0.51
2022-23	2.44	30.27	12.4	0.39

Source: NCAER's Income Surveys (1968-2005), PRICE's ICE 360 Surveys (2014-2023)

across different percentiles of the income distribution. A breakdown of percentile ratios:

► **90th-10th** Significant decrease from 35.4 in 2021 to 12.4 in 2023 highlights a substantial reduction in income inequality between the top and bottom of the income distribution. The fact that income at the top was 6.9 times higher than income at the bottom in 2023, compared to 35.4 times higher in 2021, signifies a notable improvement in income distribution.

► **90th-50th** Decrease in this ratio from 2.4 in 2021 to 1.4 in 2023 indicates a significant reduction in income inequality between the top and middle of the income distribution. This suggests that the middle-income group experienced relatively faster income growth than the top earners, contributing to a more equitable income distribution.

► **50th-10th** Significance of this ratio over the period further emphasises that the change in inequality was primarily driven by improvements at the lower end of the income distribution. A notable decrease in this ratio (14.4 in 2021 to 8.3 in 2023) would indicate the bottom earners experienced relatively higher income growth than the middle-income group.

Addressing income inequality is crucial for economic stability, social cohesion and enhancing well-being. By acknowledging the interconnected nature of inequality across dimensions — income, expenditure, education, health and opportunity — India should adopt more holistic strategies to promote inclusive growth and reduce disparities.

The writer is MD-CEO, PRICE



THE SPEAKING TREE

Unseen Force Driving F1

ULLHAS PAGEY

Formula 1, the epitome of high-performance auto racing, is a heart-pounding spectacle characterised by high-performance single-seater cars, where every second counts and victory is a matter of split-second decisions.

In the world of F1 racing, split-second decisions can determine victory or defeat. While the spotlight often shines on the technological advancements in the auto sector and the physical prowess of drivers, their inner journey, shaped by spiritual values encompassing a broad spectrum of beliefs, also plays a crucial role. For some, spirituality finds expression in mindfulness techniques that help them stay grounded amid pressures, enabling them to prioritise mental clarity. Others draw strength from personal philosophies, and prayers and reflection.

Moments spent in solitude amid the beauty of the natural world provide some F1 drivers with opportunities for introspection, grounding them and fostering a deeper connection with their spiritual beliefs. Drivers such as Ayrton Senna, Lewis Hamilton and Daniel Ricciardo have publicly acknowledged their faith in the Divine and belief in practices such as mindfulness, showcasing the diverse range of spiritual values within the F1 community.

Each driver's spiritual journey is deeply personal, shaping his mindset, approach and performance on the track. As they navigate the turns of the racing circuit, these values serve as guiding lights, illuminating the path to success and fulfilment.



Art for Heart's Sake

A Mumbai attorney representing a wealthy businessman who collected art called his client and said to him, 'Manojji, I have some good news and I have some bad news.'

The art-collecting businessman replied, 'I've had an awful day. Let's hear the good news first.'

The attorney said, 'Well, I met your wife today, and she informed me that she invested ₹50 lakh in two

pictures that she thinks will bring a minimum of ₹5 cr. I think she could be right.'

Manoj replied enthusiastically, 'Well done! My wife is a brilliant businesswoman! You've just made my day. Now I know I can handle the bad news. What is it?'

The attorney replied, 'The two pictures are of you with your secretary.'

Divine Conversion

An Ahmedabad speculator asks god, 'God, is it true that to you, a billion years is like a second?' God says yes.

The guy then asks, 'God, is it true that to you, a billion rupees is like a paisa?' God says yes.


The man asks, 'God, can I have a paisa please?' God replies, 'Sure, just a second.'

Chat Room

Did Neta's Greed Kill Voter's Creed?

Apropos 'Apathy of Urban Electorate Defining Feature of LS Polls' by Anubhuti Vishnoi (May 24), the urban voters are better educated, taxpayers with an assured income, and with highest political awareness. They are not easily swayed by freebies since they know that they will have to repay the benefit with income tax, unlike many of the rural voters. Their ease of living depends on contractor-bureaucrat-controlled municipal corporations. Finally, they are aware that their votes hardly matter because the elected class, in their naked greed for power and pelf, can break a pre-poll alliance without any compunction. Hence, the urban voters use the poll day holiday to escape from their daily grind. One way of bringing them to the polling booth is to allow the holiday only on producing the proof of voting.

GAJANAN UPADHYA
By email



A thought for today
Social media gives idiots the right to speak when they once only spoke at a bar after a glass of wine...It's the invasion of the idiots
UMBERTO ECO

It's Not Working

Are netas hearing young talk about jobs crisis?

Throughout the election period, from prosperous Kerala, Haryana and Maharashtra to Bihar, Odisha and Rajasthan, unemployment has been a running theme among voters that reporters, pollsters, party workers have all picked up. This distress call is no surprise – that India is facing a big youth unemployment problem that has only worsened post-Covid is borne out by all estimates. The latest PLFS data on unemployment, the Jan-Mar quarter, for the age group 15-29 is at 17%, a notch higher than the previous quarter. Double-digit unemployment crisis in this age group has only worsened over the years. Unpaid work is increasing, the quality of non-white collar jobs is declining, self-employment, a desperate choice for most low-income earners, is going up and real wages have been falling. This, when around 5 million people annually join the workforce.

One cruel twist of many desperate tales is that while coveted 'govt jobs' are elusive, being part of the paper-leak rackets of qualifying exams is kosher – because there's a chance to make a quick buck. Explosion of low-quality private colleges across India in the last decade has meant an explosion of the numbers of graduates. Some of those with the means have taken illegal routes abroad only to fall prey to job scams, lured into wars, labour work and illegal activity. The short-term Agnipath scheme for army recruitment has been a point of pain. To be "retired" at age 24 is how the scheme is increasingly perceived.

Whether or not the jobs distress has an electoral impact, the message for politicians is clear. Unemployment needs as much political cooperation as political will for Centre and states. Focus on the job of creating jobs via light manufacturing and skilling young India. That vaunted demographic dividend is fast losing hope in the ability of elected govts to create employment opportunities.

Vote Of Thanks

Time we celebrate millions of voters who've braved heat

Delhi will vote today in all likelihood in a scorcher of a day. Voters in other parts of India have had to cope with extreme heat as well. In north India, it's like living inside a hair-dryer. Elsewhere, heat and humidity have wrung people out. But despite the heat, and lower turnout in some places, elections have still drawn hundreds of millions of voters to their booths to exercise their franchise. That's something few are celebrating.

Democracy gives each citizen equal worth, irrespective of rank and status – we are counted, not weighed. This political equality is the one and only force that counters hierarchies of wealth and clout. Our converging and diverging with others is what makes majorities and remakes them. A vote is the only way we can participate in contests over who gets what in our country, what happens to our land and rivers and cities, what medical care and education we get, what can send you to jail, whether your identity is respected. For low-income or marginalised people, these are not abstract stakes, they are vital matters. No wonder so many Indians wait their turn patiently, braving the weather and queues and inconvenience, taking precious time away from their lives and livelihoods, just to press that EVM button. Democracy determines our common fate. Millions who have voted and will vote, braving the weather, give our democracy meaning.

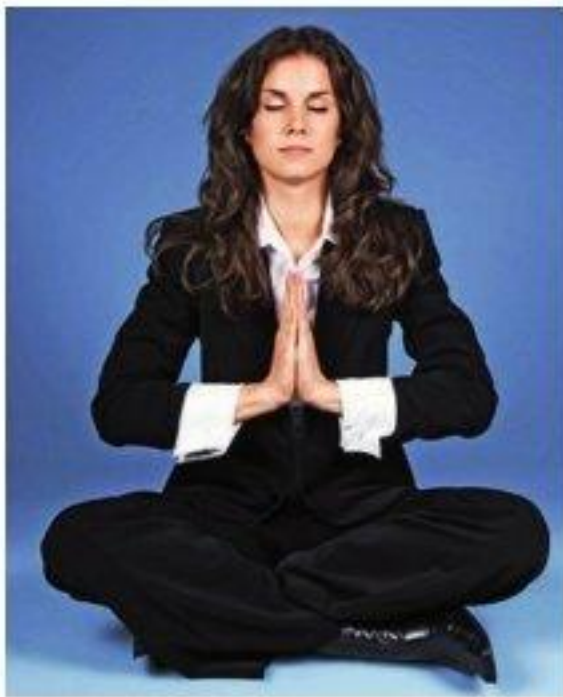
Why Religion Is Big Business

An economic lens might explain its fortunes

God's work is worldly work, and religions are businesses like any other, argues *The Divine Economy: How Religions Compete for Wealth, Power, and People* by Paul Seabright. Churches, mosques, madrasas, temples, synagogues, prayer groups, ashrams, monasteries – these are iron-fisted organisations that need capital and human resources. In US alone, the Catholic Church and faith-based organisations raked in more revenues than Apple or Microsoft in 2016, for instance. They are exempt from taxes on their revenues and properties, shielded from the usual scrutiny that applies to secular businesses.

The book investigates how religious movements gain and use authority. Like modern platforms, religions connect people in new ways, expropriate some of the benefits of this connection, and also compete with each other. This competition is expressed through war and conflict, through demographic rivalry (having more children), and through persuasion. It explores how religious organisations are changing, when they flourish and when they splinter. It also asks how the power of religion is used and abused. While the 'secularisation thesis' once predicted that prosperity, modernity and science would cause religion to fade, this has clearly not been the case. While surveys do suggest that greater existential security in North America and western Europe caused a decline in people strongly identifying as Christian, the facts are more complicated; it indicates turbulence, not a trend. Religious identity is intensifying in many parts of the world, even in places like China where it is a sensitive subject. The book finds a growing corporatisation at work, as local and

mindfield
SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



folk religions are absorbed into a handful of global religions. Christianity and Islam are booming, Hinduism and Buddhism are also bigger brands now. What human needs does religion answer, that secular structures don't? It provides a sense of the numinous, makes believers feel special and protected. Religiosity is a bundle of diverse traits, and different faiths have crafted varied appeals, from private prayer and meditation to collective spectacle to violent crusades and jihad. All religions are patchworks, and they have messages that can be interpreted as messages of war or peace. As Adam Smith observed, their effects are not to be found in their teachings, but in the interests and incentives of religious leaders. In business and in religion, fair competition makes religions more benevolent, monopoly has the opposite effect. When political leaders grant protection to one religious movement over others, there is more discord and violence. But ironically, this reduces the catchment area of believers. From Trump to Netanyahu to Putin and Xi, repressive leaders who claim god is on their side should know the diminishing returns of this strategy. When harnessed to conservative causes, religious authority ebbs away. In Iran, religious legitimacy had reduced by the 1990s because of the Islamic Revolution's instrumentalisation of Shia faith, but the backlash has taken a long time to build, as recent hijab protests show. Ultimately, a religious platform works best when it persuades, rather than coerces. It has to provide what believers are seeking, not impose itself by force. Because religious power is real and legitimate, there will always be those who use it to send soldiers to battle or voters to the ballot box, and those who are intoxicated by its call.

YOUR TUBE, MY VOTE

2019 is remembered as India's WhatsApp election. 2024 is turning out to be a YouTube one. But no matter its pervasiveness, digital media by itself can't alter electoral outcomes

SV Srinivas and Lipika Kamra



"This time, it's different," say politicians and media people covering the election. Lacklustre turnouts and pandemic political shiftiness aside, today politicians and political commentators find themselves operating in a media quicksand – a media environment that changed radically since 2019.

That election still relied substantially on TV – and on WhatsApp. It will in fact be remembered as 'India's WhatsApp election'. BJP mobilised lakhs of volunteers to push political messages through the app.

In time, phones became filled with fake news, allegations against opponents, and a great deal of 'fear speech', meant to instil dread of particular groups. Deepfakes appeared later, during the 2020 Delhi assembly election.

Platforms and distribution | Today 800 million Indians, half of them from rural areas, have access to internet. Media space has grown more varied and less centralised. Media campaigns are no longer just about political party IT cells churning out content. Its production and distribution have been substantially outsourced to social media influencers, many with hyper-local reach on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and X.

BJP was the first to recruit social media influencers, but others, including Congress, AAP and regional parties, like BRS, quickly followed suit.

YouTube is now a key election outreach platform. Notorious for harbouring extreme speech, including Hindutva pop that advocates communal violence, it has also become a hotbed of political dissidence: critics of NDA (like Dhruv Rathee), independent journalists (like Ravish Kumar) and a whole slew of opposition politicians.

In Bengal CPM finds little airtime on TV, but has a large YouTube army. Both major parties in Andhra Pradesh, TDP and YSRCP, have been moving from print and TV to YouTube.

Intermediality | All the while, the importance of WhatsApp has only grown. Today, it is not only a carrier of textual and audio-visual content, but also a crucial

re-router of voters' attention to other media platforms. The most used media platform, near-universal on Indian smartphones, WhatsApp is the key agent of what media scholars call 'intermediality', or traffic between media forms and platforms; it distributes messages from YouTube, Facebook and Instagram.

The platform's political force can be gauged from the fact that it is through WhatsApp that govt kicked off its media campaign this year, spamming millions of the app's users with a letter from the PM, sent from the staidly named Viksit Bharat Sampark account.

POLLITICS
Special Series on Elections



Wilds of social media | In Andhra Pradesh, EC sent warnings about MCC violations to leaders of both the main parties (TDP and YSRCP), but this failed to thwart

the exchange of abuses. A frenzy of personal attacks and conspiracy theories came to a head when rape videos, made allegedly by a JDS MP Prajwal Revanna, were circulated widely on pen drives in his constituency. Women featured in them were clearly identifiable and have had to go into hiding to avoid humiliation and public shame.

The fact that these videos were circulated during pre-election silence, with no consequences for their distributors, shows the extent of the difficulty in

regulating electoral messaging in the digital media age, which EC faces now.

TMC sought to restrict telecasts of Modi's rallies in jurisdictions on the eve of election, but these continued, as neither the legal framework for regulating the political uses of digital media, nor the means of its enforcement, are yet in place. Technology once again outpaced law.

The very long 44-day election season also meant that media users have been subjected to political statements and telecasts of political rallies for weeks, regardless of when they were voting.

Election gig economy | Digital media is a key player in India's massive election economy. At the bottom of its pyramid are lakhs of unemployed and underemployed educated youth who are involved in this year's media campaign as political gig workers. Viral anti-BJP and anti-Congress memes have much to do with the efficiency with which they are distributed by the last-mile IT cell workers with no political party affiliations. This economy also involves vast crowds paid to attend political roadshows and rallies, whose images are broadcast on digital media.

The *Economic Times* has reported that the scale of India's election economy is such that cities are now experiencing serious labour shortages because millions of migrant labourers have returned to their hometowns and villages to take up jobs in tenting, catering or marking roadshow and meeting attendance for every political party in play, for which they are paid more than for regular work in the cities. Election time films, which cost hundreds of crores, fail at the box office, displaced by the electoral spectacle.

Noise and distractions | The intermediality of print, TV and digital media has transformed the nature of election campaigning, but any claim to digital media's ability to determine electoral outcomes should be taken with a fistful of salt.

Opposition parties have better access to social media, while villagers, illiterate people, women and tribal communities are now plugged into multifarious political messaging on their smartphones. While the phone has deepened and expanded political choice, it has also amplified digital information noise meant to distract voters from bread-and-butter issues. New forms of communication have greater reach, but they remain no more than a medium that in itself will not upturn the outcome of these elections.

Srinivas teaches literature and media at Azim Premji University. Kamra teaches politics at Birmingham University

'Strong leher for INDIA...BJP's on backfoot...Focus on PM face becomes all about image...These are complex & crucial polls'

Tejashwi Yadav has almost single-handedly fired up INDIA's Lok Sabha campaign in 40-seat Bihar, with over 210 election rallies and 180 roadshows and sabhas, all of which have attracted large crowds. From seeking votes for candidates to lashing out at his opponents on multiple fronts, Bihar's 34-year-old ex-deputy CM is leaving no stone unturned to put up a strong fight after INDIA ally Nitish Kumar's return to NDA. In conversation with Sheezan Nezami, Tejashwi says joblessness is India's single biggest crisis, that BJP has "no answers to people's questions", and Nitish is "mimicking BJP's tone and tenor".

● **Lalu unable to campaign for INDIA candidates must have had an impact.**

We definitely miss him. His ability to connect with people remains unmatched. So is his principled position on the issues of social and economic justice. The love and support the party is getting is only because of him.

INDIA has a definite campaign plan. We've deployed all our resources in a strategic manner. Parties are closely coordinating with each other towards the larger goal of presenting the alliance as an all-India force.

● **Nitish Kumar has bitterly targeted you, your family, but you haven't reacted.**

Nitishji is a senior leader and we respect our elders. We recognise his bitterness arises from rapidly losing electoral ground and relevance in the larger political field. Plus, company matters. He has started mimicking BJP's tone and tenor.

Propaganda has its limits. Like I've been saying, you can deceive some people most of the time or most people some of the time. But you cannot deceive all the people all the time. The people of Bihar are smart and have

consistently reposed their trust in us.

● **What's your prediction for INDIA bloc? And who's the PM face if it wins, as your leaders are predicting?**

We're going to perform well; I'm very sure. There is a wave of discontent against the incumbent govt across the country. And there is a strong leher for INDIA alliance. We've worked very hard in Bihar. Work we did in a short period is being appreciated. The people of Bihar have high hopes from us and we're gearing up to deliver what we promised. I don't believe in discussing 'faces'. The thing with being focused on the 'face' is that it becomes all about image and image-management. We've seen enough and more of a 'face' for far too long. Unlike BJP, we have several capable, experienced, and energetic leaders.

● **You've promised 1cr govt jobs if INDIA forms govt. Will it help pull votes?**

Yes, we've received very positive responses from the people. Young people have seen we can deliver when we are in govt, no matter the constraints. While much of the mainstream media doesn't talk about the unemployment crisis, it's the single most important and serious issue for our country.

● **Is it tough for Misa & Rohini Acharya fighting Ram Kripal Yadav & Rajiv Pratap Rudy?**

There's massive support for both my sisters. We're getting very good ground

reports from both constituencies. If you care to look, you'll find BJP's on the backfoot. People are asking them hard questions about what they've done in the last 10 years, and they simply have no answers.

● **Modi calls you shehzada in Patna who considers Bihar his jaagir.**

Our PM doesn't look within. While it has always been so, we're able to see it very clearly during these elections. BJP itself today is the hotbed of nepotism and corruption. This is clearly visible – be it ministers, state-level leadership, even alliance partners.

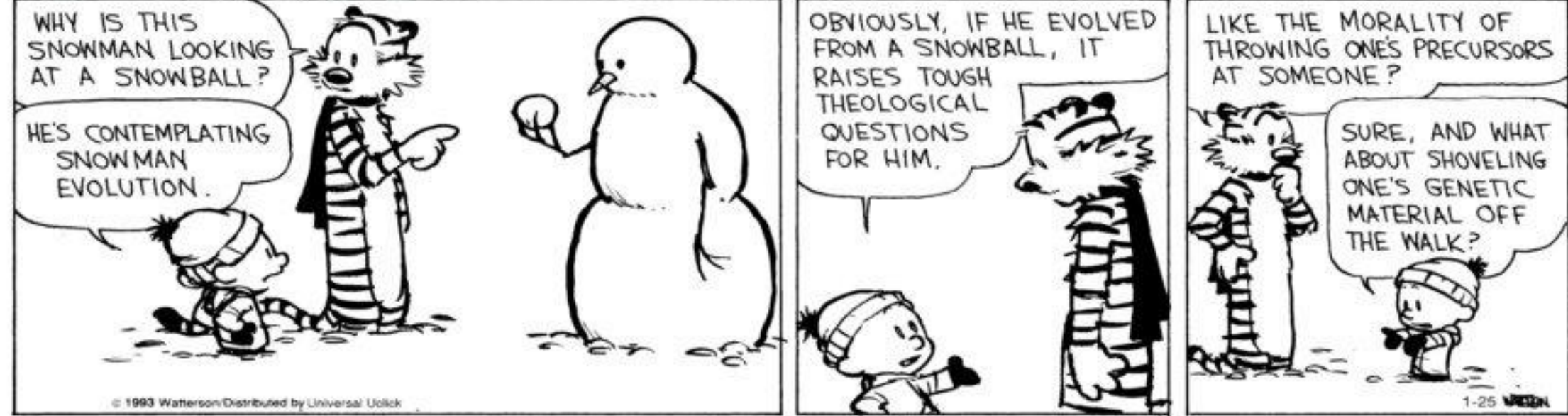
● **You've said BJP 'hijacked' Nitish, that his was still with you.**

I was merely stating a fact. Assess my comment against the situation former and incumbent CMs of Maharashtra, Jharkhand, and Delhi have found themselves in today, because of BJP's all-out attacks on their govts.

● **Contest in Purnia is between Pappu Yadav as an Independent and the JDU nominee. Was dropping Yadav as an INDIA candidate a mistake?**

Our candidate selection was not based on assessment of individuals. We took into consideration a lot of factors. These are complex and crucial elections and a lot of debate and discussion between alliance partners went into creating a strong and coherent strategy.

Calvin & Hobbes



Indic Philosophy Is Inclusive And Sustainable

Arup Mitra

In a speech called 'Message of the Forest', Rabindranath Tagore implied that India could offer its rich heritage as a gift to the world. Several foreigners travelled to India and brought new religious thoughts, but India's uniqueness lies in its generous absorption of them. India made its storehouse richer with new additions without discarding the older constituents. Thus, an all-encompassing essence called Indianness emerged, akin to Indic philosophy and spirituality. Consumerism dominates the world today, and India is no exception, yet the country's spiritual richness remains undisturbed.

One can consider the individual the primary agent; given limited means, his utility-maximising behaviour would guide the entire spectrum of material activities. However, it can result in severe inequality. On the other hand,

Indic philosophy does not oppose material prosperity alongside spiritual advancement but envisages social well-being in a much more meaningful way. The four basic tenets of human aspirations – dharma, artha, kama, and moksha – are fundamental to individual well-being.

Indic philosophy is inclusive and sustainable; it begins with a macro perspective and then deduces the route to individual satisfaction from that grand structure. The maximisation of social well-being is the spirit, and its conceptualisation is so grand that it includes human beings and their environment. In this contextual framework, when one talks about individual satisfaction, he is influenced by unselfish forces. That is how spirituality and a materialistic way of life complement each other and shape one's life in a more fulfilling manner.

Materialism alone has its limitations, and new products cannot render a sense of unending fulfilment. Hence, ethical values must be combined with the material way of life to maintain consistency between the macro perspective and microbehaviour.

When individuals pursue overarching tenets of peace and prosperity at the macro level, they enrich themselves, too. However, if the individual attempts to attain prosperity solely for himself, it can damage the individual and society. A fascinating aspect of this philosophical-economic convergence is its role in shaping completeness in life. As one undertakes every action in the name of That, one is mindful of the need to earn a livelihood without causing harm to others, thereby eliminating corrupt practices. On the other hand, to remain alert and productive, one's body and

mind must be in good health, for which spirituality is crucial. It involves meditation at both the physical and mental levels.

Yogic exercises and kriyas are essential for disciplining the body and mind, while knowledge and devotion enable individual consciousness to stay connected with a higher Reality. Thus, social welfare and, within that broader context, individual pursuits in the quest for completeness coexist in a harmonious manner.

As we march ahead with progress and prosperity facilitated by technological advancements, the role of spiritual heritage is more vital than ever. One must pursue it proactively to conjure practical solutions to the vagaries of material life and think beyond material interests. Well-being restricted to material dimension will never be able to transport an individual to a higher plane of consciousness and help attain a sense of completeness.

Sacredspace



If a king is energetic, his subjects will be equally energetic. If he is reckless, they will not only be

reckless likewise, but also eat into his works...Hence the king shall ever be wakeful.

Chanakya

BANKS SHOULD IMPROVE CORPORATE LOANS, KEEP DEPOSIT BASE HEALTHY

FOR the first time ever, the cumulative net profits of Indian banks surpassed ₹3 lakh crore in 2023-24, up from ₹2.3 lakh crore in 2022-23. The rise was driven by healthy loan growth and increase in banks' other income, though the net interest margins for some were weighed down by the rising cost of funds. While the 26 private lenders' net profits shot up 42 percent to ₹1.78 lakh crore, the 12 public sector banks (PSBs) reported net profits of ₹1.41 lakh crore in 2023-24, a 34 percent increase. Some PSBs, including Bank of India, Bank of Maharashtra and Indian Bank, saw their profits jump over 50 percent in 2023-24. Above all, behemoth SBI turned in the biggest quarterly net profit by any Indian bank at ₹20,968 crore during the March quarter; a stellar 125 percent increase.

The latest numbers validate that PSBs have indeed turned the corner: From record losses of ₹85,390 crore in 2017-18 to record profits in 2023-24, state-run banks have come a long way. The gross non-performing assets (NPAs) or bad loans, which peaked to 14.6 percent of total loans in 2017-18 and threatened the existence of some weak banks, are likely to print lower at 3 percent or below in 2023-24. Importantly, PSBs, which accounted for about 80 percent of the total industry's NPAs, have significantly improved their asset quality. That said, NPAs are likely to rise this fiscal and while a marginal increase in bad loans is unavoidable, banks should remain vigilant.

Unarguably, the reforms undertaken in the last five years helped improve credit discipline, brought back responsible lending and improved governance. If the government provided much-needed support by infusing ₹3.1 lakh crore to recapitalise PSBs between 2016-17 and 2020-21, the mega mergers not only led to consolidation but also allowed weaker banks to merge with stronger lenders who raised capital on their own. However, much of the credit growth during 2023-24 was driven by retail loans, while corporate loans saw a tepid rise. This needs to improve as the latter provides impetus to growth. Another key challenge for banks will be maintaining a healthy deposit base given that household savings are falling in favour of physical assets. This could affect banks' net interest margins in 2024-25, as they would need to pay higher interest to attract deposits.

RECORD EC HAULS MUST BE TRACED TO PARTIES

TO say that the 2024 elections would go down as the biggest poll event in terms of political significance would be an understatement. The enormity aside, the intensity with which the election is being fought is equally staggering. The higher the stakes, the stronger is the attempt to influence outcomes through inducements. In Odisha, where the Lok Sabha and assembly elections are being held simultaneously, the Election Commission's enforcement drive has led to seizures to the tune of ₹254 crore. Till the last reports were compiled, the poll body's squads had hauled up ₹17.18 crore in cash, drugs worth ₹74.4 crore, at least ₹35.8 crore worth of alcohol, besides freebies estimated at ₹113 crore. Precious metals such as gold valued at ₹14.35 crore, too, have been seized since March.

To give a perspective, seizures at the 2019 elections—both LS and assembly—were worth ₹8.18 crore. The staggering 31-fold jump in the value points, in part, to the alacrity with which the election panel has deployed its resources to take on the circulation of inducements. This time, all-India seizures are also set to shatter records. By now, the enforcement drives have netted more than ₹8,889 crore, comparable to ₹3,475.6 crore five years back. One of the major concerns, however, is the rampant use of narcotics during elections, as it accounts for about 44 percent of the total haul, valued at ₹3,958 crore. In Odisha, the drugs share stands at 29 percent.

Free and fair elections are the cornerstone of a strong democracy. To ensure the sanctity of the most important democratic process, the practice of inducements for votes must be eradicated. The EC's harder crackdown against elements using money, drugs and alcohol to influence voters is a most welcome step that deserves applause. However, the fact remains that in many cases the big hauls are barely traced back to the political party or candidate behind such inducements. Unless that is ensured, and the party or candidate is held strictly accountable for violating the very basis of free and fair elections, the raids and seizures will remain just a facile poll-time stunt without bringing any perceivable change in the system.

QUICK TAKE

WHAT UN CAN LEARN FROM FIFA

THIS week, Ireland, Norway and Spain said they will join 143 other countries in recognising a Palestinian state. It signifies the changing the mood in many western capitals. But the UN has still not accorded it full membership—Palestine has been a 'non-member observer state' since 2012—because the Security Council plays gatekeeper: Much ink has been spilt on the reforms the UN needs. One way may be for the UN to learn from FIFA. Football's governing body plays the role of the sport's church—it rushes to welcome new members and gave Palestine full membership way back in 1998. The UN can be a more forceful proponent of human rights by opening its arms in a similar spirit.

D UVVURI Subbarao, topper of the 1972 IAS batch, has written his memoir, *Just a Mercenary?* When I presented my memoir to Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan, he said, "For reconstructing the history of a country during a particular period, memoirs are of exceptional value because they record the views of the actual people who played roles in the drama as it evolved." Indian history owes much to travellers who journeyed across the country and recorded in painstaking detail its social life in different parts and their reflections on the rulers and courts they came across. We also owe much to the memoirs of rulers such as Babar and Jahangir.

I have not read Subbarao's book, but I read interviews about it. As attention can be captured more through denigration of people in power, particularly civil servants, these interviews are also confined to running down the IAS. Subbarao was an outstanding officer whose merit was rewarded by successive governments. Rarely do officers become Union finance secretary and then be chosen as RBI governor. In my memoir, I recalled with gratitude the sterling role he played for India during the Great Recession of 2008-9. I wrote, "For India, the answer lay in the Government of India and the Reserve Bank, then led by D Subbarao, acting in sync."

Subbarao also acknowledges the country has been fair to him and recognised his worth. In the concluding portion, he writes, "We are all prone to complaining about our country—how it is unfair, unjust and unequal. I complain too. But when I look back on my life and career without any bias, I realise that this country has given me so much...warts and all, there are still opportunities for merit in our country."

I was, therefore, more than a little surprised at some answers he gave to a periodical. He reportedly said, "About 25 percent of IAS officers are either corrupt or incompetent. The middle 50 percent started well, but have become complacent while only the top 25 percent are truly delivering." His reform suggestion? "I suggest a two-level entry system: initial entry for those aged 25-35, and a second tier for individuals aged 37-45. This isn't about lateral entry, but bringing in professionals from diverse fields like journalism, engineering, medicine, NGOs, entrepreneurship and farming. Those who enter young should be evaluated after 15 years, with one-third being replaced by fresh entrants."

Regarding the first part of the quote, I have read elsewhere that this formula of 25:50:25 was not Subbarao's creation but

D Subbarao has suggested a formula to recast the IAS cadre. It would be better to change the system to an outcome-oriented one focused on benefits to the people

OTHER WAYS TO REMAKE THE STEEL FRAME

K M CHANDRASEKHAR

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



SOURAV ROY

what a former chief minister told him. The fact is that comparing the ICS and early IAS officers with subsequent ones is like comparing apples with oranges. The early officers were working under a colonial political system where the sole objectives were accumulating revenue for the parent country and maintaining peace in the land. This regime continued for some years in independent India, too, until the compulsions of the new democratic political system built a new power equation with elected legislators being perceived as a bridge between the people and the government.

Over the years, the civil service had to reinvent itself to take on board the realities of the new situation. This political reality became even more accentuated with the slow but inevitable evolution of the Pan-

chayati Raj system. It is highly creditable that the civil services, particularly the IAS, adjusted well to the new political regime and still achieved significant results using leaders of the same political structure.

I also have concerns about the new reforms suggested by Subbarao. These are premised on the assumption that administration and the quality of administrators have declined because there is something wrong with the individuals who constitute these services. These new entrants come from the same stock as the ones before or those who go into other sectors of the economy. There are MBAs, doctors, engineers, IIT graduates, people who have worked in the corporate sector, all coming into the IAS and other civil services after battling through a difficult examination, which is

UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME: IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME

PRATIK KANJILAL

For years, the author has been speaking easy to a surprisingly tolerant public



SPEAKEASY

wasn't OK, after the PM went on a long campaign, describing them as prolifically fertile "infiltrators". After years of vituperation, such terms and the values they express have become normalised.

This is what makes the 2024 election deathly boring—no matter who wins, the air quality may not change for a long time.



EXPRESS

Whoever wins the election, the idea of a universal basic income will not go away. The Mahalakshmi scheme is universal basic income for families vested in a woman member. On the other hand, employment guarantees—through MGNREGA or reservations—are transactional and have duties implied

If people remain divided and the discourse is coarse, and if institutions fail to protect their independence, the outcome would be a mere statistic. GDP growth would remain another statistic reflecting the monopolistic rise of a tiny minority, while fortunes of the overwhelming majority slide.

The PM's accusation that the Congress has sought to divert the benefits of reservation from scheduled castes and tribes to Muslims is inventive. It channels old anxieties about redistribution of assets and opportunities and gives it a communal, horizontal spin. Recall the resistance V P Singh faced during the Mandal agitation. Consider the communist Tebhaga movement in West Bengal, an intervention favouring sharecroppers that both raised hackles and

far more competitive than in the years in which Subbarao and I entered the IAS. There is immense potential for harnessing their skills and building a powerful administrative system, making India a developed country long before 2047.

The fact is there is nothing wrong with the officers constituting the system but with the system itself. While the political system has changed, the administrative system is the same. S K Das, in his excellent book, *Building a World Class Civil Service for Twenty-First Century India*, writes, "David Potter, professor of political science at Open University, UK, wrote an interesting book called *India's Political Administrator: From ICS to IAS* in 1998. Potter came to the conclusion that the central features of the ICS tradition of administration continued in independent India. According to him, 'The content of the ICS tradition was not only the concern of the IAS men and women within it, for it has influenced the behaviour of the other administrators and affected the general character of the Indian state structure as a whole.' Potter found that, 'Although much had changed by the early 1980s, this basic framework of administration was still in place.' "

The system needs to undergo a sea change, shifting from the present process-oriented framework to an outcome-oriented system, with outcomes being defined as actual benefits to the people in areas where they want improvement. Public administration is entirely different from corporate governance; its goals are diverse, straddling multiple sectors, and they change from time to time as governments change. State governments' priorities may differ from the Centre's. Civil servants in India have learnt to adapt themselves to change. Changing these experienced officers is no solution to the problem of governance.

The words "steel frame" are no longer relevant. The present-day officer cannot achieve results if he is inflexible. Many countries, including our erstwhile political masters, the UK, have swept away old process-oriented systems and created new outcome-based systems. We have also tried—with performance budgeting, outcome budgeting and results framework documents at different times. We failed to make headway on account of lack of consistency and insufficient political ownership.

I hope that whichever formation comes to power this June prioritises overhauling the administrative system, making it an outcome-oriented one, with the PM and the Cabinet themselves steering it.

(Views are personal)
(kmchandrasedkhar@gmail.com)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Freedom supporter

Ref: *Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay: A centennial tribute* (May 24). One of the popular episodes that confirmed Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay's belief about the spirit of freedom in college relates to his refusal, as vice-chancellor of Calcutta University, to rusticate Subhas Chandra Bose, who in 1916 had assaulted a professor of Presidency College who had made racist comments.

N Rama Rao, Chennai

Indelible imprint

While expressing heartfelt accolades to the author for the article, I wish to add that the great Madhusudan Das was Asutosh Mukhopadhyay's childhood mentor. It's always reiterated with pride that Madhu babu left an indelible imprint in Mukhopadhyay's life.

Biraja Prasad Satpathy, Bhubaneswar

Iran gateway

Ref: *Chabahar & the US-Iran conundrum* (May 24). The Chabahar port agreement with Iran is an outstanding geopolitical endeavour by India that will create a gateway to Eurasia and Central Asia, limiting China's expanding regional dominance. Another positive feature is that we were able to manage the US reservations on this issue well through diplomatic means.

K Venkatasubramanian, Coimbatore

Full picture

Ref: *EC needs to address concerns on integrity of election data* (May 24). The Election Commission should try to win people's trust and provide the correct data as required. It has still not released the total number of registered voters and number of polled votes from each constituency. The percentage doesn't give the full picture.

Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

Impactful advice

Ref: *How to make the most of post-exam holidays* (May 23). The article comes as some much-sought-after inspiration to students after finishing stressful exams. It certainly guides young minds on how to make the best out of their break. The advice to contribute crucially to societal development is a masterstroke. This should be very impactful and can hold a phenomenal edge to transform national growth.

Aarvind Gundhalli, Raichur

Inspiring protester

The woman in Hyderabad who sat in a pothole for an hour to protest the poor state of roads is awe-inspiring. This is a good reminder of how bad Hyderabad's roads are. The lady should be appreciated for taking this issue up and the government should start repairing the thousands of potholes in the city.

Katuru Durga Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

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