





# The great significance of the ICC’s step

On May 20, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Karim Khan, made public his application to a pre-trial chamber of the ICC to issue arrest warrants against five individuals linked to the conflict in Gaza. The five are Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, and three Hamas leaders, including Yahya Sinwar, the leader of the outfit. The announcement caused a furore, which could have possible adverse consequences for the ICC. But in all the bluster and fury, it is important to ask what the legal basis for this request is, and the implications.

The ICC was established by the Rome Statute, a treaty negotiated more than 20 years ago, to ensure legal redress for grave international crimes, including genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The ICC builds on the legal legacies and jurisprudence of international courts before it, including the ad hoc United Nations tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, in order to address individual criminal responsibility. It is not a determination of culpability of a nation or group, but rather of individuals.

### The nature of crimes

The Prosecutor alleges in his statement that Hamas officials are responsible for an array of war crimes and crimes against humanity including murder, extermination, taking hostages, rape and sexual violence, torture, cruel treatment, outrages upon personal dignity, and other inhumane acts. These are allegations that stem from Hamas’ attacks against Israel on October 7, 2023. The Prosecutor’s case against the Israeli officials are that since October 8, 2023, they bear responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity such as persecution, extermination and/or murder including deaths caused by starvation, starvation of civilians as a method of warfare,



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The International Criminal Court has sought arrest warrants against the leadership of Israel and Hamas. This is a good step: no one should be able to commit international crimes with impunity, and accountability should not be a mere mirage

wilfully causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or health, wilfully killing, intentionally directing attacks against a civilian population, and other inhumane acts. These applications for warrants are supported by an independent panel of experts.

Based on the Rome Statute and the procedures of the ICC, the judges of the pre-trial chamber must now make a decision regarding whether to issue the arrest warrants requested. This determination is based on the evidence that the Prosecutor submits to the judges. To issue the warrants, the judges must be satisfied that there are “reasonable grounds to believe” that the individuals have committed a crime, within the jurisdiction of the court.

An argument against the Prosecutor’s actions is that Israel is not a state party to the Rome Statute and so the ICC cannot exercise jurisdiction over it. This is incorrect. There are other situations where the ICC has exercised jurisdiction over a non-state party. For instance, in Bangladesh/Myanmar, the court held that even though Myanmar is not a state party, the court has jurisdiction by virtue of particular crimes committed on the territory of a state party (Bangladesh). Another example is the arrest warrant issued against President Vladimir Putin, when Russia is not a state party. According to the ICC statute, the court has jurisdiction over crimes committed in the territory of a state party or a state which has accepted its jurisdiction, and Ukraine falls under this category. The court asserted jurisdiction which would apply to occupied and annexed territories. It is worth noting that this decision was met with acclaim by many states in the West, in contrast to the current situation regarding Israel.

Specifically addressing the jurisdiction of the court in this instance, a pre-trial chamber in 2021 affirmed that the ICC can exercise criminal jurisdiction in

the Situation in the State of Palestine, and that this scope includes Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. This would include any actions on and since October 7 last year.

### Obligation to cooperate

An immediate consequence of a positive decision on these warrants relates to obligations on all states that have ratified the Rome Statute to cooperate on matters, including arrest. When arrest warrants by the ICC were issued in relation to Omar al-Bashir of Sudan, states failed to follow through on their obligations. When Mr. Bashir was in South Africa for a summit, legal proceedings were brought to initiate the arrest in the country. However, South Africa decided not to arrest Mr. Bashir, a decision that was excoriated by the Supreme Court of Appeal of South Africa as well as judges of the ICC. While this was a failure to arrest, it is worth noting that the arrest warrant hampers scope of activity and remains an obligation for over a hundred states that are a party to the Rome Statute.

It is also important to note that there are separate, distinct proceedings before another court in the Hague, the International Court of Justice (ICJ). There, South Africa is alleging violations of the Genocide Convention by Israel with regard to its actions in Gaza. The ICJ has already issued decisions indicating provisional measures, akin to injunctions in domestic law. Proceedings at the ICJ are to determine the legal responsibility of a state and are not about individual criminally responsibility.

The decision by the ICC Prosecutor is of great significance. International law is being severely tested in this crisis. While this step may not be an immediate panacea, it signals that there is value in the rule of law, in the idea that no one should be able to commit international crimes with impunity, and that accountability should not be a mere mirage.

# The popularity of Dakhni

Humour, sarcasm, and bluntness have suffused the political campaign

### STATE OF PLAY

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The campaign to the Lok Sabha elections in Telangana, especially in Hyderabad, was full of quips and comebacks in the Dakhni language. Dakhni shares the Perso-Arabic script with Urdu and Farsi and is inalienable to the Deccan plateau. particularly Hyderabad. Dakhni people and speakers are spread across the plateau and speak variants of the language in Telangana, Maharashtra, and Karnataka. There is evidence that Dakhni people speak the language in Kerala and Tamil Nadu as well. Though invariably mischaracterised as Hyderabad, what Hyderabadis speak is simply a variant of Dakhni.

During the campaign, the *siyasi jalsas*, as political public meetings are called, have been filled with humour, sarcasm, and bluntness, which are all hallmarks of the Dakhni language. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Hyderabad recently, political expediency naturally led him to adopt the Dakhni lexicon. At the beginning of his speech, he said, “*Congress...Nakko, BRS...Nakko, AIMIM...Nakko*” means ‘no’ in Dakhni.

But the trading barbs in the language had started days before Mr. Modi’s ‘*nakko*’ reference. Asaduddin Owaisi from the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) had said as a riposte to Mr. Modi’s claim of being a “brother” to Muslim women, “*Nakko re baawa, tere jaisa bhai nakko humaaaku* (Oh goodness, no, we don’t need a brother like you)”.

The mixing of Dakhni and

political rhetoric ahead of the elections also came as a nod to Dakhni poets and poetry. The poems of Mohammed Ghouse ‘Khamakha’, Mohammed Himayatullah, Moin Amar Bamboo, and Hari Singh were adapted for caustic, yet humorous political use. Khamakha’s ‘*Nai Bole To Sunte Nai* (You just don’t listen)’ and Himayatullah’s ‘*Kya Hai Ki Kya Nai Ki?* (What is, what isn’t, who knows?)’, for instance, were repurposed for the *jalsas*. Mr. Owaisi reworded a poem by Khamakha thus: ‘*Karne ke jo kaamaan hai/ Woh jaise ke waise hai/ Nai karne ke kaamaan karre/ Nai bole to sunte nai* (The things need doing/ remain just the way they are/ The things that you shouldn’t be doing, you do/ You just don’t listen).” He also reworded Hari Singh’s ‘*Hao Re?*’ to say: “*Saari janta ku haula banaara, hao re? Hindu, Musalmaan ku ladaara, hau re!* (You’re making a fool of the public, eh? You’re instigating Muslims and Hindus, eh!)”. The words *hao* (yes) and *nakko* were used by all the parties.

With several loan words from Telugu, Kannada and Marathi, Dakhni was, and continues to be, a language of the common man since the mediaeval age. Richard M. Eaton notes that this was why the Sufis who arrived in the Deccan chose to use Dakhni as a literary medium. Some Sufis belonging to the Chishti Sufi order, and living in Bijapur in

Karnataka, chose to interact with the locals, both Muslims and Hindus, in Dakhni because it was the “only vernacular of Bijapur with which both Muslims and Hindus – at least those integrated with the city – were familiar,” he says. He also observes that Dakhni, as compared to Persian, which he describes as “elitist”, could reach a larger number of people. To this day, private libraries of some dargahs in the Deccan contain mediaeval manuscripts and books written in Dakhni.

In 2005, Dakhni received a fillip after the comedy film, *The Angrez*, was released. The film shows the misadventures of a motley group of friends from Hyderabad who are out to exact vengeance on the *angrez* (foreigner), in this case an NRI, who has ostensibly offended them. While the movie became popular, created Dakhni stars, and spawned a genre of films, it caricatured Dakhni the language and the Dakhnis, especially in the old city of Hyderabad.

More recently, social media, especially Instagram, has been flooded with content in Dakhni. Several content creators indulge in linguistic hyperbole. Much like *The Angrez*, this too has bordered on caricaturing the language.

However, Dakhni rappers such as Pasha Bhai from Bengaluru have brought the language into the spotlight, as setting their love for the mother tongue and seeking its rightful place as a marker of identity. In Hyderabad, history and heritage enthusiasts have run campaigns seeking to distinguish Dakhni from Urdu – contrast to those who maintain that the former is a crude dialect of the latter. With Dakhni being used widely during political campaigns, it is clear that it is here to stay.

# Parties choose middle-aged to older men to fight 2024 polls

Of the 8,337 candidates who are fighting the 2024 polls, around 10% (797) are women

### DATA POINT

#### The Hindu Data Team

In the ongoing elections to the Lok Sabha, a majority of the candidates across political parties are middle-aged or older men, shows an analysis of data by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR). This was seen in previous elections too.

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Congress have fielded the highest number of candidates this election. While the BSP has fielded 486 candidates, the BJP has fielded 440, and the Congress 327. Of them, only 2% of the BJP’s candidates, 7% of the Congress’s candidates, and about 13% of the BSP’s candidates are aged 25-35 years.

Also, only 16% of the BJP’s candidates, 13% of the Congress’s candidates, and 8% of the BSP’s candidates are women. Overall, including all the political parties and independents, of the 8,337 candidates who are fighting the elections, about 10% (797) are women. **Chart 1** shows the party-wise number of female candidates and the share of women in the total number of candidates fielded. Only select parties based on their past winning performances have been depicted. The circles correspond to parties. The bigger the circle, the the higher the number of total candidates fielded.

While no party has fielded more than 40% women candidates, some have come close or even exceeded the 33.3% mark, which the Women’s Reservation Bill promises. The Samajwadi Party (with 20% of its candidates being women), the All India Trinamool Congress (25%), the Biju Janata Dal, (33.3%) and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (29%) stand out among the parties which have fielded a considerable number of candidates. The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (3%) and the Communist Party of India (7%) are

among the parties which have fielded a considerable number of candidates. The share of women is relatively low among them, however.

According to ADR data, none of the parties have fielded a third-gender candidate. Among independents, just two candidates – Sunaina Kinnar from Dhanbad and Durga Mousi from Damoh – were recorded as third-gender candidates fighting this election.

**Chart 2** shows the party-wise number of total candidates and the share of those aged 25-35 among them in percentage. The fact that almost two-thirds of the chart from the top is vacant shows that young candidates are few and far between. However, some parties have relied on younger candidates quite heavily this election; a closer look shows an interesting pattern. Parties such as the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), the All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen, the Rashtriya Samaj Paksha, the Bharat Adivasi Party, the Republican Party of India (Athawale), and the Revolutionary Socialist Party have given a relatively high share of tickets to the youth.

All these parties have fielded these candidates in places far away from their sphere of influence. For instance, the VCK, which stands a good chance of winning two seats in Tamil Nadu, has fielded its leader, Thol Thirumaavalavan, and D. Ravikumar – both aged above 60 – in those seats. The average age of its candidates in the 11 other seats in other States, where its winning chances are extremely poor, sharply drops to 40.

**Chart 3** and **Chart 4** show the share of candidates aged 35-55 and above 55, respectively. About 55% of the BJP’s candidates are above 55 years of age, while the figure for the Congress is 47%. In the Bharat Rashtra Samithi, 71% are aged above 55, in the Shiromani Akali Dal, 69% are aged above 55, and in the Janata Dal (United), the figure is 75%.

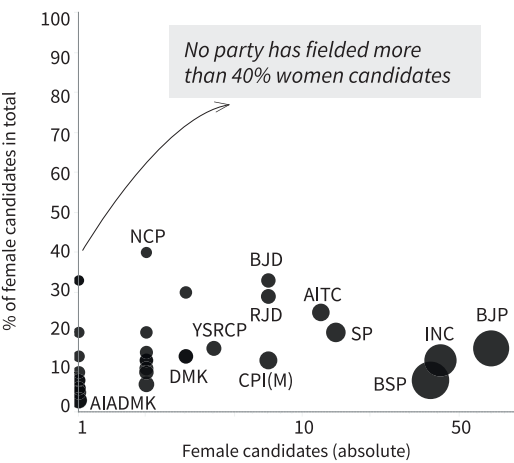


Preeti Kaur, the oldest female candidate from the BJP, holds a roadshow in Patiala. PTI

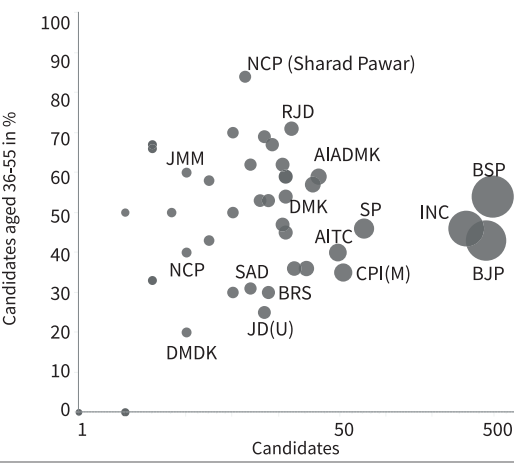
## A country for older men

The data were sourced from the Association for Democratic Reforms. All horizontal axes are in log scale

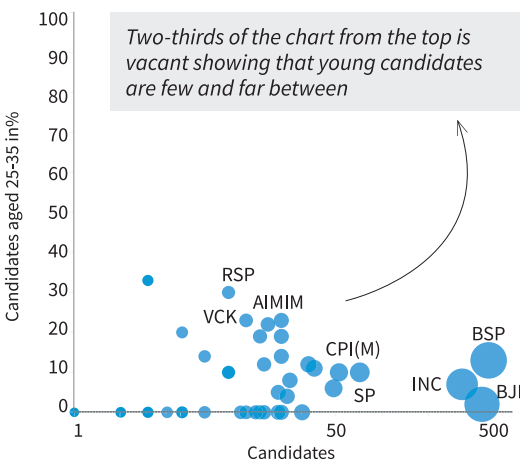
**Chart 1:** Party-wise number of female candidates and the share of women in the total number of candidates



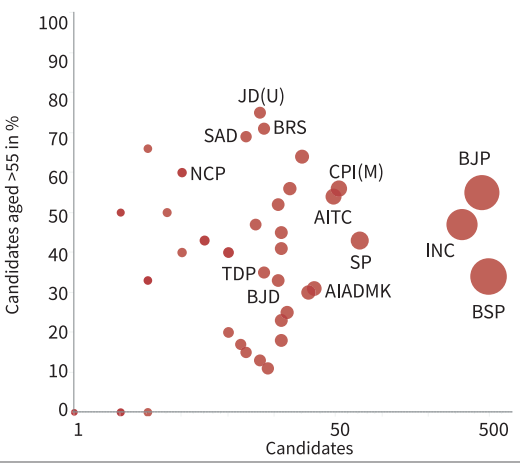
**Chart 3:** Party-wise number of total candidates and the share of those aged 35-55 among them in percentage



**Chart 2:** Party-wise number of total candidates and the share of those aged 25-35 among them in percentage



**Chart 4:** Party-wise number of total candidates and the share of those aged >55 among them in percentage



### FROM THE ARCHIVES

## The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 27, 1974

## IAEA inspection of Indian atomic plants

New York, May 26: Sources close to the International Atomic Energy Agency at Vienna have said that India has always been ‘absolutely correct’ with inspectors visiting the parts of its nuclear operation that are subject to international inspection.

At the same time these sources, quoted by “The New York Times” in a Vienna dispatch, allege that India has divided some plants – one half open to inspection, and another half closed to visitors.

The transfer agreement with Canada provides for an inspection system but it specifically excludes outside controls on materials from within India. This exclusion left the Indians free to use their own supply of uranium.

According to the Agency sources, India does have some reactor installations that are subject to inspection under safeguard agreements covering transfer of material for them from the United States and Canada but it has also others that are off limits. They say that the Canadian-supplied thermal reactor in Trombay is included among the latter and the source of plutonium used in the May 18 explosion by India came from this.

The International Atomic Energy Commission is an autonomous inter-governmental organisation reporting to the United Nations.

While the Agency officially denied it had any advance proof that India was about to detonate a nuclear device, sources close to the Agency are quoted by “The New York Times” as saying its officials had been convinced for some time that India was preparing to set off a nuclear explosion “but were powerless to do anything about it”. This was because India was not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and the plutonium used in the recent explosion was “produced in a reactor that is off limits for inspection.”

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 27, 1924

## Coonoor

Coonoor, May 25: The station will have the honour of welcoming for the first time His Excellency Lord Geschen and Lady Geschen here on 28th instant. The visit is of importance as it is reported that the Government were not satisfied with the Jam Factory on account of its loss last year.



# Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

**The Palestinians killed in the Gaza Strip since October 7**

**35,984** In more than seven months of war between Israel and Palestine, at least 80,643 people have been wounded in the Gaza Strip. AFP

**The number of motor accident claims pending nationwide**

**10.46** In lakh. The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority said that motor accident claims worth ₹80,455 crore are pending across the country. PTI

**The number of war prisoners freed by the Houthi group**

**113** Yemen's Houthi group freed more than 100 detainees in Sanaa on Sunday, calling the move a "unilateral humanitarian initiative" to pardon prisoners and return them to their families. REUTERS

**India in trade deficit with nine of top 10 trading partners**

**238.3** In \$ billion. India's trade deficit with China, Russia, Korea, and Hong Kong increased in the last fiscal compared to 2022-23. PTI

**The UN raises Papua New Guinea landslide death toll**

**670** persons. A massive landslide in Port Moresby has displaced more than 1,000 people. UN estimates that more than 150 houses are now buried. AFP  
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## An overview of Europe’s AI convention

What is the scope of the Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law? What is the difference between a framework convention and a protocol? How does the convention address national security concerns?

EXPLAINER

Krishna Ravi Srinivas

The story so far:

The global governance of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming more complex even as countries try to govern AI within their borders in various ways, ranging from acts of law to executive orders. Many experts have articulated a global treaty to this effect, but the obstacles in its path are daunting.

What is Europe’s AI convention?

Although there are many ethical guidelines, ‘soft law’ tools, and governance principles enshrined in many documents, none of them are binding or are likely to result in a global treaty. There is also no ongoing negotiation for an AI treaty at the global level anywhere. Against this background, the Council of Europe (COE) took a big step by adopting the Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law, also known as the ‘AI convention’, on May 17. The COE is an intergovernmental organisation formed in 1949, with currently 46 members. The agreement is a comprehensive convention covering AI governance and links to human rights, democracy, and the responsible use of AI. The framework convention will be opened for signature on September 5.

What is a framework convention?

A ‘framework convention’ is a legally binding treaty that specifies the broader commitments and objectives under the convention, and sets mechanisms to achieve them. The task of setting specific targets is left to subsequent agreements. Those agreements that are negotiated under the framework convention will be called protocols. For example, the Convention on Biological Diversity is a framework convention while the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety is a



ISTOCKPHOTO

protocol under it that deals with living modified organisms.

The framework convention approach is useful because it allows flexibility even as it encodes the core principles and processes by which the objectives are to be realised. Parties to the convention have the discretion to decide the ways in which to achieve the objectives, depending on their capacities and priorities. The AI convention can catalyse the negotiation of similar conventions at the regional level in other places. Then again, as the U.S. is also a member of the COE, the convention can indirectly affect AI governance in the U.S. as well, which matters because the country is currently a hotbed of AI innovation.

What is the scope of the convention?

Article 1 of the convention states: “The

provisions of this Convention aim to ensure that activities within the lifecycle of artificial intelligence systems are fully consistent with human rights, democracy and the rule of law”.

Article 3 states: “The scope of this Convention covers the activities within the lifecycle of artificial intelligence systems that have the potential to interfere with human rights, democracy, and the rule of law as follows: a. Each Party shall apply this Convention to the activities within the lifecycle of artificial intelligence systems undertaken by public authorities or private actors acting on their behalf. b. Each Party shall address risks and impacts arising from activities within the lifecycle of artificial intelligence systems by private actors... in a manner conforming with the object and purpose of this Convention.”

Does it address national security?

The exemptions in Articles 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4 are broad and pertain to the protection of national security interests, research, development and testing, and national defence, respectively. As a result, military applications of AI are not covered by the AI convention. While this is a matter of concern, it's a pragmatic move given the lack of consensus on regulating such applications. In fact, the exemptions in Articles 3.2 and 3.3 – while broad – don't completely rule out the convention's applicability vis-a-vis national security and testing, respectively.

Finally, the ‘General Obligations’ in the convention pertain to the protection of human rights (Article 4), the integrity of democratic processes, and respect for the rule of law (Article 5). While disinformation and deep fakes haven't been addressed specifically, parties to the convention are expected to take steps against them under Article 5. In fact, the convention indicates (in Article 22) that parties can go beyond the commitments and obligations specified.

Why do we need the AI convention?

The AI convention doesn't create new and/or substantive human rights specific to AI. Instead, it asserts that existing human and fundamental rights that are protected by international and national laws will need to stay protected during the application of AI systems as well. The obligations are primarily directed towards governments, which are expected to install effective remedies (Article 14) and procedural safeguards (Article 15). In all, the convention takes a comprehensive approach to mitigating risks from the use of AI systems for human rights and democracy. There are bound to be challenges to implementing it, particularly at a time when AI regulation regimes are yet to be fully established and technology continues to outpace policy.

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THE GIST

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## What is the current status with respect to spice exports?

Why is Ethylene Oxide used for sterilisation of Indian spices? What is the method that the EU prefers?

M. Soundariya Preetha

The story so far:

Last month, Hong Kong and Singapore recalled certain spice mix products of the MDH and Everest Group allegedly over the presence of a higher than prescribed level of the sterilising agent Ethylene Oxide (ETO). The Indian authorities have now initiated several measures to ensure that Indian spices comply with food safety standards of the importing countries.

Where does contamination occur?

Ganeshan Varadarajan, promoter of Lifespice, says that India does not use ETO as a pesticide but only as a sterilising agent to reduce microbial load in finished (spice) goods. Most of the agro products, including spices, are heaped in mandies (auction yards for farmers) where they are contaminated by human, bird, reptile and insect contact. Many of the large factories receive material from the mandies, which is then fed on automated lines. It leaves

them with high microbial levels and forces them to opt for ETO sterilisation. However, the contamination levels can be reduced early through the processes adopted for value addition. Consumers should start looking at the quality of products and not just the price, he says.

How big are Indian spice exports?

A quick export estimate data available with the Spices Board India shows that India enjoys a significant share in the global market for spices and spice products. In 2023-2024, India exported spices worth \$4.4 billion (nearly 14 lakh tonnes), which is 12.3% higher than the financial year 2022-2023. Data shared by the United Planters Association of Southern India reveals that chilli, spice oils and oleoresins, curry powder and paste, cumin, mint products, cardamom and pepper are some of the largest exported spices and spice products in the financial year 2022-2023. In terms of production, garlic, ginger and chilli were the top three spices produced in FY23.

China, Bangladesh, west Asian countries and the U.S. are important markets for Indian spices.

What has been impact of the recall?

An office bearer of the Federation of Indian Spice Stakeholders pointed out that Singapore and Hong Kong had not banned the Indian products, but only recalled them. Exports have resumed to these countries and hence there may not be much impact in the coming months because of this issue. India's share in total spice production globally is about 70%.

Countries have different standards for ETO and maximum (pesticide) residue levels (MRL). The European Union has stringent norms for both ETO and MRLs while Japan largely sources only organic products. The industry has been talking to the Indian government demanding discussions with the EU to relax the norms in order to boost Indian spice exports to the EU market.

A section of chilli growers in Telangana said the issue is not likely to affect farmers

much as most of them do not export directly. Further, Indian food exports have faced several challenges in the past too because of stringent norms of the buying countries. A planter pointed out that cardamom and black pepper are cultivated as inter crops with tea, coffee or rubber. The MRL is stringent for these main crops and hence the two spices are able to meet the norms. Manufacturers of spice mixes and pastes should look at sourcing genuine Indian grown spices rather than using imported spices. Further, they should be cautious when they import spices from other countries and export value added products, said a cardamom grower in Kerala. A turmeric exporter based out of Erode in Tamil Nadu says that while ETO is permitted by the U.S., the EU seeks steaming as the method for sterilisation. But while the cost of using ETO as a sterilising agent is ₹5 per kg, for steaming it is ₹20-₹25 a kg. “The Indian government should lay down achievable guidelines and tell the buying countries about it,” he says.

What has the Spices Board done?

Following the recall by Hong Kong and Singapore, the Spices Board issued a detailed protocol to all manufacturing exporters to prevent ETO contamination. The Board also said it was starting mandatory testing of spice consignments to Singapore and Hong Kong for ETO. It has also taken up with the international food standards body the need for ETO usage limit as it varies for each country.

THE GIST

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CACHE



In troubled waters: OpenAI CEO Sam Altman speaks during the Microsoft Build conference at Microsoft headquarters in Redmond, Washington, on May 21. AFP

How the cracks in OpenAI’s foundation reignited mistrust in Sam Altman

A string of researchers working on AI policy and governance in the tech company have quit in succession. For a company that started as a non-profit, OpenAI’s lack of transparency has emerged as a more serious issue than its lackadaisical approach to the future of AI safety

Poulomi Chatterjee

In November last year, over the two-day snafu when OpenAI chief Sam Altman was fired and reinstated, his perception was dramatically different. Mr. Altman, who had led the company into spearheading an artificial intelligence changeover with the release of ChatGPT couldn’t seem more adored. OpenAI employees had collectively flooded X with tweets saying, “I love OpenAI” in what was seen as an uprising against the decision of the OpenAI board. However, in the week gone by, much of the goodwill towards Mr. Altman seems to have changed. And the board’s statement that called Mr. Altman “not consistently candid”, while announcing his firing, has returned in a boomerang effect.

Concerns over AI safety

OpenAI’s rough week started with the departure of Ilya Sutskever, the co-founder and former chief scientist at the company. Mr. Sutskever, who was a key member of the team that had built ChatGPT had surprisingly backed the three board members who had voted to fire Altman. The speculation was that Mr. Altman’s views on AI safety was very different from the board’s which was worrying given the momentum of AI development. Since Mr. Altman’s reinstatement, Mr. Sutskever has practically vanished into oblivion.

AI safety seemingly was of importance to Mr. Sutskever who formed the ‘superalignment team’ in the company last year in July. Mr. Sutskever co-led the team, with Jan Leike, with the goal of shepherding superintelligence so it stayed on track with its reins firmly in human

hands by 2027. Aside from alignment, the team would also be “improving the safety of current models like ChatGPT, as well as understanding and mitigating other risks from AI such as misuse, economic disruption, disinformation, bias and discrimination, addiction and overreliance, and others,” the statement for the announcement read.

And for an ambition this lofty, the company said it would commit “20% of the compute we’ve secured to date over the next four years” for the initiative.

Last week, Mr. Sutskever waved goodbye to the company he founded. Two days later, Mr. Leike, a longtime researcher at OpenAI, announced his resignation as well saying he had reached a dead end after continuous disagreements with “OpenAI leadership about the company’s core priorities.” Signalling that the promised share of compute wasn’t granted to the team, Mr. Leike expressed concern that in the recent past “safety culture and processes have taken a backseat to shiny products.” Shortly after, the team which still had more than 25 people was disbanded.

A Fortune report shared that there was no specification around when and how the 20% compute would be distributed – was it equally over the four-year period or 20% every year or an arbitrary amount each year that would total to 20%? Regardless, it was enough reason for Mr. Sutskever and Mr. Leike to quit.

String of resignations

Even as rumblings of discord had just started, a few more researchers working on AI policy and governance quit soon after. Cullen O’Keefe quit his role as research lead on policy in April. Daniel Kokotajlo who had been working on the

risks around AI models quit and responded on a forum saying he “quit OpenAI due to losing confidence that it would behave responsibly around the time of AGI.”

Gretchen Kruege, another policy researcher, shared that she had resigned from the company on May 14. “One of the ways tech companies in general can disempower those seeking to hold them accountable is to sow division among those raising concerns or challenging their power. I care deeply about preventing this,” her post read on X.

Severe non-disparagement policies

For a company that started as a non-profit, OpenAI’s lack of transparency has emerged as a more serious issue than its lackadaisical approach to future AI safety.

On May 17, Vox reported that former employees had been under duress to sign lengthy exit documents that restricted them from ever speaking negatively about the company if they wanted to retain their vested equity in the company. Leaked emails showed that employees asking for more time to review the documents or seek legal counsel weren’t given any leeway. “The General Release and Separation Agreement requires your signature within 7 days,” a reply said for someone who had requested another week. Mr. Altman professed on X that he had been ignorant to this clause and apologised for it. The backlash to the severe tactics forced the company to backtrack and take the non-disparagement clause down.

But this might not be the end of the saga.

Jacob Hilton, a researcher at the Alignment Research Center, who quit

OpenAI a year ago tweeted on X saying tech companies are responsible for protecting researchers who speak about the tech in public interest because of how powerful it is. Mr. Hilton, who had also signed the NDA lest he lose equity said while he had received a call from OpenAI management about the change in policy, he would feel more secure if they legally enforced “non-retaliation” against ex-employees by “preventing them from selling their equity, rendering it effectively worthless for an unknown period of time.”

“I invite OpenAI to reach out directly to former employees to clarify that they will always be provided equal access to liquidity, in a legally enforceable way. Until they do this, the public should not expect candour from former employees,” he tweeted.

ScarJo vs OpenAI

Hollywood actor Scarlett Johansson’s accusations against Mr. Altman deepened public mistrust further. Post OpenAI’s latest demo of ChatGPT last week, murmurs started that the voice of the AI assistant Sky was eerily close to Ms. Johansson’s voice in the sci-fi film Her. Ms. Johansson released a statement saying Mr. Altman had reached out to her twice requesting to use her voice for Sky to which she had refused. Even more damning was Mr. Altman’s own tweet on X when the demo released, simply saying “her.”

While Mr. Altman provided proof later that the actress who did voice Sky wasn’t directed to imitate Johansson, collective evidence shows that the cracks in OpenAI’s foundation run deep and that Mr. Altman and his company are not in fact “consistently candid.”

THE DAILY QUIZ

May 27 marks the 60th death anniversary of Jawaharlal Nehru. A quiz on the life and times of one of India’s foremost political leaders

V. V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1

It is known that Nehru passed away in New Delhi. But in which city was he born and on what date (which is now celebrated as Children’s Day)?

QUESTION 2

Who were the parents of Jawaharlal Nehru and how many siblings did he have?

QUESTION 3

With which country was the ‘Panchsheel’ or ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence’

formally enunciated under Nehru’s leadership in April 1954?

QUESTION 4

Who was the interim Prime Minister of India for a 13-day tenure following Jawaharlal Nehru’s demise?

QUESTION 5

In which prison did Nehru begin to write his autobiography between June 1934 and February 1935?

QUESTION 6

Which President’s son wrote the definitive, three-volume ‘Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography’?



Visual question: Name the ‘samadhi’ of Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru where the former President of India Pranab Mukherjee is paying his tributes. FILE PHOTO

Questions and Answers to the May 24 edition of the daily quiz:

1. The Ancient Roman word for dark (or saturated) black became the source for the name of this country. **Ans: Nigeria**
2. The English word derived from ‘ater’ used to describe acts of cruelty. **Ans: Atrocity**
3. X is the name of a dark ink that likely originated in China around the third millennium BC. **Ans: India ink**
4. Name the 16th century reform movement in Europe in which, among other acts, the reformists decried the wearing of bright colours. **Ans: Protestant Reformation**
5. When a jaguar has a dominant allele containing the melanocortin 1 receptor gene with some deletions, it is called this name. **Ans: Black panther**

Visual: Until 2019, this was the blackest substance known to humankind. **Ans: Vantablack**  
**Early Birds:** K.N. Viswanathan| Jagrati Shukla| Saheni George



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

He is not a very discreet individual

He is quite a lexiphanic speaker. Nobody understands his long-winded lectures

S. Upendran

What is the difference in meaning between ‘discreet’ and ‘discrete’? (K.V. Suresh, Vijayawada)

The two words are homophones – in other words, they are pronounced the same way – but they have very different meanings. The first syllable rhymes with ‘miss’, ‘kiss’ and ‘hiss’, and the second with ‘meet’, ‘heat’ and ‘seat’. The words are pronounced ‘dis-KREET’ with the stress on the second syllable. Both come from the Latin ‘discretus’, a word which had two different meanings – ‘distinct’ and ‘separate’. Nowadays, the word ‘discreet’ is mostly used to mean ‘cautious’; a discreet person is someone who is very careful or very tactful about what he says and does. He chooses to remain silent rather than shoot his mouth off about something. He tries not to draw attention to himself or become a source of embarrassment to others.

My boss discreetly suggested that I should resign before charges were filed.

‘Discrete’ is mostly used nowadays to mean ‘separate’ or ‘distinct’; something that has an identity of its own.

My favourite author’s novels can be divided into discrete categories.

How is the word ‘lexiphanic’ pronounced? (Satish Kumar, Chennai)

This word of Greek origin consists of four syllables. The first rhymes with ‘vex’ and ‘checks’, and the following vowel sounds like the ‘a’ in ‘china’. The ‘phan’ in the third is pronounced like the word ‘fan’. The word is pronounced ‘lek-si-FAN-ic’ with the stress on the third syllable. In Greek ‘lexis’ means ‘words’ or ‘speech’ and ‘phainein’ means ‘show’; and according to scholars, this word was coined by the playwright Lucian of Samosata, in the first century. ‘Lexiphanes’ is not only the name of the main character, but also the title of the satire written by Lucian. In it, the hero makes attempts to flaunt his non-existent knowledge by using big words and lengthy sentences in his daily conversation. Today, ‘lexiphanic’ is used to refer to those individuals who wish to impress others by using big or bombastic words while speaking or writing.

I was never able to read his novels – he was, in my opinion, a lexiphanic writer.

What is the meaning of ‘change the channel’? (C. Banumathi, Trichy)

This is an informal expression which can be used in contexts other than when we are watching television. When you are talking about something, and the listener asks you to ‘change the channel’, what he is requesting you to do is to talk about something else. In other words, he wishes you to change the topic of conversation. You’ve talked about politics long enough. Please change the channel. upendrankye@gmail.com

Word of the day

Countermand:

a contrary command cancelling or reversing a previous command; cancel officially

**Synonyms:** lift, overturn, vacate, reverse, revoke, annul, repeal, rescind

**Usage:** Orders to blow up the bridge were countermanded.

**Pronunciation:** bit.ly/countermandpro

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /kaʊntəˈmɑːnd/

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



Knotty rules

SEBI's rumour verification framework could be simpler

After many postponements, a new Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) framework requiring listed companies to verify market rumours is set to take effect from June 1. It will first apply to the top 100 listed companies and then extend to the top 250 by December 1. Under the new rules, companies will be required to track news about impending corporate actions in the mainstream media.

If the news/rumour is accompanied by material stock price movements, then the company will need to issue a confirmation or denial to the stock exchange within 24 hours. Stock price moves caused by confirmed events will be excluded for the purpose of calculating benchmark prices in situations such as mergers, takeovers, delisting and preferential offers. However, SEBI's attempt to implement this in 2023 led to a demand for specific definitions of terms such as rumour, mainstream media, material stock price movement and impending event. SEBI roped in the Industry Standards Forum consisting of the industry chambers to flesh out these aspects, but the definitions have ended up overly complicating the rules.

SEBI seems to have initiated this overhaul for two key reasons. The first is to remove subjectivity in the determination of material events. Under the earlier version of Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements (LODR) Regulations, every listed company was required to disclose any event or information which, in the opinion of its Board, was material. Materiality was determined based on the likely impact of the event on the company's turnover, profits and net worth. But as such estimation involved subjectivity, material events reporting by companies was patchy at best. By casting an obligation on companies to respond to events reported in mainstream media, SEBI is hoping to widen the coverage of material events reporting. The second objective is to prevent price rigging through unsubstantiated rumours.

While the above objectives are sound, there are doubts on how the rumour verification will take shape in practice. For instance, 'mainstream media' has been defined by listing out the top 20 English national dailies, six business channels, five business newspapers and so on. This leaves out many other publications apart from the social media — which is a fertile ground for rumours. To decide what constitutes a 'material price movement', stocks will be classified by their absolute prices (below ₹100, ₹100-200 and above ₹200) and price movements will be deemed material only if they exceed specific thresholds of 5, 4 or 3 per cent for each category, after factoring in index changes. As stock prices may not behave in such a clearly defined fashion, important events may slip through the cracks. Applying these regulations only to the top 250 listed companies also allows smaller firms, which are most prone to rumour-mongering and price rigging, off the hook. Broader, principle-based regulations may have served the purpose better than getting into such details.

FROM THE VIEWSROOM.

Kaun Banega Mukhya Mantri?

TCA Srinivasa Raghavan

In June 2009, I wrote an article in this newspaper with the headline "RSS:BJP: Family:Congress". Its main point was that unless the two main parties cut their umbilical cords, they wouldn't grow.

The BJP has managed to cut it. Or so says its president, JP Nadra. On June 4 we will see how this has played out.

But the Congress hasn't cut it. Or is saying and acting as if it hasn't. Again, on 4 June we will see how this has played out.

Here I must tell a story from 2012. The UP assembly election was due soon and Congress hadn't decided who would be its chief minister.

Three of us from this newspaper were doing the annual rounds meeting ministers. To one of these ministers, who was from UP, I recalled how a leading and hugely influential newspaper had written an editorial in early June 1980 "beseeching" the prime

minister to make Sanjay Gandhi the chief minister of UP. Yes. Beseeching.

I told the minister about this editorial and asked if Rahul Gandhi could become the CM of UP. He became apoplectic. He stood up and raised his voice at us. "Aap Rahulji ko demote karna chahte hain?" (You want to demote Rahulji?).

In the event the Congress won just 28 out of the 403 seats in the UP Assembly that year. Then in the general election of 2014 it won 44 and in the general election of 2019 it won 52. That's less than 100 in two general elections. In subsequent assembly elections in UP it got completely wiped out.

So look at the paradox. A winner jettisons its parent and a loser persists with him.

Finally, let me tell you what the minister's private secretary whispered to us outside the minister's room.

"Yeh aapne kya pooch liya, Sir. Mantriji ban na chahte hain UP CM." (What a question to ask, Sir. Ministerji wants to be UP CM.).



PALASH BARUAH  
DL WANKHAR

The Covid-19 pandemic has redefined our health policies and strategies. It laid bare the inter-linkages between the healthcare systems, its availability, adequacy and affordability.

At the core is the cost implication and impact on households over hospitalisations and healthcare interventions. The cost impact is most acute for those who bear it entirely out-of-pocket.

The worrisome and perhaps unsustainable aspect of healthcare financing is the rising out-of-pocket (OOP) expenditure for households. Per the December, 2023 study by the National Insurance Academy (NIA), over 50 per cent (in 2020) of healthcare expenses are borne directly by individuals. It signifies a substantial reliance on out-of-pocket payments.

So to finance their healthcare expenditure, people either have to dip into their savings or borrow. Not being able to easily finance their health expense would result in some section of the ailing population foregoing treatment, or resorting to desperate financing.

**RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE**

A close examination of the data from the National Sample Survey (NSS) rounds of household consumption expenditure survey spanning from 1999-2000 to 2022-2023 unveils an intriguing narrative.

Hospitalisation expenditure is showing a rising trend in rural households. Monthly per capita consumption expenditure (MPCE) on hospitalisation has risen from 1.37 per cent of the total in 1999-2000 to 2.36 per cent in 2022-23. In urban areas, the increase over this period is from 1.44 per cent to 1.91 per cent (see table). Lack of medical facilities and specialised manpower have forced people in rural areas to rush to urban and semi-urban centres and cities for medical treatment.

Apart from the treatment and hospitalisation expenses, expenditure also has to be incurred on transportation, food and lodging. With better medical facilities, urban households' share out of their MPCE in hospitalisation expenses is comparatively lower, except during 1999-2000, and it ranges between 1.44 per cent and 1.96 per cent.

It is also interesting that non-hospitalization expenses (i.e., OPD



Out-of-pocket medical expenses, a big problem

MALAISE PERSISTS. This is more so in rural areas. Insurance cover, public health are issues

Percentage share of total monthly per capita expenditure (MPCE)

	1999-2000		2004-05		2009-10		2011-12		2022-23	
	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U	R	U
Hospitalization	1.37	1.44	1.62	1.44	1.65	1.83	2.15	1.96	2.36	1.91
Non- hospitalization	4.72	3.62	4.65	3.76	3.75	3.16	4.50	3.58	4.77	4.00
Total	6.09	5.06	6.27	5.20	5.40	4.99	6.65	5.54	7.13	5.91

Source: NSSO's household consumption expenditure survey      Note: R: Rural, U: Urban

expenses on medicine, X-ray, ECG, pathological tests, doctor's fees, and other medical expenses) consumed a much larger share of households' MPCE in both rural and urban areas, with rural households being more disadvantaged.

Perhaps the frequency at which expenses are carried out for non-hospitalisation interventions is a factor. It hovered around 4.72 per cent in 1999-2000 to 4.77 per cent in 2022-23 with a slight dip in 2009-10 for rural households. It stood at 3.62 per cent in 1999-2000 and at 4.00 per cent in 2022-23, with a slight dip in 2009-10 in urban areas.

Cumulatively, it implies that rural households spent about 5 per cent to more than 7 per cent of their total

**Rural households are often forced to go to urban centres to access quality healthcare.** Costs incurred on transport, food and lodging are additional expenses for them

monthly expenditure on hospitalisation and non-hospitalisation expenses. It is lower for urban households at 5 per cent to less than 6 per cent of their monthly expenditure.

This variation could be explained by the fact that generally rural households have a lower per capita income and they have to incur travel expenses when they go to urban centres for treatment where medical facilities are better. The rising medical cost would further dent rural households' budget.

Moreover, health insurance coverage in the rural areas is much less compared to urban areas. The NIA Report revealed that across age groups the "health protection gap" is in the range of 65-90 per cent in rural areas.

**A VIABLE STRATEGY**

Lowering the burden of medical expenses, especially out-of-pocket expenses, on households warrants a holistic approach for both the rural and urban households.

Public health spending in India has been abysmally low at below 3 per cent of the GDP. In the developed countries, it is between 6-10 per cent of the GDP.

Liquidity tight as Centre's cash balances pile up

G-sec yields are likely to ease further. The RBI in its June review is expected to hold rates

Aditi Nayar

Liquidity appears to be quite mismatched at present. The banking system is dealing with high credit growth, funding the same through Certificates of Deposit (CDs), with some banks resorting to deposit rate hikes, even as rate cut(s) are anticipated in the second half of this year.

In contrast, the government seems to be experiencing much more comfortable liquidity conditions, possibly linked to slower spending amidst the Model Code of Conduct and the Parliamentary elections.

The systemic liquidity deficit has averaged at ₹1.3 trillion (0.6 per cent of NDTL) during April 20-May 21, 2024, in contrast with the surplus seen during the April 1-19, 2024. Notably, the Union government's cash balances had surged from ₹1.1 trillion as on April 5, 2024, to ₹1.5 trillion by April 19, 2024.

Thereafter, sizeable GST collections along with weak spending momentum pushed the Centre's cash balances further to ₹2.4 trillion by May 3, 2024, significantly higher than cash balances of ₹97 billion as on May 3, 2023.

The government's ample cash position appears to be the trigger for two recent developments: a cutback in its

planned gross Treasury bill issuances for Q1 FY2025 by ₹600 billion and announcements of three rounds of buybacks of Government of India securities (G-sec) worth ₹1.6 trillion.

Interestingly, the total accepted amount across the three auctions in May 2024 was limited to ₹178.5 billion, just 11.2 per cent of the notified amount.

The buyback of G-secs in May 2024 was expected to dampen G-sec yields. This, along with the reduction in the planned gross T-bill issuances, was anticipated to rein in short-term rates, by easing systemic liquidity. Although G-sec yields did decline post these announcements, liquidity remains stretched.

**RBI DIVIDEND**

The government's cash balances are likely to have increased further through May 2024. Moreover, the RBI announced an unexpectedly large dividend transfer to the government, of ₹2.1 trillion. This amount is well above the ₹1.5 trillion budgeted under dividends and profits, which includes dividends from PSUs.

This windfall is likely to provide additional leeway of ₹1.0 trillion to the government for enhanced expenditures or a sharper fiscal consolidation than what was pencilled in the Interim Budget for FY2025.

A smaller fiscal deficit target would



FINANCIAL SECTOR. Liquidity issues(ISTOCKPHOTO)

likely imply lower G-sec issuances in H2 FY2025, compared to what was anticipated after the Interim Budget for FY2025 was presented.

Given this, and the typical quarter-end tax inflows along with the expectations that the government spending will remain sluggish until the full budget in July 2024, systemic liquidity conditions are expected to remain tight through the next month. This implies that the central bank would continue to conduct Variable Rate Repos (VRR) in the near term.

The RBI has conducted eight VRRs so far in May 2024, with tenures ranging from overnight to 14 days, cumulatively pumping in ₹6.3 trillion via this route in the month. Interestingly, banks have preferred the VRR route to garner

liquidity support, as against the buyback route.

Following the announcement of the larger-than-expected dividend transfer by the RBI, the yield on the new 10-year G-sec dipped to 7.0 per cent on May 22, 2024 from the previous day's closing of 7.04 per cent. ICRA expects the 10-year G-sec yield to ease further below the 7.0 per cent mark in the run up to the inclusion of Indian Government Bonds in the JP Morgan Government Bond Index-Emerging Markets, amid the possibility of a cut in the budgeted market borrowings for FY2025.

Looking ahead, ICRA expects the 10-year G-sec yield to trade between 6.80-7.15 per cent in the remainder of H1 FY2025. Yields may harden close to the upper limit of this range, if the expectations about the timing of rate cuts by the US Federal Reserve and the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) are pushed out beyond Q3 FY2025.

The upcoming MPC review in June is expected to deliver a status quo on the rates and the stance. However, the market participants would await cues on how the RBI intends to address the systemic liquidity situation over the next few months.

The writer is Chief Economist, Head- Research & Outreach, ICRA

BELOW THE LINE



Karnataka CM Siddaramaiah

**Karnataka reshuffle?**

With 16 of the 28 Congress candidates in the Lok Sabha contest being either sons, daughters or other close relatives of ministers in the Siddaramaiah Cabinet, the outcome on June 4 is likely to have several repercussions.

There is talk of a Cabinet reshuffle soon after the polls. Ministers whose kin have lost in the polls, might be

dropped and those who have performed exceedingly well may be rewarded with 'better' and more 'lucrative' portfolios. The CM has tried to tamp down such talk, but intense lobbying has already begun for berths. BJP and JD(S), though, are claiming that in case of a poor performance by the ruling party in the State, survival of the government maybe at stake, hinting at 'Operation Kamal'. The State administrative machinery is on tenterhooks.

**Alert rival**

Looks like Pakistani basmati rice exporters are more alert to the latest developments than their Indian counterparts. While they keep track of all news on basmati rice, particularly about the geographical indication tag, they are also questioning Indian experts and

analysts on their views.

A few weeks ago, the writer of a book on the history of Indian basmati was confronted by these exporters at an international forum. They quizzed the author on some of his points and what surprised him was the exporters quoted the page on which a particular point had been raised.

**Dividend wrangle**

The RBI's massive dividend payout of ₹ 2.1-lakh crore for FY24 has sent the stock markets soaring in the last couple of days.

This dividend boost is good news for banks, as it means less government borrowing and potentially lower interest rates, translating to more treasury gains.

However, the timing of this announcement, coming in the penultimate phases of the general

election, has sparked political controversy. Punters cite the rising stock market as a sign of BJP's potential victory, but political opponents argue that this move has distorted the level playing field ahead of the crucial last two phases of elections.

As the markets celebrate, the political landscape becomes increasingly charged, with debates over the impact of this financial windfall likely to dominate discussions in the coming days.

**International spoof calls**

The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) and Telecom Service Providers (TSPs) have devised a system to identify and block international spoof calls from reaching any Indian telecom subscriber. Directions have been

issued to the TSPs regarding this.

There have been reports of fraudsters making international spoofed calls displaying Indian mobile numbers to Indian citizens and committing cyber-crime and financial frauds. These calls appear to be originating within India but are made by cyber-criminals from abroad by manipulating the calling line identity (CLI). Such international spoof calls have been misused in recent cases of fake digital arrests, FedEx scams, drugs/narcotics in courier, impersonation as Government and police officials, disconnections of mobile numbers by DoT/TRAI officials, etc.

These calls with Indian landline numbers are being already blocked by the TSPs, per DoT directions. **Our Bureaus**



## Making Incredible India work

India underperforms its tourism potential

India's 39<sup>th</sup> ranking in the World Economic Forum's latest biannual Travel and Tourism Development Index (TTDI) indicates below-par performance in a high-potential business opportunity. The country has the largest travel and tourism sector in South Asia and scores as the TTDI's top lower-middle income economy, the study, which covered 119 nations, noted. This ranking is not strictly comparable with the 2019 study, in which India stood at 54. This is because of changes in index parameters. But several data subsets suggest that the country has recovered since the pandemic. For instance, India is among only three countries in the top 10 on three resource criteria — natural (sixth), cultural (ninth), and non-leisure (ninth), the last being defined as travel for business, medical reasons, and education. Also encouraging is its ranking of 18th for price competitiveness, 26th for competitive air transport, and 25th for ground and port infrastructure. The study also notes progress on some key enabling gaps, such as internet connectivity, health and hygiene, environmental sustainability, and tourism socio-economic impact.

The overall picture suggests India could do much better, given the high employment potential from travel and tourism in a country that enjoys a rich variety of natural beauty and a vibrant multiculturalism. Despite this, the country's share in international tourist arrivals stood at 1.54 per cent in 2021. Though this is an improvement over the 0.63 per cent in 2011, it obscures the fact that a large chunk of foreign tourist arrivals are non-resident Indians. Also, India does not appear to have greatly benefitted from the fact that China, one of the world's 10 most visited tourist destinations, was under a prolonged lockdown in that year. In the latest TTDI, for instance, China ranks eighth, despite lifting its draconian lockdown only in January 2023. It is notable that the world's top 10 tourist destinations are all high-income economies, mostly in Europe.

Though the beauty of their cities and countryside and professionally curated museums play a stellar role in ensuring that tourists keep coming to these destinations, the critical differentiator is the quality of infrastructure. Whether France, Spain, Japan, China, or Italy, it is possible for ordinary tourists to access top-quality local mass transport — buses, trains, and trams — and a sufficient inventory of hygienic and safe budget hospitality options. In India, with the honourable exception of the metro rail in two cities, public transport, including inter-city bus and train services, is far from the world-class quality that characterises Indian airports and air travel. Unlike in the West, where citizens of all classes use mass-transport services, rich and upper-middle class Indians generally avoid them in their own country. Such inadequacy plays a role in diminishing India's price competitiveness.

The upshot is that Indian tourism underperforms its potential. The industry accounts for about 6 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) and provides just 80 million direct and indirect jobs. In the Dharamshala Declaration as part of the G20 meetings last year, the government set itself an ambitious target of adding \$1 trillion to GDP by 2047 through tourism and sought to make India a major tourism destination. Working on the basics of making India cleaner and more habitable for all of its citizens would be a good way to start.

## Impending changes

The Tories stare at the likely end of 14 years in power

There has been much speculation about the timing of the general elections in the United Kingdom (UK). Prime Minister Rishi Sunak had the option to delay elections to as late as January next year, and there was some expectation that, given the 17-25 point lead in the polls that is currently enjoyed by the Opposition Labour Party, he would choose to wait at least until the end of the year. Instead, Mr Sunak announced the election would be held on July 4, just a few weeks away. In doing so, it appears he took his own Conservative Party by surprise even more than he did the Opposition. Labour and the Liberal Democrats, the third-largest party in the UK, have all largely chosen candidates for winnable seats — but the Tories are still struggling through the process.

The first response to Mr Sunak's announcement was that almost 80 members of Parliament from his party revealed that they would not be standing for re-election, meaning that the Conservatives will have to scramble to find replacements with just a few weeks from now. This is usually a sign, as well, that a party is not optimistic about its prospects. Similar numbers of retirement from active politics were witnessed in 1997, when New Labour, under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, brought an end to 18 years of Tory rule, and then again in 2010, when new-look Conservatives under David Cameron ousted Mr Brown. For the Conservative Party, the main aim is to avoid an epochal defeat. A 20-point lead could turn into a 10-point one and a respectable number of seats in Opposition as the campaign progresses. The real danger, however, is that Mr Sunak proves an inept campaigner and that the Conservatives — often called the world's most successful political party — may not even be the principal Opposition. This has happened before in Westminster-style systems: The traditional Canadian Conservatives never recovered from a huge defeat in 1992.

Mr Sunak's tenure has not been excellent news for the UK's bilateral relations with India. It has made it harder, for example, for Whitehall to make concessions to New Delhi in free-trade negotiations. The UK-India free-trade agreement (FTA) might already have been signed if Boris Johnson — or for that matter, his short-lived successor Liz Truss — had stayed in office. The question that must be asked now is how a Labour government would view an FTA. It should be noted that, while migration issues might no longer be a giant hurdle, questions of labour and environmental standards would take centre stage. India has to be prepared to move away from its traditional aversion to such issues, and recognise that they have a part to play in all 21st-century agreements. Labour might also take a stronger line on New Delhi's engagement with the large Indian-origin diaspora in the country. South Asians from minority religions have a powerful presence in the Labour Party, and India's internal differences might well become fodder for UK politics the way they have in Canada. If so, Indian leaders must nevertheless take an elevated view and continue to work on improving bilateral relations.



ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY

## Electricity subsidies are getting done better

On-Budget subsidies create more gratitude in the voter

There is an increasing use, by policymakers, of explicit electricity subsidies that are transparent to the recipient and explicitly paid by the exchequer. This strategy offers an important alternative to the traditional complexities of the electricity sector, where government ownership and distorted regulation were used as a way to deliver less transparent subsidies to favoured groups. Carried two steps further, these incipient policy initiatives can take us closer to an efficient electricity sector, which operates on market principles, coupled with political objectives being met through explicit subsidies. More generally, the best path to prosperity lies in stoking the engine of growth in gross domestic product (GDP) made by the private sector, and then using tax revenues to achieve political objectives.

In India electricity is one of many sectors in which state power is used to build a tax-and-spend system where some customers are overcharged in order to subsidise others. These systems are not desirable. If all taxes and all expenditures come together in Budgets, at the level of the Union, state, or city, then policymaking will be superior. Taxation will favour good taxes (personal income tax, goods and services tax, and property tax) and bad taxes will be gradually phased out (such as the burden of taxation upon commercial and industrial electricity users). Expenditure strategy will see a unified view, and choose the best uses of money, on the tradeoffs between public goods and subsidies, and on the precise groups in society that are sought to be politically targeted for subsidies.

In addition, the within-sector tax-and-subsidise

schemes hinder transparency and competition in the sector. In the name of redistribution, a great deal of inefficiency is perpetuated. The electricity sector will work well under private ownership and the incentives of the price system. The reforms that would take us there have been staved off on grounds that they interfere with the tax-and-subsidy scheme running within the electricity sector, which can only be sustained in collaboration with publicly owned firms.

It is in this context that we should see a series of electricity subsidy programmes that have sprung up, eg those in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Delhi. The new idea is that computerisation within government has now reached the maturity that the policymaker is able to define a subsidy programme and precisely deliver the commensurate money to the distribution company. A typical structure is to give each household a subsidy of about ₹1,000 a month in the form of 200 kWh of free energy each month.

This structure is gaining ground because it is efficient politics. The recipient is able to directly see the steps where she got a subsidy. She sees an electricity bill where about ₹1,000 is owed for 200 kWh of energy, and then she sees the subsidy paid by the Ministry of Finance, through which her bill goes to zero. This creates a greater sense of gratitude in the eyes of the recipients, as compared with the complex traditional tax-and-subsidy scheme running within the electricity sector where it was not clear to the recipient what she was getting. We suspect that this rationale will lead to an increasing use of this kind of electricity subsidy, all over India.



AJAY SHAH & AKSHAY JAITLEY

## The success story of fish farming

The meteoric growth of aquaculture, or fish farming, in India has remained largely unclaimed. The output of fish and other aquatic foods grown in aquaculture farms has surged by a whopping 80 per cent in the past one decade. More than 28 million fish farmers now earn their livelihood directly from aquaculture, and several million more from the post-production value chain. Farmers in many non-traditional fish-producing states have dug ponds in their agricultural fields to grow fish for better returns. The youth, in particular, are opting for fish cultivation as a means of employment and income. An unprecedented boom has been witnessed in shrimp farming, with thousands of fresh- and brackish-water prawn-producing farms coming up in states like Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat. Many of these are 100 per cent export-oriented units. India has, consequently, become the leading producer of farmed fish, almost on a par with China, and one of the top exporters of captured as well as cultured shrimps.

Interestingly, while it took almost 66 years after Independence to achieve an annual aquaculture fish production level of around 6 million tonnes, doubling this volume has taken just about 10 years. This is borne out by the official data, which indicates aquaculture production has spurred from 6.13 million tonnes in 2013-14 to over 13.1 million tonnes in 2022-23. The pace of growth is expected to accelerate in the coming years, thanks to more focused attention being paid to aquaculture under the government's flagship fisheries development scheme called the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY). This programme, launched in 2020, aims to

boost the average productivity of aquaculture farms from the present around 3 tonnes a hectare to over 5 tonnes. Besides, it also envisages doubling the export of aquaculture products and generating 5.5 million additional jobs. This apart, it also proposes to facilitate forming over 2,000 fish farmers' producer organisations, or FPOs, with the involvement of agencies like the Small Farmers' Agri-business Consortium (SFAC), the National Agriculture Cooperative Marketing Federation of India (Nafed),

the National Cooperative Development Corporation (NCDC), and the National Fisheries Development Board (NFDB). Significantly, the government is also reportedly working on formulating another scheme to promote shrimp aquaculture in a big way in non-traditional fish-producing states in the north, particularly Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana, and Punjab. Various stretches of saline land, having brackish groundwater, are mooted to be utilised for culturing brackish water prawns for domestic market and exports.

Haryana has already made a beginning in this direction, with nearly 500 hectares of water bodies having been brought under shrimp farming. Some fisheries research centres, notably the Chennai-based Central Institute of Brackish-Water Aquaculture, is being roped in to promote captive rearing of various aquatic fauna, such as shrimps, oysters, mussels, crabs, lobsters, sea bass, mullets, milk fish, and cobia. With modern technology, such farms are expected to have a high yield potential of 6-7 tonnes of these products per hectare. Shrimp aquaculture is already quite popular among fish farmers in most of the Deccan region. With northern states also poised to begin contribut-



FARM VIEW

SURINDER SUD

## The scrappy pilots of the China-Burma-India theatre



### BOOK REVIEW

ELIZABETH D SAMET

*"You and your outfit have been assigned one of the most important military missions ever given to American soldiers — the task of driving the Japanese back to Tokyo."*

So begins *A Pocket Guide to India*, prepared for World War II service members in the western base section of the China-Burma-India Theatre, commonly known as the CBI. "India is a strange, colorful land," the guide continues. "If you exercise a normal amount of curiosity you'll learn much that is fascinating; much that will enable you to begin stories to your children or grandchildren in later years, 'Now, when I was in India...'"

If the guide seems to protest too much, perhaps that's because the CBI was, as Caroline Alexander explains in her riveting new book, *Skies of Thunder*, under-resourced, improvisational and rife with smugglers, its actual purpose murkier than its symbolic value. It was the war's "most chaotic theater," she writes, marked by "competing interests, and contradictions that exposed the fault lines between the Allies." To some stationed there, CBI stood for "Confusion Beyond Imagination."

My father, who served as an air traffic controller in the CBI, didn't recall reading the *Pocket Guide*, but he did tell me stories of working in Delhi and Agra, a vital supply depot and service point, and travelling to various locations to lay radio-range beacons. The main point of these activities, he explained, was to enable pilots to fly supplies over the Himalayas to China. While it was always easy for me to picture my father in his control tower, those flights over the mountains remained mysterious until I read Alexander's vivid account.

Alexander, the author of books on

Shackleton's Endurance expedition and the fateful voyage of the Bounty, begins with the Allied loss of Burma to the Japanese in April 1942, which sealed off the ground supply corridor from India to China and led to the opening of an "aerial Burma Road." This treacherous route, known as "the Hump," supplied Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government and Allied troops, including the 14th Air Force, commanded by the flamboyant Claire Chennault.

Alexander casts her story as an "epic," yet it is one in which the actors suffer like Job more often than they fight like Achilles. There are stirring episodes of British sangfroid, "American-style glamour" and remarkable courage among the region's remote tribal peoples, but it is perseverance that assumes heroic proportions: refugees escaping through the Burmese jungle; soldiers and local labourers hacking through that same jungle to build a new road; Assam airfield personnel living in squalor, seared by the sun, swamped by monsoons, but most of all shrouded in a "miasma of cynical indifference." What

unites this book with the author's previous work is a fascination with human behaviour in extremis.

While Alexander devotes considerable space to strategic and political issues, her interest lies primarily in the vicissitudes of individual human personality. In places she represents the theatre's dysfunction as a tragicomedy of failed relationships at the highest levels of command: between the mercurial Chiang Kai-shek and the American Joseph Stilwell, the theatre's irascible, insecure commanding general; between Stilwell and the unscrupulous, self-aggrandizing Chennault; between Stilwell and the British allies he loathed.

Alexander's gift for dramatising these personal animosities occasionally produces seductive yet oversimplified

biographical explanations of historical problems, a mode E.H. Carr described as "the Bad King John theory of history."

Ultimately, and rightly, the pilots — intrepid as "sailors of old" crossing "unknown oceans" — are the core of the book. Demeaned as "Hump drivers," ostensible non-combatants at the bottom of the aviation hierarchy, they flew an inadequately charted route over baffling terrain, its surreality intensified by their frequent refusal to wear oxygen masks. Alexander adroitly explicates technical concepts — flight mechanics, de-icing, night vision — but is at her best rendering pilots' fear. Besides terrain, its sources included weather, enemy aircraft, insufficient training, night missions and "short rations of fuel" on the return leg. At least a pilot could depend on his

plane, the beloved Douglas C-47 Skytrain, until the introduction of unreliable or unsound higher-capacity models turned the machines themselves into another source of terror.

Readers thrilled by sagas of flight will marvel at the logistics required to transport a stunning 650,000 tons of cargo by air, the audacity required to fly the Hump, the search-and-rescue operations necessitated by its hazards and the experimental use of aviation involved in the Allied recapture of Burma in 1944.

They will also have to reckon with Alexander's hard-nosed conclusions about the CBI. Others who have chronicled its history concentrated on the strategic merits of this deeply imperfect theatre, or celebrated its pioneering use of air power. The image that dominates the end of Alexander's epic is "the aluminum trail" of wreckage — "the hundreds of crashed aircraft that still lie undiscovered in the jungles, valleys and fractured ranges beneath the Hump's old route."

*The reviewer is the author of Looking for the Good War: American Amnesia and the Violent Pursuit of Happiness ©2024 The New York Times News Service*





OPINION

The  
**Hindustan Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

What Rajkot fire disaster tells us

The bar on public safety at entertainment hubs is low and the administration is lax about it. This is unacceptable

At least 27 persons, many of them children, died late Saturday in a fire accident at TRP Game Zone, a privately run recreation facility, in Rajkot, Gujarat. Culpability in the tragedy will be established by a State probe and, hopefully, the guilty punished quickly. The facility reportedly did not have a no objection certificate (NOC) from the fire department. If the authorities did not know the facility was functioning without an NOC, that qualifies as a grave administrative failure. If they knew that the mandatory safety protocols were not in place, yet they let the party run its business, that's a crime. Fire safety is not a luxury. And safety regulations are not meant for rent-seeking but for authorities to enforce in the public interest. The onus is on the administration to ensure that safety measures at entertainment and leisure spaces are in place: A registry of such spaces, licences and NOCs issued to them have to be maintained and regular inspections held. Lack of compliance should be acted upon and public officials should be held accountable for negligence — not just after a disaster strikes.

The Rajkot tragedy is, unfortunately, not rare. Earlier this year, 12 students (and two teachers) died in a boating accident while out on an excursion in Vadodara, Gujarat. Two years ago, in Morbi, Gujarat, 135 persons died when a newly opened bridge, which had become the hot entertainment spot in the town, collapsed. A probe pointed to administrative lapses and mismanagement. In 2017, 14 persons died in a fire at a rooftop pub in Kamala Mills Complex, Mumbai, which did not have emergency exits and whose fire safety equipment did not work. In 2009, 45 tourists drowned at the Thekkady lake in Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary when their boat, which was operating without life jackets and lifeguards, sank. The worst of such tragedies at entertainment spots has to be the 1997 Uphaar theatre tragedy in Delhi when 59 persons perished in a fire.

These tragedies could have been prevented, or many casualties avoided, if the facilities had complied with safety norms. There is no shortage of regulations in India but officials often see them as avenues for rent-seeking and ignore their intent. Scores die or are maimed in avoidable accidents — including in fires and stampedes at shrines and fairs — annually. There is rarely any closure in any of these. The idea is not to ensure some sort of retributive justice, but it has to be hardwired into the system that no person/utility/facility shall be allowed to be lax about public safety. It is time we end this criminal negligence of the safety of citizens.

Cannes shines light on indie filmmakers

India has won big at the Cannes film festival this year with many firsts. Anasuya Sengupta became the first Indian actor to win the best actress in the Un Certain Regard segment for her role in *The Shameless*; Chidananda S Naik's *Sunflowers Were the First Ones to Know* won the first prize of La Cinéf for best short film; cinematographer Santosh Sivan was bestowed the Pierre Angénieux ExcelLens in Cinematography award; and most importantly, Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine As Light* bagged the prestigious Grand Prix, the second-highest award at the festival. It was the first film in 30 years to have competed in the main category.

In an industry driven by glitz and glamour, the accolades highlight how Indian stories and filmmaking can create a dent in world of cinema. They emphasise how grounded and fulfilling independent cinema can be, suspended from the commercial *la-di-dah* of the box office. In one interview, Kapadia makes the point that we make great films in India, which are "arthouse", but never make it to prestigious festivals for reasons best known to us. Art in India is a complex webbing of cultures often limited by the aspiration of "unity in diversity". Ironically, Kapadia, who is now being toasted for her Cannes success, was "disciplined" by her *alma mater*, the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), in 2015 for participating in a protest against the appointment of BJP leader and small-time actor Gajendra Chauhan as chairman.

Though we have become more accepting of the commercial successes of films made in languages other than Hindi, such as *RRR* or *Pushpa*, there is much to be viewed in terms of nuances of the different cultures for both us and the West. As for the audience, there is scope to indulge in the genre-bending filmmaking and not get swayed by the allure of box office success.

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



Mandate 2024: The view from Varanasi

The presence of the Prime Minister as a candidate enlivens the contest in Uttar Pradesh's Purvanchal region

I am writing this piece from Kashi, which, being the Prime Minister (PM)'s constituency for the past 10 years, has drawn great national and international attention.

The PM has built a rapport with Kashiwasis (residents of Kashi), and so, does not see any significant challenge, says Rinku, who owns a kiosk in front of Banaras Locomotive Works. Rinku needs to relocate his kiosk for the length of the PM's visit just as dozens of other such businesses have to. But, he says, he can do that much for the PM — and he is not the only person willing to make such sacrifices for Narendra Modi.

Last Tuesday, sometime before the PM's visit to Sampurnanand Sanskrit Vishwavidyalaya, I noticed a group of women waiting behind a police barricade along the route. When I spoke with them, I gathered that they were from Shivaspur and had originally wanted to meet Modi at the university. But owing to the security

arrangements for the PM's visit, they could not make it to the university in time. So, despite the scorching summer heat, they had decided to wait for the PM to pass by. I told them it could take a long time for the PM to come. "No problem, now that we've left the house, we thought we'd wave to him and greet him," they said. In areas such as Karaundi, the clearing of encroachments for the widening of a road has left some people outraged. Nonetheless, the wider road benefits a huge number of commuters.

The Congress's Ajay Rai is pitted against Modi in Kashi. Rai is the party's state president and an established political figure. He is looking to narrow the margin of defeat by as much as possible.

Kashi has traditionally flown with opposing political currents. Tea and *paan* stalls in this city are venues of heated discussions among people of different political hues — communists, socialists, nationalists, etc. These people forge the spearheads of resistance that can determine victory or defeat. Chakraborty Moshay of Agastkunda says satirically: "Don't fall into their trap; no matter what they say, in the end they will only vote for Modi."

I don't even remember the names of the other contenders here. Athar

Jamal Lari is the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) candidate in Kashi. But he is nowhere in the discourse.

Varanasi is known as the capital of Purvanchal, a region that includes 11 other Lok Sabha seats. The electoral battle is fierce in each seat. In Chandauli, which is part of Varanasi district, for instance, Mahendranath Pandey is trying his luck again. Pandey is a member of the Modi cabinet and has previous administrative and organisational experience. He is being challenged by Virendra Singh of the INDIA bloc. Singh, a former minister of Uttar Pradesh, is contesting on a Samajwadi Party ticket.

Anupriya Patel, another minister in the Modi cabinet, is fighting from neighbouring Mirzapur. She is the daughter of Apna Dal founder Soneylal Patel and the president of Apna Dal (Soneylal). Ramesh Bind of the INDIA bloc is challenging her. Both Anupriya and Pandey are fighting for the honour of their cabinet posts.

Meanwhile, Laliteshpati Tripathi in Bhadohi and Neeraj Shekhar in Ballia face a tough fight to maintain their legacies. Tripathi is the great-grandson of Pandit Kamalapati Tripathi, a former acting president of the Congress, and Neeraj is the son of former PM Chandra Shekhar. Lalitesh, a Trinamool Congress candi-



There is a fierce fight for every seat in Purvanchal except Varanasi

date, is backed by the INDIA grouping, while Neeraj is a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate.

Muscle power is also a factor that comes into play in two other Purvanchal constituencies. Afzal Ansari, elder brother of the late Mukhtar Ansari, who was known as a mafia king, is also contesting the election from Ghaziपुर. Similarly, Dhananjay Singh of Jaunpur is backing the BJP after the BSP denied his wife, Srikala Reddy, a ticket. In Azamgarh, Akhilesh Yadav's cousin Dharmendra Yadav has the tough task of retaking the legacy seat. The mandates for Azamgarh, Lalganj, Jaunpur, Machhlisahr, and Bhadohi are already sealed in EVMs, while the fight for the remaining seats contin-

ues. Although no one is talking about Robertsganj, Machhalishahar, or Lalganj, I was saddened to witness the pathetic state of the first. I'll go into more depth about this another time. However, the fight for these seats is equally fierce.

The message is clear: There is a fierce fight for every seat in Purvanchal except Kashi. If it is muscle power at stake in one; in others, it is legacy or the prestige of a ministerial post. The results on June 4 will not only determine victory or defeat but will also establish a new political trend in Purvanchal.

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

Rethink the immunity granted to governors

Serious allegations of sexual harassment and molestation have been levelled against the governor of West Bengal. Such allegations are substantive for the criminal justice process to start against an accused under India's criminal jurisprudence. But, when an accused enjoys constitutional or statutory powers, as in the present case, it is very rare that an individual or woman would come in public to lodge a complaint. Here, the accused holds a constitutional position and enjoys immunity as set out in Article 361 of the Constitution, especially in Clause 2 which states that "no criminal proceedings of whatsoever shall be initiated or continued against the governor".

This widely worded provision of immunity can be attributed to our colonial past which functioned with the concept of "the king can do no wrong". This concept was reflected in independent India's Constitution. Even in England, the Crown Proceedings Act — passed in 1947 — made it possible to sue the Crown for civil wrongs, while retaining several privileges and immunities. Under India's constitutional mechanism, the governor's immunity is very wide. One consequence of this is that the bar under Article 361(2) is set even when there are allegations of crime against women, and corruption, among others. In 2015, there were allegations of corruption against the then governor of Madhya Pradesh, Ram Naresh Yadav, but legal processes could not be initiated because of his position. Similarly, in 2017, then Meghalaya governor V Shammuganathan faced allegations of serious moral turpitude involving several women survivors.

It is not that Constitution makers, while articulating the provision under Article 361 (2), were unaware of the possible misuse of this provision. The Constituent Assembly debates reflect that; on September 8, 1949, HV Kamath questioned if the governor or the ruler shall have "no liability for the criminal act committed by him during his term of office". He asked, "Suppose for instance he commits a crime, God forbid that the President or the governor or the ruler of a State

should be guilty of criminal conduct but human nature is fallible and so if he unfortunately commits a criminal act, does this clause mean that no proceeding can be instituted against him during the whole prescribed term?" On this issue, he kept probing for a strong logical reason for such wide immunity, but the provision was nevertheless adopted.

In the case of Rameshwar Prasad (2005), while interpreting the immunity of the governor under Article 361(1) with regard to action in the discharge of official duties, the Supreme Court (SC) held that the *mala fide* actions of the governors shall be amenable to court proceedings. The SC clarified that due to the immunity, a governor cannot be sued, but that does not mean that the ground of mala fides or a proclamation without any basis in law would not be examined in court.

It further said such allegations against a governor were required to be defended by the State, given the bar in Article 361(1) meant the governor cannot be present in Court. As per this judgment, in cases of personal *mala fide*, the immunity of the governor stands diluted. Ironically, when it comes to allegations of criminal acts, the criminal justice process cannot be set in motion against the governor.

Immunity for the governor (or the President) is based on the fact that all their actions are on the aid and advice of a Council of Ministers. Hence, direct accountability for an illegal action lies only with the concerned minister(s). Thus, Article 361(1) grants immunity from acts done by governors in the exercise and performance of their powers and duties.

There is a sitting chief minister in judicial custody, facing allegations of corruption. The Prevention of Corruption Act makes government officials liable for prosecution for allegations of corruption. At the same time, they also enjoy immunity for the discharge of their duties in the exercise of official function. If the governor indulges in corruption, sexual harassment, or any other offence under the Indian Penal Code, whether these are incidental to the discharge of their official functions or not, their liability needs to be determined through an appropriate legal process irrespective of whether they are holding office or have demitted the same.

We have seen many governors resign after allegations against them were reported in the public domain, but there are also many who didn't. This depends on the political scenario at the time and the will of the central executive. Both these factors function arbitrarily and without accountability. There have been some changes, though, in England, ushered in by legislation. We have also seen President Bill Clinton facing trial as per the mechanism of the United States Constitution, in the Monica Lewinsky matter. But India continues to stick with the "king can do no wrong" principle. After 75 years of the Constitution, it is high time that we take Kamath's warning seriously. Either through an appropriate amendment in the Constitution or through the intervention of the SC in the matter already pending before it, the scope of immunity granted under Article 361(2) calls for immediate reconsideration.

MR Shamshad is an advocate, the Supreme Court of India. The views expressed are personal



It is high time we took HV Kamath's warning seriously PARVEEN KUMAR/HT PHOTO

{ FRANCESCA ALBANESE } UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON PALESTINE

(UN) Member states must impose sanctions, arms embargo and suspend diplomatic/political relations with Israel till it ceases its assault

Political parties need to queer the election pitch

The rainbow has been a symbol of the queer community. It is natural and beautiful, but also rare. It appears only when there is a perfect alignment of raindrops and rays of the sun. As this election comes close to conclusion, I wonder if the queer community is seen as special and beautiful like rainbows, or if it just gets lost in the torrential downpour of electoral agendas.

Traditionally, in constitutional democracies like India, the judiciary has been the ultimate protector of the rights of minorities. In the infamous *Suresh Kumar Koushal* (2013) judgment, some of the judges of the highest judiciary in India dismissed the queer community as a "minuscule minority" and referred Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalises the community, to Parliament. Parliament never took this up for debate. However, the Supreme Court (SC) did ultimately correct this injustice by admitting the curative petition to its own judgment and eventually delivering the landmark *Navtej Singh Johar* judgment in 2018 that affirmed the human rights of the queer community. The Court had earlier recognised the human rights of transgender persons in the watershed *NALSA* (2014) judgment.

The Rights of Transgender Persons Bill, 2014, introduced as a private member bill by Tiruchi Siva, a Member of Parliament from the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), had several provisions protecting the actual needs of the community and also implemented the provision for reservations in education and employment as directed by the SC in the *NALSA* judgment. Although that Bill had unanimous support across political parties, the 2019 version of the Bill that was introduced by the Union government was clearly in violation of international law and the SC judgment. Among other issues, it conflated the definition of transgender and intersex identities and criminalised begging by transgender people. At the same time, it failed to include any measure to improve their access to education or employment. While the government referred this Bill to a Standing Committee and tried to address some of the issues, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act and the 2020 Rules notified for the same still fail to fulfil the actual needs of the community, and

the government has repeatedly ignored the critical comments from the community members, activists, and legal experts.

While the SC has affirmed the rights of those in homosexual relationships, the government is unwilling to allow marriage equality. Attempts to introduce a comprehensive Bill to stop discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community have failed to materialise. While global surveys indicate that anywhere from 5-20% of the population of every country is likely to identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, we do not have any census data about the number of queer people in India.

There are obviously millions of queer people in our country, but majoritarian electoral politics has generally sidelined the community. Issues faced by the LGBTQIA+ have never been at the centre stage of the political debate. Many community members have also been indifferent to electoral politics. We had repeatedly approached the judiciary to protect our constitutional rights.

Even in the 2024 elections, some political parties have ignored any reference to LGBTQIA+ issues in their manifesto. While other parties have made conscious efforts to be inclusive, often, they see LGBTQIA+ as special issues and don't seem to connect them with the other issues in our society. The People's Manifesto 2024 adopted by the Vikalp Sangam, which is made up of over 80 movements and organisations in India, is unique in that it provides a framework for intersectional advocacy.

There is no hope for the queer community if we choose to be an isolated minority. We must recognise that our issues are intersectional. We need to rise above divisive politics of hatred and bigotry, and work together to protect the rainbow: The rights of LGBTQIA+, the diversity of our cultures and the entire ecosystem of nature. We in the LGBTQIA+ community hope that all political parties, civil society organisations, and others who are instrumental in defining the policy directions of India, will take the issues of the community seriously and make efforts at meaningful intersectional inclusion of our needs.

Delfina Kanchana Sundar is a LGBTQIA+ activist from Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The views expressed are personal



OUR VIEW



Pune crash: Let's tackle drunk underage driving

Tragic road accidents like the one involving a Porsche driven by a 17-year-old must serve as a wake-up call for all. It's time to start an Indian chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving

The tragic accident in Pune on 19 May involving a 17-year-old driver, allegedly under the influence of alcohol, that led to the death of two young techies and the anguished debate that followed has strong parallels with the Michigan, US, school shoot-out in November 2021. In that case, a 15-year old turned the gun on his school-mates, killing four of them. The jury trial saw the court convicting both the offender, a minor who was tried as an adult, and his parents on the grounds that they had failed to prevent their son from committing a heinous crime. Where does parental responsibility begin and end, this newspaper had asked, in the context of juvenile crime? There are no easy answers. But as more instances come to light of underage or drunk drivers taking to the road and causing death and injury, we, as a society, need to take a stand on some contentious issues. One, should juveniles (aged under 18 years) who commit heinous crimes like rape or causing death be tried as adults? Two, should parents be held responsible in such cases? Three, how can we prevent such incidents?

Take these one by one. Driving drunk before the age of eligibility for both these adult-only activities has grown alarmingly common. Although the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, and a related amendment lets juveniles aged 16-18 be tried as adults for heinous crimes after a preliminary hearing by a juvenile justice board, this is more the exception than the rule. This must change. As for parental responsibility, it could be argued that the parents of the 17-year-old in the Pune case are culpable since they apparently allowed their underage son to drive their

car, a Porsche, knowing full well that he did not have a driving licence as he wasn't yet eligible for one. Sure, we live in an age where parents have less and less influence over their progeny, especially once they reach their teens. But that does not absolve them of responsibility. Vehicles, like guns, can be lethal. And alcohol impairs abilities. Indeed, it is not just parents, but society at large that needs to do some soul-searching. As Reupert A. *et al*, write in their paper, 'It Takes a Village to Raise a Child' in *Front Public Health*, March 2022, "Even though parents may be a child's primary caregivers, a family does not exist in a vacuum." Social connectedness or the bonds that people develop, including a sense of belonging and feeling of being cared for, are no less important. Unfortunately, the covid pandemic hurt this 'social inter-connectedness.' For almost two years, humans lived almost in isolation, interacting only with close family members. That sense of isolation, loss of empathy with fellow humans may have scarred many, especially those who spent their formative and turbulent teen years under lockdown conditions.

How much of a role did all this play in the horrific accident in Pune? It is hard to say. What is true is that despite the fact that India leads the world in road fatalities, civil society is yet to respond with proactive steps like Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), a non-profit organization that began in the US and now has chapters in Canada and Brazil. By working with law-enforcement agencies, MADD has reportedly helped reduce drunk-driving deaths by more than 50%, as estimated, saving more than 400,000 lives. At the very least, the Pune accident should serve as a wake-up call to start a MADD chapter in India.

THEIR VIEW

Questions on the economy that BJP and Congress must answer

The two political parties are yet to say what model they prefer for developing the Indian economy



**PUJA MEHRA**  
is consulting editor, Mint, and the author of 'The Lost Decade (2008-18): How India's Growth Story Devolved into Growth Without a Story'

The Lok Sabha election is drawing to a close, leaving us no better informed on India's economic future. The campaigns of both the Congress-led INDIA and BJP have produced more questions than answers.

India's economic model is broken. The economy needs a structural transformation for moving labour out of unpaid distress work and disguised unemployment on farms to better-paying productive jobs in factories. Without this, we risk our enormous demographic dividend going waste. Besides, we should not have farmers toiling in the sun as the planet heats up.

How do INDIA and BJP propose to kick-start that transformation? This is unclear from their manifestos, speeches and interviews. The campaign has generated noise on redistribution of wealth. In any country, it is legit to question how the competing claims of various interest groups on the distribution of gains from economic growth would be settled. It would help if INDIA's Rahul Gandhi and the BJP's Prime Minister Narendra Modi tell us what according to them is the best way to sort out distributional conflicts and handle inevitable trade-offs.

Gandhi ought to explain INDIA's policy position on the Congress manifesto promise of legal minimum support prices (MSPs) for farm produce. A similar proposal for law-backed MSPs, agriculture economist Ashok Gulati said, was

rejected by Manmohan Singh of the Congress when he was PM. Gulati was chairman the official body that recommends MSP hikes during Singh's tenure. Has the party disregarded Singh's position on this subject or has he had a change of heart? Either way, the Congress must explain how price discovery can take place in farm markets if a legal MSP is made binding on all buyers. The fallout inescapably would be excess supply of MSP products and shortages of others. How will supply respond to demand in the absence of price signals?

The PM, in turn, should explain his government's modest record on macro-economic policies and the urgent changes they need. Three of the four engines of GDP growth—private consumption, private investments and exports—are out of steam. Increased welfare spending and 'laabharthi' economics haven't quite fired consumption spending. Wages are not growing. Labour's bargaining power is not improving.

The government cut corporate tax rates and is making its capex sweat. But private investment remains sluggish. Economists at a conference on India's economic growth at the Indian Statistical Institute last month debated if the fiscal multiplier is working at all. Has the relationship between public and private investment snapped?

The fiscal stimulus administered by the Congress-led UPA government to help the economy recoup from the shock of a global crisis had sent the deficit rising. It was almost 6.5% of GDP in 2009-10 at its peak, after which the UPA reduced it by cutting spending and sacrificing GDP growth in the process. It bequeathed a fiscal deficit of almost 4.5% of GDP to the BJP government in 2014.

The Modi government increased tax rates on fuels, which helped reduce the deficit to about 3.4% by 2018-19. However, the deficit started going up again, rising as high as 9.17% of GDP in covid year 2020-21 as lockdowns reduced tax collections. In April 2024, on the eve of

elections, it was 5.8%, according to the February budget's estimate. Even before the pandemic wrecked government finances, the government had already invoked the 'escape clause' of the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act to take leeway in the fiscal deficit for 2019-20. No other government has ever invoked this clause.

Given the implications for inter-generational equity, inflation and GDP growth, what does the PM think can be done to resolve India's chronic fiscal stress problem?

The Congress promise of ₹1 lakh per year cash transfers to a woman in every poor household may be one way of nudging the economic growth engine of private consumption. But Gandhi should explain what data-base would be used to identify beneficiaries and avoid leaks, and if he has a plan to mitigate the increased risk of populism; ₹1 lakh a year may be hiked ahead of every election season. It would also help to know if fiscal stress worries his party.

As for the BJP, the 10-year record of its government rests largely on implementing ideas that originated in previous governments or states. Its flagship PM Kisan was taken from Telangana's Rythu Bandhu and Odisha's Kalya. Its welfare narrative depends to a large extent on a rural employment guarantee and free foodgrain scheme that were inherited from the Congress government led by Manmohan Singh. The GST rollout and inflation-targeting framework for the central bank also originated in the Congress-led administration. Both were work-in-progress in 2014. So too, the digital economy, including direct benefit transfers, which has been scaled from its modest debut on technology platforms built under the previous regime. The BJP's signature ideas, demonetization and electoral bonds, turned out to be disasters. Electoral bonds were struck down by the Supreme Court for being unconstitutional. Is the BJP thinking of investing in its capacity for policy design?



MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

What explains new harmful behaviours of India's rich

MANU JOSEPH



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

Once, I was in a bus with a former nun. She had recently quit a convent. Now nobody could stop her from having fun, even in a bus. She started clapping and singing, and tried to get everyone else on the bus to join her. She also yelled at passersby on the road, all in the pursuit of fun, her idea of fun. This is probably what she thought people who had fun did. When she did not feel the fun, she tried harder, and finally looked confused at why fun was not coming to her. It's the same baffled look I see in boys anywhere in India who go out on New Year's Eve to have fun in the Republic of No-Fun. To tell themselves they are enjoying life, they have to get totally drunk, sway, fall, vomit and laugh aloud. It is the same emotion I see in extraordinarily rich young men in India when they are in luxury vehicles their dads got them. They look like miners of fun. Eventually, all they can do is get drunk and drive at 200km an hour. Now and then, they send pedestrians flying, as it happened a few days ago in Pune, when a drunk 17-year-old rammed his

father's Porsche into a motorcycle, killing a young man and a woman.

Since then, India has been very confused about what to do with the juvenile, first releasing him on bail within 15 hours of the incident, and then, because of public anger, taking him back into remand. The teenager's father, a builder named Vishal Agarwal who it appears had wilfully given him the car, reportedly tried to flee, but was eventually arrested. Stripped of legal jargon, the man was arrested for being a lousy parent and thus a danger to society. India's wealthy homes today are filled with this type.

Once, India's rich had to hide because it was very unsafe to be rich in a poor country. It was a time when the rich were called 'industrialists.' That generation of India's rich had also sponsored idealism out of self-interest to defeat the era's cultural elite, the British. They either ended up believing these ideals or had to somehow sustain the noble myth. They knew what being vulgar was, and did not wish to do that. It was hard to hide their wealth, but their displays often had a public context, as with the aplomb of royals. Even today, it is rare to see outrageous behaviour from the children of billionaires. It could be that billionaires are rare, so all incidents involving them appear

rare, or it could be that when they do mow down people, that news gets slain. Granting all this, I still get the feeling that the children of India's industrialists are briefed well at home to behave well and not kill people with expensive cars. But the ordinary rich are a different lot. I can't imagine those families telling their sons to be aware at all times of their dumb luck and be kind to those who are not as lucky.

You sit with some of India's wealthy, and all you hear is what money has bought and will buy next. What they have taken from the world, what they will take next. A new generation has been raised listening to this talk and might believe that this is the way to be, this is how the rich should enjoy their luck.

It is my guess that the best thing wealth can buy is an intellectual pursuit. The origin of intellect is in wealth, and it still serves the rich the best. Without an intellectual pursuit, wealth searches desperately to entertain itself with material things, to somehow buy fun that is unattainable for others.

In response to this demand, capitalism has invented many fake products for the super-rich. But the fun just does not come, and like that nun on the bus, they have kept doing more desperate things. They have to buy more and more, consume more and more, and veer towards the dangerous side. Like pushing a Porsche's pedal to 200kmph on an Indian road.

Garish gluttons of material goods are often mistaken as India's new rich. This is wrong classification

I do not think there are many newly enriched people in India because that would mean this is a country conducive to rags-to-riches or even middle class-to-riches. We are not such an equal society.

There could be some exceptions, but we are in essence a rich-to-more-riches nation. Most of the rich we see around us, the winners of capitalism, are beneficiaries of a head-start from previous generations, like

Vishal Agarwal, the father of the teen in the Porsche. So what we have is not the new rich, but new behaviour of the rich.

After the Porsche slammed into the bike, the people on the streets thrashed the teen-aged driver. We can assume this was not an act of rage on behalf of the victims, but rage at the Porsche.

There is a sociological mystery in the world, especially in India. Why don't the poor kill us? Why do they tolerate blatant and vulgar inequality? They know the price brackets of cars and how much we order as a single meal on Zomato. There are some obvious and banal reasons why they have not risen in violent ways. Like, for instance, the poor don't want to be violent. Also, they do not want to go to jail. But there are some underrated reasons for this peace. One is that all things considered, the poor are probably meaner to the poor than the rich are. The rich not only generate jobs and make sweet but useless art films about the plight of the poor, the affluent sophisticated Indian is the face of goodness in India, the very representation of good intent, social service and activism against the rich.

This perception lies in precarious balance with that other face of the rich—the ominous lightly damaged Porsche on a road.







## CRIMINAL ABDICATION

Fire outbreaks in Delhi and Rajkot point to neglect of rules, larger failures. Lessons must be learnt urgently

TWO DEVASTATING FIRE incidents in less than 12 hours, which have snuffed out lives, many of them children, including, most heartbreakingly, newborns at a pediatric hospital in Delhi, are reminders of the shockingly low priority accorded to basic safety measures in Indian cities. Fire preparedness is a well-developed discipline in most parts of the world. Yet outbreak after outbreak in the last three decades has highlighted the failure to learn from it and bring it into the design of public spaces, housing apartments, hospitals, commercial and office complexes. The emerging details of Saturday's fire at a Rajkot indoor gaming centre evoke a terrible déjà vu. The centre did not have a no-objection certificate from fire safety authorities, it had only one route for entry and exit and welding work was underway during business hours. The Gujarat High Court has taken suo motu cognisance of the tragedy and asked the state government as well as the Rajkot, Surat and Ahmedabad municipalities to submit a report on the functioning of gaming centres in these cities. A Delhi government investigation into the cause of the fire that claimed at least seven lives in the early hours of Sunday is also underway. Justice must be served in the two cases but it's time that larger failures that lead to avoidable fatalities are addressed. Buildings in the country continue to be tinder boxes despite the all too similar conclusions of past investigations — be it the Uphaar Cinema tragedy in Delhi in 1997 or the Bengaluru residential complex blaze of 2010, the Kamala Mills inferno of 2017, Kolkata's AMRI hospital fire in 2011 or outbreaks in hospitals during the Covid pandemic.

Part four of the National Building Code, which runs into more than 80 pages, has detailed directions on how to prevent fire hazards. Many states, including Delhi and Gujarat, also have their own fire safety rules. But fire safety operations fall under municipalities, a tier of governance whose weaknesses have multiplied in recent times. Inspections are weak and, at best, once-in-a-few-years exercises. This means that very often it requires a tragedy to uncover flagrant violations. In 2021, for instance, after a blaze killed 10 babies in a hospital 60 km from Nagpur, a Maharashtra public health department audit of 484 hospitals in the state found that more than 80 per cent did not have a fire safety clearance. In late March this year, after it was evident that large parts of the country were staring at a heatwave, the Union Health Ministry and the National Disaster Management Authority issued fire safety guidelines that gave particular emphasis to healthcare facilities. It called for comprehensive inspections of all hospitals — significant because healthcare facilities use chemicals and many patient care items, like oxygen cylinders, are either inflammable or can escalate flames. These guidelines have not received their due attention.

A FICCI-Pinkerton study of 2018 flagged that urban India has less than 40 per cent of the fire stations it needs. Two years later, the 15th Finance Commission underlined the need to modernise the country's firefighting infrastructure. A rapidly urbanising country, with closely packed population clusters, cannot continue to pay short shrift to fire safety.

## ON THE FOOD FRONT

Global climate models indicate El Niño transitioning to 'neutral' in coming month, but policy must step in

THE Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) record Rs 2,10,874 crore "surplus" transfer to the Centre has brought down the benchmark 10-year government bond yields to below 7 per cent, for the first time in almost a year. The move has, thus, lowered interest rates even without any cut in the central bank's policy lending (repo) rate. The latter action is, of course, predicated upon the trajectory of inflation. For the RBI, the primary concern would be food inflation. At 8.7 per cent year-on-year in April, it was way above the 4.8 per cent overall consumer price inflation. Food inflation is interestingly poised, like the national elections, but the uncertainty in its case will extend beyond June 4 and depend on the southwest monsoon. Adequate and well-distributed rainfall during the season (June-September) is something the RBI, and the government taking charge, would desperately want.

To be sure, 2023-24 wasn't great for agriculture. El Niño's impact can be seen in pulses. Chana (chickpea) and arhar (pigeon pea) dal are retailing at an average of Rs 85 and Rs 160 per kg, as against their corresponding year-ago prices of Rs 70 and Rs 120 respectively. A poor crop and market rates ruling higher than the official minimum support price have meant that government agencies have hardly procured this time; they had bought over 2.1 million tonnes (mt) of chana alone both in 2023 and 2022. It isn't just pulses. The all-India modal retail prices of potato, onion and tomato have risen from Rs 20 to Rs 30/kg between last year and now. El Niño resulted in not only subnormal rain, but also high temperatures and delayed onset of winter, affecting all these crops. Even wheat grown in central India wasn't spared. Proof of that is government procurement: Out of the total 26.3 mt purchased, 19.5 mt or nearly three-fourths has come from Punjab and Haryana. Others, including MP, haven't contributed much.

Global climate models indicate El Niño transitioning to "neutral" in the coming month and developing into La Niña — associated with good rainfall activity in the subcontinent — by July-August. But the government cannot take chances; nor can the RBI cut rates without a softening of food inflation. The government should allow duty-free imports of all pulses till March 31, 2025. The 40 per cent import duty on wheat, too, must go. The 26.3 mt grain procured this season comes on top of 16-year-low opening stocks of 7.5 mt. While sufficient to meet the public distribution system's requirement, the country needs more wheat to feed the open market. That gap can only be filled by imports.

## FREEZE FRAME



## E P UNNY



SUHAS PALSHIKAR

THE HINDI BELT or the Hindi heartland is a central factor in the shaping of political power in India. In part, this is due to numerical strength — the north accounts for a massive 245 seats to the Lok Sabha and, barring Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir, the Hindi belt has 226 seats. But more than mere strength, it is important because of an underlying uniformity in its approach to socio-cultural matters and in its political behaviour. Historically, the churnings in the Hindi belt have signalled momentous political shifts.

In 1967, the entire Hindi belt registered its disenchantment with the Congress. This shook the Congress system, but more than that, it marked the beginning of a new politics both within Congress and outside it. In 1977, the Hindi belt contributed to the rout of Indira Gandhi's party and facilitated a reconfiguration of political forces. In both these moments, the deeper churning in the Hindi belt had an undercurrent of social realignments — the unrest of intermediate and backward castes against the continued dominance of upper/forward castes. The realignment politically manifested itself as a protest against the Congress. That logic was further extended in 1989 when Congress was thrown out yet again — more decisively. At all these three points in time, the Hindi belt behaved more or less uniformly.

A fourth moment was the mid-Nineties, when in quick succession, in three elections, the BJP gained handsomely in this region. That marked the entrenchment of Hindutva politics in the Hindi belt. This was not merely a case of the BJP replacing Congress in the region; it was also a case of pre-existing socio-cultural sensibilities transforming themselves with more militant articulation and the politics of Hindutva smoothly taking over the region. The rise of the BJP in the 1990s and its resurgence in 2014 owe much to the party's impressive performance here: The BJP won 178 seats in the Hindi belt in 2019.

Without underestimating the party's respectable showing elsewhere, like in Gujarat, one can therefore pinpoint the Hindi belt as the BJP's core constituency. The Ram Janmabhoomi agitation consolidated the politics of Hindutva in the Hindi belt but histori-

Will Hindi belt continue to be enchanted by Hindutva despite economic issues and possible fatigue?

In this decade and overall, Hindutva has offered its followers symbolic excitement mostly unrelated to life conditions — the systematic marginalisation of the imagined enemy, construction of the Ram temple and limited accommodation of backward castes. The promises of national reconstruction and material advancement as corollaries of Hindu domination have remained distant dreams. Lokniti's pre-election survey in late March found that in this region, 60 per cent voters mentioned price rise and unemployment as issues that will determine their vote. This proportion was higher than in the south or east.

cally, Hindutva politics has had more traction in this belt than elsewhere even before the BJP spearheaded the Ayodhya agitation. Throughout the nationalist movement and subsequently in the post-Independence period, Congress in the Hindi belt struggled to accommodate the more articulate Hindu sensibilities that sought public expression of religious identity. The Hindu sensibility in this belt could easily be converted into a politics of Hindu assertion to be weaponised against Muslims — irrespective of the fact that in states like Rajasthan or MP, like in Gujarat, the Muslim presence is far too weak to be competitive or a challenge to the so-called Hindu ethos. Hindutva was being shaped in the region despite the weakness of the party of Hindutva, and post-1989, it converted its subterranean existence into the electoral strength of the BJP. Thus, there is a long term link of Hindutva with region-specific Hindu sensibilities. Today, what are the possible limitations that might unsettle the BJP's electoral hold over this region?

Three things need to be borne in mind. First, except Bihar, where the BJP had a state-level partner, the BJP's vote share in all the remaining states in the Hindi belt was between 50 and 60-plus per cent in 2019. This translates into a huge Hindu vote since available data suggest that Muslims might not have voted for the BJP in any sizeable proportion. In other words, the Hindu consolidation that the BJP aims at has almost completely occurred in this belt. This is often understood as the strength of the BJP but it also means that the party reaches a point where it cannot further add to its support.

Secondly, the party has won nearly all the seats in many of these states. In UP, though, it still came up short — with 60-plus seats out of 80. In other states of the region, even if the BJP were to repeat its 2019 performance, that would not help the party add to its strength. Thus, for the BJP to improve on its 2019 performance, it is absolutely essential to win more seats in UP. It cannot win many more seats in Bihar given that it is again in alliance with state-level parties and thus has to share seats with them.

Thirdly, while the popularity of Modi and

the attraction of Hindutva may still hold, a decade-long incumbency coupled with exaggerated promises put the BJP in a tough corner. In this decade and overall, Hindutva has offered its followers symbolic excitement mostly unrelated to life conditions — the systematic marginalisation of the imagined enemy, construction of the Ram temple and limited accommodation of backward castes. The promises of national reconstruction and material advancement as corollaries of Hindu domination have remained distant dreams. Lokniti's pre-election survey in late March found that in this region, 60 per cent voters mentioned price rise and unemployment as issues that will determine their vote. This proportion was higher than in the south or east.

This brings us to the question: Will the Hindi belt continue to be enchanted by Hindutva despite economic issues and despite the Hindutva rhetoric reaching a crescendo? Many have commented on "Modi fatigue" but is it possible that there will also be a "Hindutva fatigue"? This is not to say that the Hindi belt will suddenly turn away from Hindutva. But the question we must ponder is: Will the voters, in spite of their love affair with Hindutva, begin to exercise agency, make assessment of factors like performance and explore alternatives?

That process, if it begins, will not be confined to any one state from the Hindi belt. As pointed out above, despite state specificities, the region tends to manifest a somewhat uniform trend. Therein lies the challenge for the BJP. If there is Hindutva fatigue, it will manifest in varying degrees, across the region. If the BJP sheds its excess weight gained since 2014 in the region, that could result in the doors of electoral competition being pushed ajar.

When the campaign began, the competition appeared to be favouring the incumbent. As it closes, the central question that has arisen is whether the north, that periodically distances itself from dominant power holders, will unsettle the BJP, will begin to put it on notice or continue to latch on to the emotive appeal of Hindutva for the time being.

*The writer, based in Pune, taught political science*

## THE ICC's CHALLENGE

*Its application of warrants against Israeli, Hamas leaders will test its credibility*



PRABHASH RANJAN AND AMAN KUMAR

IN A NOTEWORTHY international development, the International Criminal Court (ICC)'s prosecutor, Karim Khan, has requested the court to issue arrest warrants against leaders of Israel — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant — and leaders of Hamas — Yahya Sinwar, Mohammed Diab Ibrahim Al-Masri (Deif) and Ismail Haniyeh. The arrest warrants are sought on the charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity over the October 7 attack on Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza. The ICC, in recent times, has come under scathing criticism for targeting leaders of the third world, and not Western powers and their allies. The application to issue arrest warrants against the leaders of Israel, thus, is a first and quite significant one. It can be argued that by charging both the Hamas leadership and the Israeli leaders, the prosecutor is seemingly giving an impression of being balanced and even-handed.

Under international law, heads of state are immune from criminal proceedings at any foreign or international court. At the ICC, however, no head of state can claim immunity. ICC statute says that "official capacity as a head of state or government, a member of a government or parliament, an elected representative or a government official shall in no case exempt a person from criminal responsibility". The same was ruled in 2019 by the court in the Jordan Referral re Al-Bashir Appeal judgment.

Like Russia, Israel, too, isn't a member of the ICC. Thus, some are questioning if the ICC can issue arrest warrants for Israeli leaders. The basis of ICC's jurisdiction in this case is that Palestine is a state party to the court. Thus, the ICC can exercise what is known as territorial jurisdiction. This means that if a crime is committed on the territory of a state party to the ICC, the Court can exercise jurisdiction on that crime, even if it is committed by people belonging to a state that isn't its member.

It is because of this provision that the court, in 2023, was able to issue an arrest warrant against Russian President Vladimir Putin for his role in Russia's war with Ukraine.

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There is generally a long road from requesting an arrest warrant to actual prosecution. The ICC's track record is not quite encouraging, especially regarding heads of states. Take the example of Omar al-Bashir, former Sudanese President. ICC issued an arrest warrant against him way back in 2009. At the time, he was the president of Sudan. In 2019, he was ousted from office in a military coup. However, he has still not surrendered to the court. On the other side of the spectrum are the cases of William Ruto, the incumbent President of Kenya, and his predecessor, Uhuru Kenyatta.

Both were accused of committing crimes against humanity, but the court finally dropped the charges and abandoned the prosecution. Similarly, an arrest warrant was issued against Simone Gbagbo, the former first lady of the Ivory Coast, but the ICC subsequently dropped the charges. Likewise, while the arrest warrant against Putin has undoubtedly limited his international travels, his surrender to the ICC seems unlikely.

Notwithstanding this somewhat dismaying history of the ICC, the application for arrest warrants against the Israeli leaders is momentous for three reasons. First, if the court issues the warrant in the coming months, it would be a big legal and diplomatic blow to Israel, which is already battling several other international cases. Second, it would severely curtail Netanyahu's travels to countries that are parties to the ICC because these countries would be under a legal obligation to arrest him. Third, and most importantly, it sends a robust signal that international law is not a hapless weapon that miserably fails to hold the powerful accountable. This case can prove to be the litmus test for the ICC's credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the world at large.

*Ranjan is a Humboldt Fellow and professor, Jindal Global Law School. Kumar is a PhD candidate, Australian National University. Views are personal*

## MAY 27, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### 4 DEAD IN PUNJAB

FOUR PERSONS WERE killed in Punjab in the last 24 hours. While three of them — a BSF constable, a Hindu Suraksha Samiti leader and a headmaster — were shot dead by terrorists, a Punjab Armed Police jawan was killed when attacked by a mob in Amritsar. Terrorists lobbed a bomb at a BSF vehicle at Gurdaspur seriously injuring a jawan, Kuldeep Raj, who succumbed to his injuries in the hospital.

### CENTRE-STATE SCUFFLE

OPPOSITION PARTIES DENOUNCED the dismissal by the central government of the Bhandari government in Sikkim followed by

the dissolution of the state assembly and imposition of the President's rule in the state. In a statement, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) said the two actions show that the central government "has forged one more link in the chain of arbitrary dismissals of elected governments and bringing states under central rule."

### FIVE-YEAR PLAN'S FOCUS

THREE ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES are being suggested by the Planning Commission for the reduction of poverty during the Seventh Five-Year Plan. These will be considered in a meeting of the Commission on June 4 presided on by Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi. Poverty-reduction will form the ma-

jo strategy of the next plan. The alternatives that are being proposed are its reduction by 15 to 17 per cent in one case and 20 to 23 per cent in another by the end of 1989-90.

### LIGHTNING KILLS 22

THE TOLL IN the current flood in Magura in south-west Bangladesh, caused by heavy rains in the catchment areas and other natural calamities rose to 175 with reports of 22 more people killed, according to unofficial estimates. Lightning struck a tin-roofed house as a marketplace in Magura during heavy rains accompanied by a storm killing 22 and injuring 40 others, the victims took shelter in the house during the rain.



# THE IDEAS PAGE

## A to-do list for inflation

Trade policy, especially import liberalisation, has to be well integrated with MSP to regulate prices and help farmers



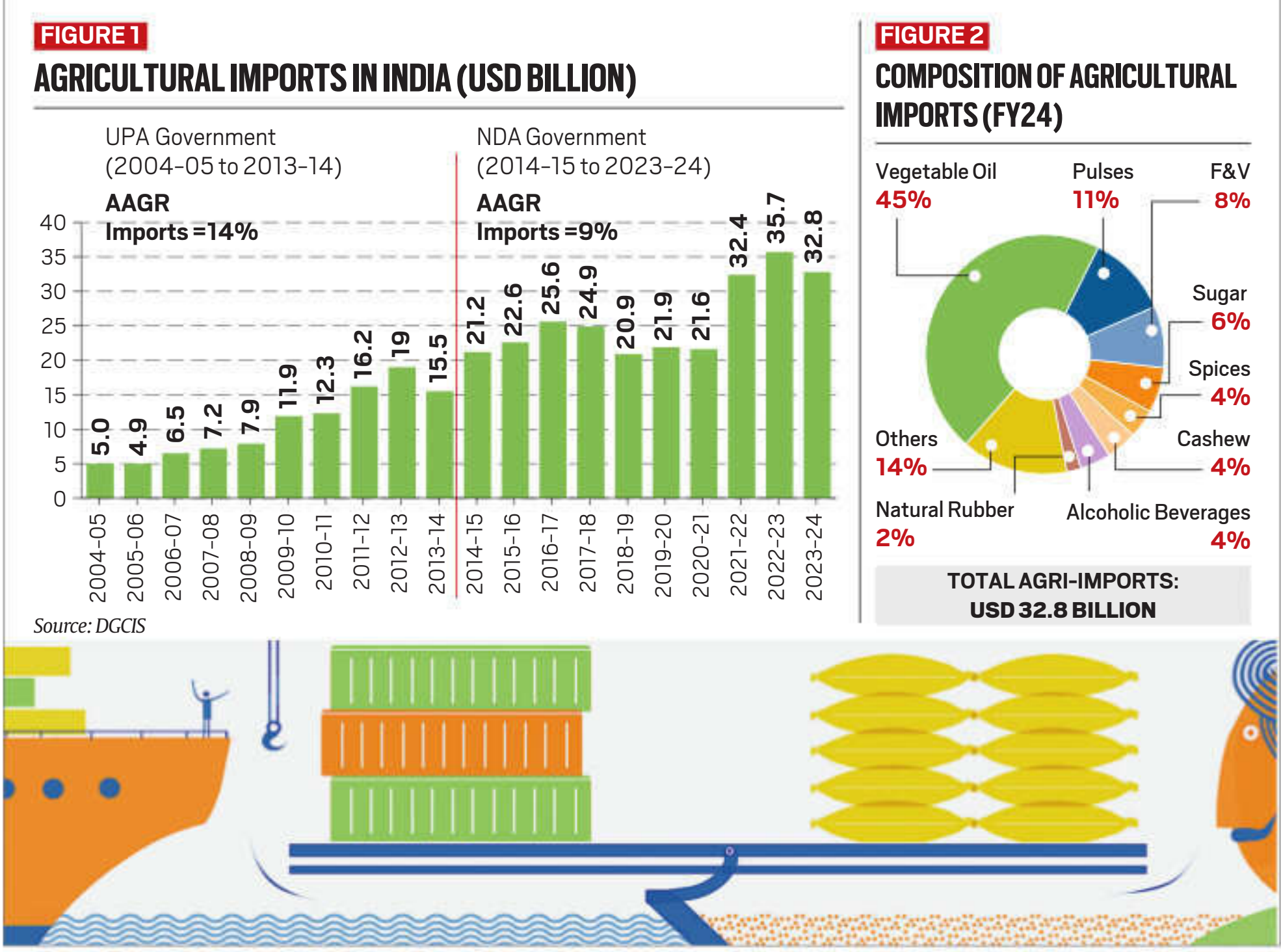
FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH  
BY ASHOK GULATI AND  
RITIKA JUNEJA

THE RESERVE BANK of India needs to be complimented for broadly containing the consumer price inflation within its mandated range of 4+/- 2 per cent. It also needs to be commended for providing overall financial stability, while generating unprecedented surpluses and giving a pleasant gift of Rs 2.11 trillion to the central government. RBI has been working very closely with the government, especially the Ministry of Finance, to ensure that India achieves high GDP growth (above 7 per cent) while containing inflation within prescribed limits. While RBI uses monetary policy to control prices, it also suggests that the government take various measures, such as through trade policy and open market operations, especially with respect to food inflation, which still hovers around 8 per cent. The government had gone on an overdrive with export controls of wheat, rice, sugar, and even onions. Although such restrictive export policies help the consumers, they hurt farmers' interest adversely. In our last piece ('Make it farmer friendly', IE, May 13), we spelt out various dimensions of agri-exports and policies associated with it. Here we focus on agri-imports.

India's agri-imports in 2023-24 have registered a notable decline of 8 per cent, dropping from \$35.7 billion in 2022-23 to \$32.8 billion in 2023-24. Interestingly, the average annual growth rate (AAGR) observed in agricultural imports during the 10 years of the Narendra Modi government appears to have slowed down — from 14 per cent during the UPA government (2004-05 to 2013-14) to 9 per cent during 2014-15 to 2023-24 (see the infographics, Figure 1). Does it indicate India becoming more *atmanirbhar* (self reliant) in agriculture? To address this, let us analyse India's changing agricultural import basket and the factors influencing it.

It is noteworthy that the decline in the value of agricultural imports in 2023-24 was primarily due to edible oils, plummeting by 28.5 per cent, from \$20.8 billion to \$14.9 billion in a single year. However, in terms of quantity, it remained relatively stable, hovering around 15-16 million metric tonnes (MT) during both 2022-23 and 2023-24. India imports roughly 55 to 60 per cent of its edible oil consumption. Within the spectrum of edible oils, palm oil accounts for over 50 per cent, followed by soybean and sunflower. The principal factor contributing to the decline in import values is the decrease in palm oil prices in international markets. The FAO's vegetable oil sub-index averaged 168.5 points in 2022-23, dropping to 123.4 points in 2023-24, indicating reduced global prices, consequently lowering India's vegetable oil import bill in 2023-24.

Next to edible oil, it is pulses, fresh fruits and vegetables (F&V), sugar, spices, cashew,



and various other items that comprise India's agri-imports (see figure 2). The import of pulses, which had declined from its peak of \$4.2 billion in 2016-17 (a record 6.6 MT) to \$1.9 billion in 2022-23 (2.5 MT), suddenly doubled to \$3.7 billion in 2023-24 (4.7 MT). In 2016-17, pulses production at home had suddenly increased by about 6 MT, while imports also hovered around the same quantity. This led to a glut and domestic prices of many pulses went below minimum support prices (MSP). Gol had to impose a 30 per cent import tariff on lentils, pigeon pea/tur, and chickpea, followed by quantity restrictions. Later, the import tariff on chickpea increased to 40 and then to 60 per cent by March 2018. For yellow/white peas, a 50 per cent duty was combined with a minimum price of Rs 200/kg, implemented in December 2019, effectively prohibiting imports below this threshold. This was to give high protection to domestic production of pulses.

However, since then, the increase in pulse production has been sluggish, hovering around 25-27 MMT. Import restrictions, coupled with somewhat sluggish growth in domestic production, are leading to high inflation in pulses. Even in April 2024, pulses group registered an inflation of 17 per cent, while tur showed an inflation of 31 per cent. This is worrying the government and no wonder, they are liberalising the imports of pulses at zero import duty, which will remain in place until the end of 2024-25. This is likely to hit the farmers, though it will help in taming pulses prices for consumers. Again a sign of consumer bias.

What could be rational trade policy that dovetails well with domestic MSP policy?

What could be rational trade policy that dovetails well with domestic MSP policy? First, instead of a sudden drop to zero import duty, it could have been more calibrated. Second, it must ensure that the landed price is not below the MSP of major pulses. Third, if domestic prices go below MSP, then NAFED should undertake large scale procurement at MSP to build its buffer stocks. Else, we are afraid, pulses farmers will lose heavily and their enthusiasm to produce more pulses may wane soon.

First, instead of a sudden drop to zero import duty, it could have been more calibrated. Second, it must ensure that the landed price is not below the MSP of major pulses. Third, if domestic prices go below MSP, then NAFED should undertake large scale procurement at MSP to build its buffer stocks. Else, we are afraid, pulses farmers will lose heavily and their enthusiasm to produce more pulses may wane soon.

A similar policy has to be adopted in case of edible oils/oilseeds, that is, ensuring that landed price of edible oils should not be below the domestic MSP of oilseeds converted to oil. Else, the vision of the Prime Minister to achieve relative self-reliance in edible oils through the National Edible Oil Mission-Oil Palm (NEOM-OP) will wash away. Having said this, Indian policymakers must recognise that achieving self-sufficiency in edible oils through traditional oilseeds like mustard, groundnuts, and soybeans would necessitate an additional area under oilseeds to the tune of 35 to 40 million hectares, which is not feasible. Only way is to promote palm oil at home on about 2 million hectares that is identified as a suitable area for this crop. This is the only crop that can give almost 4 tonnes of oil/ha.

In conclusion, the key lesson is that trade policy, especially import liberalisation, has to be well integrated with MSP policy at home. This is important for pulses and oilseeds, which demand less water and less fertilisers. Thus, farmers' and the planet's interests must go hand in hand.

Gulati is Distinguished Professor and Juneja is a Research Fellow at ICRIER. Views are personal

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"OIC and Arab League, as well as friends of Palestine in Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia must come together to enforce such a blockade against Israel if they are serious about ending the Gaza nightmare... finely worded legal treatise, and eloquently drafted resolutions will do little to save Palestinians." — DAWN, PAKISTAN

## Letting our scholars down

Changes in PhD programme don't do justice to the country's institutions and its diversity



KRISHNA MENON AND  
TANUJA KOTHIYAL

INDIA'S EDUCATION SPECTRUM, ranging from school education to research, has been the focus of many far-reaching changes in recent years. Educational institutions in India are characterised by immense diversity ranging from those located in the heart of India's capital to those in mofussil towns.

Our underfunded and ill-equipped public institutions are tasked with providing education to large sections of citizens who are battling adverse life circumstances, while also trying to match global standards of knowledge production and dissemination. The size and diversity constitute a challenge. They are also sites for building a society based on equality and dignity. However, rather than imagining education as a mode of developing values of critical citizenship, recent changes suggest a penchant for techno-managerial solutions. The new guidelines for direct admission to PhD programmes upon completion of the four-year undergraduate degree is one such example.

This is a time of sweeping and somewhat reckless changes, often selectively adopted from starkly different contexts, adding to the woes of higher education in India. The guiding principles are lofty and aim to make India an intellectual storehouse. However, the chosen pathway needs serious rethinking, keeping in mind questions of access and diversity.

Skilling for employment and the pursuit of doctoral research require equally rigorous, but very different approaches. Sadly, the current model fails to satisfy either. The hasty introduction of too many changes, the absence of adequate physical infrastructure, shortage of trained faculty, lack of funds, relentless homogenisation and increased dependency on technological solutions to what are essentially epistemological and pedagogical challenges are some of the reasons.

The four-year undergraduate programme (FYUP) with its focus on skill education, and a substantially shrunk discipline-specific learning, is an interesting experiment provided our educational institutions, especially our public institutions, have the funds, infrastructure and faculty expertise to turn these ideas into reality. Colleges are scrambling for resources, classrooms, teachers and in the process, many aspects of the FYUP are being reduced to a formality, while compromising heavily on domain specialisation.

The research component in the touted four-year undergraduate programme is expected to prepare students for doctoral research. This is based on the assumption that all undergraduate programmes across all institutions in India would be able to equip their students with rigorous training in research tools and methods. While the structure offers multiple exit options to the stu-

dent, it remains to be seen how many students are actually able to stay on till the fourth year, given the imperatives to earn a livelihood and shoulder domestic responsibilities. On the other hand, there is also little clarity on employment possibilities for those who do exit midway.

Further, the idea of a research intensive fourth year leading to direct admission to PhD seems to rest on the assumption that research is only a skill-based enterprise. If appropriately skilled in research methods, a scholar can arrive at "findings and conclusions" in the minimum possible time. This approach fails to consider research a reflective and deeply deliberative exercise. If a PhD is only about solving a specific problem within a stipulated period of time, how can it justifiably be described as a Doctorate in Philosophy?

While the PhD programme is sometimes seen as a lonely furrow where some chosen people engage in esoteric intellectual puzzles, it is in practice a socially located pursuit of knowledge. Along with well-known skills such as writing, communication, problem-solving and troubleshooting, a PhD programme should instil critical, creative and calibrated thinking — skills needed for consolidating our democracy and robust citizenship. A PhD programme hopefully creates in the researcher the ability to question and re-imagine rather than accept whatever is presented as a fact. It also inculcates a commitment to integrate the individual pursuit of knowledge with the larger community's needs.

The new guidelines for PhD issued by the University Grants Commission seek to flatten institutional and student diversities and create a uniform admissions process. But such streamlined mechanisms are neither attuned to the diverse needs of students nor that of institutions. A techno-managerial approach that seeks control and regulate sees this diversity as a problem that needs fixing and what better tool than supposedly neutral technology-assisted solutions?

This has resulted in the conduct of computer-based tests that contain multiple choice questions (MCQs), not in keeping with the idea of research that requires, at the very least, the ability of critical thinking and questioning. Often, there is a mismatch between the expectations of the programmes of study, especially interdisciplinary ones and the entrance examination. Unfortunately, the total dependence on a single MCQ-based exam has, in a very short span of time, resulted in the mushrooming of cram schools and guidebooks.

The challenge of diversity of institutions, faculty, and students within higher education can be seen either as a problem or as an asset. We must not lose sight of the specificities of our social needs and in our rush to become the "teacher to the world" create students who are unable to make meaningful interventions in the contexts that they work and live in.

Greater patience and caution while bringing in such sweeping changes would help us retrace our steps, in case it is required. Not doing so belies a hubris that is unbefitting of decision makers in the field of higher education.

Menon and Kothiyal are professors of Gender Studies and History, respectively, at Ambedkar University, Delhi



RAJAN KUMAR

## An exercise in strategy

Putin's Beijing visit served to strengthen informal alliance between China and Russia

VLADIMIR PUTIN'S VISIT to Beijing was a strategic exercise to secure sustained support from China amid its ongoing conflict with Ukraine. China's backing is critical to Putin's goals of keeping the Russian economy afloat, saving Russia from political isolation and projecting a joint front against the West. Putin returned home reassured that his bosom friend Xi Jinping would remain steadfast and offer unwavering support to Moscow.

At a macro level, the Moscow-Beijing partnership has become a decisive factor in international politics, whose implications are neither entirely understood or appreciated. It is moving towards a formidable alignment to shield itself from the looming Western menace, to challenge the overbearing dominance of the US, and to expand its influence worldwide. The relationship spans from extensive commercial exchanges to strong defence ties and intimate collaboration in multilateral institutions. In the hierarchical structure of the international order, this partnership has emerged as the second most powerful entity, positioned just below the Western alliances. Its influence is burgeoning swiftly in the Global South as countries seek an alternative to the traditional dominion of the West. The Joe Biden administration's short-sighted strategy of provoking both Russia and China simultaneously has contributed directly to an "alignment of the aggrieved".

President Putin and President Xi accord high priority to this partnership. The absence of leadership change on either side ensured a consistent and stable relationship — a privilege typically reserved for authoritarian regimes. Xi and Putin have met more than 40 times in the last two decades and often chose

each other's country as their first destination abroad after re-election. Xi Jinping's first foreign visit after assuming the highest office in China was to Moscow in 2012. Again, after his re-election in March 2023, he visited Russia on his first trip abroad. Similarly, Putin visited Beijing in May 2024 on his first trip abroad after assuming office for his fifth term. These gestures might appear symbolic but they are not devoid of substance.

China became a lifeline for Russia in the wake of Western sanctions following the Ukraine crisis. Russia's economy would have collapsed had China backed out and joined the sanctions. Russia's biggest trade partner for the last 13 years has been China. It accounted for roughly 30 per cent of its total global trade in 2023, a sharp rise from merely 11 per cent in 2013. In an unprecedented growth, their trade reached \$240 billion in 2023, overshooting the target of \$200 billion set for 2024. According to some estimates, Beijing supplies 70 per cent of Russia's semi-conductors and other critical technology. Therefore, the economic dependence of Russia on China can hardly be overstated.

A growing asymmetry in their economies has led some Western analysts to contend that the power equation has inverted and Russia has become a "junior partner". They argue that Russia's economy is one-tenth the size of China's. It was \$1.8 trillion in 2021-2022, while the Chinese economy was approximately \$18 trillion. However, calling Russia "junior partner" would be a premature assessment. Moscow is conscious of its great-power past, and its elites resent the idea of subordination. West's policy to subordinate Russia in the 1990s failed miserably. The war in Ukraine

would not have happened had Russia consented to becoming a junior partner of the West. Therefore, Russia will not readily submit to a secondary status to an Asian power.

In this context, one is reminded of what Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote in 1876, "in Europe, we were hangers-on and slaves, while in Asia we shall be the masters. In Europe we were Tatars, while in Asia we too are Europeans". Russia invariably turns to the East when the West spurns it. Gone are the days of Russia being "masters" in Asia, but Putin can certainly expect equality and solidarity from many Asian states.

Besides commercial ties, Russia and China have solid military cooperation. It began with confidence-building measures in the 1990s, and their most significant achievement was resolving the 4,300-km border dispute. There is supreme cooperation in the field of aircraft engines and anti-aircraft missiles. Over time, they have signed several joint projects concerning space, shipbuilding, rocket engines, military helicopters, production of aircraft, and the S-400 missile defence system. Russia's arms exports to China reduced drastically after 2007, but the latter still relies on the former for critical weapons such as the S-400 and the fifth-generation aircraft.

Further, joint military exercises have become a regular feature of their defence cooperation. The Joint Sea Exercise of 2015 in the Mediterranean raised concerns at the NATO headquarters. They participated in Zapad exercises in 2021, conducted a joint bomber patrol and used each other's airfields in 2022, did Vostok exercises with all three military branches in 2022, and executed joint air and sea drills in the Sea of Japan in 2023. Regular exercises mean some degree of interoperabil-

ity and the possibility of integrated command if required. However, they have not become a formal "military alliance" yet. In fact, China is not even supplying weapons to Russia during its war in Ukraine.

Moscow and Beijing are taking pre-emptive measures to safeguard their interests without becoming alliance partners. A formal alliance is cumbersome, and states refrain from being part of an alliance. It entails what is referred to as the "fear of entrapment" in other's conflict and the "fear of abandonment" when needed. Beijing would not like to get entrapped in Russia's conflict with the West, and likewise, Moscow is wary of China's conflict in Taiwan. Russia is also conscious that a formal alliance with China may alienate its Asian partners, such as India, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Therefore, they will continue to work closely without signing a formal alliance treaty. Moreover, many informal agreements have worked better than formal ones. Some Western analysts argue that the Moscow-Beijing alignment is far more effective than the much-touted Quad coalition in the Indo-Pacific.

New Delhi is wary of the growing ties between Beijing and Moscow. However, its strategy of cultivating robust ties with Washington while maintaining a balanced relationship with Moscow has proved exceptionally effective in managing China. New Delhi's strong ties with Russia situate it favourably in continental geopolitics. However, the balancing act will get more challenging as the tension between Russia and the West intensifies.

The writer teaches at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### CHINA-TAIWAN TIES

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Power play in the sea' (IE, May 25). The presence of a democratic Taiwan that has better socio-economic markers than mainland China has always been a threat to the CPC. It is only militarily that mainland China is superior to Taiwan. The latest power projection by China is aimed at not only the newly elected President but also to reassure the pro-mainland Taiwanese population and the domestic lobby that still believes in the wolf warrior style of diplomacy. However, in the long term, the Chinese will try to incrementally restrain Taiwan rather than attempt a direct military takeover. China knows that Taiwan represents a redline for the USA and it does not have an army to take on the might of the US.

Shubhada H, via email

### A CONVENIENT CLAIM

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The kite-flying about RSS' (IE, May 25). RSS, which has expressed strong reservations against the final draft of the Constitution of India, and was unhappy with the choice of colour of the national flag, still claims that it is not active in politics. This is the reason for skepticism against RSS despite calling itself an organisation for social unity and nation-building.

Nonetheless, creating such an image has advantages. For instance, it hoodwinks other parties to underestimate RSS's political significance and engages with people as a cultural organisation. Today, they are entrenched in all institutions like the media, bureaucracy, universities, judiciary, etc. But the writer surprisingly opted to debunk that hinting at souring relations between RSS and BJP.

LR Murmu, New Delhi

### IN BAD TASTE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Target on her back' (IE, May 25). It's heartening that the Election Commission of India (ECI) has 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. It does not behoove someone of his professional background to stoop so low. The poll panel has asked the BJP to issue an advisory to all party candidates and campaigners to ensure that such lapses do not recur during the campaign period. Also, 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 or workers".

Khokan Das, Kolkata



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IDEA EXCHANGE

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

ON RBI-GOVERNMENT TUSSLES

Tension between govts and central banks is in some sense hardwired into the system... As the central bank tries to maintain price stability and financial stability, short-term goals might be compromised

**Ishan Bakshi:** The Indian economy has seen two major shocks in the past two decades: the financial crisis of 2008 and the Covid pandemic. What are your views on the policy response of the then and now government and RBI?

Let's first talk about the two crises and their origins. We had the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008, and then we had the financial crisis triggered as a consequence of the pandemic. The GFC had its origins in the financial sector, whereas the financial disruption that happened following Covid was a result of a cause outside the financial sector. When the GFC happened, central bankers and governments were in the forefront because the solution had to come from within the financial sector. In the financial crisis after Covid, the solution had to come from outside the financial sector. You are right in the sense that both governments and central banks played from the same playbook in terms of responses to the financial instability. But, as I said, there is a difference because central banks were doing a holding operation during and after the pandemic, until a solution came, whereas in the GFC you were there right in the centre and front, fighting it. In the GFC, America was the epicentre. Whereas, after the pandemic you had to ensure that there was no pandemic anywhere in the country. In terms of effectiveness, at least in managing the financial fallout of the Covid pandemic in India, both the government and the RBI have done very well.

**Ishan Bakshi:** Do you think the central bank should be actively intervening in currency markets?

No, if anything, the RBI should be less interventionist than it is. I say this because we want to be a developed economy, we want financial deepening, we want more capital to come in. So we need more exchange rate flexibility instead of an expectation in the market that every time the exchange rate moves, the RBI intervenes. If the RBI intervenes, let's say, to prevent appreciation, it is building reserves, but there are costs to holding reserves. Unlike China, whose reserves are built out of their earnings, our reserves are built out of borrowing.

The second reservation I have about RBI's intervention is that you're shifting the burden of adjustment from one segment in the economy to another. Again, illustratively, if the RBI is preventing appreciation of the rupee, it is benefitting exporters at the cost of importers. Is that fair?

Third, if the RBI's stated policy is that we do not target an exchange rate, we only manage volatility and if the RBI is seen intervening even if there is no apparent volatility, the market will tend to believe that the RBI is targeting an exchange rate.

My most important reservation about this policy is that when the RBI intervenes, there is a moral hazard. If you want to be a developed economy, you want our market participants, corporates to be able to manage the exchange rate risk. If the RBI keeps intervening, they will outsource risk management to the RBI, which has a cost.

Finally, on the 90th anniversary of the RBI, the Prime Minister had said that the RBI must try and internationalise the rupee. That's not going to be possible if the RBI continues to intervene.

**Harish Damodaran:** You have talked about too much fiscal stimulus during the UPA period and the stimulus not being withdrawn. One is fiscal stimulus, second is the monetary stimulus, but there was a third stimulus which was too much credit and that created a legacy problem of twin balance sheets. They have now come out with draft regulations on project-lending, but was that the real problem?

I must admit that the monetary stimulus we had given during the crisis was not withdrawn soon enough. And that was for reasons... I admitted that the economy would have been served better had I withdrawn the monetary stimulus faster. But we were acting in real time within the universe of knowledge available to us. The information we were getting was that the economy had not picked up. Only in hindsight we realised that growth was in fact faster. If you throw back your mind to that time, there was a lot of concern about financial instability. The global financial crisis had not died. In hindsight, the credit flow, particularly to the infrastructure sector, was much more than what would have been healthy for the economy. But again, we were acting in real time. Infrastructure was uncharted territory, both for the corporates investing in infrastructure and for banks lending to them.

WHY D SUBBARAO

Hardly had D Subbarao taken charge as the Governor of the RBI on September 5, 2008, that the Lehman Brothers collapsed in the US, triggering a global financial crisis which quickly spilled over to the real economy. With the Indian government led by Manmohan Singh immediately swinging into action, Subbarao became

part of the team that ensured India emerged relatively unscathed. In his new book, *Just a Mercenary? Notes from My Life and Career*, published by Penguin, he writes about the many assignments, challenges and lessons in his long career, and the constant soul searching if he is giving back to the society

ON FISCAL MANAGEMENT

The economy would have been served better if I had withdrawn the monetary stimulus faster... In hindsight, the credit flow, particularly to the infrastructure sector, was more than what was healthy for the economy

# ‘Democracy functions best if there is sufficient space for Opposition’

Economist and former central banker D Subbarao on how the RBI has dealt with multiple crises, internationalisation of the rupee and why corporates are not investing yet. This session was moderated by Ishan Bakshi, Associate Editor, *The Indian Express*



Economist D Subbarao (right) with Ishan Bakshi during the interaction *Abhinav Saha*

Other factors that came into play included the Supreme Court orders cancelling coal blocks, cancelling 2G ban on exports, which affected the quality of credit, quality of recovery and growth.

**Ravi Dutta Mishra:** In your book *Who Moved my Interest Rate?* (Penguin) you mentioned that it was not the financial crisis that bothered you more but the currency depreciation that followed. How do you compare that period and now, the volatility and the management?

The management was better this time. I don't want to be defensive but that was a different problem as compared to today. The taper tantrums happened because of a lot of quantitative easing that money had flowed in. Then (Federal Reserve) chairman (Ben) Bernanke said they were going to taper and emerging economies lost stability, our exchange rate dived 20 per cent peak to trough in a matter of four months. We were part of the fragile five because of structural problems in our economies, not just the exchange rate... The fiscal deficit we were running, the quality of our imports, high oil prices and so on.

We learnt from that lesson but this time the exchange rate had moved. The flows that had come had not exceeded suddenly, so there was not that sudden stop and reversal as we had seen that time. It was relatively easier to manage the exchange rate this time. Apart from that, we have a war chest of reserves, our fiscal deficit is much lower, our fiscal credibility is higher.

**Sukalp Sharma:** Do you think the internationalisation of the rupee can be achieved in near-to-medium term or is it wishful thinking?

It certainly cannot be achieved in the short term. Whether it's achieved in medium-term or long-term, I do not know. But it's feasible. The US dollar is the world's dominant reserve currency today not because countries got together and anointed the US dollar as the reserve currency but because of the strength of the American economy, depth and resilience of the American financial markets, and credibility of American institutions of governance.

For India, it is good for our trade and investment. But if two trading partners have to do their trade in their bilateral currencies, the trade has to be roughly balanced. For example, between India and Bangladesh, they pay us in taka, we pay in rupees, let's say Bangladesh builds up huge balances and they say, 'What do we do with the rupee, pay us in dollars'. So if

a trade is roughly balanced, it's possible to internationalise the rupee, but if there is a large trade imbalance one way or the other, it would be challenging.

**Sukalp Sharma:** Since 2014 — when we had a majority government for the first time in decades — two central bankers have left amidst voices of erosion of autonomy. During such periods, when we have a majority government, do you think central banks can be politics-proof?

Tension between governments and central banks is in some sense hardwired into the system. The core mandate of a central bank is to maintain price stability and financial stability. Delivering on this core mandate enjoins the central bank to keep long-term sustainability of the economy. Typically, there is a conflict between short-term compulsions and long-term sustainability. Because there is a conflict, institutionally, we have established a central bank at an arm's length from the government. It acts independent of political compulsions. You cannot give the control of the printing press to governments because driven by short election cycles, political compulsions, they would misuse that. That's why you have a central bank with a certain amount of autonomy. That is the institutional rationale for central banks, and that is why there is tension because as the central bank tries to maintain price stability and financial stability, certain short-term goals might be compromised.

During my time, growth was trending down, inflation remained stubborn and the growth inflation conflict was quite tense. Today, growth is doing reasonably well, inflation is above target but within reasonable range. So, the tension is not very strong. It is also a function of the

chemistry between the Governor and Finance Minister and the Prime Minister.

**Ishan Bakshi:** During this electoral cycle, there has been a reference to the issue of inequality and redistribution. There has been some advocacy of an inheritance tax. What are your thoughts on that?

I'm not competent to comment on that because I have not studied it. We certainly have a problem of inequality. (Economist) Thomas Piketty and others have done studies and there are several other world inequality indexes which show that India is one of the most unequal societies in the world. Resolving inequality is not just a moral issue or political issue. It is also an economic issue. We need to resolve inequality for our own long-term economic interest.

Our biggest growth driver is the consumption of the bottom segments of the population. If their incomes go up, they'll spend that money. Their marginal propensity to consume is higher. If they spend that money, there will be more production, more jobs, more growth and we can get on to a virtuous cycle. If, on the other hand, the benefits of growth do not go to them, we cannot sustain our current growth momentum.

**Harish Damodaran:** Why do you think corporates are not investing yet?

For about seven to eight years, we've had the NPA (Non-Performing Assets) problem, twin balance sheet problems. That is now behind us. Both corporate balance sheets and bank balance sheets are cleaned up. They are in the pink of health... The economy is running on a single engine now, which is public investment... If you look at capacity utilisation, it's been low. It's picking up. I think it's 75 or 76 per

cent now, and historically corporates have thought about investment when capacity utilisation gets to about 80 per cent. They must also be waiting for the election to get over.

**Ravi Dutta Mishra:** You mentioned the relationship between the RBI and the government is sometimes ruled by political considerations. In that context, how do you see the RBI's dividends that it is giving to the government?

That's a tricky question because I was on both sides of that battle. When I was finance secretary, I was resisting pressure from the RBI to pay higher dividend and as governor, I was resisting pressure from the government to pay higher dividend.

I don't think that is a policy issue like monetary policy or regulatory policy. That is more of a fiscal issue. It is legitimate, appropriate for the government to ask for more money and for the RBI to make sure that its balance sheet is robust enough to command credibility because the central bank balance sheet is an important variable in potential investors assessing our economy. When does the IMF (International Monetary Fund) come into play? Typically when the government balance sheet is weak, they draw confidence from the fact that the central bank balance sheet is strong. After much thought, you should work on the central bank balance sheet. You should not do it light-heartedly.

It's right for the government to ask for more, but the RBI wants to put it into reserves for covering their losses. The Bimal Jalan Committee has determined what is the level of reserves that the RBI must hold. I hope that formula will see that the friction on dividend payment is lower.

**Ishan Bakshi:** This government has made a concerted attempt, like previous governments, to encourage manufacturing. There has been a lot of debate on manufacturing versus service. Former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan also advocated a more service-oriented pathway as opposed to manufacturing because the view is that we may have already missed the bus for manufacturing. What is your view?

Let me preface by what Dr Rajan and Rohit Lamba, his co-author, have said (in *Breaking the Mould*). To paraphrase what they've said, India is spending public resources in subsidising manufacturing, the hardcore of manufacturing. But if you take the entire chain of manufacturing, that is

the least value-added segment. If the argument is that this is the entry point for the entire vertical chain to come to you, perhaps that expectation may not be realised because the comparative advantage of global value chains itself is getting eroded. In any case, India is a high tariff regime, so it is not worthwhile for the value chains to come in. On the other hand, as populations are ageing in rich countries, the demand will be more for services than for manufacturing. Because of technology, we are now able to deliver service from a distance. We have a first-mover advantage that we must exploit. That is the argument of this book. I agree with that.

But I do not think that is a solution to our short-term or medium-term problem. First of all, manufacturing and service are not mutually exclusive. Even Dr Rajan and Dr Lamba have not said that they are mutually exclusive. We have a huge unemployment problem. Numbers can be disputed but the problem cannot be denied.

We need to provide jobs in the semi-skilled segment. We need to focus on future generations, give them more skills and more education. But for the next five to 10 years, we need to provide jobs to this segment of labour force which is largely semi-skilled. The only way to do that is in the manufacturing sector.

**Ishan Bakshi:** Many have described this election as a make-or-break election. At the end of the day, what gives you hope, what worries you, what scares you and what are your expectations?

What gives me hope is the resilience of our democracy. What is of concern is the deeper problems that we have. As much as poverty has gone down, awareness levels, literacy levels have gone up and people now have a better quality of life than they did 25 years ago, there is still a lot of inequality and unemployment. My deeper worry is about the long-term challenges, which includes climate change. What are Artificial Intelligence and robotics going to do to comparative advantage? How are the geopolitics going to unfold? How will globalisation unfold? How in this world are different demographic transitions taking place that are going to change demand patterns and comparative advantages? How is India going to navigate through that? That's a long list of my worries.

**Ishan Bakshi:** Does the shrinking Opposition space worry you?

I think democracy functions best if there is sufficient space for the Opposition.





## Rating the rankings

While achieving global benchmarks is a good goal, they should not be treated as an end in itself

THE RECENT FINANCIAL Times ranking of the world’s executive MBA programmes saw four Indian business schools taking spots in the list of 90 — Indian School of Business (ISB), Hyderabad, at 26, and Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Bangalore, Ahmedabad, and Indore at 48, 70, and 85, respectively. Europe and China dominated the list, snagging the top nine spots, and one has to go all the way to no. 10 to find a US institute — Yale School of Management. While it is laudable to see the Indian institutes being recognised globally, one is also inevitably prone to question why the number is so few. At the outset, it begs the question: Are Indian B-schools not good enough? However, this question does not have a straightforward answer. First, one might consider the rankings themselves — even if the most popular ones such as the Quacquarelli Symonds, FT, and Times Higher Education rankings — are taken into account. A quick look at their methodologies will show that these lists are not using uniform parameters. Moreover, as with any statistical exercise, they suffer from biases — for example, the FT rankings survey alumni and new students, both of which are not indicative of how the school runs at the present.

Second, accreditation comes into the picture. The QS and the FT rankings require institutions to be accredited by either the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, an American organisation; EFMD Quality Improvement System, prevalent in the European Union; “or equivalent”. However, accreditation is a lengthy, expensive, and extensive process — the fabled “triple-accredited” status, which also includes the Association of MBAs accreditation from the UK, has only been acquired by 129 B-schools worldwide. Lastly, the age of the institutions should be considered. Earning reputation and the trust of stakeholders come with time. Different schools also start off at different points — ISB was established in 2001 by influential stalwarts who had access to capital and contacts to make the school a success. Similarly, of the 26 IIMs, only four are triple-accredited. This seems low at first, but a majority of IIMs (15, to be precise), are less than 20 years old.

This then warrants another question: How can one ascertain if B-schools are doing well? While there is no singular answer, one can begin to look at how employable the schools make their alumni, which is somewhat reflected in some of the rankings mentioned, and if graduates themselves feel that their expensive degree will be useful in the future (ISB did rank first globally in the FT rankings on this parameter). This is but one way to view performance, and an informed decision should be made by the prospective students based on what they require from their studies. This is not to suggest that Indian institutions should stop vying for spots in these global lists. Once they have reached a certain age and reputation, they should certainly seek to represent India in the lists.

But it’s also certain that B-schools should not be judged by rankings alone. As Phil Baty, chief global affairs officer at Times Higher Education, states, “While an overall, composite ranking score and position can provide a helpful overview of an institution’s strengths, there are many, many great things that universities do that can never be captured and reflected in a ranking.” Rankings, therefore, should definitely be a goal for educational institutes, but they should not be treated as an end in itself.

## ● FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

THE CENTRE’S MOVE TO CONTROL INFLATION BY BANNING AGRI-EXPORTS HURTS THE FARMERS

# Taming food inflation

ASHOK GULATI  
RITIKA JUNEJA

Respectively, distinguished professor, and research fellow, ICRIER. Views are personal

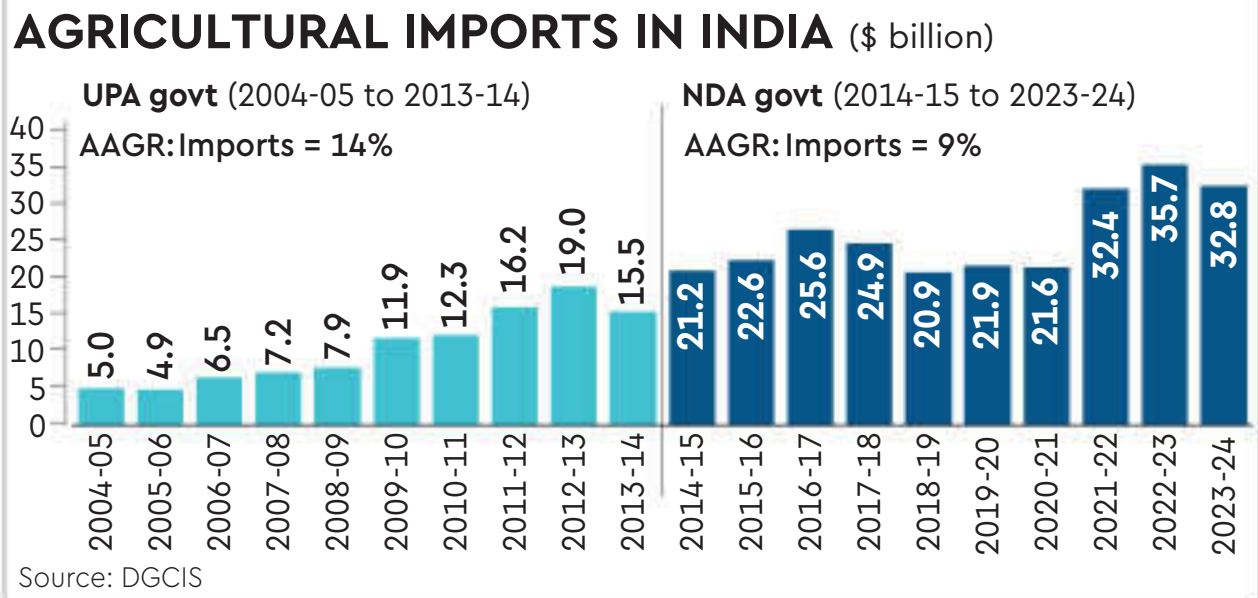


consumption. Within edible oils, palm oil accounts for over 50%, followed by soybean and sunflower. The principal factor behind decline in import values is the drop in palm oil prices globally. The FAO’s vegetable oil price index dropped from 168.5 in FY23 to 123.4 in FY24, resulting in substantial savings in India’s vegetable oil import bill in FY24.

Next to edible oil, it is pulses, fresh fruits and vegetables (F&V), sugar, spices, cashew, and various other items that comprise India’s agri-imports. The import of pulses, which had declined from its peak of \$4.2 billion in FY17 (a record 6.6 MT) to \$1.9 billion in FY23 (2.5 MT), suddenly doubled to \$3.7 billion in FY24 (4.7 MT). In FY17, India’s pulses production had suddenly increased by about 6 MT, while imports also hovered around the same quantity. This created a glut and domestic prices

of many pulses dropped below minimum support prices (MSP). The government had to impose a 30% import duty on lentils, pigeon pea/tur, and chickpea, followed by quantity restrictions. Later, the import tariff on chickpea was increased to 40%, and then to 60%, by March 2018. For yellow/white peas, a 50% duty was combined with an MSP of ₹200/kg, implemented in December 2019, effectively prohibiting its imports. It gave high protection to domestic production of pulses.

However, since then pulse production remained sluggish, hovering around 25-27 MMT. Import restrictions, coupled with sluggish production, led to high inflation in pulses. Even in April 2024, pulse prices increased by 17% (y-o-y), while tur prices shot up by 31%. This worried the government, and no wonder, it liberalised pulses imports



# Gauging inflation, poverty & GDP growth



R GOPALAN  
MC SINGHI

The authors are former civil servants

The govt has released a fact sheet on consumption expenditure; the new surveys indicate persistent inequality in consumption and access to assets

## Self-driving cars are getting a new testing ground

THE MARKET FOR driverless cars has been through a reckoning. Efforts by Apple Inc., Ford Motor Co., and Uber Technologies Inc. to make AI-driven vehicles have mostly failed, while chronic overselling from Elon Musk and tougher regulatory scrutiny in the US all suggest the industry is stalling. But not all hope is lost. Google’s Waymo, General Motors Co.’s Cruise, and several Chinese firms are still pursuing driverless projects. Now, the UK is racing forward in that effort too.

This month, London-based start-up Wayve leapt out of relative obscurity by raising \$1 billion to put its self-driving software into modern cars. The funding mostly came from existing investors including Microsoft Corp., Nvidia Inc., and Softbank Group Corp. And it came just days before the UK also passed a comprehensive law that will allow driverless cars to British roads by 2026. The regulations are the first to address one of the industry’s most chronic problems: exaggeration.

The Automated Vehicles Act includes a section called “Communications likely to confuse as to autonomous capability,” which bans companies from creating confusion over whether their cars really can drive themselves. It’s a sharp but subtle policy that the industry has long needed, given how much puffery has raised expectations that the industry has failed to deliver on. Among his many pronouncements, Musk once tweeted that Tesla cars would self-drive as well as a human by 2021, the same year Ford also predicted it would sell cars without steering wheels. Both were wrong.

“How you set and meet expectations to the customer is really important,” says Alex Kendall, Wayve’s chief executive officer. Kendall, who’s originally from New Zealand, co-founded the company in 2017 while studying at Cambridge University for his PhD in deep learning, an approach to building artificial intelligence.

Cambridge has a legacy of AI breakthroughs from scientists like Alan Turing, but like the rest of the UK, its spinoffs have struggled to commercialise cutting-edge research in the same way Silicon Valley has.

Wayve’s mega funding round, which was the biggest-ever for an AI company in Europe — even more than that of French AI hotshot Mistral — suggests Britain’s market for deep-tech start-ups may be starting to get the late-stage financing they need to grow. This raises hope for the likes of Oxa, a driverless car spinout from Oxford University that sells self-driving software to enterprise customers like grocery delivery and mining companies and raised \$140 million last year. Neither Wayve nor Oxa have disclosed their most recent valuations.

Wayve also focuses on building software rather than manufacturing cars, and it’s capitalising on hardware being built into forthcoming cars. Kendall tells me that many vehicles that were manufactured in the last year by leading carmakers are already equipped with the necessary equipment to drive autonomously, including powerful computer chips and plenty of cameras facing the front and back.

Kendall has an animal-kingdom analogy to explain this approach: The mantis shrimp is technically the creature with the best eyes (sensors), but humans capitalise on eyesight best thanks to our superior intelligence (Wayve’s AI). To enhance that technology, Wayve takes footage collected from cameras on its test-driven cars, and plans to collect more through its licensing deals with car manufacturers. Kendall declined to name the carmakers he’s partnering with.

Britain’s new law should help his efforts as well as those of Oxa and others in the country. “The regulatory environment, if anything, has accelerated our ability to develop this tech,” Kendall says.

The UK is still smarting from the slow demise of its car-making industry since the 1990s and the acquisition of marque names like Rolls-Royce, Jaguar, and Bentley by foreign companies. Car production in the UK has also halved since 2016. Should Wayve’s partnerships pan out and its peers capitalise on the new regulations, they could perhaps spark a modern-day revival with autonomous-vehicle technology.

While Chinese companies are closing the gap with America on autonomous driving capabilities, a friendly regulatory environment in the UK coupled with AI expertise from some of the world’s finest universities mean the Brits are emerging as viable contenders in that race too.

THE MINISTRY OF statistics and programme implementation, after a gap of 11 years, released a fact sheet on per capita expenditure for 2022-23. A detailed report on private consumption expenditure is awaited, yet the fact sheet itself has generated many observations. Four issues are significant here, and we briefly indicate our observations on them.

### Consumption & assets of decile class of population

Between 2011-12 and 2022-23, the overall increase in per capita consumption expenditure has been 9.45% for rural and 8.61% for urban areas. While growth in per capita expenditure is nearly uniform across the decile classes of population, at the lower levels there is a relatively faster increase. Consumption of the bottom 10% of the population has increased by 9.8% and 10.4% in rural and urban areas respectively compared to a growth of 8.7% and 7.3% for the top 10% of the population. Notwithstanding the moderate increase in consumption expenditure at the bottom level, we do not see much improvement in access to consumption at this level. Based on the debt and assets survey, it is observed that more than half of the household assets are still concentrated in the top 10% of the population. Though this inequality has moderated slightly, it remains much above the inequality in consumption. The assets held by the bottom 40% of the population is just 6% in rural and 3.3% in urban areas. The new surveys indicate

persistent inequality in consumption and access to assets.

### Levels of poverty

Post-1973, poverty estimates in India are made with reference to a basket of goods. The task force in 1979 and expert groups afterwards, including the one under C Rangarajan in 2014, have continued estimating poverty solely with reference to the distribution size of private consumption expenditure, based on a National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) methodology. This conscious decision is because of the significant difficulties in capturing household incomes through recall-based surveys of sample households. The Rangarajan expert group recommended monthly per capita consumer expenditure (MPCE) of ₹972 in rural areas and ₹1,407 in urban areas as poverty lines for the country. The MPCE covered primarily food and some essential non-food items. The poverty line so estimated was around 68% of average MPCE in rural areas and 54% of average MPCE in urban areas. Since poverty estimates are not so far provided for 2022-23, one could consider two alternatives. First, the indicated proportion of MPCE in 2011-12 could be used for 2022-23. That puts MPCE of ₹2,624 in rural areas and ₹3,489 in urban areas, indicating that 33% people in rural areas and 24%

in urban areas are poor. The second approach could be upscaling MPCE using the consumer price index (CPI). This puts rural and urban MPCE at ₹2,177 and ₹2,940 respectively. Based on this MPCE level, people below the poverty line in rural and urban areas would be 20% and 15% respectively.

### Inflation based on derived weighting diagram

The third issue related to the PFCE based on the NSSO survey is redrawing the weighting diagram for consumer price indices. Using the indices at the broad groups in the current CPI and weighting them in terms of the derived weighting diagram at rural and urban levels, inflation shows a downward trend post-July 2023. Average inflation for rural areas for July-February under this dispensation works out to 5.2%, the same as observed for current series. For urban areas, the inflation under the new dispensation at 5.8% is higher than the inflation in the current series at 5.1%. The proposed fine-tuning with actual commodity-wise details, we believe, may not influence changes in the monetary policy.

### NAS & NSSO comparison

An important expectation from the new expenditure fact sheet has been its validation of GDP growth rates and its deviation from the PFCE, as indicated in

National Accounts Statistics (NAS) data. Historically, private consumption derived from NAS and NSSO surveys are significantly different from each other. According to the NSSO surveys at different points, the derived PFCE in 1993-94, 1999-2000, 2004-05 and 2009-10 have varied between 48% (2004-05) and 62% in 1993-94. In 2009-10, the NSSO-based PFCE was 50% of NAS-PFCE. The food component was relatively closer to NAS estimates than the non-food component. Part of the difference could be methodological (use of imputed values for owner-occupied houses and consumption of goods produced by household) and partly owing to the exclusion of certain sectors.

The Rangarajan Committee has stated that these two estimates of consumption (NSS and NAS) do not match in any country. But what is alarming in India is that the difference between the NSS and the NAS consumption is widening over time and at the aggregate level, the NAS consumption has always been more than the NSS consumption. In 2022-23, we observe NSSO to have declined to 46% of NAS consumption with the usual inter-group variations. The rate of growth of NSSO consumption at the aggregate level and NAS consumption from 2011-12 to 2022-23 at 10.2% and 11.6% compound annual growth rate respectively is not significantly different. In view of this, the claim that NAS-PFCE overstates GDP growth (not validated by NSSO) is not borne out by facts.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Curbing unemployment

Social scientists fear that despite GDP growth, the country’s inability to translate India’s economic success story into one of better jobs and living conditions across regions could be a hindrance to future progress. Kerala’s story stands out amidst slow improvement in Indian employment conditions. Kerala has the second-highest unemployment rate among its educated youth population (15-29).

Only 38.98% of educated youths are employed, compared to 21.84% nationally. Even as working conditions for the average Indian improved slowly, though consistently, over the last two decades, wide variations across geographies remained. Economic growth and good job prospects seemed to have bloomed only in select industrial areas. However, it is the Kerala story that stands out. The state has spectacularly improved its ranking

of employment conditions among the major 22 states. Opportunities in labour-intensive manufacturing and rapid urbanisation should be looked into.

—Jayanthi Subramaniam, Kerala

### Not a clear pitch for IPL

Apropos of “Bowlers graveyard” (FE, May 25), T20 has truly become a batsmen’s game, sadly though. This year’s Indian Premier League (IPL) saw scores of more than 250 on

eight occasions, and Kolkata Knight Riders once could not even defend 261. The impact player’s rule has further favoured the batsmen in the IPL. All this has to be changed if we really want this game to be more balanced and for children to aspire to become bowlers. Pitches should also play their part to make the contest more even.

—Bal Govind, Noida

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com



# WAKE-UP CALL FOR FIRE SAFETY FROM GUJARAT’S HORROR HOLIDAY

WEEKEND amusement at a gaming arcade in Gujarat’s Rajkot went horribly wrong as at least 28 holidayers, including nine children, were charred to death in a sudden blaze. Hours later, six newborns died in a massive fire at a children’s hospital in Delhi. A few days ago, a boiler blast at a chemicals factory in Maharashtra’s Dombivli killed more than 10 workers and left many others injured. Preliminary probe into the Rajkot fire traced its source to sparks from some welding work on the premises. The holiday crowd got trapped as basic fire safety protocols like adequate extinguishers, emergency exits, and trained personnel for quick evacuation appeared to be missing in the sprawling TRP game zone. The blazing hot sun beating down on the air conditioned multi-storeyed temporary structure built using metal and fibreglass and encased in tin sheets made it a tinderbox. Taking *suo motu* cognisance of the holiday horror, the Gujarat High Court called it a man-made tragedy as reports suggested the Gujarat Comprehensive General Development Control Regulations were bent to create the temporary structures. Whether or not it had the paperwork to run the facility, like a no-objection certificate from the fire safety department, is a matter of investigation. A special investigation team set up by the Gujarat government has already begun the probe. As for the Delhi hospital, it too is said to have lacked regulatory clearances. Exploding oxygen cylinders within the premises made the intervention of fire safety personnel risky. A few of the rescued babies are recuperating at another hospital.

While the owner and manager of the Rajkot facility have been arrested, the administrative machinery in the city must be held accountable if it is found that they let it function without clearances. Likewise, the Delhi and Maharashtra administrations must be taken to task. Only a quick and transparent probe as well as exemplary punishment would act as a deterrent for the brazen circumventing of norms. Mercifully, all gaming centres across Gujarat have been ordered shut for a fire safety audit. Other states, too, could follow suit.

While the governments announced ex-gratia reliefs, the matter should not end there. Revisiting fire safety codes is a national imperative, more so as the heat wave sweeping the country has a multiplier effect on the risk of fire hazards. There can be no loss of innocent lives to satisfy the greed of a few.

# GOVT SHOULDN’T STRETCH RBI’S RESERVES TOO THIN

THE markets have cheered the Reserve Bank of India’s decision to transfer a record surplus of almost ₹2.11 lakh crore to the government coffers. First of all, the bonanza will give the exchequer enough fiscal leg room in the current financial year. The bumper surplus transfer also means lower borrowings and, therefore, more benign yields on government securities. This could, in turn, mean lower interest rate in the near future. These benefits, however, should not make the government lose sight of the fact that such large transfer of RBI surplus has its own downsides. The government should be wary of stretching thin the central bank’s reserve, which at times is testament to the strength of the economy. The strength of RBI’s balance sheet often plays a decisive role in getting funds from international agencies like the IMF.

The RBI’s surplus transfer for FY24 is 2.5 times that of the previous year. The government had budgeted for ₹1.02 lakh crore dividend from the RBI and PSU banks. However, the surplus transfer turned out to be more than double that, touching 0.35% of the GDP. The government can, therefore, hope to bring down its FY25 fiscal deficit to below 5% from the budgeted target of 5.1% of the GDP. The Centre can continue with its high capex focus without worrying too much about the fiscal situation. The additional dividend also increases the chances of the government achieving the 4.5% fiscal glide path by FY26. This should bolster India’s case for a rating upgrade.

By all means, the higher-than-expected RBI dividend signifies many positives for the economy, including lower yields on government bonds that should reduce the cost of capital for private sector as well. However, the government must not over-exploit the central bank’s reserves and surpluses. The surplus transfer does fulfil the Bimal Jalan Committee recommendations, yet the government’s over-dependence on RBI resources to plug fiscal leakages raises many moral questions. It also gives it an excuse for being fiscally ‘irresponsible’ without consequences. This should not be a permanent solution for any government’s fiscal profligacy. The RBI has emerged as a strong and mature central bank globally, and the credit to this goes to its conservatism. Any laxity in this approach may not serve India in the long term.

## QUICK TAKE

### SAME WOOD, DIFFERENT TREES

THE same week Payal Kapadia made Indian filmdom proud by winning the Cannes Grand Prix with her elegy on two women’s lives, new research showed how stodgily regressive the average Bollywood and Hollywood plotlines have been on societal issues. A team led by Sunny Rai of University of Pennsylvania and Kushang Zaveri of Mahindra University used AI to scour through 5,000 movie themes. They found that while Bollywood mostly focused on shame, especially concerning female sexuality, Hollywood tended to scorn poverty. The likes of Kapadia are reminding us that formulaic flicks are not the best way forward. The many-hued indie film movement must be nurtured to bloom.

OUR Constitution is quasi-federal. This was a historical necessity. When it was adopted, the princely states integrated into the Republic continued to have elements which, in the absence of a strong Union, could have disturbed our constitutional enterprise. In a country as large as India with a population of 1.4 billion, the epicentre of power in Delhi makes it difficult for states to develop at their own pace considering their unique needs and priorities. The flow of finances to states is largely controlled by the Union.

Despite the manner in which resources are to be shared between the Union and states as allocated by each Finance Commission every five years, the Union continues to garner additional resources through imposition of cess and other levies that it need not share with the states. Being the recipient of a large share of revenues, states are not given enough independent economic space to cater to their needs. The Union government, along with the Reserve Bank of India, is the arbiter of their destiny.

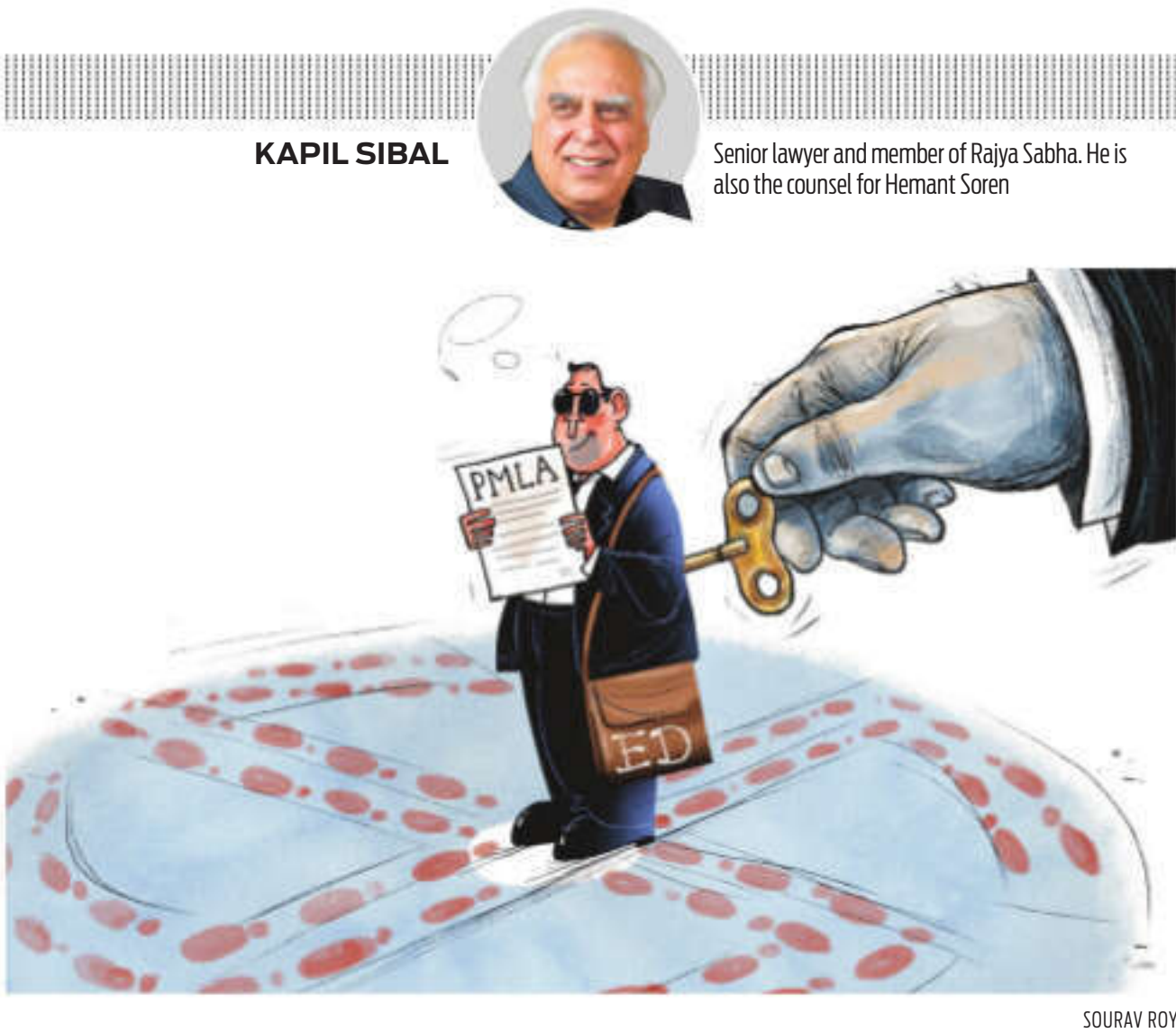
But a far more serious issue that confronts the federal structure of the nation today relates to the rampant misuse of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA). It is evident from the manner in which the investigation arm, the Directorate of Enforcement (ED), has been functioning under the present government. The situation has been exacerbated by a judgement of the Supreme Court, allowing for its rampant misuse.

The PMLA is perhaps the most draconian law in the history of India. Preventive detention laws, which were often used at one time, still provided for procedural safeguards that are absent in this legislation. The Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, 1987 (TADA), another draconian law, targeted individuals, not states. Similarly, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA), is person and organisation centric. Both the erstwhile TADA and the present UAPA essentially sought to prosecute those who, through their alleged acts of violence, destabilised or attempted to destabilise the state. In contrast, the PMLA, by targeting individuals associated with the opposition party in power in states, is destabilising the federal structure of this country. The following analysis will demonstrate this fact.

Under the PMLA, the ED, under the control of the Union, can access any state to investigate the alleged offence of mon-

In no state where the ruling party is in power or in a coalition, or even at the Centre, has any politician been investigated under the PMLA. This only seems to happen in opposition-ruled states

# THE MISUSE OF DRACONIAN LAWS FOR POLITICAL GAIN



KAPIL SIBAL

Senior lawyer and member of Rajya Sabha. He is also the counsel for Hemant Soren

SOURAV ROY

ey laundering. This can only be done if an offence alleged to have been committed is part of the offences specified in the Schedule to the PMLA. Such an offence is called the ‘predicate offence’. If the offence generates a monetary benefit, it is referred to as the ‘proceeds of crime’. What happens on the ground is that the moment a predicate offence takes place in a state—which is a scheduled offence like cheating (420), forgery (467 – 471) and other offences under the Indian Penal Code like murder (302), culpable homicide not amounting to murder (304), along with violations of provisions of enumerated statutes—the ED, though not obliged to, registers, in its discretion, what is called an Enforcement Case Information Report (ECIR). This gives it the right to enter that state and start investigating the offence of money laundering.

It is appropriate to explain that monies generated from the predicate offence are proceeds of crime and using those proceeds by projecting them as untainted money is ‘money laundering’. By virtue of the explanation added to the definition of money laundering through the Finance Act, 2019, it in effect alters the meaning of money laundering. The added explanation obliterates the distinction between proceeds of crime and money laundering. Therefore, under the law as it stands today, the proceeds of crime and money laundering allow the ED to enter any state to investigate the offence. This has serious implications on the federating units in our country and the inde-

# SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GANGA AS ONE OF OUR HOLIEST RIVERS

WITH the spotlight on Kashi for reasons we all know, it’s interesting to look again at its cultural significance. Some come to Kashi to die a ‘holy death’ with the surety of salvation. Death itself is known as ‘Kashi Labh’, the ‘Profit of Kashi’, while Kalbhairav, the city’s fierce guardian deity, is addressed as ‘Kala-kala’, the ‘Death of death’, like his master Shiva.

For at least over three millennia, every Hindu pilgrim to Kashi carried away a small sealed copper pot or two of Ganga water to his far corner of the sub-continent. The pot is kept in his prayer nook or room. Every time there is a death in the family, the seal is broken and a few drops of Gangajal are poured into the dying person’s mouth for his or her salvation. The pots have been steadily replaced by each generation, so the Ganga may literally be found in every Hindu home across India.

No wonder there were salty local sayings about this never-ending ebb and flow of humanity in Varanasi. The modern satirical poet ‘Bedhab’ Banarasi joked, ‘*Bedhab kabhon na chhodiyo aisi Kashi dham/Marne pe Ganga miley, jeete langra aam.*’ ‘Never leave a place like Kashi, Bedhab, where dying, you have the Ganga, and alive, langra mangoes’.

When in Kashi, this rush of associations made me run impulsively to the Ganga’s sandy edge across from the ghats and wade in deeper and deeper until I could swim a few strokes. My modest cotton tunic and pants ballooned comically in the water and a few people in wooden boats some distance away looked at me for a moment, but only for a moment, since Kashi has seen everybody and everything. A soft plop to the other side made me turn my head swiftly. A small, sleek brown body dived down and I was just in time to catch that veriest glimpse of a Gangetic dolphin.

Treading water, I looked back at the ghats with the illusion of being right in the middle of the broadly curving river, filled by a sense of deep connectedness. It was a sodden, sandy business going back, but the epiphany was worth it. I understood why Adi Sankara, the pillar of Hinduism, rushed forward in exhilaration at his first glimpse and hurled himself into the river, crying, “Mother! Your child from the South has come to you!” I had laughed scornfully at this story as a cool undergrad at Delhi University. But to actually be in the river was quite another



RENUKA NARAYANAN

## FAITHLINE

thing. The centuries were on the Ganga’s side and it was part of my ‘hard-wiring’. There was no escaping that hold.

This uncontrollable rush of joy towards the Ganga was not unique to me or my infinitely saintlier predecessors. Such spontaneous leaps are not unusual in a regular Hindu pilgrim or even a reluctant one, nor in a suddenly-overtaken casual visitor, for



WIM MEDIA COMMONS

One can witness Ganga’s girlish, joyful dance as she tumbles down the mountains through Rishikesh before entering the plains, where she sobers in her flow. From Haridwar, she turns positively wide and matronly as she proceeds further eastwards to Bengal and the sea

the idea of the Ganga is imbibed “with mother’s milk”, as the saying goes, and celebrated through story, song and prayer in almost every Indian language. The callous modern disregard for the physicality of the river is therefore hard to understand.

Meanwhile, the pilgrim party never stops along the Ganga’s banks. It begins at its icy Himalayan source, Gomukh, with offerings of flowers. As the Ganga makes her way from the snowline down to pine forests, the pilgrim presence picks up volume with many sacred chants at the ashrams along its banks at Rishikesh. While the soul-seekers meditate, chant and pray on the riverbank, another kind of party goes on in the river itself. Hooting and hollering, river rafters

and kayakers bounce on the Ganga between the bronzed rocks on the wilder stretches of the river, in and out of rapids with terrifying names like ‘Golf Course’ and ‘Three Blind Mice’. I, too, have been river-rafting on that stretch from Rishikesh to Haridwar, to experience the Ganga’s girlish, joyful dance as she tumbles down the mountains and enters the plains, where she suddenly sobers in her flow. From Haridwar, she turns positively wide and matronly as she proceeds further across the endless hot and dusty plains eastwards to Bengal and the sea. Hindus say she swells as she goes with the increasing load of human sin washed away in her as she flows from tirtha to tirtha (a holy place by the water).

The meeting of the Ganga with the sea at journey’s end is considered a mystic moment. However, in a quirky link with the English who founded Calcutta on the Ganga’s estuary, I experienced the river not from a pilgrim place but from a river warden’s boat. The river warden wore a white uniform and a black kepi and his face was wrinkled around the eyes from years of peering intently at the river and its banks, taking in details others would probably not notice. He knew every inch of the river on his stretch, every rock hidden in the riverbed, every shifting sand bank, every tide.

“Do you pray to the Ganga?” I ventured when a silent camaraderie of sorts was established after twenty minutes or so of peacefully watching the river. The warden grinned. “I’m a child of this river; as much as any Bhishma. I am the Ganga, an indivisible part of her while alive. And one day, my ashes will float on her waves and disappear into her.” He chuckled when I shared a very in-house Hindu verse with him from the river’s upper reaches: ‘Before you come here in a pot or a jar/Do spend some time alive in Haridwar’.

Chop and change as we may, there’s no evading the fact that our personal journeys have never ceased to flow with the Ganga.

(Views are personal) (shebaba09@gmail.com)

pendence of state governments. There are numerous instances of motivated investigations intended to destabilise regimes in states where the opposition is in power. This has led to divisive litigation between the Union and the states, wherein the states believe the ED is targeting and destabilising them at the behest of the Centre. In Tamil Nadu, for example, the ED has asked for information about all FIRs registered in the state. The obvious intent is to ferret out cases that can be investigated. The ED has also sought information about illegal sand mining, which is not even a part of the schedule of offences under the PMLA.

The modus operandi of the ED is to enter a state the moment a predicate offence is committed and ask the state government to share with the Union the details it seeks. If the complaint is filed or an FIR is registered with respect to a scheduled offence, the ED enters and starts investigating any involvement of the accused named or unnamed. Even though the predicate offence has not resulted in a chargesheet and is at the initial stage of investigation, the ED merily starts arresting persons. Once arrested, it is impossible for the accused to secure bail because of the stringent legal provisions wherein the court has to come to the conclusion that the accused is not guilty of the offence.

These provisions are being misused in opposition-ruled states wherein incumbent chief ministers find themselves in jail. State politicians and bureaucrats find themselves at the mercy of the ED. So, at the stage of investigation of the predicate offence itself, the ED gets into the act and starts targeting people, including chief ministers and others. This is how both Hemant Soren and Arvind Kejriwal find themselves in jail. Very convenient for the ruling dispensation in the midst of elections!

In no state where the ruling party is in power or is in a coalition government with other parties, or even at the Centre, has any politician been investigated or arrested under the PMLA.

In the case of Kejriwal, no money trail using proceeds of crime has been established. In the case of Hemant Soren, the allegation is of forcibly occupying land which, even if true, is not a predicate offence.

There are multiple other examples of such rampant misuse of laws and the investigating machinery under the present dispensation.

(Views are personal) (Tweets @KapilSibal)

## MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

### Counterproductive comments

Ref: *Mighty Modi takes on peaceable Patnaik* (May 26). Odisha CM Naveen Patnaik, who has been ruling the state since 2000, now faces a formidable challenge from the BJP but is quietly confident of keeping the saffron party at bay. Discounting the fighting skills of the BJD patriarch, who has already served five terms in office, could prove very costly. The unsavoury references to former IAS officer V K Pandian by the PM could prove counterproductive.

**C V Aravind, Chennai**

### People’s hypocrisy

As long as Naveen Patnaik was perceived to be allied with Modi, he was anathema to many people, but now that they are fighting each other in Odisha, previously unknown virtues are being suddenly uncovered.

**Hemant D Pai, Bengaluru**

### Voter participation

Ref: *62% turnout in crucial 6th phase* (May 26). It looks like 40% of people didn’t bother to use their right of franchise and took the exercise casually despite the government’s appeals. It seems nothing can be done to motivate people to go to polling booths. Maybe PM Modi, hopefully in his third term in office, will evolve some out-of-box solution for this issue.

**K Nehru Patnaik, Visakhapatnam**

### Delayed numbers

Ref: *EC releases absolute poll numbers for 5 phases* (May 26). After a prolonged reluctance, it is pleasing that the EC finally disclosed the number of votes cast. What is displeasing is that it took two months to disclose the exact figures in the age of technology. The EC must discharge its duty without will or favour to enhance the trust in the electoral process.

**M Rishidev, Dindigul**

### Unsafe structure

Ref: *4 kids among 27 killed in Rajkot fire* (May 26). How did civic authorities allow such a big gaming mall with a roof made of fibre to operate without getting a proper NOC from the fire department? This is the second big accident in Gujarat after the Morbi bridge collapse in which 141 people died.

**P Victor Selvaraj, Palayamkottai**

### No accountability

Every time these incidents take place, it is customary for the government concerned to order audits at similar locations. A blame game starts, and finally no one is held accountable. Only innocents are punished. It is important to make accountable the entire government machinery for giving permissions callously or those who have allowed it to function if permission was not given.

**Venkata Kapardee Mallajosyula, Vizag**

## THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

Chairman of the Board: **Manoj Kumar Sonthalia** Editor: **Santwana Bhattacharya**

Resident Editor (Tamil Nadu): **Anto T Joseph** \* Printed and Published by **R K Jhunjunwala** on behalf of Express Publications (Madurai) Private Ltd., at Express Press, ‘Express Gardens’, 29, Second Main Road, Ambattur Industrial Estate, Chennai - 600 058. **Chennai:** Vol. 94, No. 126. RNI Reg. No. TNEN9/1002/57. Phone: 044-23457601, Fax: 044-23457619. \* Responsible for selection of News under the PRB Act. **Copyright:** Express Publications (Madurai) Private Ltd. All rights reserved. Reproduction in any manner, electronic or otherwise, in whole or in part, without prior written permission is prohibited.



## There's a Fork in the Road to Clean Energy

Hybrids are half-solutions, EVs need a push

Hybrid cars are gaining on EVs in India because they represent a gradual pathway to energy transition. Lack of charging infrastructure offsets the tax advantage EVs enjoy over hybrids. Besides, EVs are still more expensive to manufacture, with research costs yet to be priced in and relatively immature supply chains. This raises the question of whether EVs should continue to enjoy their tax advantage over hybrids that offer a cheaper and more pragmatic solution to emission control. It depends on how lawmakers look at hybrids. If they see them as catalysing electric mobility, there could be a case for incentivising the technology. That would, however, trap a large section of Indian car buyers in a half-solution.

Hybrids run on electricity generated by burning fossil fuels. This situation will not change as we move up the hybrid technology tree. EVs, too, run on electricity produced in India principally from fossil fuels. However, transition to renewables makes EVs progressively less polluting. At some point in the future, EVs will be far cleaner than hybrids. So, do the two categories deserve the same fiscal encouragement?

The lower cost of operating an EV is offset by its sticker price and convenience in charging. Additionally, its accelerated depreciation as energy generation and storage tech won't level out against internal combustion engines (ICE) on all three parameters. Tax breaks for hybrids could risk slowing the energy transition. However, there might be immediate gains in emissions. A car owner who pays half as much in his hybrid to get from home to the office is unlikely to revert to a gasoline engine. His next purchase would probably be an EV that gets him there, at a tenth of the cost. This first shift is already evident in sales of hybrids. The second shift is governed by the competing ecosystems of fuel-burning and battery-operated cars. The fork in the road is real.

## US Must Read the Riot Act to Israel

There seems to be no end to the war in West Asia. While Hamas claimed on Sunday that it fired a 'large rocket barrage' at Israel's commercial hub of Tel Aviv, Israel has ignored the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) ruling, asking it to halt its offensive in Rafah immediately. It has also intensified attacks across Gaza, killing more than 80 Palestinians in the past 24 hours.

Israel's decision to ignore the ICJ ruling is unfortunate. Tel Aviv must stop acting like a law unto itself. There is no doubt that Hamas violated international law on October 7 when it attacked Israel and continues to do so by holding Israeli civilians hostage. Israel's response is legitimate, but its nearly eight-month offensive violates the tenet of proportionality. In persisting with its military action to 'eliminate Hamas', Israel has inflicted untold suffering on Palestinians, giving rise to a humanitarian crisis in a region that could do without renewed polarisation. Far from achieving its objectives of destroying Hamas and its military infrastructure, Israel is probably aiding the terrorist group's fresh recruitment. In disregarding calls from its closest ally, the US, Israel is undermining the rules-based global order.

143 countries have supported full UN membership for Palestine, and three European countries — Ireland, Norway and Spain — have decided to formally recognise Palestine as a state for 'peace in the Middle East'. Israel's friends and partners, the US in particular, need to stress to Tel Aviv the diminishing returns of its current course of action. The peace and security in the region and the fate of the multilateral rules-based order hang in the balance. Disruptions like these have a long-term ripple effect on an already tense world.



### JUST IN JEST

If you think mujra's a version of 'dance bar', you should culture up

## Pop Art of Taking Low Blows at High Arts

Most things of high culture are consumed by most people in their easily-chewable, lowest common denominator formats. Nothing wrong with that. After all, to appreciate the nuances of Test cricket, or subtleties of classical music, or a film felicitated at Cannes, needs a certain aesthetic bent of mind that most people don't care to cultivate. Instead, T20 cricket, 'dhikchak' music, and over-the-top blockbusters are *hoi polloi's* Big Macs. But when the high arts become fashionable targets of derision for being, well, high, you know the squares come full circle.

Take the art of *mujra* — 'payment of respect' in Urdu — a dance and song/music format that emerged in Mughal India, around the same time ballet emerged in Renaissance Europe. For those aware of matters a bit more than via Sanjay Leela Bhansali movies and see *mujra* being more than a version of 'dance bars', it means the performative space from which great art forms like *kathak* and *ghazals* were honed. As one *saavan* put it, *mujra* is the 'dance of suggestion, a sophisticated cabaret'. Which is what popular depictions in films like *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Paakeezah* — where the *objet petit a* (unattainable object of desire) is the dancer's feet — *Jalsaghar* and *Umrao Jaan* celebrate. To conflate it with something coarse is missing the point. Or, perhaps, taking up a fine point only to diss it.

Onus is on EC, and incoming government, to make voting, polling, electioneering less harrowing

## Viksit Elections, Bharat?



Ashok Malik

India prepares for the final day of voting on Saturday in the 2024 Lok Sabha election with a collective sigh of relief. Exciting as democracy is, the sheer length of the election process has been draining. It has left candidates and campaigners and, more so, citizens fatigued.

Election season really began in January. By the time the new government and ministers are in place, and pending key civil service appointments are made, it will be June-end. In essence, the country would have devoted six months to the election.

While the people's mandate is and must always be unexceptionable, this long period invites some questions.

Policy-making is suspended. With the best of intentions, an inertia develops in government — whether in New Delhi or the states — and even routine decision making is affected. Business and investment clarity, whether among domestic or international stakeholders, suffers, and calls are deferred.

As voter numbers keep growing, such a timeline will become increasingly infeasible. It is reasonable to ask if India can curtail the election process by making it more efficient. A modernising economy and a polity that should be responsive to society's urges deserve as much. Ease of living and ease of business need to be complemented by not just ease of voting, but also ease of electioneering and ease of conducting elections.

In recent years, Election Commission



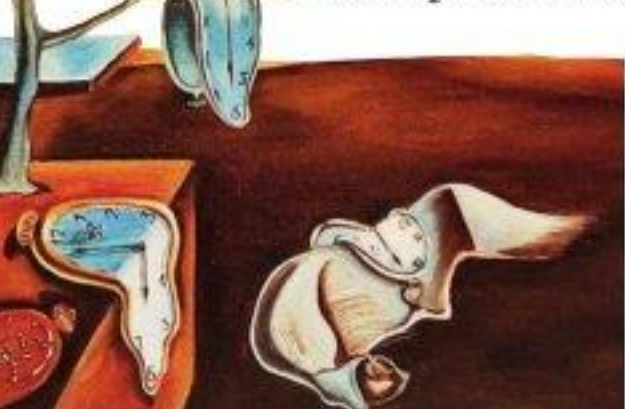
In summer, so much of social and economic life happens after sundown. Why can't voting?

has made herculean efforts to upgrade the election process. From 2004, EVMs have become the norm. Quickly revising electoral rolls, smoothly issuing voter identity cards, and an appreciable rise in the number of polling stations are commendable achievements. However, at the cusp of the 2030s, the next election demands not incremental change, but a paradigm shift.

► **Distance makes the voting grow fonder** With unprecedented internal migration, use of postal ballots will not expand but explode. Voting at home — currently restricted to those above 85 or physically challenged — will also see an uptake. At some point, the current physical (ballot paper) nature of postal voting could take a digital or online form, with sufficient guardrails.

Even absent of that, the facility of voting other than at the polling station will need to be matched against demographic and actuarial data.

Consequently, staffing and material requirements must be anticipated. This



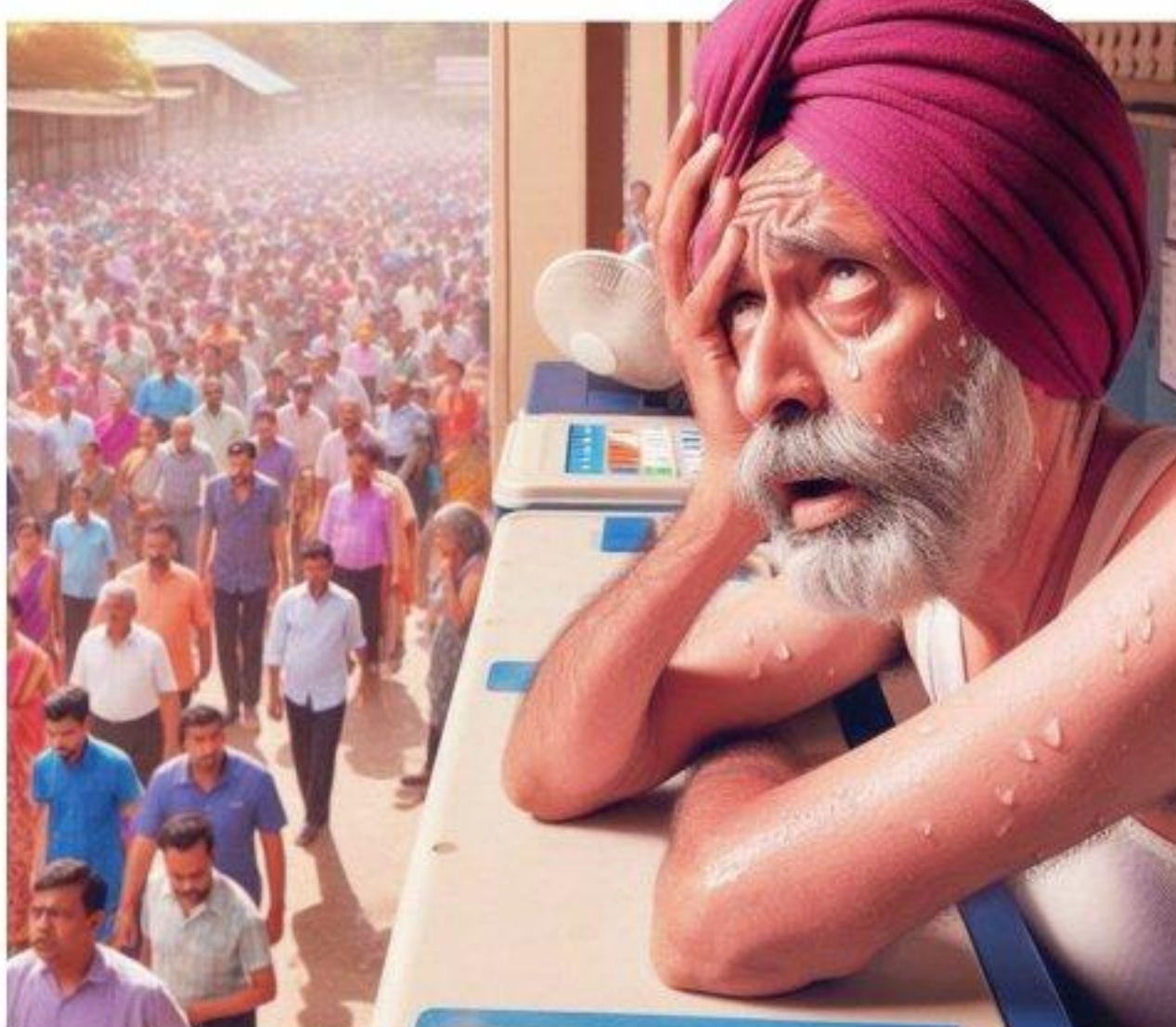
**This long poll period leads to inertia in governments.** Business and investment clarity among domestic and international stakeholders suffers, and calls are deferred

will be continual. Preparations for 2029 begin in 2024.

► **Stretch in time, saves lines** Voting schedules need to factor in a society's intrinsic habits and lifestyle evolution. In Britain, going to the ballots exactly a month after our election results are out, polling stations are open from 7 am and shut at 10 pm. In India, which borrowed many electoral practices from Britain, they close at 6 pm. This is puzzling.

In summer, so much of Indian social and economic life — even going to the market for groceries — happens after sundown. Perhaps in the 1950s, inadequate electricity, poor commuter transport and security concerns enjoined voting only in daylight. Eight decades on, this needs amendment.

► **Dating app** Correctly, election dates tend to avoid traditional holidays and festivals. Shouldn't EC consider other parameters as well? This year Delhi voted on a Saturday. The preceding Thursday was a holi-



Let's do more ease of doing elections, people

day, Buddha Purnima. Earlier that week, school summer vacations began.

The concept of a long weekend break is relatively recent in India. But, especially in urban constituencies, it makes sense to integrate such potential conflicts with the polling calendar. Otherwise, it will hurt turnout.

► **Mind the gaps** A deeper challenge is to reduce the interval between successive rounds of a multi-phase election. In 2024, there have been 7-to-10-day intervals,

with the time lag justified in terms of movement of security forces and other arrangements. Could augmentation of resources, hiring more planes, for example, or simply better coordination collapse this period? If so, elections

could then conclude in early summer, rather than be dragged to peak heat. Such an endeavour is not about a political negotiation. It necessitates a logistical and systemic exercise involving EC, home ministry, education ministry — since school examination dates would need to be harmonised every fifth year — and state governments. Again, it is advisable this planning start early, well in advance of 2029 and future elections, in the interests of predictability and

regularity. ► **Why the 2-day silence?** Relatedly, abolition of the 48-hr period between end of campaigning and voting should be seriously considered. That itself would shave two days between polling rounds. The 48-hr 'silence' was an idealistic regulation designed in a simpler age. It gave the voter 'a quiet time' to think over speeches, promises and manifestoes of candidates and parties and make a sober choice.

Today, local canvassing stops, but media and social media campaigning continues even while voting is on. Speeches from other states and constituencies — where polling is on a later date — are targeted at the day's voters. What does the 48-hr window achieve? It may as well go.

A shorter election is not merely a civic convenience. It encourages cleaner politics. The longer an election process, the more money parties need. Inevitably, this promotes familiar angularities and distortions of campaign finance, and has a multiplier effect on governance and public life. The onus is on EC, and the incoming government.

The writer is partner, The Asia Group, and chair of its India practice

## C'mon, You Can Get Your AIF Cert!



Gopal Srinivasan

In a May 13 circular, Sebi mandated that 'at least one key personnel' on the investment team of the 'manager of an alternative investment fund (AIF)' should have NISM (National Institute of Securities Market) certification by passing the NISM Series-XIX-C exam. This regulation came into force from May 10 and will have to be complied with by May 9, 2025.

What does Sebi hope to achieve by setting down this rule for investment managers? One can only assume the following:

► **Positive signalling** It would send a powerful signal to teams and

communities of the prowess of a certified fund manager.

► **Certification=legitimacy** Almost every other profession — lawyers, company secretaries and doctors — requires certification. Moreover, with changes to the regulatory regime, experienced professionals have undergone additional examinations to become insolvency professionals under IBC, chartered valuers, or chartered financial analysts. Certification brings legitimacy and is an invaluable tool for any profession's self-regulating ability.

► **Lifelong learning** As professionals, the value of adapting to changing business environments can't be understated. Taking this exam not only encourages young professionals, but also exemplifies a commitment to continuing education and evolution.

Sebi's decision may be met with scepticism, especially among the senior PE/VC community. How-



Certified cat's whiskers

ver, it makes sense on several fronts:

► **Go Global** The market regulator has significantly altered how AIFs operate since introducing AIF guidelines in 2012. Each change has aimed to gain recognition for this asset class, contributing to the remarkable growth of AIF commitments in the past decade. It's time for Indian fund managers to position themselves as global leaders, challenging Western dominance.

► **Understanding the biz** The playbook and charter are clear.

Achieving the 60% pass threshold should be easy for most practising managers, even without studying the material. But it's more than just dry legal governance. Reading NISM's exam material explains the rationale behind the AIF business model's features. It's satisfying to review them for a consistent understanding and application of the business model's specific terminology.

► **Creating a talent pool** It makes sense for the next generation of professionals, not to mention India's pressing need to create numerous funds and cultivate talent to manage them.

We should welcome the decision, but those of us who can't and are still having qualms over it can take refuge in the words of George Burns, 'You can't help getting older, but you don't have to get old.'

The writer chairman-MD, TVS Capital Funds

## Your First 100 Days To-Do List, Gov



Subhrakant Panda

The 18th Lok Sabha polls are almost done and dusted. A new government will be in place once results are declared on June 4. While the incumbent government has done much to enhance ease of doing business and to reduce cost of doing business, there are several reforms which the incoming government must implement to capitalise on the growth opportunities available to India.

Covid and geopolitical crises have driven home the importance of diversified and resilient supply chains at a time when India is ready to step up to the plate to become not just the world's backroom office, but also its factory. The next five years are crucial for this, as any tapering off of the growth trajectory will cast doubt on India's ability to live up to its potential. Besides, a young population must be gainfully engaged to reap the demographic dividend.

Some steps that the new government should take:

► **Improve manufacturing**

**competitiveness**, including steps that address inefficiencies in factors of production.

► **Digitise land records** and streamline the land acquisition process to accelerate project timelines. This is crucial as supply-side constraints could fuel inflation and lead to lost opportunities.

► **Implement new labour codes** and transition to a 'living wage' standard to address the care economy, and enhance female participation in the workforce.

► **Eliminate cross-subsidy of domestic tariff**, which weighs down industry, as India accelerates its energy transition journey to deal with climate change.

► **Initiate GST 2.0** Introduction of GST was one of the most significant reforms this country has seen. It has proved its worth both in terms of dismantling internal barriers to trade, as well as bringing about greater formalisation of the economy as reflected in the record collection of Rs 2.11 trillion in April. The time has come to move to a three-rate regime over time, which will further simplify the indirect tax regime and improve compliance while being revenue-neutral.

► **Bring more sectors under PLI**, since the programme has worked wonders, with mobile phone output growing by leaps and bounds, creating more than 5 lakh

jobs. The concept of 'value addition' must be considered in addition to incremental production. Design, innovation and R&D will all need a boost for India's manufacturing sector to flourish and drive economic prosperity.

► **Help MSMEs'** digitalisation and sustainability journey. While MSMEs are the backbone of the economy, and provide bulk of employment, and multiple state schemes support MSMEs, a focused effort is required for their tech upgrade.

Studies show that the sector has a high degree of awareness in these areas. But their preparedness is limited due to financial and capability constraints. Addressing these gaps will enhance the resilience of

MSMEs and ensure that they are an integral part of India's growth journey.

► **Stay committed to fiscal prudence** while aggressively pursuing growth. The measured approach during the Covid crisis and commitment to a fiscal glide path thereafter is commendable.

Robust direct and indirect tax collections, and the bonanza of a record ₹2.11 tn dividend from RBI to GoI for 2023-24, have laid the foundation for GoI to allocate funds to priority sectors and initiatives while continuing to gradually pare down the fiscal deficit, leaving space for the private sector to borrow for its requirements.

Many of these ideas can be implemented immediately, boosting the manufacturing sector, and enabling India to become a preferred investment destination.

This is not a comprehensive list. Other interventions are required to complete the bouquet. There is no time to lose in pursuing a growth agenda that builds on the nation's strengths and takes advantage of favourable circumstances. Therefore, the first 100 days of the new government will be crucial for setting the tone for a broader and deeper reform agenda to transform the nation.

The writer is managing director, Indian Metals & Ferro Alloys



THE SPEAKING TREE

## Witnessing The Mind

ANANDMURTI GURUMAA

Our thoughts are a constant stream, so much so that we don't need to seek freedom from external influences but from our mind. It's easy to comprehend tangible objects, but how can we grasp the workings of the mind, a mere illusion that governs our world and actions?

Understanding the mind is not a quest for external knowledge, but a journey of self-discovery that takes us inward. It's a journey that, once completed, allows us to transcend the mind's influence. To truly comprehend your mind, you must embark on this journey, exploring the depths of your own consciousness.

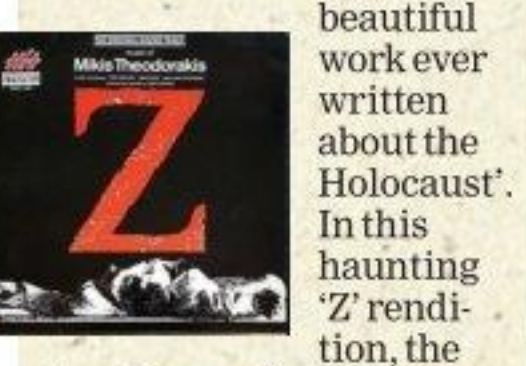
We are always engrossed in activities, but the essential nature of the mind is to be detached. The temperament of this mind is such that no matter how hard we try to bind it to this world, it refuses to be bound. It remains dispassionate.

Watch your mind to see what kinds of thoughts come in. Do not pass judgment on these thoughts. Your mind is a showman; it brings so many shows in front of you; watch these shows of your mind. Adopting an approach of witness, watch your mind and its activities like an observer, unattached. Don't get carried away by those activities. When you view your mind as an observer, the mind will cease to be a problem and become a free entertainer. Be a witness to your mind, and only then will you come to know that you and your mind are different entities.



MELODY FOR MONDAY Antonis Mikis Theodorakis

Mikis Theodorakis may be most famous for his score of the 1964 film, *Zorba the Greek*. But this absolutely stirring track the Greek composer scored for Costa-Gavras' 1969 political thriller, *Z*, leaves one breathless. The sheer pace of *Antonis*, driven by the chopper strums of the bouzouki, a Greek stringed instrument from the lute family, punctuated by the horse-gallop percussion is music that is furious. The tune is from Theodorakis' earlier composition of a song cycle with poet and Holocaust survivor Iakovos Kambanellis titled 'Mauthausen Trilogy' described as 'the most



beautiful work ever written about the Holocaust'. In this haunting 'Z' rendition, the tune is transferred to a different context — outrage against the right-wing junta that had taken over Greece from 1967 to 1974. The folk elements seep through the subversive notes of the wordless song, even as the edge grows steelier. The bouzouki soars in the middle like a raised fist. Even as Theodorakis' great song of resistance to ugliness segues to an end through a crash of table, its raw beauty still holds us transfixed in its beauty and its rage.


## Chat Room

## More of a Punchline

Apropos the edit 'Poll Predictions Not Weather Forecasts' (May 26). The biggest challenge pollsters face in India is whether voters disclose their real decisions (in exit polls) or they shrewdly say what the pollsters want to hear. This affects the margin of error. India has many poll-conducting agencies, and news channels also conduct and publish poll predictions with conflicting projections of outcomes. Poll prediction is now more about entertainment than an exercise for a clearer sense of the outcome.

YG CHOUKSEY Pune





CONTRAPUNTO

He knows nothing and thinks he knows everything.  
That points clearly to a political career

-GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

# Tragedy Foretold

Rajkot, Delhi fires point to familiar stories of official negligence that allow shady businesses to flout norms

A horrifying weekend – fires killing at least 9 children along with 28 adults and counting in a Rajkot gaming/recreational set-up, and 7 newborns in a private children's hospital in Delhi. Post-tragedy, Indian authorities are all too efficient at making arrests, filing FIRs, hand wringing, chest-beating, announcing compensation – while courts do their thing. In a few months' time, little would have changed and in all likelihood, it'll be business as usual. Owner of the Rajkot facility that operated in tin sheds has been arrested for culpable homicide, as it should be. The tragedy was one waiting to happen.

**Loophole in urban plan** | But the Rajkot facility's owner is not alone to blame. As TOI reported, a glaring loophole in Gujarat's development regulations (CGDCR) allowed illegal recreational activities to flourish. Implemented in 2017 to regulate urban development, CGDCR has zero construction and safety guidelines for recreational facilities, which private players have exploited, erecting temporary structures for gaming facilities, without any approvals.

Here then, it is policy itself that poses a significant threat to public safety, especially for children. Per reports, numerous such establishments have cropped up, even in bigger cities like Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar. Most are functioning without mandatory fire safety or town planning sanctions. Privately owned plots hosting such activities often sidestep regulatory scrutiny altogether. On the Rajkot premises, 2,000 litres of petrol were stored onsite along with numerous tyres.

**Fires & accidents routine** | Oxygen cylinders exploding triggering fatal fires, as was the case in the Delhi hospital yesterday, are nothing new for commercial premises, even though their storage is supposed to be strictly regulated. The Mumbai billboard tragedy is a recent case of criminal negligence. It is when authorities turn away from brazen flouting of norms that fatal accidents occur. In fire after fire or bridge collapses – Morbi (135 deaths), Kollam temple fire (109 deaths, 2016), Varanasi flyover collapse (at least 18 deaths, 2018), or Delhi's Mundka fire (27 deaths, 2022) – at fault is official oversight, lax enforcement of safety norms and audits, and lack of accountability for low-quality construction and maintenance across India.

**Pin the blame** | Experts have long cautioned against this pan-India disregard for safety regulations. As court takes note, and investigation proceeds, it is the system of ignored rules, avaricious bureaucrats and crooked businessmen that must be in the dock. Nothing will lower the probability of future tragedies more than swift and exemplary punishment of the powerful.

## All We Can Create

What Cannes Grand Prix for a young director tells us about beyond-Bollywood Indian cinema

As already noted, the Cannes Grand Prix for Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine As Light* is a big moment for Indian cinema. Kapadia's feature directorial debut is the first Indian film in 30 years and the first by an Indian woman director to be showcased at the main competition. The question to ask, though, is why did it take so long for an Indian film to feature in Cannes' main draw.

**Bollywood to regional** | While Bollywood continues to dominate India's reach and soft power in global cinema, the last few decades have also seen regional cinema get more play. Thanks in large measure to streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime and myriad others, even small-budget, non-Hindi Indian films today have a shot at reaching larger Indian and, sometimes, global audiences.

**Global collaborations** | This in turn has provided a fillip to global collaborations in films. For example, Kapadia's film was produced by Thomas Hakim and Julian Graff through their France-based company Petit Chaos, in co-production with Indian companies Chalk & Cheese Films and Another Birth, as well as by the Netherlands' BALDR Film, Luxembourg's Les Films Fauves, Italy's Pulpa Films and France's Arte France Cinéma. Kapadia herself used money from the Huub Bals grant and Cinéfondation to live in Europe to plan the film's production.

**Many Kapadias** | The success of *All We Imagine As Light* also highlights the depth of Indian cinematic talent. India's Nehruvian socialist past had a propensity to view cinema as elitist unless it served national projects. This began to change after liberalisation. But the state still displays a control mindset when it comes to cinema, especially through censorship. Kapadia herself was disciplined for protesting against the appointment of Gajendra Chauhan as FTII chairperson in 2015. Her success today should tell officials that talent needs nurturing, not monitoring.

## My favourite Alice

Short stories that last long

**Shinie Antony**

Of all the Alices who wrote, only one Alice stuck to short stories. Despite declaring that her ambition was to write a novel before she died and penning interlinked stories now and then, Alice Munro gave us story after story, all of them short. Intense, raw, drawn from real life, in prose that dissolved into tragic truths, she drew you in with the deceptive promise of brevity, to keep it short. But as one story led to another, and you vanished into the Munro-esque world of fiction that felt like facts, your sense of size altered. In her shortest story was the fastest novel.

Much-awarded and maniacally-read, her tales are a tight close-up of human ties that were initially dismissed as domestic. Kitchen, babies, the urge to write, the sudden appearance of an unsuitable man...

A headline once said of Munro: 'Housewife finds time to write short stories.' A housewife who went on to pick up the Booker and a Nobel. 'Relationships' had been a pink and fluffy word pre-Munro, what women writers were thought to harp on because they knew nothing of the larger world of stocks and shares, war or bankruptcy. With a recent Harvard study on happiness bypassing career and cash to tick relationships, Munro's preoccupations proved bang-on prescient.

Munro's women are complex, carrying too much of you and me to be entirely knowable. They up and leave when we expect them to stay put. They flirt with a stranger after getting drunk. They leave their baby alone in a train compartment to cavort with a man they just met. In 'Dimension' (a story in *Too Much Happiness* that Munro said she couldn't re-read), Doree takes three buses to visit her husband. His crime and her forgiveness are both unbearable. And this is what he states: 'I could say that I was crazy then but what does that mean? Crazy. Sane. I am I.' Munro never interrupts when her characters talk.

Munro's death seems fictitious. 'The things within things' she said she wrote about have no expiry date. We know the bare facts: Canadian, dropped out of university to marry early, opened a bookstore, divorced, remarried, mom to four daughters...

With books titled *Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* and multiple versions of the same story, she can never go away. Alice Munro is a two-word short story in herself.

# So, What's On UP's Mind?

Modi brand is still strong. Yogi's impact is visible. What's new is murmurs for a 'stronger opposition', as INDIA makes its presence felt. Nine observations and a short story from the fields of east and west UP

**Avijit.Ghosh@timesgroup.com**

**Caste holds** | Everyday struggles of life and livelihood – *roti, kapda aur rojgaar* – are part and parcel of any poll talk in east and west UP. But the centrality of caste and community in electoral discourse remains. Broadly speaking, BJP's social alliances (upper castes + non-Yadav OBCs like Patels, Nishads and others) and Samajwadi Party's (Yadavs + Muslims) remain intact. SP's ally Congress brings a sliver of vision and a certain assurance to the combo in urban constituencies. BSP is still the go-to party for most Dalits, but a section of non-Jatav Dalits is likely to migrate.

**'Betiyan mahfooz hain'** | Cab driver Deepak Mishra, a Modi supporter, lives on the outskirts of Allahabad. A father of four daughters, two in their teens, says 'law and order' has improved during the Modi-Yogi rule. For him and many like him, 'law and order' is a synonym for women's safety in their daily lives. Ghaziabad fruit-seller Shamim, critical and uneasy of Centre's new law on citizenship, says the only positive thing about governance in recent years is "*betiyan mahfooz hain* (daughters are safe)." Law and order is a state subject. But janta doesn't distinguish. Safety is what they experience first-hand on the ground.

**Temple flags** | Not so long back, party flags fluttering on rooftops was a common sight in UP. BJP flags were dominant in towns, but visibly diminished as one moved towards the mofussils, kasbahs and villages, where SP and BSP flags were prolific. Now party flags have vanished. Various types of Ram Mandir and Hanuman flags are the most visible, even in homes of non-BJP Hindu voters. Ayodhya Ram Mandir has earned BJP enormous goodwill. But religion isn't a major point of discussion among the public.

**Free grain welcome** | Of all NDA govt schemes, 5kg free grain per person appeared to be the most effective and far-reaching. Irrespective of caste or community, most people that one spoke to in the hinterland admitted to receiving the handout, and the needy were genuinely appreciative.

**Modi brand endures but...** | Still all-pervasive, conversations and votes centre on Modi, not BJP nor the

candidate. The party appears to have become secondary to the leader. Yadavs are mostly committed to SP. But Varanasi railway porter Manu Yadav says he'll vote for PM. "*Ghar ka mukhiya ek hona chahiye. Unke ghar ka mukhiya kaun hai* (A head of family is needed. Who's their leader)," he asks of INDIA. Even some who're not voting Modi are appreciative of him. Jai Singh Yadav, a voter in Chandauli LS constituency, says, "It's hard to find someone like Modi, but I'll vote SP to help create a strong opposition."

Supporters believe Modi has raised India's prestige (*rashtra samman*) abroad and protects national interest (*rashtra hith*). But a few also feel Modi

is 'overexposed', that the brand is reaching a stage of diminishing returns. "He can be encashed in 2024, not 2029," is Santosh Singh's take, a voter in Chandauli.

**Yogi's clout grows** | Former armyman Pawan Sharma of Ghaziabad travelled to Maharashtra, MP, Rajasthan and Gujarat last month. He found people referring to UP in 'Yogi' terms – "*Aap Yogi ke yahan se aaye hain* (oh, you've come from Yogi's

UP)." It's not often a state is synonymous with its CM as early as the second term. Sharma found Yogi's name has travelled beyond his state.

**Akhilesh, Rahul gain in stature** | Voters and sympathisers have a definite improved perception of both Rahul and Akhilesh. Messages of Congress's manifesto, with its specific plans to address unemployment, have made a positive impression among a section of urban youth. Unemployment is a major issue, and for most 'job' means a govt job.

**Don't quote me** | It was common for journalists covering elections to be at the receiving end of the expression, "*Aur poochhiye (Ask away)*". That has disappeared. People from every community still speak freely. But villagers frequently refuse to be quoted, asking half-mockingly, "Why do you want to know my name? Do you want to send ED after me?" It is interesting how 'ED' has entered the lexicon and psychology of hinterland India, just as Bofors had four decades ago.

**EVM story** | EVMs caused intense debate before the polls. The din subsided after Supreme Court ruled out problems with EVMs. But there is lingering cynicism about their integrity and vulnerability, primarily among non-BJP voters in both rural and urban areas. The yearning for ballot paper is strong, while completely non-existent is the memory of the days when ballot papers were routinely looted, found dumped in drains and rivers.

**Tailpiece** | A group of students in Prayagraj in a huddle on the other side of the river is preparing for a competitive examination. They don't want to talk about the polls. "We don't like politics. It is of no use," one of them says. "Will you vote?" "I will," she replies. "Nota".



## Britain's Poor Little Rishi Rich

UK's first Indian-origin PM, almost certainly headed for a poll drubbing, had a chance to make a mark. But he saw 10 Downing Street as just another job and mucked it all up

**Rashmee Roshan Lall**

For Rishi Sunak, there is history and then there is his story. The history books will record Sunak as Britain's first prime minister of Indian origin, its youngest in 200 years and the wealthiest occupant of 10 Downing Street, far richer along with wife Akshata Murthy than the country's monarch King Charles III. But then there is his story.

**Rishi's meteoric rise** | After a 20-month premiership, Sunak has called a general election for July 4, which opinion polls indicate he is on course to lose. If so, Sunak will have helped pull down the curtain on 14 years of governance by his Conservative Party, which is currently some 20 points behind in the polls to the main opposition Labour.

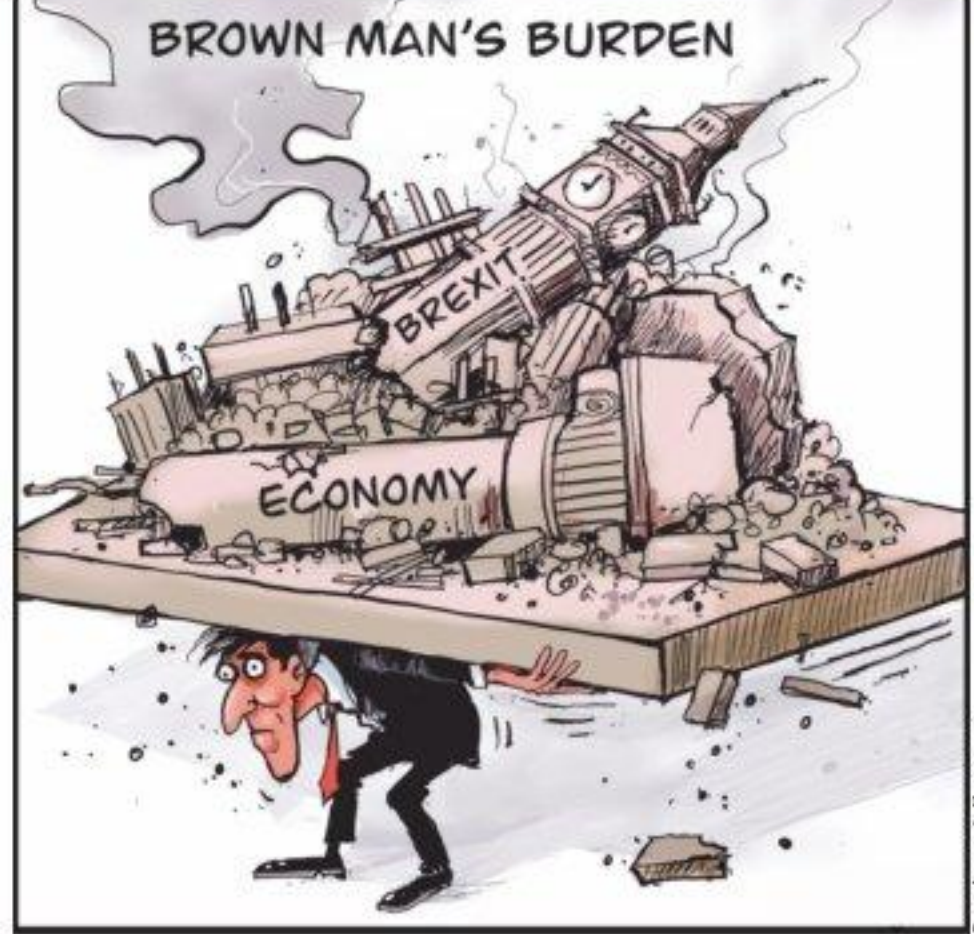
It would be an unusual milestone in Sunak's customary high-flying trajectory, which a British TV interviewer once told him on air was "one of life's success stories". Indeed, Sunak was headboy at his expensive private school, went to Oxford and Stanford universities, had a profitable career in finance, married the daughter of Infosys co-founder Narayana Murthy and entered the British parliament just seven years before his dizzying elevation to PM. Along the way, he acquired an apartment in Santa Monica, California, the sixth most expensive address in US.

**And the fall** | By every measure, Sunak has proved himself a thoroughbred winner. If his streak of success is now unmade, at least some of this could be charitably ascribed to the vagaries of Britain's current political climate, with Conservatives as enervated as the country they led through the self-inflicted chaos of Brexit, the once-in-a-century pandemic and the risible parade of five PMs.

And yet, his story at this point, may underline a

quite different failure than the predicted election loss. For Sunak, the prime ministerial role seems to have been a job like any other rather than a historic chance by a multicultural man to punt for real change.

The voting public and political pundits have been as quick to pick up on Sunak's apparent disinterest in fighting for a new vision of 21st century Britain as they



have noticed his failure to articulate one. Sunak's personal ratings have fallen precipitously in recent months. According to a YouGov survey in May, his net favourability score is a dismal -51, compared with -49 for Conservatives as a whole.

**Wobbles galore** | Sunak's personal political heavy weather hasn't been helped by his decision to pull the trigger on an error-strewn start to the six-week election campaign, spawning multiple mocking memes on

social media. He announced the election date in the pouring rain outside Downing Street, sans an umbrella or even, as one commentator trenchantly noted, without "a weather app on his phone".

**A sinking ship** | The "soggy Sunak" story would only be displaced by Sunak of the "sinking ship" when he travelled on day one of the campaign to Titanic Quarter, the historic but unhappily named regeneration site in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where the famous vessel was built and launched, only to sink on its maiden voyage. On his way back from Belfast, he injudiciously posed next to an aeroplane sign spelling out a four-letter word – exit. And he has faced the daily humiliation of an ever-larger cohort of prominent Conservative MPs announcing their renunciation of the rough and tumble of politics – 78 have decided not to stand for re-election this summer.

**No rescue in sight** | Meanwhile, Britain deals with high taxes, low growth, crumbling infra and little hope of the sunlit uplands of economic success any time soon. Through it all, Sunak has stuck to his months-long "plan-is-working" slogan, delivered in the robo-call tones that have now become staples of British radio comedy shows.

**Exit plan?** | It has given rise to perhaps the worst aspersions cast on a politician navigating a perilous stretch – he is on the point of doing a runner. The rumour mill is whirring with speculation that Sunak suddenly announced the election for the last day of his younger daughter's school term, presumably permitting the family to make a near-immediate getaway to California if it all goes badly. At least one unnamed Conservative MP has been quoted to indicate it's all very well for Sunak to call an election at a bad time, but "I don't own a ranch in California".

In fact, neither does Sunak. He has an apartment there, but also the pain of being cast as Rishi Rich.

Lall writes on international affairs

## Calvin & Hobbes



## Empowerment Practices To Boost Inner Strength

**Brahma Kumari Shivani**

Bharat embodies a tapestry woven with threads of rich culture, history, and spirituality. However, this tapestry has knots of diseases, discord and moral decline tugging at its fabric today.

Societal well-being hinges on spiritual well-being; therefore, we must prioritise it by embracing principles that help in transcendence. Our collective spiritual wellness will provide fertile soil for happiness, health, and harmony to flourish again.

To foster a clean and healthy society, instead of pointing fingers at others or situations, we take personal responsibility for our thoughts and emotions. We refrain from seeking peace from places, love from people and happiness from objects.

The depth of our emotional resilience redirects our mindset from stress to

calmness, fear to faith, comparison to self-respect, competition to cooperation, and complaining to gratitude. In times of challenge, we do not sink in despair. Knowing everything aligns with the law of karma, we focus on elevating our present karma.

Daily empowerment practices boost inner strength, equipping us to gracefully navigate failure, loss, separation, and grief. As powerful souls, we bounce back from setbacks with renewed energy. Forgiveness, releasing the past, and letting go happen naturally. Therefore, healing past traumatic experiences becomes feasible.

Perceiving the individual self as a body, we think, 'I am unwell... I am in pain.' This mindset intensifies our suffering since it is always mind over matter. Realising that we are souls, we grasp the truth – 'I, the soul, am perfect.

My body is unwell.' Such detachment lessens pain and distress.

Many illnesses are psychosomatic, indicating that our thought patterns, radiating to every cell of the body, cause disease, apart from our lifestyle. Releasing emotional blockages and shifting our mindset from fear to faith and from complaint to gratitude initiates the body's healing.

Awareness that we are eternal souls, and the body is just a perishable costume eliminates our deepest fear of death. Overcoming the fear of death dispels numerous other worries.


We connect as souls, transcending labels of relationship, role, position, or age. This wipes away ego clashes and nurtures soul-to-soul connections. By acknowledging everyone as fellow souls, we surpass barriers of religious differences and catalyse the shift from

intolerance to unity. We understand that gender applies solely to the body, not the soul. Despite individuals inhabiting male or female bodies, we affirm the equality of all souls.

This stance eradicates gender discrimination and ensures independence and dignity for people of every gender. It marks a crucial shift from lust to purity, abuse to respect, and bias to equality. Choosing a healthy response in every interaction, we transform from ego to humility, anger to compassion, hurt to forgiveness, expectation to acceptance, and attachment to love.

Our every karma enhances soul power, leading to a natural state of contentment. This prompts us to buy things out of necessity, not for happiness or social validation. Thus, we adopt a minimalist lifestyle. When we raise our vibrations, they radiate outwards and energise the air, earth, water, vegetation, wildlife, and the world.

Sacredspace



Think of the life you have lived until now as over and, as a dead man, see what's left as a bonus and live it according to Nature. Love the hand that fate deals you and play it as your own...

Marcus Aurelius



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



FIRST COLUMN

STRATEGIES FOR INNER PEACE AND EMPOWERMENT

We seek solace and direction, grappling with negative influences and internal strife



RAVI VALLURI

Are we running after a chimera? Or like Rama and Lakshman are we running after a non-existent golden deer? Or like the Pandavas, (barring the righteous Yudhisthira) do we partake in water from a poisonous lake? In all such situations, our mind is fully aware that what we are attempting is incorrect and inchoate, yet we undertake that activity like a Kamikaze pilot. There are a couple of reasons for this hara-kiri or running after the hubris.

A) We are not wakeful (not sleepy in a literal sense) as we are not focused or centred. We cannot differentiate and distinguish between choices.

B) Our mind and thoughts (a human mind on average receives 70k thoughts a day) cannonade us endlessly. Now the company we keep and the food we partake in has a significant impact on the human mind and body.

Negative company drains a person and toxic food and drink enervates and debilitates our system. I was a victim of alcoholism and realised the suffering one goes through. By adopting the techniques of Sudarshan Kriya and Pranayama, overcame the disease. It was a weak mind which fell prey to Bacchus.

C) Tools for Effective Time Management- Try the POSEC METHOD - That is to prioritise by organising, streamlining and economising time to be effective.

“Undertake a SWOT analysis to emerge triumphant.

“We should learn to work in teams and practice the art of delegation.

“As a routine, attempt all arduous tasks first.

“Build flexibility in one’s schedule or else one would suffer from psychosomatic disorders.



“Develop hobbies and read inspirational and self-help books.

“Every morning and night while being grateful make an inventory of dos and don’ts and must-do lists. Let us learn to say ‘NO’ and to utter ‘YES’ when an oxymoron kind of situation arises. A ‘Yes mind’ makes an individual take up responsibility. And taking up responsibility can only empower a person.

Live life king-size and learn to celebrate. We can celebrate only if we can quieten our minds. These are some ways to quieten our mind and develop a relaxation room or space in our mind. For that we can do the following:

Go for long walks, talk out our problems, hug a person (perhaps someone whom we do not like), write down all our botherations, be in sync with our breath and movement, pursue a passion, be a daredevil, get out of our comfort zone, exercise vigorously (positive endorphins get released which have a soothing effect on the mind and body), have cold water baths to conquer passion and carnal instincts.

Despite practising all techniques, we may not be able to find our place in the Sun.

So, what does one do?

Just surrender to the immense power within ourselves and learn to accept. Realise that “ham Brahmasmi”- “I am the infinite reality”, as written in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Our mind has that immense power. It needs to be harnessed and realised. We just need to declutter our minds.

There are several ways to channel this energy. There may be some who may practice meditation, breathing techniques and observing silence to quieten and silence the mind. There may be others who remain focused by playing a game of tennis and sweating it out.

We should feel blessed and feel abundance. Let your mind not be judgemental and complain and cling to negativities. Willy-nilly we provide the hook to hang the coat of negativity.

(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He is a faculty of the Art of Living; views are personal)

# Punjab voters’ dilemma: Choosing the lesser evil



SUKHDEV SINGH

As Punjab gears up to vote in the last phase of the Lok Sabha elections, the State’s electorate faces a plethora of options but finds few truly meritorious candidates



In the Lok Sabha election 2024, over twenty million voters in the State of Punjab have plenty more options than ever before for choosing their representatives from among Indian National Congress (INC), Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Communist Party of India- Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPI-CPIM) and others, yet they are faced with a lack of enthusiasm and disinterest more than ever before in ‘who to vote and who not to vote’. On the other hand, every political party is grandstanding to be the best candidate for the voters’ choice, yet very unsure, fearful and worried about the voters’ response.

Among the voters, there is a ‘stony silence’ while the candidates and political parties are clamouring for their candidature and claim on all the thirteen Lok Sabha constituencies.

During the last couple of months, the leaders and the parties have been trying their fresh ‘makeover’ by switching positions: the individuals by hopping parties as the perceptibly stronger boats for them to sail through the election and the political parties by adopting the leaders of their opponents as perceptibly stronger ‘horses’ to pull their horse carts. The situation is caused by the politicians’ ‘faulty’ understanding of democracy as a game of ‘taking turns’ to enjoy as ‘rulers’ and render the ‘citizens’ as ‘subjects’ while following the policies ‘not so pro-people’ that redefine democracy as

“

NO POLITICAL PARTY HAS INCLUDED CONVENTIONAL ISSUES LIKE THE TRANSFER OF CHANDIGARH AND PUNJABI-SPEAKING AREAS, WATER DISTRIBUTION AND MORE RIGHTS TO THE STATES ETC IN THEIR MANIFESTOS, SPEECHES AND SLOGANS

a Government of the people, by the people but nor ‘for the people’.

The political parties have been promising at the time of elections but not performing to fulfil the promises after their victory. After the elections, pursuing policies that help the political class, corporations and their associates, the political parties and individuals in power have been dodging the real issues by projecting the emotive but peripheral issues, leaving the people begin with nothing in essence and end with nothing in essence; the politics of ‘nothingness’ has been going on leading the voters to the current situation of ‘the agony of choice’ caught in an existential crisis of deciding ‘to vote or not to vote’/ ‘who to vote or who not to vote’.

The available choices of candidates and political parties in ‘matter’ are plenty but all alike in ‘essence’: distinguishable in appearance but indistinguishable in actions, leaving the voters confused but ‘condemned to choose’.

Significantly, no political party has included conventional issues like the transfer of Chandigarh and Punjabi-speaking areas, water distribution and more rights to the States etc. in their manifestos, speeches and slogans. Furthermore, no major

political party is firmly raising issues that glare in the face of the people as well as the State: unemployment, poor education, health and civic amenities, migration abroad, drugs, mining, corruption, law & order and urban development.

Instead, the game of party switch or candidate hunting, as a ‘war’ before the election ‘war’ has been in practice as a principle rather than an exception in this election in Punjab.

Facing the ‘trust-deficit’ of the people and ‘self-confidence-deficit’, the political class has remained engaged in a dance of party-switch and candidate-hunting.

Analysing their profiles can help to see the political parties’ faces more clearly. For example, the BJP may be credited with governance and a brisk economy, but it is discredited for pro-rich and anti-small businesses, farmers, shopkeepers, urban and rural poor and religious polarisation. It is a ‘crisis of plenty’ where the economy of the country is being touted as the ‘fifth largest in the world’ yet its people have become poorer and the unemployment and prices are on the rise.

The Congress may be credited for the all-inclusive politics and the pro-farmer promise of MSP but discredited for a divided house

and ambiguous performance in the past. The AAP is credited for some concessions like free power and free bus travel for women in the State but discredited for non-performance, inexperience and overdependence on Delhi.

The SAD is credited for its historical pro-State positions and fights but discredited for family control of the party and a pro-corporate tilt in its position.

The communists are credited for honesty, commitment, secularism and pro-poor ideology but discredited for resource crunch to contest elections, inability to win and have much role in the Government.

The voters are confused because they are not sure whether their vote shall be for Congress, BJP, SAD or AAP after the candidate wins; they are not sure if the candidate they vote for will remain in the same party or switch to the party more beneficial to him; they are confused because they are not sure if the parties and leaders will do what are saying.

Yet they will have to choose someone. But that will happen on the day of voting. The situation is as hazy and ambiguous as the manifestos of the political parties.

(The writer is a retired professor from Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar; views are personal)

# Key takeaways from ICMR’s new dietary guidelines

## It emphasises prioritising whole grains, adequate protein intake, limited fat consumption and daily physical activity

Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) jointly released a New Dietary Guideline for Indians on 7 May 2024. The comprehensive set of 17 dietary guidelines is aimed at reducing the burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as obesity, diabetes, stroke and coronary heart disease (CHD) in the Indian population. According to NIN, under the apex health research body, about 56.4% of the total diseases in India are due to unhealthy dietary habits. They also Stated that having a healthy diet and physical activity can lower the risk of CHD, hypertension (high blood pressure) and type 2 diabetes mellitus



WAJIHA MEHTAB

by up to 80%. The burden of NCDs and resultant mortality is expected to increase unless massive efforts are made to prevent and control NCDs and their risk factors. The dietary guidelines for Indians (DGLs), developed by a team led by the director of NIN, Dr. Hemlata R, are evidence-based food and lifestyle-related recommendations. They are logical, sustainable, easy to follow by

Indians and provide long-term solutions for fighting against malnutrition and having a healthy life. These guidelines are practical approaches for ensuring diet diversity to meet the requirements of essential nutrients among people of all age groups across the country. Following are some of the important and key takeaways from the DGLs:

General lifestyle To ensure a balanced diet, it is crucial to include foods from all food groups, selecting a variety that is appropriate for age, gender, physiological status and physical activity level. At least 50% of cereals consumed should be whole grains and millets, which are minimally polished to provide adequate

nutrients. However, cereals should account for no more than 45% of the total caloric intake. Pulses, eggs and meat should contribute 14-15% of the calories, supplying good quality proteins and essential amino acids through natural food combinations. Avoid protein supplements for muscle mass building, as they are unnecessary if a balanced diet is maintained. Fat intake should be limited to 30% of total calories, with essential fatty acids obtained from nuts, oilseeds, milk products and seafood, which should collectively provide 10% of daily caloric intake. Include non-starchy fresh vegetables, green leafy vegetables and at least 30 grams of fruits in every meal. Vegetarians should consume

n-3 PUFA-rich foods like flax and chia seeds to meet their B12 and n-3 PUFA needs. High-fat, high-sugar and high-salt (HFSS) foods should be avoided. Adults should engage in a minimum of 30-45 minutes of physical activity daily, while children should aim for 60 minutes. During pregnancy and lactation, maintaining healthy dietary habits and an active lifestyle is essential. Infants should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months, with no additional feeds, not even water. Lactating mothers should continue breastfeeding even if they have any disease unless advised otherwise by a medical professional.

For cooking and food storage, air-fryers and granite-

coated utensils (without Teflon) are preferable. Earthen pots are the safest cookware as they are eco-friendly, require less oil and preserve nutrition. Avoid using non-stick pans at temperatures above 170 degrees and discard any damaged or broken non-stick cookware. Acidic foods should not be stored in aluminium, iron, or unlined brass/copper containers to avoid chemical reactions that could contaminate the food.

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) unveiled new dietary guidelines on May 7, 2024, to combat the rising tide of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in India. These guidelines aim

to address the unhealthy dietary habits contributing to 56.4% of the country’s disease burden. Evidence suggests that a healthy diet and regular physical activity can significantly reduce the risk of conditions like coronary heart disease, hypertension and type 2 diabetes by up to 80%.

The guidelines, crafted under the leadership of Dr Hemlata R, provide practical, sustainable and culturally appropriate recommendations to ensure a diverse diet that meets the nutritional needs of Indians of all ages. Key recommendations include balancing food groups, prioritising whole grains and millets, ensuring adequate protein intake through natural foods, limiting fats to 30% of daily

calories and including a variety of vegetables and fruits in each meal. The guidelines also emphasise avoiding high-fat, high-sugar and high-salt foods and promoting daily physical activity-30-45 minutes for adults and 60 minutes for children.

Special considerations are given to pregnant and lactating women, advocating for exclusive breastfeeding for infants during the first six months. Additionally, safe cooking and food storage practices are recommended, such as using air-fryers, granite-coated utensils and earthen pots to preserve nutrition and avoid chemical contamination.

(The writer is a Consultant Celiac Dietician at AIIMS Delhi; views are personal)



## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

### Rajkot tragedy

Laxity in enforcing fire safety norms inexcusable

THE fire at a Rajkot game zone, which left 27 persons dead, and the death of seven newborn babies in a Delhi hospital on Saturday are stark examples of how cheap life is in India. Just over a week ago, nine lives were lost when a bus caught fire with people sleeping inside near Haryana's Nuh district. The Rajkot disaster was waiting to happen. The summervacation had just begun, and the game zone was teeming with families enjoying a weekend outing. According to the police, the place neither had adequate fire-fighting equipment nor had obtained a no-objection certificate from the local fire department. As per the FIR, the owners of the commercial establishment endangered the lives of people despite knowing that a blaze on the premises could cause deaths and injuries. Taking suo motu cognisance of the case, the Gujarat High Court said it was prima facie a 'man-made disaster'. The court observed that such gaming zones and recreational facilities had come up without necessary approvals from competent authorities.

Even as the police have registered a case against six persons operating the game zone, a thorough probe is required to establish criminal negligence that led to the shocking incident. It needs to be ascertained whether any concession or relaxation was given to the owners by local officials. The HC has rightly sought details of the licences and permissions, including the one regarding compliance with fire safety regulations, that were given to various entertainment zones under the territorial jurisdiction of municipal corporations.

It is obvious that fire safety norms are being blatantly given the go-by. Such callous disregard for human life must not go unpunished. Unfortunately, no lessons seem to have been learnt from the Uphaar fire tragedy of 1997. Zero tolerance to violations should be the way forward. A nationwide audit is the need of the hour to rouse the authorities into action across the country.

## Muted voices

Young women take a back seat in Haryana polls

WHEN the results of Haryana's 10 Lok Sabha seats that went to the polls on Saturday are out on June 4, they will, sadly, reflect the muffled voices of women voters in the 18-19 age group, drowned out by the louder participation of their male counterparts. For, the data from the Election Commission of India reveals a glaring gender imbalance: only 34 per cent of these first-time voters are women. Of the nearly 4.2 lakh such voters, a staggering 2.8 lakh are men. This disparity highlights the state's patriarchal character and deep-rooted societal biases, where the registration of young women as voters is often postponed until after marriage. Efforts by officials to encourage voter registration among young women face resistance. Many families prioritise marriage over political engagement, reinforcing a cycle of disenfranchisement.

Making matters worse, women's political agency is further limited as men are often seen dictating their choices. Equally skewed is the representation of women in the electoral fray. Of the 223 candidates in the contest in Haryana in the General Election, just 16 are women — including five from mainstream political parties — even though women constitute nearly 47 per cent of the voters. Major parties, despite their claims of supporting women's rights, have failed to field female nominees proportionately.

However, there is a silver lining in certain pockets of the state. Women are beginning to voice their concerns on issues like water supply, electricity and employment; an increased female participation at public meetings has also been witnessed. But a lot remains to be done to bridge the gender divide and dismantle patriarchal structures. Amplifying women's voices is essential for making India a truly transparent and inclusive democracy.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, MAY 27, 1924

### Jinnah's presidential address

IN the address delivered by Muhammad Ali Jinnah as President of the 15th Session of the All-India Muslim League, which concluded its deliberations at Lahore on Sunday, he pointed out the great necessity of bringing about Hindu-Mahomedan unity — which is one of the chief items in the Congress programme. But it is disappointing that Jinnah did not attempt any clear diagnosis of the real causes of the present communal mistrust, which stands in the way of progress and the speedy attainment of Swaraj. We sadly miss in the address any constructive proposal to promote unity and remove the root-causes of such estrangement as is seen on certain occasions at present. It would have been particularly useful if Jinnah had explained what in his opinion would lead to a right solution of the problem. In the prefatory portion of his address, he has been at some pains to declare that non-cooperation has failed, that the Khilafat organisation, which he calls "the handmaid of the Indian National Congress", has failed too; and that the boycott of the law courts, the schools, colleges and the councils, have all failed. In fact, there is no mention of any organisation of the people that has been working on right lines to secure the country's freedom. We have not been told either what political purpose a separate communal organisation of the kind Jinnah presided over is designed to serve and what has been the League's net contribution to the country's progress. Jinnah, however, admitted that as "the result of the struggle of the last three years... the ordinary man in the street has found his political consciousness."

# Separatist sentiment alive in J&K, but just

Jamaat-e-Islami's pro-election stance marks a momentous new turning point



NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN  
SENIOR JOURNALIST

IN 1983, the story goes, Saaduddin Tarabali, the then Amir of the Jamaat-e-Islami Jammu and Kashmir (JeI), travelled to Islamabad for a meeting with Pakistan's then military ruler, Gen Zia-ul-Haq. Puffed up with the importance of a man who was fighting America's war against the Soviet Red Army in Afghanistan, Zia's balloon was punctured by Saaduddin's cold reception to his proposal — that Pakistan would divert funds and men from Afghanistan if the JeI launched an armed uprising in Kashmir.

"Inko zafrani kahwa pilao," Zia said to the amusement of the others present in the room. Saffron kahwa is a warming brew. But Saaduddin was hardly persuaded by the joke. He replied that Kashmiris were not afraid to launch an insurrection, but Pakistan did not have the capacity to take it to its logical conclusion. The pro-Pakistan JeI aimed to bring Islamic rule into Jammu & Kashmir but believed it could do this only by participating in elections and getting into positions of power, while retaining its character of being a socio-religious organisation. Saaduddin warned Zia that an armed resistance against India would only result in mayhem. Kashmiri would kill Kashmiri, he predicted.

Until 1987, the JeI would continue to contest elections, including panchayat polls, as it had done since 1963. But anger at the 'stolen' 1987 Assembly election changed the political dynamics of the state. By 1989-90, hundreds of JeI cadres had already joined the Yasin Malik-led Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) and were crossing the Line of Control for training in armed militancy by Pakistan's



DECLINE: The Hizbul Mujahideen, led by Syed Salahuddin, seems to have become more or less toothless. AP/PTI

intelligence agency, the ISI. But the JeI also feared for its own existence, that it would be swallowed up by a 'secular' Kashmiri nationalist militant group.

Soon after the 1987 election, the JeI's influential leader Syed Muhammed Yusuf Shah (he had lost to his National Conference opponent) decided to join the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM). Shah took the name Syed Salahuddin. He has since been based in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) as the head of the umbrella grouping of militants called the United Jihad Council. Soon after, the JeI was running the HM.

Four decades later, the wheel has turned full circle. On May 14, the JeI's acting Amir, Ghulam Qadir Wani, made the surprise announcement that the organisation would return to mainstream politics if the government lifted the ban on it. The ban had been imposed in February 2019, in the days after the Pulwama suicide bombing. The JeI is believed to have had no direct role in the attack, but it was proscribed on the grounds that it was in close touch with militant outfits, and supported extremism, militancy and secessionism in J&K. This February, the ban — which has crippled the once-fearsome JeI network of schools, madrasas and mosques and put its leaders and hundreds of cadres in jail — was extended for another five years.

### The Jamaat-e-Islami's existential crisis is more severe today than it was in 1989-90.

As J&K went to the polls, logging unusually high voter turnouts in all its constituencies, the JeI did not issue its customary boycott call. Wani himself was spotted queuing up to cast his vote in the Srinagar Lok Sabha election — which recorded a high 38 per cent turnout. Wani told journalists later that JeI had not asked the people to boycott the polls because the organisation had always believed in the democratic process. The JeI *majlis-e-shoora*, Wani added, had decided that the organisation would contest the Assembly election if the ban was lifted.

This is a momentous new turning point, not just for the JeI, but for separatist politics and militancy in J&K. After its takeover of HM put the JKLF in the shade, the JeI had turned into a vehicle for cross-border militancy in Kashmir, its network providing the backup and support Gen Zia had once suggested. When the separatist All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) was formed in 1993, Syed Ali Shah Geelani, an influential Jamaat member,

became one of its founding members. It was also in this period that a state-backed counter-insurgency force rose up. Called the *Jhawan*, its members were feared by Kashmiris. And they were targeting the JeI systematically.

As the fratricidal war spiralled, the JeI Amir at the time, Ghulam Mohammad Bhat, announced that his organisation was not affiliated to any militant organisation. From then on, relations between the JeI and the pro-armed struggle Geelani were never the same. He formed his own party called the Tehreek-e-Hurriyat, and was the man behind the strikes, agitations and other protests that plunged Kashmir into violence repeatedly from 2007 to 2018. The JeI stayed away from elections. Behind the scenes, though, it became a supporter of Mufti Mohammed Sayeed's PDP formed in 1999, to break the dominance of the National Conference.

Meanwhile, the separatist Hurriyat suffered an internal split in 2005, with Mirwaiz Omar Farooq heading the APHC and Geelani heading his own active and assertive faction. The two, along with Yasin Malik, came together to lead the agitation that erupted after the 2016 killing of militant Burhan Wani. But the Hurriyat's failure to challenge the Modi government's unilateral decision to scrap Article 370 in August 2019, and Geelani's decision to step down as chairman

in July 2020, a year before he passed away in September 2021, were serious setbacks for Kashmir's separatist politics. In early May, Mirwaiz Omar Farooq spoke of "serious alterations on the ground" and "changed circumstances" as the reason why the APHC had decided not to issue a call to boycott the 2024 elections.

The JeI stands to lose far more than Mirwaiz from the changed circumstances. For one, most of its leaders and hundreds of its cadres are in jail. The ban has snuffed out its funding. The party's existential crisis is more severe today than it was in 1989-90. Those in charge blame the organisation's pro-Geelani group for its problems. Pakistan, meanwhile, consumed with its own flailing economy and dysfunctional politics, seems unable to take advantage. A Pakistani observer described the Azad Jammu and Kashmir wing of the JeI as a 'spent bullet' mired in corruption.

As for the HM, it seems to have become more or less toothless. When Abdul Majeed Dar revolted against the Hizb in 2000, he was eliminated. An official Hizb statement from Muzaffarabad, denouncing Wani for his pro-poll comments, seemed for a moment like a Dar rerun. But Wani, instead of backing off, has openly doubled down, saying that the JeI is in touch with New Delhi for lifting the ban.

The question is: what does the Centre gain from lifting the ban on the JeI? A new participant in J&K politics which can better challenge the mainstream political parties than what the J&K Apni Party has been able to do? Maybe.

For now, the National Conference, a sworn enemy of the JeI since its inception, has welcomed the new development. The PDP, which benefited from the JeI's silent support in 2014 but also faced its wrath during the 2016-18 agitation, is yet to react.

Of course, the risks are great, especially if a hardline faction regains control of the organisation. On the whole, though, and for now, it may be safe to say that while the separatist sentiment may still be alive in J&K, it no longer has political patrons.

### THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

In Kashmir, you need utmost cooperation between all centres of authority. — Rajiv Gandhi

## An 'elephant' on a moonlit night

BUDDHADEV NANDI

IT was a June evening. My friends Prakash and Soumitra barged into my house and persuaded me to join their expedition to the forest range at Basdevpur village to enjoy a moonlit night. I restrained myself from pouring cold water on their exuberance.

An unused and dilapidated runway of the military airport built by the British, penetrating the forest, bore testimony to World War II. The forest had been in the news because of the regular migration of herds of elephants from the Dalma range of Jharkhand.

When we were deep in the jungle, a small group of people engaged in cutting a big sal tree warned us not to proceed further as a herd led by a tusker had become 'permanent residents' of that part of the jungle. We disregarded their advice, if only to show them that we were not scared.

But fear had already started looming large in our minds. Prakash, seemingly an omniscient person, advised us to run in a zigzag pattern if an elephant made a real charge, as it was not very nimble due to its bulky size. After a long silence, Soumitra gave his expert view, which seemed strange to me. He stated that if we stayed downwind from a charging elephant, it would find it difficult to smell us and detect our position. I suggested that they throw their rucksacks to distract the chasing elephant if it drew nearer.

However, we were so exhausted after a long walk that our hasty steps turned into a trudging stroll. The desire path seemed never-ending. All of a sudden, Soumitra stopped like a beagle catching the scent of a quail, looking at something on the left side. We followed suit. But before I could see or perceive anything, both of them scrambled, clamouring 'elephant, elephant...' like two aircraft chased by enemy planes.

Both Prakash and Soumitra claimed there was a big elephant swinging its trunk a few metres away from the desire path. My heart almost sank in fear imagining the sight of a wild pachyderm nearby. Prakash had already hurled his rucksack on the path. We reached home around 9 pm.

Early next morning, Prakash turned up at my house on a motorcycle to retrieve his rucksack. Luckily, as the desire path perhaps had still not been used by any person, we found the blue bag lying on the narrow passage between dense shrubs. We moved forward a few metres until we reached the spot where we had apparently come across an elephant the night before.

We turned our eyes to the right and were astonished to see, nearly a hundred metres away, a bushy mango tree with creepers hanging down from its boughs — like the trunk of an elephant. The creepers were still swinging in the morning breeze. Both of us burst into laughter.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Modi's bid to win over Punjabis

Apropos of 'Modi in Punjab', the Prime Minister's rallies in Punjab amid the farmers' protests highlight a desperate bid to gain political ground in the state. Modi's attempt to invoke Sikh sentiments by patting himself on the back for the opening of the Kartarpur Sahib corridor in 2019 and his government for reopening files of cases related to the 1984 anti-Sikh riots are of no use as the farmers' grievances remain unresolved. The repeal of the contentious farm laws, a reluctant concession, hasn't addressed the cultivators' core demand of a legal guarantee for MSP. Modi's gestures are unlikely to sway the farmers, who remain sceptical of the BJP's intentions after the prolonged agitation and perceived betrayals. Until substantial policy changes take place, symbolic gestures will fail to mend the fractured trust.

GURDEV SINGH, BY MAIL

#### Stop treating tillers as anarchists

Refer to the editorial 'Modi in Punjab'; the stir launched by farmers against the enactment of the three contentious farm laws was initially treated by the government with disdain and apathy. The authorities wanted to quell the agitation by deploying all types of heavy-handed measures to scare the cultivators away. But the farming community braved the elements with remarkable resilience and didn't succumb to pressure. The laws were only repealed when it became clear that the protests could not be reined in. More recently, the government attempted to scuttle the Dilli Chalo march. If the ruling regime wants to pacify the irate farmers, it should stop treating them like anarchists. It is not the use of force but dialogue that can help the government mend fences with the farmers.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, LADWA

#### Hill state suffers from govt apathy

With reference to the article 'Uttarakhand beset by Char Dham Yatra chaos, forest fires', the hill state has been reeling under the weight of mismanaged pilgrimages and rampant forest fires. The Char Dham Yatra, a spir-

itual journey, has morphed into a perilous trek, claiming lives because of negligence. Overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure and disregard for safety norms have marred the sacred event. Meanwhile, the state's lungs burn in uncontrolled blazes, an outcome of the government's environmental apathy. The authorities' lackadaisical approach to disaster management and environmental conservation is alarming. It is high time that the officials behind the lapses were held accountable and measures were taken to save lives.

SAHIBPREET SINGH, MOHALI

#### Try Pune car crash teen as an adult

The Pune Porsche car crash involving a drunken teenager that resulted in two deaths has understandably sparked a nationwide outrage. The incident has once again thrown the spotlight on the flaws in our justice delivery system. The juvenile, who is old enough to know the difference between right and wrong, must be tried as an adult. It is shocking how the boy's family, which happens to be quite influential, tried to frame their driver to save the teenager. The fact that the teen was granted bail within hours of the mishap on some ridiculous conditions, like writing a 300-word essay on accidents and undergoing counselling, is telling. Any juvenile who commits a serious crime should be tried as an adult.

O PRASADA RAO, HYDERABAD

#### Heatwave hits voter turnout

North India is reeling under a scorching heatwave. Understandably, some polling booths wear a deserted look towards the afternoon. The Election Commission of India (ECI) must have a good explanation for the inordinately long election schedule. Intense heat has robbed many voters of enthusiasm, discouraging them from leaving home and exercising their franchise. Holding elections at the peak of the summer was not a good idea in the first place. But the election authorities must at least make some basic arrangements, like drinking water, for voters at polling stations. The ECI must not take the voters for granted.

RAMESH GUPTA, NARWARA



# Support of European trio augurs well for Palestine



**UDAY BHASKAR**  
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PALESTINE's quest for statehood began in November 1988, when the Palestine Liberation Organisation, then in exile, declared the establishment of the 'state of Palestine'. And it was soon recognised by a number of countries, including Egypt, Jordan and India.

Currently, 143 nations have accorded such recognition, though there is no tangible, consensual territoriality to the state of Palestine. This goal remains the Holy Grail for the oldest inhabitants of the Holy Land, and this is a contested and unresolved claim between Arabs and Zionists. Citizens of the former British-mandated territory, identified as Palestinians, are now dispossessed and on the brink of mass starvation and deprivation, following the disproportionate war of reprisal unleashed by Israel after the dastardly October 7 Hamas terror attack.

The quest for statehood will receive a significant symbolic boost on May 28, when three European nations —

Ireland, Norway and Spain — formally accord recognition to Palestine. Most of the countries that have accorded such recognition are part of the Global South, and not the US and other G7 nations.

Given that the Israel-Palestine matter is a complex and intensely contested political issue, few nations in Europe wanted to antagonise the US, and it was only Sweden that recognised Palestine despite being an EU member. The other seven European nations — Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greek Cyprus, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia — did so just before joining the EU.

Thus, the addition of three major European nations, albeit symbolic, is significant and will strengthen the Palestinian quest at this critical and tragic juncture. The political symbolism of Ireland, Norway and Spain breaking away from the US/G7 position on recognising Palestine has the potential to be substantive, and this will be shaped by the domestic politics of certain countries, particularly the US, France, Germany and Israel.

Ireland, Norway and Spain are expected to be joined by a few other European nations, and Britain and Malta have indicated that they will do so when the conditions are 'right'.

Ironically, the October 7 Hamas attack has served to focus global attention on the long-neglected issue of state-



**IMPACT:** The October 7 Hamas attack has served to focus global attention on the long-neglected issue of statehood for Palestine. REUTERS

hood for Palestine. In the last few months, as the scale of destruction in Gaza-Rafah and the number of total deaths have mounted (it is now over 36,000), Israel has become increasingly isolated, even though it continues to receive critical US support by way of weapons and funds.

Israel and its top political leadership are under the scanner of the ICC (International Criminal Court) and the ICJ (International Court of Justice), and the decision of the three European nations will only add to the discomfiture of Tel Aviv.

The European trio is to be commended for taking this political decision — and while this one initiative will

If the Palestine issue remains deadlocked in the UN Security Council, the BRICS summit in October could provide a forum for some innovative political rewiring.

not end the violence in Gaza-Rafah anytime soon — it may act as a catalyst to energise the constituencies that are seeking to prevail upon the US and, through it, Israel, to agree to a ceasefire followed by negotiations.

The historical context that has encouraged the three European nations to empathise with Palestine merits recall. Ireland, with its record as an oppressed colony and its experience of the British jackboot, has traditionally been a supporter of the Palestine cause. Since October 7, Irish political leaders have been the most vocal in calling out Israel for its many genocidal transgressions and have reiterated their support for any effort

that would advance the two-state solution. They noted that it was the only means for the two nations (Israel and Palestine) to coexist peacefully and to put a stop to the "generational cycles of violence, retaliation and resentment".

Having emerged from decades of dictatorship (1936-75), Spain is the new convert to the principles of liberal democracy and international law and has a long association with the Arab rulers. The 1991 Madrid Peace Conference supported by the US and Spain laid the foundation for ending the long-festering Arab-Israeli conflict. In the current context, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has asserted that his decision to recognise Palestine was born "out of moral conviction" since it is a 'just cause' and added that this was the 'only way' to achieve peace and security in the region.

Norway, with its history as a successful peace-maker in West Asia (1993 Oslo Accords), is supportive of a two-state solution in the long term. And it is evident that, currently, Oslo, Madrid and Dublin have coordinated their Palestine policy to nudge the rest of Europe to support the call for an immediate ceasefire through concrete political action.


Europe has a very nuanced position on the tangled Palestine issue. Recently, French President Emmanuel

Macron hosted his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, in Paris. They issued a joint statement on Palestine. It noted: "The two heads of state called for a decisive and irreversible relaunch of a political process to concretely implement the two-state solution, with Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security, both with Jerusalem as their capital, and the establishment of a viable, independent and sovereign state of Palestine based on the 1967 borders and reaffirmed their commitment to this solution, which is the only way to meet the legitimate aspirations of the Israeli and Palestinian people for lasting peace and security."

China has emerged as an effective interlocutor in West Asia since its 2023 success in enabling an unexpected Saudi Arabia-Iran rapprochement, and this was the result of decades of quiet and sustained diplomacy devoid of any grandstanding. Beijing appointed its first special envoy for West Asia in 2002, and since then, Chinese diplomatic investment in the region has been unbroken. There is a cue here for India.

If the Palestine issue remains deadlocked in the UN Security Council because of a US veto, the BRICS summit being hosted by Russia in October this year could provide a forum for some innovative political reviving. Case for Madrid 2.0 under BRICS auspices?

# Surfeit of dynasts, defectors lays bare leadership vacuum



**AMARJIT BHULLAR**  
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COLUMBIA, CANADA

A SIGNIFICANT number of the candidates fielded by mainstream political parties in the current parliamentary elections in Punjab, Haryana and some other states are political dynasts or turncoats or both. The parties are facing a dearth of ideologically committed, competent and electable candidates. Most of them have poached members of other parties to get 'suitable' candidates — for instance, in West Bengal.

Those who are ambitious or feel marginalised in their own parties gladly accept such offers. Immediately after the switchover, they begin a campaign to undermine the party they have left and cheer the top leadership of the party they have joined. They had often criticised the same leadership before joining its ranks.

Yet another way to fill the gap is to bring in film stars or sports persons who have mass appeal. The experi-

ence, so far, shows that few have performed and gained the confidence of people over the years, while many have found the political climate difficult to handle.

Why is there a vacuum in the parties? Why have even 100-year-old parties failed to nurture their young leaders to compete in the political arena?

In fact, a majority of these leaders treat political capital as other forms of capital (like land, gold, etc.) and not as goodwill earned by serving the electorate. Politics, as a profession, allows them to accumulate the political capital, which, unlike other forms of capital, cannot be transferred by a legal will to anyone of their liking. Rather, one must engage in the political process to receive that. In countries like India, power, status and prestige are derivatives of the political standing. So, naturally, there is an incentive to retain political power in the family or in the coterie.

Political leaders utilise some time-tested methods to transfer the political capital within their families/coterie.

In the last few decades, top leaders of political parties, barring a few, have demolished internal party democracy and tried vigorously to establish family control over the party by blocking the entry of



**SWITCHING LOYALTIES:** Defections are the norm in states such as West Bengal. ISTOCK

young, competent leaders. They have passed their political legacy, which include the brand name as well as the financial, social and human capital advantages, to their progeny to consolidate their dynastic control. The inheritance of political power within families is a common phenomenon across the world and true even in democracies. But the inheritance is not as easy and quick elsewhere as it is in India.

The dynastic political perpetuation limits the 'pool of candidates' who can compete in politics and win elections. In this way, the founders of dynasties cre-

The dynastic perpetuation limits the 'pool of candidates' who can compete in politics and win elections.

ate a situation of political emptiness in their parties so that the heirs may face little competition.

Established leaders of political parties often select their associates on the basis of incompetence. Political scientists call it negative selection. Negative selection, as per *everipedia.org*, a blockchain-based online encyclopaedia, is "a political process that occurs... when a person on the top of the hierarchy, wishing to remain in power forever, chooses his associates with the prime criterion of incompetence — they must not be competent enough

to remove him from power". Resultantly, sycophancy becomes a means to entering a party. It determines one's status and remuneration in the party rather than one's ability to perform for the benefit of the party and the public.

Certainly, the strengthening of dynastic rule and negative selection are a risk for a party, but most leaders consider it a risk worth taking. Economists call it a moral hazard. Moral hazard occurs when a person takes a risk because someone else bears the cost of that risk. So, when a dynasty is established or an incompetent second-rung leadership is formed in the party, the gains, if any, are accrued to the top leaders and if the heirs/second-rung leaders underperform as public representatives, the sufferers (of their underperformance) are the people.

"Moral hazard explains 40 per cent of the descendants' underperformance," say Siddharth Eapen George and Dominic Ponattu in their study titled *How Do Political Dynasties Affect Economic Development? Theory and Evidence from India*.

At the time of elections, parties face a self-created shortage of good candidates, forcing them to recoup it by promoting defections. Therefore, the quality of governance and

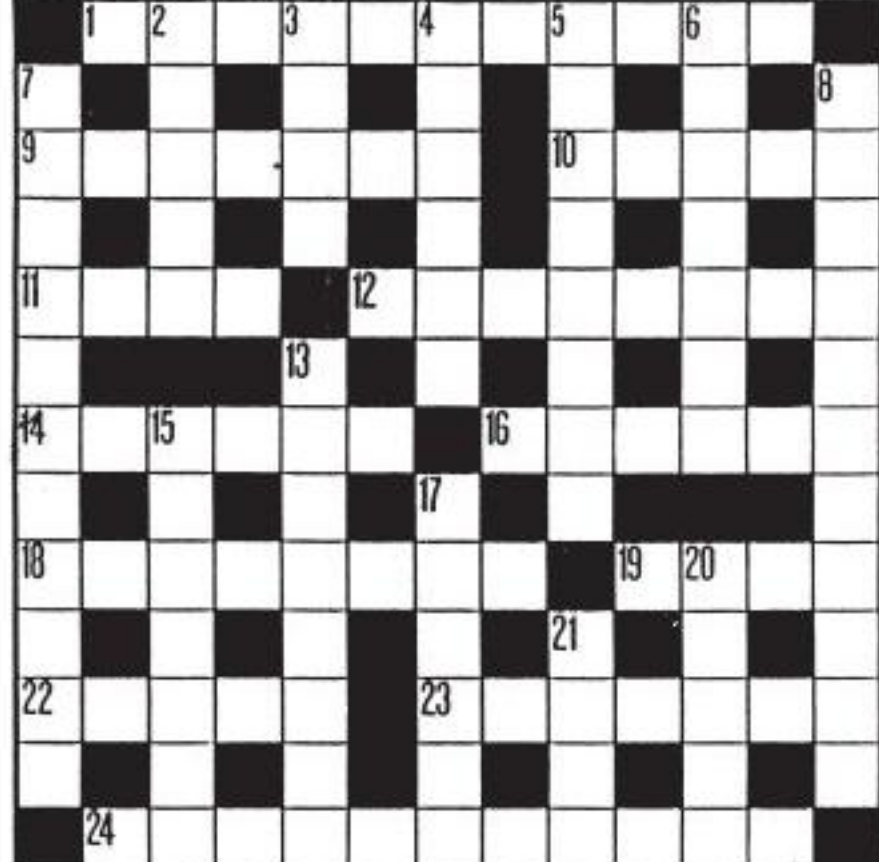
development processes decreases as members of the legislative and executive bodies are selected from a limited pool.

How does such politics affect optimal governance? Such behaviour disturbs the legitimacy of democracy and worsens the quality of public policies as politicians have motivations to implement policies that will increase their gain and ensure their continuation in power. Politicians place personal interests above public and party interests. It leads to patronage and corruption, which weaken governance institutions. Politicians, while in power, make public investments for their own gains.

Economic development is also hit due to bad governance. "We find that dynastic politics has an overall negative effect on economic development," says the study by George and Ponattu.

Dynastic succession and negative selection are the most significant challenges for political parties in general and the electorate in particular. Most of the parties do not adhere to open, transparent and democratic procedures for their functioning. There are limited opportunities for ordinary members and ideologically committed workers to climb the ladder in the party, while elevators are available for the descendants and their cronies.

QUICK CROSSWORD



**ACROSS**

1 Off the beaten track (3-2-3-3)

9 Under perfect conditions (7)

10 Be in state of uncertainty (5)

11 Expect and desire (4)

12 Absolute ruler (8)

14 Northern Ireland (6)

16 Subtle distinction (6)

18 Fillip (8)

19 Unconvincing (4)

22 Additional (5)

23 Tropical cyclone (7)

24 Available for purchase (2,3,6)

**DOWN**

2 Consume completely (3,2)

3 Unctuous (4)

4 Experimental test (3-3)

5 Country of northeast Africa (8)

6 Unfavourable (7)

7 Without previous inspection (5,6)

8 Considerable sum of money (6,5)

13 To hand down (8)

15 Captivated (7)

17 Business patronage (6)

20 Habitual residence (5)

21 To box in practice (4)

**SATURDAY'S SOLUTION**

**Across:** 1 Mumble, 4 Esoteric, 9 Jargon, 10 Primeval, 12 Spin, 13 Corny, 14 Even, 17 In a bad temper, 20 Nothing for it, 23 Avid, 24 Revel, 25 Sham, 28 Dilatory, 29 Ramble, 30 Monarchy, 31 Blithe.

**Down:** 1 Majestic, 2 Marzipan, 3 Loom, 5 Strong-minded, 6 Tame, 7 Revive, 8 Colony, 11 Cost the earth, 15 Havoc, 16 Deify, 18 Prohibit, 19 Stampede, 21 Random, 22 Violin, 26 Stir, 27 Pall.

SU DO KU

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

MEDIUM

FORECAST

SUNSET:	SUNRISE:	MONDAY	TUESDAY	19:16 HRS	05:23 HRS
		CITY	MAX	MIN	
		Chandigarh	45	27	
		New Delhi	46	28	
		Amritsar	45	27	
		Bathinda	45	26	
		Jalandhar	43	25	
		Ludhiana	44	26	
		Bhiwani	45	30	
		Hisar	46	26	
		Sirsa	47	29	
		Dharamsala	35	23	
		Manali	28	15	
		Shimla	30	19	
		Srinagar	32	16	
		Jammu	42	25	
		Kargil	27	11	
		Leh	23	08	
		Dehradun	39	25	
		Mussoorie	25	17	

TEMPERATURE IN °C