#### Need more competition

Small finance banks have a clear path

he Reserve Bank of India last week issued rules outlining the glide path for existing "small finance banks", or SFBs, that wish to transition to regular "universal" banks. While it is unclear if any of the current SFBs will take advantage of the process immediately, it is welcome that a clear set of policies has been introduced for what has been a long-stated goal. SFBs that transition will gain certain advantages — for example, they will then have lower capital requirements and can reduce their level of priority-sector lending. This will bring down their capital intensity and allow them to become more profitable. The RBI's requirements are relatively stringent, and so most SFBs will not qualify. Small banks should be listed and functioning for five years, as well as pass the regular due diligence exercise by the regulator. But they should also have reported a net profit the previous two years and have at least ₹1.000 crore as their net worth. All existing SFBs other than AU SFB have a net worth below ₹1,000 crore. But AU SFB is also going through a merger, first announced in October 2023, with Fincare SFB, which may open up new geographies in South India.

The broader process, however, is good news. The eventual goal must be greater competition in the banking sector alongside clear regulatory goalposts. Most SFBs — a category announced in 2014 — were created from non-banking financial companies, or NBFCs. They now have a path to universal banking. There is thus a clear ladder of safety, reliability, and regulatory oversight that the financial products sector can follow up to become a regular bank. For the banking regulator, it must be a priority to increase competition in the sector. Research has shown that, in the era of bank consolidation in India, which began in 1998, the efficiency of monetary-policy transmission declined significantly. This is natural, as greater market power increases individual banks' alternative financing sources.

The SFB category was originally developed to increase financial inclusion. A worthy locus for further research is whether they have served that purpose. However, theoretically it seems clear that banks that have emerged from the regulatory environment that defines SFBs will help expand the scope of universal banking as well, given that they have specific know-how about increasing bank deposits from the underbanked. The growth of deposits in the banking sector will likely be a major priority, going forward. Recent research by Standard & Poor's has shown that loan growth in banks is 2-3 percentage points higher than deposit growth. Some in the banking sector argue this is a natural corollary of other trends. Household financial savings, for example, are under pressure and the performance of alternative investment sources — such as mutual funds — has been attractive.

Returns on deposits in banks in recent times, meanwhile, have been too low in real terms. However, demand for credit continues apace. Thus, in the aggregate, according to S&P, loan growth is 1.5 times the growth in nominal gross domestic product (GDP), while deposit growth is just keeping pace with nominal GDP. As a consequence, unless deposit growth is juiced up, loan growth may have to fall, with unintended effects on the macro-economy and overall investment and growth. Greater bank competition with a focus on expanding the banking base is one way to mobilise deposits.

### Chasing paper trails

Supreme Court puts WPAT controversy to rest

s Indians queue up to vote in one million polling stations around the country, the Supreme Court has set at rest concerns about the credibility of electronic voting machines (EVMs). On the same day as the second phase of polling, the court delivered a verdict rejecting the plea by the non-profit organisation Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) for 100 per cent cross-verification of EVMs by a manually counted voter verifiable paper audit trail, or VVPAT. In separate but concurring judgments, the two-judge Bench chose to retain the current provisions of counting the VVPAT slips of five randomly selected Assembly constituencies or Assembly segments of Parliamentary constituencies to verify the EVM count. In addition, the court has directed the Election Commission to seal and store symbolloading units (SLUs) for 45 days after the election result is declared.

The SLU is a memory device that enables candidates' symbols to be loaded on to the VVPAT machine; it is typically retained for a day before being handed back to the manufacturer to be programmed and reused in other VVPATs for subsequent phases. This directive implies that an SLU can be opened and examined in the event of an election petition. The Supreme Court has also allowed candidates standing second or third in a constituency to ask for a verification of EVM software by submitting a written request identifying the polling station or serial number within seven days of the results being announced. These petitioners will have to bear the expenses of a procedure that will require manufacturers' engineers to conduct checks on 5 per cent of the EVMs per Assembly constituency or segment. This goes some way towards addressing a key concern raised by the ADR that an EVM processor can be tampered with.

The Supreme Court's reasoning for these limited changes is that 100 per cent manual counting of VVPAT slips would take too long and that the exercise of tallying 5 per cent VVPAT slips with votes cast had not, so far, revealed mismatches. The Election Commission will, however, be required to invest in larger numbers of SLUs, given the restrictions on their reuse. This judgment builds on earlier Supreme Court verdicts that steadily added credibility to the world's largest election exercise by electronic machines. In 2013, the apex court directed the Election Commission to introduce the VVPAT paper trail and in 2019, the court enhanced the number of polling stations for VVPAT verification from one Assembly constituency or segment to five.

Now that the matter has been settled in court, political parties would do well to not raise unsubstantiated questions, which can undermine the electoral process. Elections have been won and lost by different parties since the use of EVMs started. Besides, it is also at one level a decentralised exercise conducted by both central and state-government officials, which makes any intervention to influence outcomes difficult. EVMs should not be perpetually held responsible for electoral outcomes.



## Bad ideas in taxation

#### Taxation of wealth and inheritance has been tried before

 $\blacksquare$  here is a great populist urge in India — to a negligible amount of tax revenue. take from the rich and give to the poor. This is the path to sustained poverty and economic failure. Two specific mechanisms that are being discussed — wealth tax and inheritance tax — are well known in the field of public finance. All over the world, there is analytical clarity on their lack of usefulness. They have been tried in India. They should not be resurrected.

Roughly once every decade, in India, the taxation

of wealth and of inheritance comes up in the public debate. These ideas have been around since the 19th century and have been tried in many countries. The removal of these taxes, as part of the shift to greater economic freedom, has coincided with greater prosperity. In India, estate duty was present

from 1953 to 1985. The rates could be very high, as much as 85 per cent, but in practice collection was small. It was abolished by Rajiv Gandhi. Taxes on the estate or of inheritance are present in many advanced

economies. On average, in the 24 countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) where these are found, they account for 0.5 per cent of tax revenues. It seems like a lot of complexity to suffer, in public administration, in return for a small amount of tax revenue.

The prospect is even less appealing with wealth tax. This was introduced in India in 1957. As of 2012-13 it generated ₹800 crore. It was abolished in 2015. It is present in four OECD countries and generates

Going down these routes comes at a cost: The loss of focus on the core business of establishing a sensible tax system in India. Taxation in India is at very high levels, with a maximal personal income tax of 42 per cent, a corporate income tax of 25 per cent and a peak goods and services tax (GST) rate of 28 per cent. Taxing imports, and non-tariff barriers, has been steadily rising. These add up to an extremely high tax environment when compared with most of the

post-1991 period. Tax administration in India fares poorly on fair play, rule of law and the arbitrary power of tax officials. The priority in tax policy is not adding on the fresh challenges of a wealth tax or an inheritance tax. It is to make the present machinery (income tax, GST, property tax) work well at the level of both tax policy and tax administration while abolishing all other taxes.

ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY

An economist is someone who wonders whether what works in practice works in theory too. Is the empirical experience made of just a few accidents, or is there a conceptual foundation that is inescapable? It is interesting to go under the hood and ask why inheritance tax and wealth tax

work poorly. People respond to incentives. The first response to more taxation is to work less. If wealth and inheritance are penalised, people will work less hard to

create wealth. This is harmful for the country. The second response is to reorganise life into tax-efficient structures. Instead of going to the end

of life with a will, persons will transfer assets to the chosen ones while living. This distorts behaviour while hindering the ability of the government to obtain revenues. Many a parent may prefer to repeatedly edit a will in the years leading up to the unexpected death event, instead of losing power by transferring assets to children early in order to

The third level of response is to relocate business activity to friendly jurisdictions such as Dubai, Sri Lanka, Cayman Islands, Singapore, or Ireland. This hampers tax revenues.

If India were an open economy, nothing else would go wrong: A person would establish a tax residence in Ireland and run business activities in India without any friction. But India is not an open economy and there are myriad hindrances against crossborder activities. Convertibility is absent on the current account and on the capital account. Hence, once a person shifts tax residence to a location outside India, a process of estrangement sets in, and the focus upon building organisations in India tends to subside. India's future is in the hands of about 10,000 firms, and it is better to organise the Indian state in a way that nurtures the energy and ambition of each of these leadership teams.

In sum, wealth tax and inheritance tax work poorly because (a) they distort the behaviour of people, which harms gross domestic product (GDP), and (b) the behavioural distortions are sufficient to not generate meaningful tax revenues. These taxes thus end up with the worst of all worlds: Behavioural distortions that harm GDP, a complex tax bureaucracy (which will abuse the arbitrary power that tax officers in India have), and poor tax revenues.

This debate fits into the larger puzzle of redistribution vs growth. We should not get distracted into arguments about how to divide the pizza. India is a lower middle-income country. There is a daunting journey in front of us, which is of sustaining growth, of developing state capability, over the coming 100 years. Only four countries which were poor in 1947 have graduated to "advanced economy" status today: The journey to development is a difficult one, and there is no guarantee of success. Emphasising class warfare will hamper private dynamism and hold back the emergence of state capability.

Lant Pritchett says that 99 per cent of the variation in the poverty rate across countries is explained by one number: The median income. If we want to change the poverty rate, the number to focus on is the median income. All the redistributive efforts of the state, through taxes, social programmes, etc sit in the residual 1 per cent (of the variation of the poverty rate which is not explained by the median income) and come at the price of reduced growth of the median income. The emotions of envy, of resentment, of takers rather than makers, should be excluded from public life.

The writer is a researcher at XKDR Forum

## Japan's equity renaissance

THE OCCASIONAL

**ASIDE** 

**AMIT TANDON** 

**SNAKES & LADDERS** 

AJAY SHAH

wo countries, India and Japan, dominated the conversation at the recent 3,000-peoplestrong HSBC Annual Global Investor Summit in Hong Kong. As readers are familiar with India, I will talk about Japan, where following decades of stagnation, Tokyo's benchmark Nikkei 225 broke past its 1989 peak on February 22, 2024. While stable macro-economic, favourable geopolitical conditions and leaner balance sheets have energised its equity markets, governance reforms have had an equally important role to play.

Japan began focusing on governance reforms from the turn of the century, with a call for independent directors and board committees. Initially there was scenticism regarding independent directors' ability to understand a company's culture and contribute to its growth since they had not been with the company for 30 years! It was only after Shinzo Abe came to power for a second time in 2012 that the governance reforms gathered pace. And it may not be out of place to mention the India Governance Scorecard that I have periodically written about was thanks to the generous support from the Government

of Japan during Shinzo Abe's tenure. "Reforms, new policy ideas, and civil society participation arrived in a heady rush (with Abe)," says Jamie Allen, who recently stepped down as secretary general of the Asian Corporate Governance Association (ACGA), a non-profit membership organisation driving effective corporate governance practices throughout Asia. He lists the Japan Stewardship Code of February 2014 (it has undergone two revisions since, in 2017 and in 2020); the Ito Review, in August 2014, which put return on equity (RoE) and corporate competitiveness on the map; the Corporate Governance Code of June 2015; a new third system of board governance, the Audit and Supervisory Committee Company, in 2015; the growth of sustainability reporting, strongly encouraged by the Financial Services Agency and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI); the emergence of new director-training institutes; an official set of Guidelines for Investor and Company Engagement in June 2018; new METI guidelines on group governance in June 2019.

"Part of (Abe's) government's genius was to link CG reform not to risk reduction — as in most markets where governance is a corrective to excessive corporate risk taking — but to the long-term growth of companies and the revitalization of the underperforming

Japanese economy," avers Jamie. This is reiterated in the "Ito Review of Competitiveness and

Incentives for Sustainable Growth — Building Favorable Relationships between Companies and Investors", published by the powerful METI. As resistance to change emanates from cultural facets, the Ito Review noted that "increasing capital efficiency in the broadest sense is crucial from the perspective of Japan's survival".

There have been two updates to the Ito Review. The 2017 review focused on company-investor engagement or "collaborative value creation" and the 2022 review on

"sustainability transformation". METI has remained concerned that Japan Inc was cash-heavy and that the financial indicators for Japanese companies trailed their European and United States counterparts. Years of poor capital allocation led to low RoE and low price to book (P/B). Approximately half the listed companies on the Prime Market and 60 per cent in the Standard Market have RoE below 8 per cent and P/B ratios below 1. This contrasts with 5 per cent for the S&P 500 and 22 per cent for the STOXX 600. These financial numbers called for a shift in mind-set from a "profit and loss" focus to being driven by "balance sheet and cash flow". This meant limited interest from global investors.

The challenge was to link governance and financial performance, which the Tokyo Stock Exchange did through its focus on capital allocation (which, together with succession planning, is one of two priorities of any board).

In March 2023, the exchange asked companies with a P/B ratio below 1 to disclose specific policies and initiatives to lift their value above it. While there may have been other financial indicators for companies to focus on, like return on capital equity or return on capital employed, the exchange narrowed in on P/B, which is now the prominent indicator.

Since then, companies have begun focusing on capital efficiency. They have begun buybacks, mergers, spinoffs, unwinding crossholdings, and disposal c treasury stocks. All these are standard tools for any well-managed company but were shunned by Japanese enterprises. As peer pressure builds — Honda Motors' \$1.5 billion buyback announcement was followed by Toyota Motor offering to buy back \$1.0 billion it is easy to understand the change in Japan.

As the directive is not binding, the exchange has begun releasing a list of firms that have disclosed plans to increase their capital efficiency. In doing so it is obliquely naming and shaming companies that have not articulated a plan — as they don't find

"The Tokyo Stock Exchange's Action Plan for companies to disclose on board awareness of their cost of capital and to improve RoE is a culminating factor signalling improving returns for shareholders," said Amar Gill, who this month assumed charge as secretary general, ACGA.

The Japan story is still in its early days. But the lesson it holds is that companies, regulators, and the broader market micro-system all need to continuously evolve to ensure that a country's capital markets remain robust.

The writer is with Institutional Investor Advisory Services India Limited, a proxy advisory firm. The views are personal.

## Reports from MAGA frontlines



**BOOK REVIEW** 

JENNIFER SZALAI

espite Steve Bannon's Wall Street pedigree, his taste for five-star hotels and billionaire-owned yachts, he is truly a man of the people – that, at least, is the impression he strains to convey each time he appears in Finish What We Started: The MAGA Movement's Ground War to End Democracy, a new book by Isaac Arnsdorf, a journalist at The Washington Post.

As far as Bannon is concerned, anyone who complains that Donald Trump's far-right supporters are on the fringes of the fringe is just a whiner who can go cry some more. As he put it at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in 2022: "All they talk about on

MSNBC is 'democracy, democracy, democracy.' We're gonna give them a democracy suppository on November 8!"

The line was classic Bannon: Gleeful, bombastic, mildly disgusting. It would also turn out to be wrong. The "red wave" that he and other MAGA enthusiasts envisioned for that year's midterm elections never materialised.

There have been several books about the Trumpification of the Republican Party focused on the politicians and operatives who allowed such a transformation to happen. Finish What We Started focuses instead on the ordinary foot soldiers in the MAGA grass roots — who, in the aftermath of January 6, continued to insist that the 2020 presidential election had been stolen and are determined to never let such an outrage happen again.

The rampage at the Capitol had been spectacular — maybe too spectacular for its own good; what the MAGA movement needed was something stealthier and more tedious, less likely to draw the attention of anyone who would try to

thwart it. Arnsdorf recounts how, a month after the attack, Bannon invited a Breitbart blogger named Dan Schultz to his "War Room" podcast to explain what Schultz called "the precinct strategy." The plan was to take over the Republican Party from the ground up: Get some true MAGA believers into the humble yet foundational building blocks of the party structure — "precinct positions that were often vacant because no one was paying attention."

Instead of state legislatures staffed by RINOs (Republicans in name only) who had shown themselves too willing to betray the MAGA cause by abiding by the Constitution and certifying the 2020 election, an influx of new precinct committee members would ensure that the 2024 election would reflect the will of the real people — the MAGA faithful.

One person who heeded the message was Salleigh Grubbs, who ran for Republican county chair in Cobb County, Ga., in 2021 and received a phone call from Trump when she won. Arnsdorf juxtaposes Grubbs's trajectory with that

of Kathy Petsas, a Republican Party chair for a legislative district in Maricopa County, Ariz, who went from fielding maybe three applications a month for precinct committee membership to an astonishing 40 a week. In the months leading up to the 2022

midterms, Petsas was formally reprimanded by her new MAGA colleagues and saw

FINISH WHAT

her preferred Republican candidate for Arizona governor get trounced in the primaries by the Trump-endorsed Kari Lake; Grubbs, meanwhile, seemed to be flying high on MAGA fumes until she began to grasp

"how much more complicated things are, how much you couldn't see from outside, how there are always unintended consequences." Arnsdorf describes her growing discomfort with efforts to purge the party of anyone who doesn't toe the new line.

Arnsdorf mostly hangs back, presenting his subjects' thoughts in free indirect style. His stated aim is to convey "what makes them believe, what motivates them, what stirs them to action." Petsas seems baffled by the takeover of her party and clings to the old mode of doing things. Incredulous that the MAGA wing doesn't think of her as a "real Republican," she emphasises her decades of experience as an insider when that lengthy

tenure is obviously

considered a mark

**FINISH WHAT WE** STARTED: The MAGA Movement's **Ground War to End** Democracy Author: Isaac Arnsdorf Publisher: Little, Brown **Pages: 247** 

against her. Grubbs, for her part, is initially fuelled by a sense that official explanations for political results she doesn't like seem Price: \$30 very, very fishy. After January 6, she

blasted out a message to her Facebook group: "All. DO NOT BELIEVE THE NEWS. Trump people are not violent. The Capitol protest was fine until Antifa co-opted and committed violence." She suggests she's mellowed a bit since becoming a county chair, but mellower MAGA still runs hot. At Georgia's state Republican convention in 2023, she

poses for a photo with Trump. Grubbs deems it "one of the happiest days of her life."

Arnsdorf's book arrives at a moment when Democrats are warning that Trump and the MAGA movement are seeking to end democracy as we know it. Bannon's extravagant bluffing — "We're two-thirds of the nation!" he bragged at CPAC — can't hide the fact that MAGA extremism is still terribly unpopular. An NBC News poll last year put the share of Americans with a favourable view of the MAGA movement at a meagre 24 per cent. The precinct strategy has become another way of energising the base.

And the base turns out to have infinite patience for the nitty-gritty of local politics, as long as the ultimate goal is not governance but domination. "Now they understand how important the rules are," a merry Bannon tells Arnsdorf. "We're having a civics lesson here. We're exploding, and the reason we're exploding? We're really getting into the granular, and people can't get enough of it.'

The reviewer is the nonfiction book critic for The Times ©2024 The New York Times News Service



# Rising Tide Set to Raise All Flights

Indigo Airbus order shows market maturity

Indigo's order for wide-bodied, long-range jets from Airbus signals the rising ambitions of Indian airlines to muscle into international air travel. Competitor Air India has also ordered a mix of wide-and-narrow-bodied jets, but this is the market leader's first official indication of its plans to ferry Indians in and out of the country. India is expected to shoulder much of the growth in global aviation, both in domestic and international travel, over the next decade. The country's leading airlines are drawing up the blueprint on how to claw back market share lost to carriers in the Gulf that currently cater to the bulk of air traffic to India. Aviation hubs have sprung up all over West Asia, based on its location in Asia, Africa and Europe as well as plentiful cheap oil.

Jet fuel is one of the criteria for Indian airlines to venture abroad. Refuelling overseas brings down the single-



biggest cost of running an airline, which is padded up by high taxes in India. Wide-bodied aircraft permit carriers to configure the cabin to offer business class that fattens profit margins and cuts dependency on the predominantly economy class domestic Indian traveller. A generation of Indi-

an airlines has floundered trying to offer services to price-conscious Indians while running up enormous fuel bills. International traffic offers a way out of this trap.

It also could pay for some of the aviation infrastructure that GoI is putting up, hoping that some of its biggest airports can turn into international transit hubs. There is scope to bring some business from Dubai and Singapore to Delhi and Bengaluru. India has the potential to create multiple transit hubs, given the size of its landmass. For all of this, of course, Indian airlines need to start flying abroad. It is a sign of the growing maturity of the country's aviation industry that its biggest airline, Indigo, which began life as a budget carrier, is making the leap.

# Rumpus on Campus, Keep Free Space Safe

Hundreds of students have been arrested on university campuses across the US, as protesters persist in demanding a ceasefire in Gaza and divestment from companies allegedly 'financing' Israel's nearly 7-month military conflict in the Palestinian enclave. In a country that prides itself on free speech, university authorities called in police to deal with protests, some in their second week, and restore normalcy. University authorities claimed that professional/outside protesters have infiltrated the protests, which is why police were called. This echoes the argument from certain quarters against, say, the 1969 anti-Vietnam student protests in Chicago — 'Days of Rage' — that don't quite stick. Meanwhile, in Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu waded in, describing the de-



monstrations as 'antisemitic' and comparing the crowds to rallies held in support of the Nazi Party in inter-war Germany. This is shocking.

US universities have never been shy about calling in the police to deal with protesting students. Authorities must weigh the

A departure from cheesy clichés by our

justification of taking precautionary measures to prevent violence, or exploitation of student protests by non-university actors when evaluating actions of university authorities in similar situations.

Universities must be safe spaces for spirited discussions and arguments as well as peaceful protests. But in these intensely polarised days, does one need to draw a line in the sand? One can argue, in fact, that there is all the more reason now for this free space. But Netanyahu's equating protesting students with Nazi rallies is, at best, silly, at worst, nasty. Protests calling for a ceasefire, and calling on those with influence to lean on Israel to stop its military offensive, stem from a concern for a humanitarian crisis. They are not antisemitic or to be conflated as anti-Israel.

We can mitigate climate change by embracing India's rich ecological diversity on our plates

## Beat Heat by What You Eat



The Edit Page

**KumKum Dasgupta** 

n We Are What We Eat, Alice

Waters — a longtime advocate for universal access to healthy and organic foods and proprietor of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California — writes that every decision we make about what we put in our mouths affects not only our bodies, but also our families, our communities and our environment. Set up in 1971, Chez Panisse's menu runs on the principle that food must be fresh and in season, grown locally, organically

and sustainably. Waters' words came to mind at a recent dinner event where India's top chefs, such as Indian Accent's culinary director Manish Mehrotra and former ITC corporate chef Manjit Gill, slow-cooked nourishing and healthy dishes with indigenous ingredients. Also on the menu were their personal stories about India's regional culinary traditions and local cultures. Each story underlined one message: our food choices must be sustainable in a climate-hit world.

The event was part of the launch of Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment's (CSE) First Food: Future of Taste, the fourth book in the First Food series. The book is a primer on how to survive food shortages brought on by uncertainties in extreme weather events. It has 100-odd recipes from top chefs, food bloggers/influencers and food enthusiasts that include summer vegetable loaf with foxtail millet, vegetable



paella made with kodo millet, as well as ragi srikhand cannoli and a sorghum sweet beverage.

A common thread runs through the delightfully rich and varied local food traditions of different communities. Consumers must learn from traditional knowledge of local communities, who have, over centuries, experimented with weeds, tree-borne foods, seeds that can be stored for long periods, plants with short lifecycles, and even those parts of plants that are generally wasted to create healthy and nutritious recipes.

The book follows many scientific reports—the latest being World Meteorological Organisation's (WMO) 'State of Climate in Asia 2023', released this month — that show that heatwaves, floods, droughts, wildfires, and

Nutritional value of food

is also declining due to

intensive agricultural

practices that strip soil of

micronutrients,

aggravate climate

change and spur

biodiversity loss

tropical cyclones are affecting societies, economies and ecosystems. These are inflicting sehardships on small-scale farmers, forcing many to leave their profession, or

rapidly intensifying

adapt to the challenge, altering India's farm landscape. Along with changes in cropping patterns and reduced

farm yields, nutritio-

nal value of food is al-

so declining due to intensive agricultural practices that strip the soil of micronutrients, aggravate climate change and spur biodiversity loss. A biodiverse landscape is crucial because it helps control pests and diseases, maintain a healthy water cycle and ensure pollination. Without hardworking pollinators, the world

stands to lose its food variety and wild-harvested foods.

'We need hardy foods to survive the climate-risked world. More importantly, we need knowledge about how to use them,' says CSE director general Sunita Narain. 'We must link with the idea of

and making them trendy what is resilient. What is that food that is good for the farmer, good for nutrition and good for the environ-

community of people and

chefs taking an interest in

Narain added, 'On one hand, we have farmers affected by climate change. They need risk mitigation strategies. On the other hand, we have food adding to emissions that lead to climate change. 10% of emissions are from this sector. This is why the industrial food farming systems, which add to GHGs, must be avoided.

While the farm sector is facing troubling times, all is not lost. CSE's Vibha Varshney, who has been resear-

ching India's indigenous food systems, says that farms and food of countries like India with diverse food systems will provide answers for the

However, you and I have a critical role to play in driving this change. We will have to change our diets and provide farmers with a strong incentive to cultivate healthy and climate-resilient future foods. It's only by embracing India's rich biological and ecological diversity on our plates that we can save it.

For example, millet, which GoI has been promoting, is water-prudent, heat-resistant and nutritious. Then there is makhana (fox nuts). It's grown in wetlands, and every time you consume makhana, wetlands — a bulwark against urban floods, among other things — have a chance to survive from the clutches of greedy realtors.

The good news is that the country has a growing community of people and chefs taking an interest in local foods, researching them, and making them trendy. In a recent in-

as, formerly with Bombay Canteen, reminisced how he once cooked an entire meal using local ingredients such as moringa, raw mangoes, curry leaves, betel and banana leaves foraged from his neighbourlocal foods, researching them hood in Bandra,

terview, Thomas Zachari-

Mumbai. Enthused by the outcome, he started The Locavore, which champions the best regional food across India through storytelling, recipes, events and producers.

India's food systems are vast, messy and complex, and making responsible food choices is challenging. Many of the ingredients mentioned in First Food: Future of Taste may sound unfamiliar to us. But finding them is not as hard as it seems. Look around your nearest farmers' market, and you will spot many of these climate-friendly 'superfoods' right near you.

kumkum.dasgupta@timesgroup.com

## T+0, More Than Procedural Update



**Mrugank Paranjape** 

Last month, stock exchanges launched same-day transaction settlement (T+0), by which sellers can have instant access to 100% of their cash on the transaction day. This cycle is a move that promises to fundamentally alter how trades are settled in our markets.

The evolution of the Indian capital markets has been accompanied by a series of pioneering moments:

► Era of dematerialisation This was our first roadshow as brokers, which targeted market intermediaries, spearheaded the era of dematerialisation, revolutionising securities handling, and storage.

▶ Digital trading innovations Executing the first-ever online derivative trade marked a monumental leap, propelling markets into the digital age. It connected swathes of investors across nations, making markets more inclusive.

▶ Rolling settlements Phased introduction of rolling settlements was critical in reducing systemic risk and enhancing market efficiency. These milestones were not mere

changes but reformatory evolutions that paved the way for robust market systems and efficiency in market transactions, making markets deep and liquid. The critical transformation the market went through includes:

▶ Enhanced access to markets Providing investors unobstructed access to various asset classes It includes investors, including global investors, looking to diversify their hol-

nage portfolio risks. Stringent risk management Developing a robust risk management framework that has evolved to mitigate the risk of contagions is pivotal in safeguarding market integrity without compromising market efficiency or the cost of participation. One can safely Time is money mention that regulators

dings, follow India's growth

story, and appropriately ma-

and Market Infrastructure Institutions (MII) have mastered the same. Capital flows across borders Despite the instability in the global markets and rapidly changing foreign in- stock X immediately at the current vestor sentiments, regulatory supervision and the digital ecosystem have evolved these years to ensure smooth capital movement across asset classes to maintain market dynamism and liquidity.

segments, including derivatives un- rences creates an arbitrage opportu-

der Sebi in 2015, helped streamline processes and policies, setting a solid foundation for today's advancements. For example, the unified clearing mechanism ensured efficiency in capital utilisation across the allowed segments. The risk management is entirely ringfenced.

> The shift to T+0 has met with mixed reactions and holds immense potential to enhance market operations. Here's why it can potentially improve the efficiency in the cash markets to the next level. Let us explore a detailed sce-

> nario that illustrates the arbitrage opportunities arising from T+0 settlements that run alongside the T+1 segment in the cash market.

Setting the context for an arbitrager

With T+0, the immediacy of trade settlements significantly changes the liqui-

dity dynamics. Consider investors with two diffe-

rent participation objectives: Investor A wishes to sell shares of

market price to capitalise on her re-Investor B is interested in purchasing stock X but prefers the traditional T+1 settlement due to cash flow

considerations. Consolidating the capital market This difference in settlement prefesuch arbitrage opportunities, capitalises on this by bridging the gap between Investor A's and B's needs. Steps involved: Investor A sells her shares at

nity. Investor C, who always looks for

799.985 in the T+0 market, seeking immediate liquidity.

▶ Investor Bagrees to buy at ₹100.015 but on a T+1 basis, benefiting from a slight price advantage and deferred payment.

Arbitrageur (Investor C) buys from A at ₹99.985 and sells to B at ₹100.015, earning a spread of ₹0.030 per share — leveraging on the overnight rates of 7.25/7.50%, i.e., 2 bps per day. Outcome:

Investor A receives funds immedi-

ately achieving its goal of quick liqui-Investor B benefits from buying at

a slightly higher price but with the advantage of deferred payment. ▶ Investor C profits from the price

differential (3 bps), effectively leveraging the day's interest rate (2 bps), which might be about two basis points daily, translating to a significant advantage over large volumes.

This scenario exemplifies how T+0 can create fluid, dynamic opportunities for liquidity and arbitrage, enhancing market efficiency. It's a fundamental shift towards greater efficiency and alignment with global market efficiency.

The writer is managing partner, MC3 

## America Doth Protest Too Much?



By the looks of it, 2024 general election is about as lively as hitting the snooze button on a Monday morning. If we're pointing fingers at low turnout and general methodology, let's not forget politicians, who seem more adept than ever to say the same old, same old. Take those yawn-inducing moments when reporters toss out the age-old question to fresh-faced politicos: 'Why politics?' We expect some witty retort. Instead, we get nuggets like 'I love connecting with people' or 'I'm a people person.' And then there's the ultimate snoozer: 'I enjoy working with people.' What's with this insistence to showcase people-mania?

We get it. You're human. But, for voters listening to that standard tune is like listening to the same muzak in the elevator. Wouldn't it be refreshing if politicians made it a little worthwhile for voters? 'I'm here because the perks of being an MP/MLA are sweeter than a corner office with a view.' Or, 'I may not be a fan of heat and dust, but there's something oddly satisfying about having a crowd attending a rally just to hear my voice. Nobody paid attention to me back when I was just a lowly prefect in boarding school. Now, I've got my own chamchas!'

Sure, these won't get you to the top of the ballot. But hey, at least we, the voters, won't be in danger of nodding off into our coffee cups this election season.

murderous group whose leaders community's consistent support and enjoy Qatari hospitality and fly frontline role in the civil rights



Seema Sirohi

Washington: Free speech is on trial in America as Ivy League universities and less-endowed colleges struggle to contain student protests and mushrooming tent encampments. Hundreds have been arrested with no sign of protests abating. The pro-Palestinian anger is ear-

nest, and many Jewish students are participating. But some of the slogans have crossed into hate speech. 'We are Hamas' is a common chant and placards saying 'Al-Qasam's next targets' have been spotted. Al-Qasam is the armed wing of Hamas—not that the rest of Hamas are Gandhian. Loud threats that the Oct 7 attacks on Israel will be repeated, not once, not twice, not a hundred but ten thousand times, have gone viral.

Frothy fulmination? Or an omen of things to come? Mini 'Gazas' inhabited by kaffiyeh-donning students are springing up on campuses across the US to protest the 34,000 and counting dead. Interestingly, the tents look much the same, as if supplied by a single source, and allegations that protests are being funded by outside groups have surfaced.

It's one thing to condemn Israel but quite another to celebrate Hamas, a

around in private jets while letting the 'people' die for the 'cause'. It's not kosher to say, but Hamas could help end the slaughter of Palestinians by negotiating seriously to release hostages. But it won't because it's winning the war of narratives.

World opinion is against Israel, and Joe Biden is being squeezed by both the political left and the right — he looks helpless against Benjamin Netanyahu. Democrats are bracing for a repeat of 1968 when anti-war protesters disrupted their party convention in Chicago, resulting in a brutal crackdown by police. Republicans won the White House.

That Biden is losing support among the young is well-known. The coalition that helped him win in 2020 is deeply fractured in no small measure because of his adamant support for Israel. Many Blacks fervently oppose his policies and liken the fate of Palestinians to their own historical experience with racism and subjugation. Forgotten is the Jewish



Eyeless about Gaza?

movement. showed that only 13% of African

A recent Pew Research Center poll Americans support Israel in its war against Hamas compared to 38% of Whites. My local lefty WPFW radio station, which calls itself the home of 'jazz and justice', regularly features Black talk show hosts who rapidly equate Jews with the oppressor class. Black sympathy shifted to Palestinians in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, and there's no going back.

Hamas is enjoying the spectacle. The streak of antisemitism, sometimes blatant, sometimes hinted, running through the protests is a welcome byproduct. New York mayor Eric Adams said he was 'horrified' and 'disgusted' by the antisemitism spewing in and around Columbia University and blamed 'outside

agitators' trying to spark violence. Jewish students have been harassed, pushed around and even spat upon. While any other minority group - say Blacks or gays - faced with abuse would have immediately garnered sympathy and support, in today's hierarchy of oppression, Jews are 'White' and part of the 'oppressor class', Israel is a colonialist state. Hamas is a beneficiary of the contemporary mélange of ideolo gy, identity politics and new academic orthodoxies.

When and where did things change so much that 'Go back to Poland' can be a slogan today? The current milieu has been building for some time, and via the same elite universities that now feel powerless to contain their wards and enforce house rules. Somewhere along the line, efforts to diversify faculty and infuse multiculturalism into syllabi — both admirable goals - became a singleminded pursuit of antiracism, anticolonialism, and gender and sexual orientation studies.

They were the guiding principles. This narrowing of the canon meant that only a certain kind of contemporary left learning was acceptable. Academic writing became obsessed with 'intersectionality' and 'decentering Whiteness', robbing the room for complexity.

Professors of West Asia studies have been at the forefront of decolonising higher education, a worthy objective if done mindfully but not as indoctrination by other means. The Hamas attack showed how far things have lurched. Joseph Massad, professor of modern Arab politics at Columbia University, seemed to relish the attack. Writing on Oct 8 in The Electronic Intifada, he used words such as 'astonishing,' 'stunning," 'astounding,' and 'awesome' to describe the 'takeover of settlercolonies' by Hamas. Cornell professor Russell Rickford called the Hamas attack 'exhilarating' and 'energising,' but later apologised. Open admiration for Hamas might

have been hugely problematic once. But today, it's tolerated on campuses in the name of free speech. How free should free be?



## THE SPEAKING TREE

## Rejoice in **Little Things**

#### **SUMIT PAUL**

"I'd not be what I'm today, if I had never seen the sunrise, or the moon, or flowers in bloom or people's faces," wrote the great Persian mystic Hakim Sanai. This mystical statement has a profound meaning. Consciousness blossoms when awareness comes and awareness comes through playful observation. When we observe little things and nature's regular phenomena all around us, our heart is filled with bliss. This bliss ripples into enlightenment.

Rumi also says the same thing: "Look at everything with a sense of admiration and astonishment. You'll evolve as a human." Wisdom lies in small things. Once a disciple of a Zen master came to him and said, "Master, I try to get into meditation but I'm unable to concentrate. My mind is never at one place." The wise master said, "See, children are playing there. Go and try to play with them. If you can't, at least sit and watch them play. Don't try too much to meditate." The disciple did what the master advised. Seeing little kids play, his heart became filled with a state of indescribable joy and he effortlessly slid into a contemplative mode. One doesn't have to be a recluse. misanthrope or aloof to be enlightened.

Remember, you'll connect with the Universe later. First, plunge yourself into the world you're a part of. So, rejoice in things all around and put no extra effort into self-evolution or enlightenment. Satori dawns on a seeker all of a sudden. You needn't hanker after that.



## World is Full of Crashing Bores

### MORRISSEY

Morrissey channels his inner Oscar Wilde in this great manifesto for the misunderstood, The World is Full of Crashing Bores. From his 2004 'comeback' album, You Are the Quarry the caliph of misery is in top gear.

The opening chords has

Mozza croon: 'You must be wondering how/ The boy next door turned out/ Have a care, but don't stare,/ Because he's still there. And then the voice drips with disdain as he laments the 'uniformed whores' and 'educated criminals' The chorus swells like an aria: 'This

world is

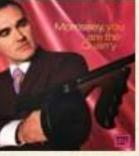
full, oh,

ohohoh,

So full of

crashing

bores./And



I must be one'/ Cause no one ever turns to me to say, / 'Take me in your arms/ And love me. In any other person's hands, the song would have become a paean to self-pity. But what Morrissey crafts is the source of world disdain-unrequited love.

singer himself being one of the crashing bores the world is populated with turns a complaint into an existential concern. This beguiling song is a love letter to the oddballs,

The high possibility of the

and the quiet lot who secretly dream of tangoing with fate.

### Finally, EVMs **Cut the Mustard**

Apropos the news report 'Returning to Ballot Paper Foible, Unsound and Regressive: SC' (Apr 27). The Supreme Court has vindicated the integrity of the electoral process. A blessing in disguise, the petition allowed the court to do a deepdive into protocols and processes of the voting system. This should put to rest, once and for all, misgivings about the sanctity of the electoral process. Even so, if doubts persist, there is a provision for candidates to seek a review.

GOPALASWAMY J Chennai



# MONDAY, APRIL 29, 2024



#### GROWTH FOR ALL

Union minister for communications & IT Ashwini Vaishnaw

As India shares its journey, we hope to inspire other nations and learn from everybody and define our own digital priorities. We believe we all have a collective responsibility to create a more inclusive and prosperous planet

## Don't tax progress

Another set of tax reforms must be sensitive to taxpayer's ability to pay

**OMPLETING TAX REFORMS** via the long-shelved Direct Taxes Code is reportedly going to be on top of the agenda of the Modi government if voted back to power. The Congress party's poll manifesto also talks about revisiting the code, first mooted by the UPA-1 government way back in 2009. The broad direction of the reforms is clear — making tax rates benign, expanding the base, simplifying the tax structure, laws and governance, and easing compliance. A stable, transparent, non-intrusive tax regime that leaves the least scope for dispute and litigation is the goal. In fact, a lot of significant changes along these lines have already been carried out over the last few years.

What's left mainly is a rewriting of the Income Tax Act, 1961, from scratch to remove the ambiguities. In the process, the capital gains tax and TDS regimes may also be streamlined, and the domestic tax provisions aligned more with those in mature economies. However, a few pertinent questions about the direction of the reforms itself need to be raised at this juncture, without quarrelling with the compelling objective of raising the country's tax-GDP ratio by several notches. The first decade of the millennium saw a steady and unprecedented jump in the tax-GDP ratio (for central taxes, it rose to a peak of 12.1% in FY08, sharply up from 8.7% in FY01), and resultant higher revenue buoyancy. However, contrary to what many believe, a further rise in the ratio could not be achieved in all the erratic years since, with an average of just 10.7% between FY10 and FY25 (BE).

A shift in tax incidence from companies to individuals, and a fall in the share of direct taxes in total tax revenues for the government are two other worrying trends. These are surely not among the stated objectives of the reforms. Direct taxes had a share of 59% in the Centre's gross tax receipts in FY10, and for FY25, this is budgeted to be 53%. Revenues collected from the tax on corporate income were 2.15 times those from personal income tax (PIT) in FY11, but PIT receipts were higher than corporate tax revenue by ₹1.33 trillion in FY24 (in other words, PIT was 1.15 times the corporate tax). Curiously, the government doesn't seem to have a problem with this — the interim Budget for FY25 envisages PIT collections to be 19% of total inflows to the exchequer, higher than GST (18%) and corporate tax (17%).

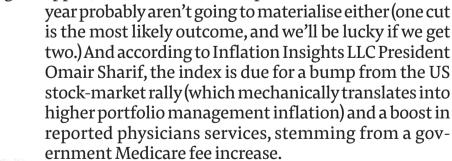
It is doubtful if the tax reforms have paid off, despite the strong support of digital infrastructure that encouraged compliance and sleuthing, and the growing financialisation of wealth that should have normally boosted government revenues. An "inheritance tax" may be a blunt tool to correct the socioeconomic inequalities for a low middle-income economy like India. But a progressive tax system, where tax rates increase with incremental income, and are linked to taxpayers' ability to pay, must remain the focus of India's policy. When household savings are at the lowest level in half a century, and their debt seemingly at a historic high, taxes shouldn't pinch. Removal of explicit tax incentives for household savings is the right policy, as it allows taxpayers more freedom on what to do with their money, but a lower incidence of tax must be ensured. It's more desirable and practical to have domestic demand financed more and more via domestic savings, rather than a bloated current account deficit.

## Keep the faith on inflation, but prepare to be disappointed

**THERE WERE A** couple of ways that the latest inflation data could have gone, and Friday's result was clearly the most positive of the not-great potential outcomes. Following a hot quarterly inflation print on Thursday, investors learned from the monthly numbers that most of the heat came at the start of the year. Yesterday's news, in other words. Still, it's become clear that markets may have to brace for a few more months of disappointment, and that the data will probably keep the Federal Reserve's policy rate at its current 5.25%-5.5% for most of 2024.

The Bureau of Economic Analysis said on Friday that its core personal consumption expenditures deflator — the Fed's preferred inflation gauge — rose 0.32% in March from the previous month, with January's number revised up to 0.5% and February coming in a hair higher at 0.27% (I'm going to the second decimal place because such is the level of scrutiny and handwringing around these numbers.) From a momentum standpoint, it's a welcome development that the worst of the problem is now a full three months behind us, leaving year-on-year core PCE at 2.8% (about 80 basis points above the Fed's target of 2%). Not exactly a hyperinflationary crisis!

Here's the bad news, however: Unfavourable base effects now mean that you'd need monthly core PCE reports of under 0.2% for the rest of the year to meet the Fed's year-end forecast for 2.6%. And though I hate to discourage my fellow optimists, that's not going to happen, and as a result, our hoped-for three rate cuts this



In the medium run though, it's still reasonable to expect more good news than bad.

Most of the PCE inflation heat continues to come  $from \, the \, extremely \, lagging \, housing \, category \, and \, other \,$ idiosyncratic factors including financial services and health care, which is affected both by government nego-

tiations and the long-tail of health care wage inflation during the pandemic. Both those drivers should cool into the end of the year and 2025; we've just underestimated how long it would take for the lags to play out. Likewise, in another closely followed gauge of prices in the economy, auto insurance has been pressuring the consumer price index significantly higher — a lagged reflection of the surge in car and parts prices in 2021.

Bloomberg

The hawks would have you believe that inflation has become a story of an economy juiced by excess demand and the wealth effect from a hot stock market, but I still doubt that's the case. A report on Thursday showed that gross domestic product expanded at a reasonable 1.6% annualised pace in the first quarter, helped by resilient (but not over-the-top) consumption spending. The 'economy's too hot' story falls apart when you realise that the parts of the inflation basket that have been the hottest (housing, health care, financial services, and insurance) are not necessarily the parts of the real economy that have been the strongest.

Durable and non-durable goods have had negligible impacts on the inflation numbers, and the hot service categories in recent months don't exactly scream "overheating economy" (aside from the aforementioned housing and health care, legal services, and funeral services also come to mind.) I'll be watching items such as recreation services and consumer discretionary goods as potential canaries in the coalmine that the overheating narrative is actually coming true, but as of today, I don't see it.

In other words, Friday's data showed that the case for disinflation remains intact. Unfortunately, it may take some thick skin to remain an optimist in this environment, as the near-term data continues to complicate the situation and the market embraces a far uglier view of the future.

FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

THERE IS A NEED TO CHANGE OUR POLICIES TO BE PEASANT- AS WELL AS PLANET-POSITIVE

## India and the Earth Day

The Indian portion of the

planet, which is only 2.4%

of the world's

geographical area, 4% of

freshwater resources, and

18% of population, is

under huge stress, be it

soil, water, air,

or biodiversity

PRIL 22 WAS EARTH Day. It was in 1970 that millions of people came out in USA in support of saving this planet, the only one known to have intelligent life so far. These concerned citizens, under the leadership and clarion call of Senate Gaylord Nelson, felt at the time that humanity was damaging the earth's environment severely in its race to development, and it may be an irreversible damage threatening the very diversity of life on the planet. More than 50 years have passed, and many Conferences of the Parties (COPs) have been held, the latest being the 28th edition in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, in November-December 2023. For the first time, agriculture was brought into the agreement in COP28. But India did not sign it, even when most of the G20 countries including the US and China did. The reason behind it was that the Indian government thought it would involve significant changes in our agricultural policies and farming practices.

However, the fact remains that agriculture is the one sector that is responsible for much of the biodiversity loss on this planet. It is a result of the rising population, which has to be fed. It took Homo sapiens more than 200,000 years to reach a population of one billion in 1804. But the next billion was added in just 123 years, in 1927. And now, within less than 100 years, humanity has multiplied from 2 billion to more than 8 billion. No wonder, if humanity had to be saved from mass famines and starvation deaths, farming had to be done on large swathes of land by clearing forests. In that race against hunger, genetic diversity and several species were lost. But even large parcels of land under cultivation through traditional and



organic methods could not have saved humanity. As Norman Borlaug, the father of the green revolution, once said, this planet has a capacity to feed a maximum of four billion people on its own. If science had not come to the rescue, millions or even billions would have starved to death.

But science, like fire, can also harm if not used properly.

The green revolution, based on highyielding varieties, irrigation, chemical fertilisers, pesticides, etc., did produce more food than humanity needs today. In fact, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization, 30% of the food produced never reaches the mouths due to high losses from harvest to retail

and waste at the consumer end. So there is no dearth of food supplies though access to food is an income issue, and for that each country has to devise its own policies to ensure that people do not die of hunger. India has the largest food subsidy programme in the world — under PM Garib Kalyan Yojana 813 million people are getting free rice/wheat.

But the issue of inappropriate policies harming the planet has remained

largely unaddressed. For example, the policy of heavily subsidising the use of chemical fertilisers, especially urea, has led to a skewed use of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potash (K). Soils have been damaged and are starving for organic carbon. The optimal level of soil organic carbon (SOC), according to World Food Prize laureate Rattan Lal, should be between

1.5% and 2%. Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, who launched a campaign on his bike and drove across countries to "Save Soil", says that SOC should be between 3% and 6% for the soil to optimise productivity in a sustainable manner without much chemicalisation. The reality, however, is that

more than 60% of Indian soils have SOC of less than 0.5%. Our soils are literally in the ICU, but our policymakers are blind to it. Mere slogans of prakritik kheti or natural farming are not going to bring our soils out of the ICU. We need to change our policies, especially those of chemical fertiliser subsidies. A simple directional change from heavily subsidising the pricing of N, P, and K, to direct income transfer to farmers and then letting the prices of the fertilisers to be

decided by the market forces can matter a lot. But this needs advance preparations in terms of land records of farmers, the crops they are growing, irrigation, etc. But all of this can be done if one is serious about saving our soils.

Take the case of groundwater in India. In most states, it is depleting, most alarmingly in Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan. Punjab and Haryana, in particular, are tuned to free power for irrigation, and minimum support prices and open-ended procurement of paddy (rice). It is leading to an ecological disaster in this belt, with the water table receding year by year, and paddy fields emitting carbon at the rate of almost 5 tonnes per hectare.

These policies are also leading to the loss of crop diversity. For example, in Punjab in 1960, only 4.8% of the cropped area was under rice. Today it is more than 40%, displacing maize, millets, pulses, and many oilseeds. Successful high-yielding varieties of rice and wheat also lead to a loss of varietal diversity.

So, the Indian portion of the planet, which is only 2.4% of the world's geographical area, 4% of freshwater resources, and 18% of population, is under huge stress, be it soil, water, air (greenhouse gas, or GHG, emissions), or biodiversity.

Unless we change our policies to be peasant- as well as planet-positive, we will be committing a crime against our future generations. Time is running out. Climate change is upon us, and extreme weather events are likely to increase, causing massive damage to lives and livelihoods. It is time to wake up and make our food systems not only climateresilient but also restore our soils to a healthy status, arrest groundwater depletion, reduce GHG emission significantly, and reward biodiversity through green credits. Can we do it in time?

## Pivoting India's growth strategy

procurement



**NIRVIKAR SINGH** 

Professor of economics, University of California,

A change in macroeconomic policies to foster greater export competitiveness and thereby broaden the dynamics of industrial growth is warranted

**INDIA'S GENERAL ELECTION** is just kicking off, but it is unlikely to change the country's political equilibrium. One of the factors favouring a continuation of this equilibrium is the development of a robust, albeit restricted, sense of national pride. There is evidence that many Indians view the country as a rising global power, and the country's leadership that is not averse to making that claim. Along with geopolitics, a strong recent growth record is a contributing factor to this sense of rising status, although India will need decades of rapid economic growth just to reach where China is today. The current government has been

unabashedly pro-business, and pursued an industrial policy that subsidises some businesses, seeking to accelerate their growth. The growth of firms can allow them to take advantage of economies of scale, and of learning-by-doing, though the latter mechanism is not guaranteed, especially if there is no competitive pressure on the subsidised firms. In the case of the East Asian "miracle" economies, this pressure came from competing in export markets, and one policy that helped them pursue this "export-led" growth was keeping their exchange rates undervalued.

Anewanalysis by California economist Paul Bergin and Korean economists Woo Jin Choi and Ju H Pyun offers some insights into the mechanism that could have driven sustained high economic growth. Their data consists of 45 advanced and developing economies over the period from 1985-2007, so their conclusions are not based on the 1960s East Asian mira-

cle. The analysis suggests that capital controls and the accumulation of foreign exchange reserves, policies that are associated with undervalued exchange rates, led to a dual effect on the dynamics of business firms. These policies helped existing firms to grow, and also shifted business activity from countries that were not pursuing such policies. These dynamics were the basis for sustained growth, through larger productivity gains.

In the current global economy, shifting production, or what the authors of the study call "firm delocation", is associated with reconfiguring

global production networks, so the process now is likely to be different from what it was three or five decades ago. In India's case, a global political rebalancing — moving away from reliance on China — gives it an opening beyond what pure economic factors might determine. This opening

may include foreign direct investment (FDI), which has been increasing in India over the past few years, both through liberalised Indian policy and because India is viewed as a more attractive investment destination.

FDI brings know-how with it, and it is difficult to see how India generates the firm dynamics it needs without it. But foreign capital can put upward pressure on the exchange rate. Measuring "real" exchange rate levels, which

take account of differences in inflation between countries, is a tricky exercise, but it does appear that India's real exchange rate has risen since the start of its growth boom of the early 2000s. There was a brief reversal during the US Federal Reserve's tapering of its expansionary monetary policy in 2013, but the real exchange rate has otherwise remained higher than in the 1990s and early 2000s.

If policy ideas are to be drawn from the Bergin-Cho-Pyun study, then there might be a case for India's central bank,

the RBI, to allow the exchange rate to depreci-**Intelligent reforms** ate, possibly by neutralisin the agricultural ing some foreign exchange inflows. This can also be a sector and food tricky direction for policy, since it can fuel domestic policies could make inflation, but there could macroeconomic be a case for domestic policy realignment restructuring to reduce market frictions and propolitically feasible vide at least a one-off

countereffect to bring

down prices. In particular, India's agricultural sector is extremely inefficient, and this inefficiency reflects in food prices and food price inflation, which is where political pitfalls are the greatest. In 2020, the government had broadly the right idea for tackling this issue, but botched the design, sequencing, and proposed implementation of agricultural reforms.

To recap the elements of a possible growth strategy for India, industrial

dynamics have to be accelerated, especially through greater participation in global production networks. This will lead to productivity gains and sustained growth. Enabling this process means keeping the exchange rate lower, to enhance the global competitiveness of Indian firms. But the inflationary consequences of this have political ramifications, particularly in the food sector. Agricultural market reforms which are based on some kind of inclusive approach and political consensus can provide a one-time counter to inflationary impacts. The previous reform effort was particularly opposed by farmers who were not being directly affected — but their anxiety was indicative of a broken national food procurement policy. Changing

that has to be part of the reforms.

Providing subsidies to industrial firms can help India get its manufacturing sector going, but it can also be fiscally costly and have limited impact. If the Bergin-Choi-Pyun study has relevance for India's current situation, a change in macroeconomic policies to foster greater export competitiveness and thereby accelerate and broaden the dynamics of industrial growth could be warranted. Intelligent reforms in the agricultural sector and food procurement policies could make this macroeconomic policy realignment more politically feasible. None of this would be easy, but sustained economic growth is harder to achieve than short-term boosts in national pride.

#### **LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

#### Skilled workforce and the demographic dividend

Apropos of "Upgrade human capital" (FE, April 27), skilling and apprenticeship are essential for gaining demographic dividend. The industrial ecosystem must coordinate with educational institutions to facilitate skilling. Simultaneously upskilling and reskilling the existing skilled manpower is also imperative. Primarily, it is the responsibility of the

engineering and technical institutions to ensure that their students are employable. The industry and educational institutions should complement each other in skilling, upskilling and reskilling of the students and workforce. It is thus crucial to implement the New Education Policy 2020 within the next two years to facilitate and accelerate skill development education at the school and college levels. —Vinod Johri, Delhi

### Validity of EVMs

The Supreme Court's (SC) rejection of the demand for 100% verification of the paper trail left by the votes cast via electronic voting machines comes as no surprise, as there is no solid proof that the verification system has any major lacuna. It reaffirmed the trust the judiciary has reposed in the integrity of the electoral process, especially after the introduction of voter verifiable paper audit trail

(VVPAT). The SC rightly suggested that VVPAT slips may be counted through machines, and symbols loaded in VVPAT units may be barcoded for easy counting. Such advances alone can make the process fool-proof. Voter confidence in the system is one thing, but the need for the election watchdog to be seen as impartial is quite another. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

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THE HINDU



#### **Turnout and tropes**

Voter turnout has been lower in most States compared to the 2019 election

comparative assessment of polling in the second phase of the general election on Friday, for 88 seats from 13 States/Union Territories, shows that high turnout (more than 70%) in the East and the North East (Assam, Manipur, Tripura, and West Bengal) and low turnout (less than 60%) in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have followed earlier trends. The turnout seems to be lower in Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan too, but any parsing of the reasons should wait for comprehensive post-poll surveys. That said, voter turnout has indeed reduced in comparison to 2019 in the first phase as well, compelling the Election Commission of India to look into whether the heat-wave conditions in many States were responsible. That could be a factor but one cannot rule out the notion that voters seem to be less compelled about their choice this time in comparison to 2019. Considering the fact that the BJP won a comfortable majority and its highest vote share in 2019 coinciding with the higher voter turnout, a lower turnout could be a sign of worry for it, even if, conventionally, a higher turnout has generally been a message about anti-incumbency in earlier polls before the BJP became the pole of the Indian party system.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the lynchpin of the BJP, and whose leadership of the party and the Union government is marshalled by the party as a key campaigning tool, had taken recourse to coarse communal rhetoric and criticising the Congress party's manifesto. This suggests a twopronged ploy. To whip up the sentiments of the ardent support base of the party who believe in the Hindutva agenda and to seek higher participation in voting by these sections. And, to discredit the Congress's studied pivot to the agenda of social justice (although it hinged on an idea of recognition made possible by a caste census) and expanded welfare (through neo-Keynesian policies). The Congress lost its base in the Hindi heartland to the parties that favoured "Mandal" politics of intermediate and lower caste-based mobilisation and patronage since the 1990s. The BJP, then, successfully managed to upend these parties by mobilising sections of the OBCs, who felt left out due to the hegemony of select intermediate castes in the Mandal parties, besides using Hindutva to form a solid base of support. Now, the Congress seeks to revive itself in alliance with the Mandal parties who also seek a new resurgence. This has led the BJP and Mr. Modi to take to slandering the grand old party's manifesto, particularly its emphasis on welfare, using familiar communal tropes. It remains to be seen whether the electorate will be emotionally swayed by this rhetoric or logically match it against its expectations of better jobs and livelihoods. This will decide the course of the election as it moves on to the next phases.

## A three-dimensional view of the Israel-Iran crisis

n March 2018, Benjamin Netanyahu was asked in an interview what the three greatest threats Israel was facing were. "Iran, Iran, Iran," responded the Prime Minister. "Iran is building an aggressive empire in the Middle East," he added. Mr. Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving Prime Minister, has never minced words about Iran. His opposition to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, brokered by the Obama administration and unilaterally destroyed by Donald Trump, was hardly a secret. He projected himself, to both his voters at home and allies abroad, as a tough leader who could stand up to the Iran threat. Yet, it was on Mr. Netanyahu's watch that Iran launched a massive barrage of drones and missiles on Israel on April 14 – the first such attack on the Jewish nation by a state actor in over three decades.

Iran crossed a red line when it launched a direct attack on Israel. It shattered the Jewish nation's deterrence. The United States still reined Israel in. And Israel's response to the Iran attack was rather "feeble", as Mr. Netanyahu's National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir himself called it. After the first round, when both sides step back from the brink, the multi-dimensional crisis reinforces Iran's growing risk appetite in an increasingly volatile and violent West Asia, America's strategic reluctance and Israel's near-total dependency on the United States for its security.

#### The Biden doctrine

Ever since Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, the Biden administration's focus has been on preventing the Israel-Hamas conflict from escalating into a regional war. President Joe Biden offered his full support for Israel's military operation in Gaza, but at the same time unleashed a diplomatic initiative to keep tensions low between Israel and its neighbours. This approach, however, faced two challenges. One, while the Biden administration successfully kept Israel-Arab ties stable, Washington had little leverage over Iran. Two, Israel fought its war in two theatres – one in Gaza and the other in its neighbourhood where it sought to roll back Iranian influence. This set the path for a potential Israel-Iran confrontation open.

When Israel bombed the Iranian embassy compound in Damascus on April 1, 2024, killing senior Revolutionary Guard officers, this became a plausible scenario. The U.S. knew Iran would retaliate and had leaked its intelligence to the press. Mr. Biden realised that if Iran carried out a successful attack and Israel retaliated, it would lead to a regional war from which the U.S. could not stay out. A war with Iran and its proxies is not in America's interests. The U.S. has other immediate strategic priorities, in Eastern Europe



**Stanly Johny** 

and in the Indo-Pacific. So, the U.S. and its allies helped intercept "99%" of Iranian projectiles, averting a disaster on Israeli soil. And then, Mr. Biden told Mr. Netanyahu that the U.S. would not participate in any Israeli retaliation against Iran. The message from Washington was clear: de-escalate.

A shadow war has been going on between Israel and Iran for years. In recent years, Israel has carried out over 400 air strikes in Syria alone. targeting Iranian interests. It has also carried out operations inside Iran, including the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a senior nuclear scientist, in November 2020. These operations were relatively cost-free as Iran never responded forcefully, emboldening Israel further. In other words, Israel kept drilling tiny holes into Iran's deterrence.

After October 7, Israel has stepped up this shadow war. On December 25, it killed Sayyed Razi Mousavi, a senior Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps adviser, in a strike in Syria. Once again, Iran's response was muted. When the Israelis got the intelligence that Mohammed Reza Zahedi, a top IRGC commander, was present in the embassy compound in Damascus, Israel went ahead with the strike. Israeli officials later told American media that they did not expect Iran to launch a direct attack when they carried out the Damascus strike.

Iran's retaliation has left Mr. Netanyahu in a dilemma. He has always favoured force against Tehran. The Iranian attack, many argued, gave him a perfect opportunity to hit the Mullahs hard. But the strategic reality in which Iran carried out its strike was not favourable to Mr. Netanyahu. While Mr. Netanyahu favoured force against Iran, his plan has never been to fight Iran alone. He wanted America's lead, participation and support. But when Mr. Biden told him that the U.S. would not join Israel's retaliation, it limited Mr. Netanyahu's options. He could still have gone ahead testing America's will to stay out of a direct Israel-Iran war. But Israel's war in Gaza remained unfinished and it wanted Mr. Biden's continued support in the offensive. So, Mr. Netanyahu resorted to a largely symbolic strike inside Iran, targeting a radar system, according to the American media, and did not even claim the attack. This was a rare victory for the Biden administration as it reined in its ally to avoid a regional war. But from an Israeli point of view, it was a weak response that did little to bolster its deterrence.

#### The Ayatollah's calculus

For years, Iran has shown strategic patience in its shadow war with Israel. That was also because Iran had taken a long-term view of its growing presence in the region. It has lost a host of senior

officers and scientists in the shadow war, but the Israeli strikes have hardly scuttled Iran's influence. Its nuclear programme continues to expand and its proxies continue to strengthen their muscles. But the Israeli bombing on its embassy annex seems to have altered the strategic thinking in Tehran. After the attack, Iran has decided to impose a cost on Israel's continuing strikes on its officials. While the embassy attack was the trigger, a host of other factors seem to influence the change. Iran today has better strategic ties with Russia and China. While its relationship with China is largely economic, the strategic partnership with Russia is multilayered, especially after Iran started supplying drones to Russia to fight the Ukrainians. Iran has also rightly assessed that the U.S. has a low appetite to get involved in another prolonged war in West Asia, at a time when China and Russia are directly challenging America's leadership of the world.

And in West Asia, after six months of fighting Hamas, Israel is far from meeting its objectives, i.e., dismantling Hamas, releasing hostages and strengthening its deterrence. Israel's vengeful use of massive force on Gaza, which has destroyed northern and central Gaza, killed 34,000 people, and turned nearly the entire population of Gaza into refugees, has triggered an international uproar. There is a genocide case against Israel in the International Court of Justice. Iran's view was that the October 7 attack and the subsequent war on Gaza have substantially weakened the state of Israel in a region where the U.S. security commitments are no longer as "iron clad" as Washington claims it is. This has allowed Iran to change the rules of the game by launching an open attack on Israel. And despite the collective defence of the U.S., the United Kingdom, France, Jordan and Israel, some Iranian ballistic missiles still hit Israel proper.

Israel's meek response and its refusal to claim its attack, along with the call for restraint from its allies in the West, all suggest that Iran's risk assessment was relatively accurate. This is likely to embolden Tehran further. As of now, Iran is the only country in West Asia to have launched missile/drone attacks against the U.S. and two of its closest allies. In 2019, drones attacked two Saudi oil facilities, knocking off half of the kingdom's output for days; in 2020, Iran launched 12 ballistic missiles at America's As-Assad air base in Iraq in retaliation against the killing of General Qassem Soleimani. And on April 14, it attacked Israel. On all three occasions, Iran walked free, or with a tap on its wrist, which speaks volumes of the new strategic reality of West Asia.

#### Towards green growth

The KBI must assess the impact of climate change on economic stability

notable feature of the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) latest Monetary Policy Report (included in its April Bulletin) is the primacy given to "extreme weather events" and "climate shocks" affecting not only food inflation but also likely having a broader impact on the natural rate of interest, thereby influencing the economy's financial stability. Natural, or neutral, rate of interest refers to the central bank's monetary policy lever, which allows it to maintain maximum economic output, while keeping a check on inflation. The report mentions a "New-Keynesian model that incorporates a physical climate risk damage function" being used to estimate the "counterfactual macroeconomic impact of climate change vis-à-vis a no climate change scenario". The report's authors go on to warn that the "long-term (economic) output" could be lower by around 9% by 2050 in the absence of any climate mitigation policies. They ominously add that 'if inflation hysteresis gets entrenched, it may lead to a de-anchoring of inflation expectations, and the undermining of the central bank's credibility would warrant higher interest rates to curb inflation, leading to greater output loss'.

Beginning with its July 2022 discussion paper on 'climate risk and sustainable finance', the RBI has made incremental progress to address the transition to a green economy, even while admitting that India requires over \$17 trillion to achieve its net zero ambitions by 2070. Its peers in advanced economies, most notably the European Central Bank, have aided the formulation of a green taxonomy for the entire Eurozone's economic value chain. A green taxonomy is a framework to assess the sustainability credentials and possible ranking of an economic activity. The RBI and the Finance Ministry could take inspiration from the developing world, especially the ASEAN region, where a layered green taxonomy as a living document keeps getting updated with sectoral views of possible sustainable trajectories. While the issuance of ₹16,000 crore worth of Sovereign Green Bonds and expanding the resource pool by allowing Foreign Institutional Investors to participate in future green government securities are welcome steps, the RBI must undertake a thorough-going assessment on the quantitative and qualitative impact on economic and financial stability due to climate change. It must encourage administrative consultation to begin populating a layered green taxonomy that is reflective of India's fragmented developmental trajectories. The effort should be to mitigate the transitional risks to the financial system as the economy moves towards a sustainable future.

## Inequality can no longer be ignored

he Congress's party's election manifesto, the Nyay Patra, has triggered a debate on inequality, concentration of wealth and Minister, with his misleading comments on what the Congress manifesto contains, has also managed to provoke a discussion on wealth redistribution. There is ample evidence to show that inequality in India has been rising. The World Inequality database found that in 2022-23, 22.6% of the national income went to the top 1%, the highest ever since 1922. Wealth inequality is even more stark with the top 1% population having 40.1% share in wealth. It is clear that inequality can no longer be ignored and justified as a collateral to growth. The cost of such unequal growth must be interrogated.

#### As an election issue is welcome

The unfairness of some people and a few corporates doing so well while most of the population continues to struggle for decent employment opportunities is becoming more and more obvious. The logic of trickle down and of supporting 'wealth creators' so that more jobs are created and prosperity spreads has failed time and time again not just in India but across the world also. The futility of continuing to depend only on economic growth even at the cost of increasing inequality, for improving the lives of people, is a core political economy question facing countries today. That it is finally becoming an election issue in India must therefore be welcomed, irrespective of what the election outcome in 2024 will be.

The public discussion, especially on social media platforms, has so far mostly been confined to direct redistribution measures of the 'Tax the rich, subsidise the poor' nature. These are very relevant in the Indian context. After all, India not only has a low tax-GDP ratio compared to other middle-income countries (India's tax-GDP ratio is 17% compared to 25% in Brazil) but also a regressive taxation structure, where indirect



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taxes contribute to almost two-thirds of all tax revenue collection. Furthermore, even direct taxes are not very progressive. For example, the effective tax rate (tax to profit ratio) according to the Receipt Budget 2023-24 was 19.14% for companies that had more than ₹500 crore profit before taxes compared to an effective tax rate of 24.82% for companies in the group of 0-₹1 crore

#### Welfare spending is low

On the other hand, spending on welfare and the social sector is very low compared to other countries. Public spending on health for instance is still around 1.3% of GDP whereas the National Health Policy (NHP) targets achieving 2.5% of GDP by 2025. Despite COVID-19, we have not seen any such massive increases in health expenditures, and going by the current trend, we will not achieve this target. A number of other major budgetary allocations of the Union Government such as for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), education, budget for children, show a decline as a proportion of the total expenditure or of GDP. Hence, improving revenue mobilisation in a progressive manner while also increasing spending on areas that directly affect lives of the poor is very much a

relevant issue and needs to be paid attention to. However, addressing inequality is also about questioning the nature of growth itself. In a situation where the major source of livelihood for people is through employment, how far can growth that does not generate jobs contribute to development? The kind of growth we have experienced recently has been one that has been accompanied by joblessness as witnessed by a declining employment elasticity of output. Further, there is a rise in profit shares and stagnant real wages. The discussion, therefore, has to be on generating employment – not distress self-employment but decent jobs with adequate remuneration. For this, we have to

focus attention on more equitable growth where the purchasing power of people also increases. Governments can play a role in this by spending on programmes such as the NREGA and the Public Distribution System. Cash transfer schemes such as the Mahalakshmi scheme proposed in the Congress manifesto can also contribute to this.

#### Job creation

At the same time, governments can also contribute to directly creating jobs by filling up all existing vacancies and expanding much needed public services in health, education, nutrition and social security. The quality of jobs, such as of anganwadi workers, accredited social health activists and other frontline workers, also need to be improved with adequate wages and improved work conditions. These direct job creation efforts will not only create employment opportunities for many, especially women, but also contribute to improving human development outcomes and reduce the burden of unpaid care work on women and free them up for other employment. Further, they can also address the inequality in opportunities and the intergenerational inequality that gets perpetuated due to the unequal access to services such as pre-school education and nutrition during childhood.

An employment-centered growth pattern will be one where government policy focuses on supporting small and medium enterprises that are more labour-intensive in nature, promoting skill training and overall human capital (health and education) along with enabling women to participate in the labour market through measures such as maternity entitlements, childcare, transportation, safe and affordable accommodation and so on. It is only when we address the employment issue that we can address inequality in earnest. On the other hand, as long as growth is of the nature where profits for few is the priority, the employment issue is also likely to remain unaddressed.

#### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### **Delayed relief**

Financial matters have always been a bone of contention between the Centre and States for long (Page 1, April 28). It is unfortunate that the Union government has released ₹3,730.32 crore towards "relief assistance for natural calamity" from the National Disaster Response Fund to Tamil Nadu and Karnataka only after these States

moved the Supreme Court of India. People should not be caught in the silly politics between Centre and States.

Kshirasagara Balaji Rao, Hyderabad

The move fails to satisfy anyone because the funds have arrived too late and only after the States having approached the top court. The speed and spirit in

which assistance was extended to a favoured State in the north is jarring, strengthening the perception of the apathy that the Union government has towards non-BJP-ruled States. Such a policy and attitude will impact the federal structure.

A.G. Rajmohan, Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh

affected by natural calamities have had to approach the Supreme Court for release of relief funds by the Centre. The objective of disaster relief is to enable States to overcome a crisis. The delay in releasing funds by the Centre points to a sour, stained relationship with

some States. Balasubramaniam Pavani. It is unfortunate that States Secunderabad

#### 'The bloc and PMs'

One is really at a loss to fathom as to where Prime Minister Narendra Modi was able to scoop the information that should the INDIA bloc be voted to power, it plans to have five PMs over five years (Inside pages, April 28). The top leader's ingenuity seems to know no bounds! After 'vanishing mangalsutras' and 'x-rays being used to

peer into household safes', his spinmasters seem to be in overdrive compiling fanciful stories. We might have more yarns being spun till the entire election campaign draws to a close! C.V. Aravind,

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

## Making space for migrants in manifestos

n election manifesto is a public document outlining a political party's vision, intention, and promises. For the first time, the BJP and Congress have expressed concern for migrants, in their manifestos for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdowns brought attention to migrants and made them visible to the state and policymakers. There are an estimated 600 million internal migrants in India and they contribute significantly to the economy. Yet, they remain highly vulnerable and disenfranchised. In this context, it is important to examine the promises made by the two main political parties to effectively include the huge migrant population.

#### The BJP's manifesto

Under the heading, 'Modi ki Guarantee for Shramik Samman', the BJP in its manifesto, Sankalp Patra, has made two specific promises for internal migrants and others that will indirectly benefit them. The first is to reach out to migrant workers registered on the e-Shram portal. It is due to the lack of documentation and registration that migrants were rendered 'invisible'. This was a critical contributor to the crisis during and after the lockdowns. After the Supreme Court directed the Central government to build a national database of unorganised workers, the e-Shram portal came into existence in 2021. More than 295 million workers are registered on the portal so far. Creating a credible database of migrants is a pre-requisite for their meaningful inclusion, but identifying migrants among registered unorganised workers is a significant challenge. The manifesto has rightly identified the need to disaggregate the database. However, issues of e-Shram, such as Aadhaar-seeding and technical and infrastructural problems, have not been addressed. The manifesto ensures the benefits of various welfare



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While the BJP and Congress have both made promises to migrants in their respective manifestos, they have overlooked some critical

programmes to workers registered on e-Shram. We found in a study we conducted many misconceptions among migrant workers regarding e-Shram: for instance, some believed that after registration, money would be deposited into their bank accounts. There is still no clarity from the government regarding the benefits for workers after they

enrol on the portal, other than the

accident insurance. The second is to enhance the Special Train Services for migrant workers. Last year, the Railways Ministry said it was planning to run regular non-AC trains to connect major migration corridors in India. Given the high degree of inter-State migrants, these special trains should run throughout the year and not just seasonally.

The BJP's manifesto also ensures a periodic review of the National Floor Wages considering the minimum living standards of workers. This could be effective as most migrant workers are daily wagers. However, critics are concerned that it could push workers further into exploitative conditions. Also, different floor-level wages for different regions will trigger skewed migration towards the places where wages are higher, as is the case with Kerala now. Sankalp Patra also states that post office savings, accident and life insurance, and social security measures for workers will be implemented using digital technologies. However, without digital literacy, skills, affordability, and infrastructure, the technology will exacerbate the divide. The manifesto ignores women, children, and young migrants who all face unique challenges. In 2021, NITI Aayog had prepared a draft National Migrant Labour Policy, but the manifesto is silent on its implementation. The BJP pushes a 'city-centric development' approach and is silent on sustainable village development. This can consequently trigger distress migration to cities. It also

promises implementation of 'One

Nation, One Election', but that may deprive migrant votes.

The Congress' promises

In its manifesto, Nyay Patra, the Congress has promised to enact a law to regulate the employment of migrant workers and ensure their fundamental legal rights and social security. It assures it will update ration card holders, expand Public Distribution System (PDS) coverage, allocate sufficient funds to PDS and the Integrated Child Development Service, and launch a mid-day meal scheme that would benefit migrants. However, it is silent on the portability of PDS. The party's promise to increase the wage under MGNREGA to ₹400 per day and keep the same amount as the national minimum wage is crucial for rural migrants. The availability of employment in a locality reduces distress out-migration.

The party has also promised to launch an urban employment scheme for the urban poor, which could eventually be helpful for urban migrants too. The promise of enforcing the principle of 'Same Work, Same Wages' to prevent gender-based discrimination is significant. The manifesto focuses on women's welfare and promises to build sufficient night shelters for migrant women workers and safe and hygienic public toilets for women in towns and cities. However, the manifesto would have been more effective if it had addressed the specific challenges faced by migrant women. It has also missed the opportunity to identify the range of issues faced by internal migrant workers, including the exploitative informal labour market, fragmentation, and forced labour conditions.

While it is good that migrants have found space in the manifestos, both the parties have overlooked critical areas such as public health inclusion, education of migrating children, housing, water, sanitation, and legal aid and dispute resolution. Only political will can only change the lives of migrants and their families.

### Tracking the flow of cash

To tackle bribery, officials need to do more than just seize cash and freebies

STATE OF PLAY

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ontesting for Assembly and Lok Sabha seats from Telangana is becoming costlier with every election. This is evident in the increase in the amount of cash, the quantity of liquor and narcotics/drugs, and gold and other precious metals that are being seized in the run-up to the election in the State.

Enforcement agencies seized more than ₹155 crore between March 1 and the third week of April. This includes ₹60.96 crore of cash, liquor worth ₹29.35 crore, drugs and narcotics worth ₹23.87 crore, precious metals worth ₹18.36 crore, and 'other freebies' worth ₹23.12 crore. In contrast, in 2014, ₹34.38 crore of cash was seized before the Assembly and Lok Sabha elections in united Andhra Pradesh. Of the seizures this time, the highest amount of cash was seized from Hyderabad district (₹16.73 crore) and then Mahbubnagar (₹6.34 crore).

The seizures had increased by the 2018 Assembly elections when enforcement agencies become more vigilant on the borders and in certain sensitive areas in the State. Then, ₹145 crore was seized, with the police department reporting ₹103.89 crore and the Income Tax (IT) department reporting ₹34.19 crore. Before the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, ₹84.26 crore including ₹46.4 crore by the police and ₹29.14 crore by the IT department was seized. Senior officials said the election authority has details of the total amounts seized in the 2018 and 2019 elections, but not cohort-wise reports as they were not maintained/ monitored. "We have cohort-



wise reports only of the 2023 elections," Chief Electoral Officer Vikas Raj said.

Before the 2023 Assembly elections, there was a meteoric rise in the quantum of seizures; it crossed ₹750 crore. While political parties distributed cash and liquor in the past, the distribution of drugs/ narcotics and precious metals has been increasing since the 2018 Assembly elections. Notably, 'other freebies' such as laptops, cell phones, sarees and two wheelers and four wheelers too form a significant chunk of seizures now.

In the 2023 Assembly elections, the enforcement agencies seized ₹317.58 crore of cash, liquor worth ₹128.24 crore and drugs/narcotics worth ₹41.71 crore. Gold, silver and other precious metals worth ₹186.97 crore were also seized. There were allegations that a major chunk of these belonged to jewellers and traders, but the attempts to lure voters with these items has not been ruled out.

Other freebies such as laptops, cookers, sarees and even rice were seized in some areas in the 2023 Assembly polls. These freebies meant to induce voters amounted to ₹85.54 crore in that election and has reached close to the ₹25 crore mark in the current Lok Sabha polls.

The CEO said officials have kept a keen eye on the movement of inducements. This has resulted in seizures of huge quantities of cash and other allurements. Officials were also alerted by the confessional statements of the accused in the phone-tapping case in 2023. In their statements, the accused said that money was transported in government and police vehicles. The CEO said steps have been initiated to ensure that there is no scope for such developments this time around.

The secretary for the Forum for Good Governance, M. Padmanabha Reddy, contended that the money meant for inducing voters has been reaching them in spite of the seizures by the election authorities. The phone-tapping case is under investigation by the police. "The accused have admitted that they have transported huge amounts of cash from one place to other during the elections," he said.

Given the huge amounts of cash and other freebies that have been seized even before the last date of filing nominations, officials have been checking government and police vehicles too as a precautionary measure. Though more and more seizures are being made, no cases have been registered against the candidates contesting, who are responsible for the distribution of cash, liquor, and freebies. Due to lack of evidence, they are unable to present evidence in the special court constituted to try the offences, including election offences, by MLAs and MPs. It is grossly insufficient to register cases against drivers transporting the cash or freebies but not the candidates who are trying to induce voters. If officials are serious about tackling bribery, they need to do more than just seize cash and

## Little correlation between higher temperatures and lower turnout

Many seats had lower turnouts despite lower temperatures while some saw high voting despite more heat

#### **DATA POINT**

#### Srinivasan Ramani

o far, 189 out of 543 constituencies have voted in two phases in the Lok Sabha elections. We do not have the overall turnouts in phase 1 and phase 2 as the Election Commission of India (ECI) has not provided updated figures or electors' information for all the seats that went to the polls in these two phases. But the ECI has provided seat-by-seat voter turnout data. The numbers suggest that turnout has fallen somewhat in both phases compared to the 2019 elections. Overall, voter participation or the turnout rate increased or stayed the same in only 32 of these 189 seats compared to the 2019 elections; the rest have seen a decrease in turnout. In the 2014 elections, 60 seats saw an increased turnout and 129 saw a decreased turnout

(Table 1). One of the key reasons propounded for the lower turnout is the ongoing heat wave across many States. The ECI has taken note of the heatwave and is trying to find ways of tackling it. India is a predominantly tropical country with many States, including in the Gangetic plains, the central, western, eastern plains, and the peninsular regions, experiencing a relatively hot summer this year.

Did higher day temperatures result in subdued voting across constituencies in India? A look at constituencies in the aforementioned regions (172 seats overall) show that there was an increase in temperature in 118 seats compared to 2019 and a decrease only in 54 seats. In 2014, there was an increase in temperature in 142 seats and a decrease in 30 seats compared to the previous elections.

Did the turnout fall because of an increase in temperature across these constituencies? Not necessarily. The correlation between the

the turnout compared to the 2019 election is almost negligent (0.016) for the seats in the aforementioned region. So is the correlation (-0.048) for corresponding figures in comparison with the 2014 elections (Table 3).

The reasons are not difficult to fathom. In some States such as Chhattisgarh, and to some extent Karnataka, turnouts increased despite the increase in temperature, while in some States such as Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, the turnouts decreased despite a decrease in temperature in a number of seats. The lack of uniformity in decrease in turnouts corresponding to increases in temperature and vice-versa has led to little correlation in these two variables (change in temperature versus change in turnout).

When we look at semi-urban and urban seats (largely metropolitan areas), there is a slightly higher and non-zero negative relationship. This means an increase in temperature has coincided marginally with a decrease in turnout. These figures hold true for changes from both the 2014 and 2019 elections. When we consider only urban (metropolitan) seats that have gone to the polls, the relationship gets a bit stronger between higher temperatures and lower turnouts but even then, the correlation coefficient is only -0.3 in the case of differences between the 2014 and 2024 elections and -0.16 corresponding to changes from the figures in 2019.

It is suffice to say that for a section of voters, rising mercury is not the sole reason to stay away from elections. The answers for the relative increase in voting apathy can only emerge from postpoll surveys. But it must be said that both the 2014 and the 2019 elections saw relatively higher voter turnouts compared to earlier elections. That was a consequence of both greater awareness due to the work by the ECI and the fact that a large chunk of the voters turned up to favour the BJP.

The tables are constructed using past election data from LokDhaba, and past temperature data using IMDLIB

Beating the heat: An elderly woman walks with the aid of a stick as she arrives to cast her vote at Morakkala in Chalakudy Lok Sabha constituency on Friday. THULASI KAKKAT



Table 1: The table shows temperatures and turnouts in seats on the days when polling was held in 2019 and 2024

State	Count of seats	Average temperature difference with 2019* (°C)	Average turnout difference with 2019 (Percentage points)	Average temperature in 2024 (°C)	Average temperature in 2019 (°C)	Seats in which turnouts decreased from 2019	Seats in which temperature increased from 2019
Tamil Nadu	39	1.04	-2.69	38.49	37.46	35/39	35/39
Rajasthan	25	-3.97	-4.77	38.37	42.34	22/25	1/25
Kerala	20	2.37	-6.63	35.10	32.73	20/20	20/20
Uttar Pradesh	16	4.38	-6.24	39.09	34.71	16/16	16/16
Karnataka	14	1.59	0.84	36.52	34.93	4/14	13/14
Maharashtra	13	0.57	-0.14	41.71	41.14	8/13	6/13
Madhya Pradesh	12	-2.25	-8.08	40.41	42.66	12/12	0/12
Bihar	9	5.76	-3.84	40.49	34.72	9/9	9/9
West Bengal	6	3.34	-3.46	34.12	30.78	6/6	6/6
Chhattisgarh	4	2.20	1.41	40.89	38.69	0/4	4/4
Tripura	2	1.62	-1.44	32.82	31.21	2/2	2/2
Puducherry	1	0.90	-2.34	35.96	35.06	1/1	1/1
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	1	0.43	-0.99	33.00	32.57	1/1	1/1
Assam	10	0.3	-3.36	36.77	36.47	6/10	4/10

\* The averages are for the temperature/ turnout differences across seats in States

Table 2: The table shows the seats with the most turnout and the least

turnout in select states as of phase 2				
State	Most turnout	Least turnout		
Tamil Nadu	Dharmapuri (81.2%)	Chennai Central (53.96%)		
Rajasthan	Barmer (75.93%)	Karauli - Dhaulpur (49.59%)		
Kerala	Vadakara (78.41%)	Pathanamthitta (63.37%)		
Uttar Pradesh	Saharanpur (66.14%)	Mathura (49.41%)		
Karnataka	Mandya (81.67%)	Bangalore South (53.17%)		
Maharashtra	Garhchiroli - Chimur (71.88%)	Nagpur (54.3%)		
Madhya Pradesh	Chhindwara (79.83%)	Rewa (49.43%)		
Bihar	Katihar (63.76%)	Nawada (43.17%)		
West Bengal	Jalpaiguri (83.66%)	Darjiling (74.76%)		

Table 3: The correlations between changes in temperature and turnout in seats in the 2014 and

Correlations for 2014	Correlations for 2019
All tropical areas	All tropical areas
-0.037	+0.023
Semi-urban and Urban areas	Semi-urban and Urban areas
-0.238	-0.239
Urban areas	Urban areas
-0.299	-0.155

The charts are based on data collated using the IMDLIB python library which scrapes weather data from the India Meteorological Department. The library was developed for lwcc.in by Saswata Nandi, Pratiman Patel & Sabyasachi Swain



FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 29, 1974

### Bhutto keen on ties with

Islamabad, April 28: Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Z.A. Bhutto, said to-day he hoped diplomatic relations between his country and India could be restored by the end of this month or the beginning of next month. "I don't see why we should not restore diplomatic relations - the sooner the better," he told UPI in an interview.

Mr. Bhutto said he saw no difficulty in Mrs. Indira Gandhi's acceptance of his informal invitation to her to visit Pakistan.

"So, at the appropriate time I expect the Indian Prime Minister would visit Pakistan," he said.

On Pakistan's difficult relations with neighbouring Afghanistan, Mr. Bhutto said, "Afghanistan, on its own, does not pose a problem to us."

He acknowledged Pakistan would be in deep trouble if Afghanistan received "physical support" from outside for an attack on Pakistan. He pledged that Pakistan would "never commit aggression against Afghanistan."

Asked about Afghanistan's claim that it had "documentary evidence" that Pakistan had plotted to unseat the new regime in Kabul, Mr. Bhutto replied, "I can tell you with all the emphasis at my command that this is not true. We are always prepared to discuss all matters but we cannot compromise on our territorial integrity." Afghanistan had lent support to the efforts of tribals to carve out what they called "Pakhtoonistan", Mr. Bhutto said.

Answering questions about arms supply Mr. Bhutto insisted that the U.S. was "obligated" under two bilateral treaties signed in 1958-59 and never abrogated, to supply arms to

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 29, 1924

#### Raw cotton

The Director of Agriculture sends us for publication: The receipts of loose cotton at presses and spinning mills in the Madras Presidency from 3rd February 1924 to 19th April amounted to 143 bales of 400 lb. lint against an estimate of 4,77,800 bales of the total crop of 1923-24. The receipts in the corresponding period of the previous year were only 67,577 bales, 28,793 bales mainly of pressed cotton were received at spinning mills and 13,491 bales were exported by sea while 4,503 bales were imported by sea, mainly from Bombay.

change in temperature and that of



{ OUR TAKE }

## EVMs win the day in the court

SC rejecting a return to paper ballots should end the debate on the use of the machines in polls

he Supreme Court's order last week should set at rest the doubts raised about the sanctity of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and thereby, the integrity of the election process itself. The two-judge bench, ruling on a clutch of petitions that demanded 100% cross-verification of votes cast on EVMs with the Voter Verified Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs) or a return to the ballot paper system, said the machines are "simple, secure and user-friendly" and that a return to paper ballots would be tantamount to undoing many years of electoral reforms: The plea for returning to paper ballots is "foible and unsound" as well as "regressive", and the fears regarding tampering or data mismatches in the electoral process were "unfounded", the judges said.

Indian elections have been a work in progress since the first general elections in 1952. The Election Commission of India (ECI) has shepherded this mammoth process involving hundreds of millions of voters in a remarkable fashion. The deepening of a democratic culture in the country, technology, tweaks in ECI governance, tightening of the laws, even judicial directives, have, over the decades, contributed to the strengthening of the process. Among the many reforms, the introduction of EVMs marked a major departure in the conduct of elections: In the era of paper ballots, the counting of votes was a long-drawnout process that often led to delays in the declaration of results. Drawing parallels with the experience of elections in liberal democracies in the West does not work because of the scale of the exercise and size of the electorates — for instance, the ECI has set up over a million booths across the country for nearly a billion voters. To suggest a reversal of this progress is, to put it mildly, foolhardy. Besides, the Court has given directives to address concerns regarding the security and functioning of the machines, of course, with caveats. That should address apprehensions regarding the sanctity of the election process.

Though the Court has unambiguously settled the matter in favour of EVMs, there is a need to reflect on the rising scepticism regarding the integrity of the election process. What took the form of a lack of faith in technology in the court is, in fact, a reflection of rising distrust, presumably among a small but expanding minority in society, in institutions, including ECI. The onus is on the venerable ECI to reaffirm its institutional independence and uphold its stellar legacy as the custodian of Indian elections. The ongoing elections provide it with enough opportunity.

## Fight the rising tide of food insecurity

7ith food insecurity worsening, the Sustainable Development Goal of zero hunger by 2030 seems all but abandoned. The Food Security Information Network (FSIN)—an alliance of the United Nations (UN) and several development groups—reports that 282 million people around the world faced acute hunger in 2023, largely because of conflict and the climate crisis. That this was the fifth consecutive year of a rise in the numbers facing acute hunger is evidence of a deeply skewed food availability and access dynamic, given large surpluses in some economies and nearabsolute deprivation in some regions.

Conflict has played a major role in the upswing of hunger since 2016-17. The FSIN report makes particular mention of the conflicts in Gaza and Sudan. Conflict becomes a multipronged attack on food security by pulling down food production in impacted areas, disrupting supply chains and fuelling desperation which, in turn, stokes further conflict. Now, the weaponisation of hunger by blocking aid and relief, as was seen in Gaza, has added another dimension.

Against this backdrop, and the portents of the climate crisis, nations must act in a concerted manner. First, warring parties must ensure unimpeded food supply to conflict-affected regions. Second, countries must make farm resilience a leading part of their adaptation efforts, with a focus on hardy crops, bio-fortification to lessen nutritional insecurity, and closing the production gap. To address the skewed dynamic of surplus and wastage in some economies and deprivation in others, tariff and non-tariff barriers for agri trade must be lowered for easier flow of food to destinations that need it. Only then can the zero-hunger aim be revived.

# Back Make in India with testing in India

From high sugar in baby food to adulteration in masalas, regulatory agencies need to be alert and equipped to deal with the crisis

eople are fed by the industry, which pays no attention to health ... and are treated by the health industry, which pays no attention to food," was the caustic observation of American writer and environmentalist Wendell Berry. While this critiques the organised medical profession's inattention to nutrition and the role of the food industry, public health votaries recognise the importance of adequate and appropriate nutrition across the life course and are vigilant about the role of the food industry in enabling or endangering health through myriad products that reach our mouths from the market. Hence the outrage at recent reports that Nestlé was marketing a baby food cereal in India and many other developing countries with higher sugar content than the version it marketed in Europe. Around the same time, reports of regulatory agencies in Hong Kong and Singapore banning masalas marketed by two Indian manufacturers aroused alarm.

The report on Nestlé's baby food cereal (Cerelac) was released by Pub-

lic Eye, a Swiss NGO, which conducted the study in partnership with the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN). IBFAN has been watching Nestlé since they battled over the manner in which the transnational food company marketed breast milk substitutes. Indian and global health authorities recommend exclusive breast milk feeding for the first six months of life because of its ideal nutrient composition, immunity-boosting properties, and support for the growth of a healthy microbiome in the baby's gut, apart from promoting a close psychological bonding between mother

and child. Commercial campaigns to promote breast milk substitutes have often undermined these health considerations. Let's turn to the contro-

K Srinath versy over the nutrient Reddy composition of a baby cereal that the industry has been promoting. Is the industry turning a blind eye to health considerations while enhancing the addictive appeal of the baby cereal by increasing the sugar content? If so, why is it careful not to do so in Western Europe while it feels free to do so in developing countries, including India? Is it because there is considerable variance in the capacity of national regulatory agencies to lay down clearly defined rules, vigilantly monitor and enforce compliance, conduct independent testing, and initiate action against violators?

High sugar content in baby cere-

als, can lead to obesity, while increasing insulin resistance in muscles, fat and liver. This sets the stage for prediabetes, which can progress to diabetes. Since high sugar content instils addiction, the baby demands more cereal leading to high levels of total body fat and abdominal fat but with a poorly developed lean muscle mass. That dims the hope of a fit, tent of a baby cereal food product. preferred pliable persons in the healthy, and economically productive generation that can be the flag bearer of our future progress.

The masala mystery has a different storyline. Ethylene oxide, a chemical carcinogen, was reportedly found to

be a contaminant of internationally marketed Indian masalas by regulatory agencies in Hong Kong and Singapore. Following their ban in these two countries, the media has also reported that this chemical had been detected in 527 Indian food products by the European

Food Safety Authority (EFSA), between September 2020 and April 2024. This industrial chemical is mainly used as an intermediary in the manufacture of other chemicals. It is also used in the fumigation of spices. Human exposure to ethylene oxide can cause cancers like lymphoma and leukaemia. Residual presence of the chemical in packaged spice products or contamination during processing in premises where industrial chemicals are also produced/stored is probably the result of poor manufacturing practices, unlike the intentionally raised sugar con-



Our regulatory agencies need to be resourceful, vigilant, and impervious to industry influence or political pressures

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) is reportedly attempting to obtain IBFAN's reports of the tests conducted on Indian and international versions of Cerelac. It is also collecting countrywide samples of the Indian masala brands that have been red-flagged by international regulators. These will, no doubt, be tested in competent Indian labs. It is good to see the agency reacting, but what measures were taken proactively in the past to check food products manufactured in India? Do our regulatory agencies have the required systems in place, with defined processes and needed resources? Why should we depend on revelations by foreign organisations or alerted by proscriptions by international regulators? When we make in India, should we not also test in India? Our regulatory agencies need to be resourceful, vigilant, and impervious to industry influence or political pressures. They must have technical strength internally and, when needed, must draw upon the expertise of other scientists who have no conflicts of interest. We must guard against agency capture through positioning of industry's agency's leadership positions or heavily loading them into technical advisory committees that guide the agency. While such appointments are often political decisions, civil society voices must ensure that regulatory agencies remain committed to the protection of public health.

These concerns are not unique to India. In the past decade, some Western nations have witnessed evisceration of their regulatory agencies by libertarian political ideologies and industry's overpowering influence. Developing countries must be even more vigilant against the erosion of

regulatory efficiency. While commenting on Food Politics, a book by food industry critic Marion Nestle (unconnected to the food giant), celebrity chef and author Julia Child cautions: "We learn how powerful, intrusive, influential and invasive big industry is and how alert we must constantly be to prevent it from influencing not only our own personal nutritional choices, but those of our government agencies."

K Srinath Reddy is distinguished professor of public health, PHFI. The views expressed are personal

STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



## Bihar poser: Will caste trump all other factors?

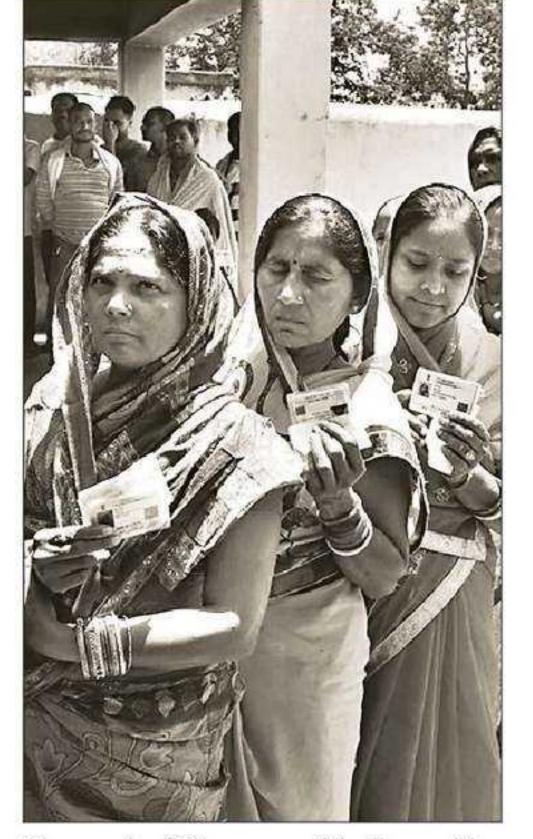
m penning these words from Bihar, whose political dynamics are key to understanding India's intricate political landscape. Bihar's politics is a play full of twists and turns, where characters emerge unexpectedly and recede into the shadows without warning.

This is why the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) did not hesitate to support Nitish Kumar when he broke with the grand alliance and formed a government with the party ahead of the 2020 assembly elections. This alliance fought and won the 2020 elections, but after 24 months, Nitish returned to Lalu Prasad, breaking free from the "natural partnership" and returning to the "old family".

Everyone knew then that the tide would turn again. Nitish Kumar, who had previously felt "suffocated" with the BJP, agreed to form a government with the party a few months before the Lok Sabha elections. He is now a member of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and has stated, "Now I will not go anywhere; I will stay here."

The Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and BJP also changed their tone on Nitish Kumar accordingly. Bihar is the only state in recent times where the chief minister (CM) has changed political partners four times. But why are the RJD and BJP collaborating with Nitish without learning from previous mistakes? The answer is simple. Among Bihar's approximately 76.4 million voters, 8–10% choose to be with Nitish in all situations.

The reason behind such loyalty to Nitish Kumar is that after becoming CM for the second time in 2005, he took several revolutionary initiatives. His government gave away bicycles to girls in every town and village. This brought girls out of their homes to pursue education and ushered in a shift



The people of Bihar are politically sensitive, but are obstinate about voting on caste lines

in society's lowest classes. He also envisioned schemes for providing water and electricity to every household.

Furthermore, through liquor prohibition in 2016, he won the hearts of underprivileged women in villages. The experiment has also been criticised, though, because of the loss of lives caused by the consumption of illicit liquor. Liquor smuggling is also commonplace now. The prohibition law was so harsh that people started calling it "devilish". It was softened to some extent as opposition mounted, but is still as hard as a tortoiseshell.

The opponents of Nitish Kumar argue that his recent shift has done irreparable damage to his reputation. Some of his recent utterances have also led to a great outcry. The current election will be the most significant test of people's attitudes towards him.

It is necessary to mention Tejashwi Yadav here. He fought the 2020 elections with the Congress and the Communists. The RJD emerged as the largest party in the Bihar Assembly in that election. But five of his MLAs switched sides and the BJP became the largest party in the assembly with 85

Needless to say, the BJP plays political games carefully. The party knows when to be friendly and when to abandon someone. Its ties with the Paswans are an example. Ram Vilas Paswan died while campaigning for the 2020 election was underway, sparking a power struggle between his son, Chirag Paswan, and younger brother, Pashupati Kumar Paras. Five of the six Members of Parliament of the Lok Janshakti Party supported Paras, who split the party and was appointed to the Cabinet. This stunned Chirag, who calls himself "Modi's Hanuman". But prior to the current elections, the BJP pivoted back to Chirag, leaving Paras high and dry. Former CM Jitan Ram Manjhi is among those who have joined and left the NDA. He has been shifting sides throughout, which has been extremely beneficial for

The BJP has wisely balanced caste equations in the state. All its candidates intend to cross the river holding the hands of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is the most popular leader here as well. But the INDIA bloc will give the NDA a tough fight. In the first phase of elections in Bihar, votes were polled for four seats. But voter turnout for the polls was 5% lower, just as in other states of the Hindi belt. This has made the NDA more alert.

The people of Bihar are undoubtedly politically sensitive, but they remain obstinate about voting on the basis of caste. In such a situation, will the NDA be able to work its magic in the state, just as it had done in 2014 and 2019? Or, will caste equations become the overriding factor? When viewed from the top, the land of Chanakya and Chandragupta appears to be filled with apathetic silence, but the same questions are resonating in the minds of every Bihari at this moment.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, Hindustan. The views expressed are personal POPE FRANCIS } SOVEREIGN OF VATICAN CITY STATE

Prison is a harsh reality, and problems such as overcrowding ... give rise to a great deal of suffering. But it can also be a place of moral and material Ha rebirth

## Gaza's chilling effect on counter-terrorism

he world was on the edge as both Israel and Iran came close to war in the past few days. Iran responded with an aerial attack to avenge Israel's strike on a facility in Damascus, Syria, which killed one of its senior military officials. After a seemingly controlled Israeli retaliation against Iranian mili-

tary facilities, Tehran did not escalate further. These tensions in West Asia, as the war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas continues, are taking place amid multiple fissures in the global order. The United States (US), despite playing a critical role in the region, is both, not keen on being part of another long-drawn military competition, while simultaneously attempting to maintain its hegemonic power structure when the likes of China and Russia

are playing spoiler. In the middle, the likes of Hamas, are doubling down on their political power and clout beyond just tactical assaults.

Qatar has hosted the political representation of Hamas since 2012, an office opened with the blessings of both the US and even Israel. Tel Aviv reportedly continued a level of cash flow to Gaza under Hamas control, despite concerns being raised. How-

ever, the Qatari leadership is now having second thoughts about continuing to host Hamas at a time when negotiations with the group spearheaded by Doha and Cairo seem to be at an impasse. Qatari prime minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani is revaluating his mediation role after increasing criticism against the Gulf State. Simultaneously, the chairman of the political bureau of Hamas in Doha, Ismail Haniyeh, recently visited Turkey as rumours started to make rounds that the group was potentially looking for a new office space.

Hamas, proscribed as a terror organisation by the US since 1997, has managed to empower its political office by many folds since the October 7 terror strike against Israel. Utilising the fact that the group's military wing in Gaza still holds dozens of Israeli hostages captive, and not just piggybacking, but manipulating pro-Palestine narratives as pro-Hamas ones, these lines have been significantly blurred by a global pushback against Israeli military action in Gaza and the rising number of civilian casualties.

Hamas is not the first one to benefit from the empowerment of political narrative diluting the militant one, and more specifically, being platformed by the realpolitik of Doha. The Taliban in Afghanistan is now in its third year of

holding power in Kabul, and the deal which got them to walk in and take control, was signed with the US in Qatar in February 2020. The Taliban's political office in Doha arguably gained significant political clout while the group enacted its militant activities in Afghanistan unabated, mobilising successfully the old proverbial adage which says, "you have the watches, we have the time". Hamas seems to be playing the same deck of cards. Political negotiation with a proscribed extremist group is not a new idea. Interestingly, the group's own appeal and politics often drive decision-making on what level they can be engaged with, if at all. Offhanded and reactionary engagement has dire consequences as well and it potentially legitimises both ideology and the polity.

In the post-9/11 and War on Terror (WoT) era, these have consequences. This WoT era, now on its deathbed after wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, allowed many countries to finally define their own terror threats and counter-terror requirements. Multi-Kabir lateralism led by US power came out Taneja with new tools to counter these threats and there was a sense of abso-

lutism on disallowing terrorism and accompanying narratives space or attention. These new tools benefited many, including

While there is no doubt that despite the mistakes and ills made during the WoT period (such as the Iraq war), there were benefits as well which were more visible for countries that usually did not get space or attention on raising issues of terrorism. India has tried to hold this momentum together within its limited capacities by hosting a session of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee in 2022 and the subsequent release of the Delhi Declaration specifically concentrating on the use of emerging technologies by terror groups.

Global counter-terror narratives are backsliding, and this trend needs to be arrested as a compromise with a section of these groups becomes an acceptable way out. Political empowerment of certain ideologies is myopic deterrence without long-term thinking factored in. A better quality of thinking is required in countering terrorism that goes beyond a level of normalisation for concessionary policies and politics.

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**OUR VIEW** 



## **Higher-for-longer rates** pose a peculiar problem

Interest rates will probably stay higher for longer not just in the US, but here in India too. It could restrain a revival in private investment and constrain what the government can spend

s nations, both India and the US have shared civilizational values, especially the unshakeable belief in democracy as a just and equitable political model. There is another critical area where commonality seems to be emerging: the path that leads from monetary policy to the political economy. The US central bank, the Federal Reserve, and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) are both confronted with a quandary that has implications for the theatre of politics. Both central banks are under pressure to cut benchmark interest rates, but find their hands tied by an odd growth-inflation dynamic. Wall Street, for example, looks convinced that US inflation data for March—at 2.7%, up from February's 2.5%—may prolong the wait for interest rate cuts. In the face of strong growth impulses and robust hiring numbers, the US Fed is likely to keep its principal policy rate—currently at 5.33%—higher for longer. This has sparked off a debate over the utility of restrictive rate structures and whether policy has been tightened sufficiently over the past few months to rein in growth impulses, consumption expenditure and their feedback loop with inflation.

India's central bank faces a somewhat similar conundrum. RBI initiated rate hikes around the same time as the Fed in 2022, coupled with a bespoke liquidity play. This disinflationary strategy did yield dividends, but only up to a degree, given that Indian inflation right now is primarily a supply-side phenomenon. So, while the rise of India's consumer price index has slowed from 5.7% in December 2023 to 4.9% in March 2024, its volatile elements remain elevated. The rate of food inflation, for instance, was 7.7% in March, slightly lower than February's 7.8%. Concerns shadow the winter harvest; the prognosis of a harsh summer has spelt worries of crops in short supply, especially vegetables and pulses—though, if it happens in time, a Pacific pivot towards La Niña later this year could enhance monsoon rains. RBI acknowledges that volatility in food and fuel prices—the latter on account of geopolitical flashpoints—has put its disinflationary push at risk. An added wrinkle is our post-pandemic recovery in economic activity and a 7% GDP growth forecast for 2024-25. Minutes of the last monetary policy committee meeting reveal that its members view the current growth-inflation dynamic with some unease and would like to tread with caution. Or, higher-forlonger in India too.

This poses a peculiar problem for the Indian political economy. The government's frontloading of capital expenditure, with spending on it from April 2023 to February 2024 having grown by over 36%, has failed to achieve the desired effect of inducing the private sector to invest and broad-basing the economy's revival. With policy rates unlikely to go down anytime soon, the private sector might stay reluctant to open purses for longer too. While rates alone do not guide investment decisions, they do tilt the balance, as a higher cost of capital demands a larger return on capital employed to justify credit uptake. Unless markets for goods and services buck up to promise a significantly broader boom ahead, uneven private investment would keep job generation at sub-par levels. With rural stress also in evidence, this could dampen growth impulses as we go along, which would restrict the Centre's revenue below what's imperative for India's development and welfare enlargement.

#### **THEIR VIEW**

## Allot or auction satellite telecom spectrum? Signal clarity, please

The rationale of insisting on auctions has weakened as technology and global norms have evolved



are technology policy experts with the Koan Advisory Group

he 2G spectrum judgement of 2012 is making headlines again. The government is pleading at the Supreme Court (SC) for an amendment to its landmark telecom auctions ruling that mandated the sale of 2G spectrum to the highest bidder. But the Centre wants to allocate some spectrum through administrative means, such as licensing—an approach often used for procuring services from the private sector. This comes amid talk of the telecom department processing a permit for Elon Musk's Starlink that needs spectrum to run satellite communication services in India, which will improve connectivity in remote regions with poor land-based telecom infrastructure.

But such exceptions are a sensitive matter, given the past political and economic fallout of the 2G case. In response to a presidential reference, by which the country's nominal head seeks clarity on any law pertaining to current or anticipated public importance, the SC had clarified that spectrum auctions were not universally required.

The 2012 judgement had the severe economic consequence of 122 telecom licences getting cancelled, causing chaos. The SC's reply to the President was advisory in nature, but the government is not taking any chances. India's new Telecom Act allows allocation of spectrum via administrative means in certain cases, but leaves it subject to

ambiguous determinations of public interest, which is not defined. Economic welfare considerations go beyond revenue maximization, but until this is spelt out in laws, administrative decisions would be vulnerable to judicial intervention.

The pricing of public goods or services must help ensure a fair distribution of resources to those able to make the best use of them. If the primary focus of allocating public goods is maximizing revenues from private bidders, pushing them to squeeze most profits out of what they acquire this way, it would risk these resources being monopolized by the richest few, retail prices getting inflated and consumer access declining.

Exceptions to the auction route are practical necessities. Take the case of satellite spectrum, a shared global resource. Unlike terrestrial spectrum used for communication signals between mobile-phone towers and users on the ground, satellite-based communication involves transmission of signals to and from assets in space. This necessitates global coordination to prevent signal disruptions between senders and receivers.

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the oldest United Nations agency, coordinates cross-border management of satellite spectrum. It works with 193 member countries, including India, through an international treaty-Radio Regulations. These guide members on regulating relevant bands of spectrum, including shared satellite spectrum. They recognize that satellite spectrum and geostationarysatellite orbits are limited natural resources and "must be used rationally, efficiently and economically."

The agency bolsters state capacity to oversee the complexities of satellite spectrum management. National telecom regulators don't have the capacity to replicate what the ITU does, as Radio Regulations are hard to enforce. They are revised every three or four years at its World Radiocommunication Conferen

 $ces \, (WRCs), which \, involve \, nearly \, 5,000$ experts and country representatives who negotiate spectrum allocation and frequency coordination, and also develop strategies to ensure efficient and equitable use.

Allocating satellite spectrum is likely to fail in the absence of international coordination. Auctions may also lead to a violation of Radio Regulations that require member states to avoid harmful disruptions to signal transmissions. International precedence is in favour of administrative allocation in the case of satellite spectrum for these reasons. No country holds such auctions without considering their international impact, and all experiments to do otherwise so far have failed.

The US, for instance, was conducting auctions for satellite orbital resources for domestic broadcasting needs, but ceased this practice and passed the more up-to-date Orbit Act in 2000, which banned such auctions. Other attempts to auction satellite spectrum in countries such as the UK and Thailand also failed on account of insufficient bidder interest.

India must emerge from the long shadow of the 2G case because the evolving nature of technology and international cooperation demands a more responsive regulatory framework. The post-liberalization establishment of over a dozen economic regulators, including for the telecom industry, was party meant to ensure that rigidities of the public sector don't spill over to the private sector and throttle progress and innovation.

Indian laws should offer clearer guidance to regulators. This will ensure that they have the clarity necessary for effective governance. As courts don't always have what's required to interpret ambiguous statutes and optimize economic gains, we need better legislation to guard against the repeated erosion of economic value. We must not forget this important lesson from India's eco-

#### 10 PEAKS AGO



Not a single one of the cells that compose you knows who you are, or cares.

**DANIEL DENNETT** 

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

## Let's accept it: Life is beautiful and without any magic

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the 'Decoupled

n odd quality of the Western intellectual world is that its giants take simplistic questions very seriously. It is as though social equality makes it hard for them to be dismissive of majority opinions that are usually very naive. For instance almost every Western intellectual superstar finds the need to denounce God. But how sophisticated can any argument against God be? Stripped of all ornaments of articulation, such debates cannot be qualitatively any different from what we used to have in high school. But there is a related question that Western intellectuals are obsessed with, which is more complex and for that reason highly entertaining: Is there magic? Is life mystical? Are some things, plainly, spooky?

In my view, most people who are called philosophers are not that at all. Most of them are fans of philosophy, or actors who simulate thinkers. But I have for several years grown to accept what Daniel Dennett suspected about himself—that he was a philosopher, even though he was also known as a

'cognitive scientist.' Dennett died last week of what some people would call old age. But he was only 82.

He said there is no magic, and even as he persuaded us to let go of our last hope of a mystical world, he somehow made it seem that the alternative was more entertaining. He said there was no magic in the mind, especially the human mind which can perceive itself as a mind. He said the mental can be physically explained; every aspect of the mind can be explained as we understand more and more about our physical body. If there is a human soul, it would not faze him. To him, the soul was probably more of a semantic problem. Whatever it might be, it's made up of millions of tiny robots called cells, and smaller robots inside these cells, robots inside robots inside robots, all of them together creating the idea of the self, of consciousness, of a life that regards itself as life. No magic is required. He found this more beautiful than a mystical world where the Universe has a point to its existence.

We should not have happened. Human life was a freak accident. "Evolution is a process that depends on amplifying things that almost never happen," he wrote in one of his many books, From Bacteria to Bach and Back. A mutation in DNA almost never happens. "Not once in a billion copyings—but evolution depends on it."

The fact that we happened is astonishing. But having happened, it is not so astonishing that we think we did not happen by chance. We look at our rare occurrence and marvel at how many things had to go right, against steep odds, and wonder if

there is someone out there who is responsible, or "some force" as some people say to sound scientific.

Dennett points out that many complex things in nature are so exquisite that they appear to have purpose but are a series of logical accidents. For instance, the intricate and exquisite colonies of termites. These insects don't know what they are doing. They build their cathedrals robotically because they are programmed to do that.

There is something individually 'mindless' about the hive-mind. The termite colony is an architectural phenomenon that has ensured the survival of a species, yet it has no purposeful design, Dennett says, unlike Antoni Gaudi's church in Barcelona.

The human brain is more like a termite colony than a magnificent church. Our brain is the evolution and synchronization of millions of mindless robots called neurons, the cells that form our nervous system. Dennett writes that neurons were once organisms with their own plans, but now they consti-

tute the brain. Modern neurons "are in effect the Our perception domesticated descendants of very ancient eukaryoof a soul or even tes... Composed of billions of idiosyncratic neurons vulnerability to that evolved to fend for events beyond themselves, the brain's functional architecture is our control can more like a free market than a 'politburo' hierarchy be explained where all tasks are assigned from on high.' without magic

The fact that millions of tiny robots can create not just the brain, but also the

idea of the self, made him worry about artificial intelligence (AI). He could never underestimate what a cluster of lifeless things can eventually become. Even there, even in the possibility of AI simulating human life, there is no magic. It can be perfectly explained.

For someone who denounced magic,

Dennett also said there was no free will. At first brush, that sounds like a nod to magic.

One day, you step out of the house for a walk and instead of taking a left turn, you turn right. Was it inevitable? But why should the universe make that decision: doesn't it have grander things to do? We can see all of universe as deterministic; filled with dominos whose fates are preordained by an event from the beginning of time. But doesn't life break that? Isn't life chaotic enough for random actions to determine outcomes?

Dennett was probably not so interested in microcosmic free will—what made you turn right, He couldn't have known, anyway, His idea of free will concerned the larger arcs of life. When we make a choice, he said, we appear to use information to make a rational decision, or a rebellious one. But that is not what led to our choice. Our mind is a cauldron of emotions and biases: it already knows what it is going to do, but is not aware of it. Many human decisions, he argued, were pre-ordained, a continuation of long chains of events. Choices are made for us by forces that are too strong for us to control.

So, maybe ves, there was a powerful reason why you turned right. It was inevitable that you would turn right. But even in that, there is probably no magic.



## Universities can drive economic expansion around campus towns

More public investment in developing world-class institutions of learning would attract students and boost local economies



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oston University (BU), a mid-sized private research university in the US, has around 700 Indian students who pay an average of ₹50 lakh annual fee and spend another ₹20 lakh on living expenses. The total money coming from these students into Boston from BU alone comes to about ₹490 crore. Northeastern Univer sity, in the same city with similar fee, has around 2,000 Indian students who bring about ₹1,500 crore annually to Boston. For a city of 650,000,  $this \, implies \, that \, Indian \, students \, from \, these \, two$ universities alone are stuffing ₹30,000 into every Bostonian pocket, in a manner of speaking. And these are just two of the 44 institutions of higher education in this city with a sizeable Indian student community. If one sums up the city's total international student population, its universities will look like the spinal cord of its urban growth. For an estimated 465,000 Indian students pursuing their higher education in the US, the country collects almost \$19.24 billion annually from us (by way of comparison, Himachal Pradesh's state GDP last year was about \$23 billion). No wonder that after covid (when foreign students couldn't go), many American universities removed the requirement of a four-year undergraduate degree for qualification to their Masters' programmes.

What economic needs do universities fulfil in modern societies? Prominent scholarly responses to this question focus on employment opportunities for graduates, learning that may lead to innovation, startups by graduates and so on. In that way, universities provide an impressive range of positive externalities, benefitting third parties that get to enjoy the fruits of a more educated society. While all this is indeed true, the prevailing discourse eclipses another crucial factor: universities and colleges serve as growth engines for local economies. The benefits of knowledge spillovers are spread over time and space: their employment benefits materialize over time and accrue to communities across the world.

We argue that there are substantially large and immediate benefits to local economies where colleges and universities are located that are hardly considered in policymaking.

People do talk about how colleges could spur economic growth in small towns. We see buzzing economic activity around a college or university. This is not only about shops, paying-guest hostels or taxi services around campuses, but also visible in the way student crowds go about the city living their daily lives. Every year, hundreds of thousands of students leave their homes and move to a new town to pursue higher education, infusing a new energy into those local economies. During summer breaks, many of those places look as if their lifeline



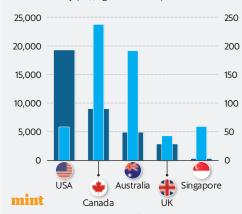
#### India's educational outflows

The money that Indian students spend on universities abroad amounts to a commercial bonanza for host countries and campus towns.

- Total money poured by Indian students in host country (in \$ million)
- country (in \$ million)

  Total money poured by Indian students per capita of

host country (in \$, right-hand scale)



ll values are approximate and for 2021-22 Source: Authors' calculations using ministry of external affairs data and other publicly available sources

is gone. Indeed, the prosperity of local businesses in such towns is closely linked to the presence and activities of a student community.

But these discussions are anecdotal. The more important question is: Have we recognized the full potential of a university as a growth engine for a town?

Western countries have recognized the significance of hosting both local and international students. According to 2022 data from India's ministry of external affairs, there are 1.33 million Indian students pursuing education abroad and 60% of them study in English-speaking countries. The US has about 465,000 Indian students, followed by Canada, with around 183,000. Australia and the UK have roughly 100,000 and 55,000 Indian students.

dents, respectively. When we estimate the total amount of money pumped into these countries' economies (assuming the average fee structure and living expenses mentioned earlier), the numbers are telling. For instance, the US earns around \$19 billion from Indian students alone. Measured per head, this is like saying every American earns an average of \$57 annually from Indian students alone. The aggregate value of income from all foreign students per capita would be much higher. According to estimates, the per capita annual inflow from international students ranges from \$43 in the UK to \$237 in Canada. In rupee terms, this implies that Indian students are putting some \$1,600 into every Canadian's pocket every month.

This is not simply a positive externality. This is direct earning. Universities need to be seen as a powerful engine of economic growth locally. It is no surprise that in most parts of the world, fees for international students are significantly higher than that for local students. Attracting foreign students, or even local ones, can therefore be seen as an effort in generating greater opportunities for local businesses.

In India, we only see such benefits in the form of *dhabas, chai* stalls and other small eateries near our campuses that are sustained by students. What we don't see is the huge underexploited opportunity.

India suffers from what we can call a sizable international student deficit. While we sent 1.33 million students abroad in 2021, we received only around 47,000 (and mainly from countries with lower per capita income). To unlock the potential of our universities and revitalize local economies, we need world-class institutions, with substantial investments in human capital (higher salary for faculty), infrastructure (where learning spaces flourish), and interdisciplinary collaboration (for large research projects).

India's budget allocation for education is about 3%, with only one-third of it for higher education. In countries with far lower international student deficits, the share is much higher. The solution lies in high public investment in higher education. As they say, build it and they will come. Only, this time, we must build excellent universities.

#### MINT CURATOR

### Google's Pichai has firmly put down an employee rebellion

It can't afford disruption over crucial defence-sector opportunities



DAVE LEE
is Bloomberg Opinion's US technology
columnist.



Pichai's tone was a stark departure from the company's old touchy-feely approach to employee activism. Not now. Pichai wrote: "This is too important a moment as a company for us to be distracted."

For most of his tenure, Pichai has been described in many quarters as a "peacetime CEO," a highly capable executive steering a ship whose course had already been set by the visionaries who came before him—in his case, Google co-founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page.

That changed when OpenAI fired the first salvo in the artificial intelligence wars in late 2022 with the release of ChatGPT, beating Google to that breakthrough. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, who quickly invested in OpenAI, laid down the battle lines after that, making it clear he thought Google's business model was now at risk. "They have to defend it all," he said.

With a fight on Alphabet's hands, the pressure is on the mild-mannered Pichai to get things in order. This hasn't been going altogether well. The company's rollout of AI has been confused, controversial and suffering from the perception it is lagging behind competitors. Its cloud business remains a distant third in market share behind Microsoft and Amazon. It's telling that Brin has recently returned to Google, like a retired old general "back in the trenches," as the Wall Street Journal put it.

So when Google employees held sit-ins and other protests against the company's involvement in Project Nimbus, the company did not hesitate to force out the unruly. "Every single one of those whose employment was terminated was personally and definitively involved in disruptive activity inside our buildings," Google said in a memo to employees. The 'No Tech for Apartheid' group disputes this, saying



Sundar Pichai doesn't want employee time spent on debating politics

some "non-participating bystanders" were also let go.

Would things have been handled differently had it been several years ago?

It's difficult to say. Sit-ins are an egregious form of business disruption. And it's not the first time Google has fired workers who have become outspoken on company ethics, offered poorly researched treatises on the differences between male and female engineers or claimed that the company's AI had become sentient.

What seems certain, however, is that Google is not considering heeding the protestors' demands, unlike in 2018 when it decided to back away from Project Maven, a Pentagon contract involving the use of AI. That episode provoked a fresh debate on what role American tech companies should play, or perhaps be obliged to play, in bolstering the tech capabilities of the US and its allies. Google erred on keeping its employees happy and the "don't be evil" culture intact.

Jeff Bezos' Amazon took a different approach: "This is a great country and it does need to be defended," he said at the time as the company was jostling with Microsoft for a lucrative Pentagon cloud contract. Employees not on board with that could work somewhere else. Google is now directing its employees to consider the same. Defence money is flowing to technology companies. "America's military-industrial complex has been rapidly expanding from the Capital Beltway to Silicon Val ley," concluded a recent report from the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University. From 2018 to 2022, Alphabet received \$4.3 billion from US defence spending compared with \$13.5 billion for Microsoft and \$10.2 billion for Amazon. As the defence sector. like every other industry, works to integrate cutting-edge AI, venture capital is pouring into defence tech startups: \$100 billion between 2021 and 2023, according to Pitchbook, more than the amount in the previous seven years combined.

There's opportunity on the table. Google wants it and fears missing out. There is no time for employees to spend work time talking about "disruptive issues" or "debate politics," Pichai has decreed.

Looking at Google's predicament, he's probably right. **©BLOOMBERG** 

**GUEST VIEW** 

## Viksit panchayats offer us a pathway to Viksit Bharat

#### SWATI PIRAMAL & MANMOHAN SINGH



are, respectively, vice chairperson of Piramal Group and head of Aspirational Bharat Collaborative, Piramal Foundation

ecades before the term 'Viksit Bharat' was coined, Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali held out an Indian vision: "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; Where knowledge is free; Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake." This encapsulates Viksit Bharat. With visible changes in many sectors, India is moving rapidly towards becoming a developed nation by 2047. Though urbanization is making rapid strides, 64.1% of our rural population (as per World Bank) governed by Gram Panchayats still has miles to go. The current Amrit Kaal cusp calls for us to examine the crucial role of Panchayats led by Sarpanches. As they play a pivotal role in grassroots empowerment and societal progress, it is essential to keep them at the centre of India's developmental agenda, anchored by the decentralization of authority.

the decentralization of authority.

Devolution of power: A Reserve Bank of India report highlights that states with a higher devolution index perform better on socio-economic development. So, for Viksit

Bharat, Gram Panchayats (GPs) need to operate independently: They must identify, plan and implement projects with agility, aligning them with local needs established through community consultations. The government has categorized Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into neatly defined Local Sustainable Development Goals (LSDGs) and issued guidelines for themebased planning. The GP Development Plan (GPDP) necessitates the formation of a GP Planning Facilitation Team (GPPFT) at each GP as a forum to facilitate the participation of various community stakeholders and departmental representatives and guide the planning and implementation of initiatives.

planning and implementation of initiatives. For achieving LSDGs, the devolution of three Fs (funds, functions and functionaries) is crucial. This will empower GPs and make their functioning transparent, accountable and efficient. The devolution of powers and functions to GPs varies considerably across the country. Kerala, for example, has devolved major functions to GPs. Its welfare programme Kudumbashree has made a significant difference in the lives of citizens. Similarly, Karnataka has devolved powers to GPs and introduced a system of preparing a GP Human Development Index. We need collective effort in various states to devolve

authority to GPs and leverage their capacity to achieve our collective aspirations.

Data for democratic decisions: India is leading the way for the world with digital technology to transform citizen services, exemplified by innovations like Aadhaar, UPI, Co-win and ABHA. Another useful

innovation, the Universal Citizen Interface is expected to act as an interface between citizens and government welfare schemes at the GP level. This tool's data orientation can guide the village Sarpanch on domain and locality-specific issues, enabling prioritization, planning and alignment with state and central schemes. By disseminating information on various welfare schemes in local

welfare schemes in local languages, GPs can use its potential for hyper-local problem-solving at scale.

Empower women leaders for a Viksit transformation: With women comprising nearly half of India's population, the participation of women at all levels of governance is the need of the hour. The 73rd Constitutional

Amendment Act mandates 33.3% reservation for women and marginalized communities in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) nationwide. Various instances show how decisions taken by empowered women have led to a profound societal transformation.

Aadhaar, led to a profound societal transformation.
Take the case of Jyoti Behar Devi, Sar
panch from Gumla, Jhark
hand, who stopped the sale
and consumption of alco

country status

requires that

no citizen gets

left behind.

**Empower rural** 

institutions

panch from Gumla, Jharkhand, who stopped the sale and consumption of alcohol in her panchayat and directed people towards livelihood opportunities. Anita Devi, Sarpanch from Gaya, Bihar, converted her vehicle into a 24×7 ambulance, mobilized multiple stakeholders and led lastmile convergence, which reduced home deliveries from 65% to 8% in less than

India has an opportunity to harness the potential of elected women representatives at PRIs to drive crucial social behaviour changes in health, education, water, agriculture, sanitation and more. Empowering these women with additional support can spark millions of micro innovations required to address local challenges.

Create motivation and competence: India has some of the world's best policies, legislation and welfare schemes. The efficacy of these is determined by an effective team with an enabling structure to drive the delivery of quality services on time. Top leaders at all levels can deliver on their development agendas thanks to such teams. This needs to happen just as efficiently at the rural level.

Andhra Pradesh has enabled the setting up of a 'village secretariat' at the GP level to induct teams for good governance, streamline administrative processes, enhance service delivery and empower local communities. If scaled up, this model, with appropriate customization as per local contexts, can empower more GPs across the country.

Our national aspiration of Viksit Bharat will require collective reflection aimed at a re-imagination of how Gram Panchayats are enabled to deliver services to citizens

enabled to deliver services to citizens.

Viksit panchayats can lead us to Tagore's

Heaven of Freedom: Viksit panchayats and
Viksit Bharat are two sides of the same coin,
as the goal implies that every citizen of our
country must have access to quality public
services and government schemes and benefits. It is only when no one is left behind that
we can say with pride that we are citizens of
a developed country.

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-PAPER WITH PASSION-

## **Orange hills**

Nainital is just one example of ongoing forest fires damaging the fragile ecosystem in Uttarakhand

istorically, Uttarakhand is somehow a little more prone than other hill States in India to the scourge of frequent forest fires, especially in summers. Otherwise famous for its breathtaking beauty and lush greenery, the State has of late again experienced a series of jungle blazes: To give an idea of the seriousness of the situation, more than 500 have been reported since January and one almost every hour in the past 24 hours. The latest incident has struck perilously close to the inhabited areas in Nainital, gutting 108 ha of forest land and sounding alarm bells for the residents and authorities alike. With the situation worsening, the Army and IAF have been pressed into action to aid containment efforts. These fires, often man-made to clear dead vegetation or fuelled by natural friction amid dry vegetation and exacerbated by strong winds, pose a significant threat to the fragile ecosystem. Despite concerted containment efforts, the inferno has spread its tendrils closer to human population. The IAF helicopters equipped



with water-spraying capabilities are deployed to douse the flames, offering a crucial advantage in reaching inaccessible terrain. Additionally, Army personnel are working on ground to create firebreaks and prevent further spread. As for the bright side of this challenge, the wildfires have brought out the best in humans cooperating with authorities and fighting it together. Amid the suffocating chaos and burning uncertainty, the spirit of community resilience has shone brightly. Local residents, alongside volunteers and NGOs, have rallied together to support firefighting efforts and offer assistance to those affected.

From food and shelter to lending a helping hand in evacuation efforts, the collective response has underscored the strength of solidarity in the face of adversity. However, these forest fires carry grave environmental implications. The loss of precious flora and fauna, coupled with the release of harmful pollutants into the atmosphere, underscores the urgent need for proactive measures to mitigate future fire outbreaks. Strengthening forest management practices, implementing early warning systems and fostering community awareness are paramount in safeguarding the region's biodiversity and mitigating the risk of catastrophic wildfires. It is about time that a comprehensive policy was framed to fight the wildfire menace. The Uttarakhand Government must draw from the US experiences in California, where such fires are frequent but they manage them rather well and swiftly with an early warning system, besides a mechanism for controlled burns. As the battle against the Nainital forest fire rages on, it serves as a stark reminder of the fragility of our natural ecosystems as also the resilience of the human spirit. With the combined efforts of authorities, armed forces and local communities, there is hope that the flames will soon be extinguished. However, the aftermath of this crisis should serve as a catalyst for concerted action towards building a more resilient and sustainable future for Uttarakhand and beyond.



Veerakumars' gather to participate in the the Karaga festival at Sri Dharmarayana Swamy Temple, in Bengaluru

## Pakistan paying for its misplaced priorities

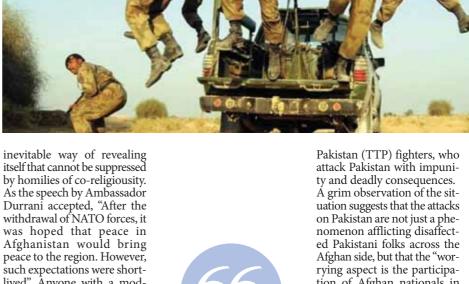
**BHOPINDER SINGH** 

Ambassador Asif Durrani acknowledges the Pak Government's shortcomings in handling the Afghanistan situation and underscores a reality check for Islamabad's foreign policy

akistan's Representative on Afghanistan, Ambassador Asif Durrani, conceded the grave reality of the Pakistani Government's abject failure in Afghanistan. Speaking at a conference titled, "Pakistan in the Emerging Geopolitical Landscape", the diplomat accept-Geopolitical ed that the ensuing price of the flared tensions along the Durand Line far exceeded the human and financial cost of all the wars with India, put together! Cold and frightening statistics like

the loss of over 80,000 lives in the so-called 'War on Terror' which Islamabad joined in 2001 (including 8000 security personnel) and an estimated economic loss of \$150 billion-the reality check of what ought to worry Pakistan, i.e., between its traditional enemy across the Line-of-Control, or the one across the Durand Linecouldn't have been clearer. To make matters worse for Islamabad, it isn't even close to the end of its miseries as the deadly attacks by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have shot up by 65% and the accompanying suicide attacks by 500%! In such a scenario to persist with India as the 'enemy number 1' is not only to suffer from an acute sense of Ostrich syndrome, but also to refuse the hard lessons of Karma i.e., what goes around, comes

The fixation with India owes itself to the wounds of the partition and the desperate need of various institutions to have an 'enemy' to legitimise themselves in the eyes of the citizenry e.g., clergy, military, politicians etc., as also, as to defend the flawed 'twonation theory' that ostensibly rationalises Pakistan. The creation of Bangladesh in 1971 exposed the hollowness and amorality of a nation created in the name of religion - the current equation with Afghanistan further exposes the untenability of a relationship based on co-religionism. That religion can never be the basis of nationhood or indeed ensure a protnerly relation (as insincerely claimed) with a neighbour, is further proved. At the end of the day, what matters is, 'intent' or neat. Over time, intent has an Pak-facing Tehreek-e-Taliban



lived". Anyone with a modicum of understanding about history (especially about Afghanistan, the home to many 'Great Games') ought to have known that to 'control' the narrative in Afghanistan THE PROJECT OF was not just impossible and impractical, but also counter-**DEMONISING INDIA** productive. The worst-kept BY THE PAKISTANIS secret of nurturing a desire to have 'Strategic Depth' in HAS FAILED Afghanistan could not be hidden even from its creation, the **SPECTACULARLY** Afghan Taliban. While the Afghans had accepted the sup-**AMONGST THE** port and infrastructure afford-CONSERVATIVE ed by Pakistani regimes of all hues and shades since the late AFGHANS, AS EVEN 1970's — to expect the proud THEY HARBOUR A Afghan (even a Pak-created Taliban) to toe Islamabad's RATHER WARM line blindly was an affront to the cultural-civilisational iden-PERCEPTION OF THE tity of an Afghan. Not only did INDIANS, AS the Taliban Government bolt out from the shackles of con-OPPOSED TO THAT trols, 'advisories' and condescending platitudes from Islamabad, but it knowingly

tion of Afghan nationals in these attacks". Basically, either as genuinely motivated or even as trained mercenaries, Afghan nationals are attacking Pakistan! The project of demonising India by the Pakistanis has failed spectacularly amongst the conservative Afghans, as even they harbour a rather warm perception of the Indians, as opposed to that of the Pakistanis. At the end of the day, the difference in sovereign intent emanating from Islamabad, versus those emanating from Delhi, has surfaced. Beyond certain constraints mandated by their self-invested image, ideology and inert conservativism, the language used by the Taliban Government officials bears a stark contrast, from the one that was imagined when the US/NATO forces abandoned Kabul and the Taliban stormed into Kabul.

Today, given the 'dark' invest-ments made by the Pakistani State it finds itself in an awkward and inextricable position. Try hard as it might, the Pakistanis are struggling to undo and trace back the steps that it took to create the prevailing environment, infrastructure and instinct in the region. As Ambassador Durrani lamented. "Afghanistan has become a permanent fixture in Pakistan's regional paradigm for over four decades". Therefore, all support or otherwise to Pakistan is seen from the lens of Afghanistan. Ironically, Pakistani complaints about the situation with Afghanistan fall on deaf ears as the global community attributes much of what went wrong with the Afghan storyline, to the Pakistanis themselves. In some sense, it is a 'cry wolf' situation for the Pakistanis and there simply aren't too many takers or sympathisers of the Pakistani woes. A deeper introspection would reveal the rot in the thinking of the Pakistani system set in 1947 when it thought that religion was to be its trump card. History is instructive, that religion can never be a basis of Statehood for any moral and sustainable nation. Both Bangladesh and Afghanistan discredit the 'two-nation the-

(The writer, a military veter an, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. The views expressed are personal)

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Supreme Court rejects 100 per cent VVPAT verification plea", published on April 27, this is my response. The Supreme Court has rightly reaffirmed its faith in the working of EVMs and refused the return of ballot papers. They seem to be satisfied with several safe-guards and stringent checks which have been an integral part of EVM functioning. It is also a welcome move by the court that they have now given number 2 and 3 placed candidates an option to check and verify 5 per cent microchips per assembly segment so that they

harboured and supported its

ideological offshoot i.e., the

remain fully satisfied. One additional burden the Election Commission has to make is to also store symbol loading units for 45 days in addition to EVMs. Now hopefully this EVM issue should be closed for good and the opposition must create a narrative which resonates with the voters. The ruling party has given a lot of opportunities to the opposition where the former could have been put on the mat but the latter failed to do so. There are still 5 phases to go in the current elections and the opposition would do better to channel their energy in the right direction and highlight BJP's negative points than keep crying over

Bal Govind | Noida

#### **JAMMU ELECTIONS**

proper Statehood.

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Stage set for phase II LS Polls", published on April 25, this is my response. The second phase of the Lok Sabha elections is completed now. The EVMs had made it captured the fate of Jammu as well. The people of Jammu and Kashmir are specifically annoyed with the governance of J&K as a Union Territory. The bigger mandate of J&K so disclosed appears to be extremely annoying with the BJP the people want to topple the UT administration to put in place

### No moral high ground for India or the US

propos the editorial, "All is well", published on April 27, this is my response. Neither the US nor India can claim to be on the moral high ground to point an accusing finger at each other. The regularly occurring deaths of Indian students in the US are as much a blot on that nation as are the deaths of hundreds of innocent Manipuris in the State of Manipur. India's response to the allegations made by the USA has been rather dismissive because we all know the truth about Manipur.

The US apart, even the Opposition parties of India had raised a quarrel over the situation in Manipur and rightly so. Therefore, for India to say that the US report is "deeply biased" and reflects a "significant misunderstanding of the ground realities" is to turn a blind eye to the facts. Both countries need to introspect and take measures to set their own house in order instead of indulging in a provocative blame game.

**Avinash Godboley** | *Dewas* 

The hope of Congress restoration is high along with the National Conference & PDP party compared to the Bhartiya Janta Party. The people of Jammu and Kashmir are anxiously waiting for this very moment. Hope the design will be fulfilled soon and very soon Jammu and Kashmir will enjoy complete Statehood

like other Indian States.

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

#### STRENGTH IN DIVERSITY

Madam — In every domain, women are enchanting their presence. The inclusion of women in the decision-making process is their fundamental right and it is also pivotal for sustainable development. If women have significant representation, We will attain legal parity in economic opportunities and also unleash the benefits and economic progressions linked with this assort-

Also, they will influence voter's opinions, mobilise support and actively participate in the electoral process. A

paradigm shift of the Government's strong focus on women-led development, going beyond women-centric, represents a key pillar of India's progress. The Government is promoting women's empowerment by implementing a host of schemes, like, Skill Upgradation and Mahila Coir Yojana, Women Scientists Scheme, PM Mudra Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana and many more. On top of that The Women's Reservation Bill passed by the parliament, gave women a significant voice in the Lok Sabha and State assemblies. In 2024, the launch of the Alliance for Global Good-Equity and Equality, focus on investing in women with the theme for International Women's Day 2024 -"Invest in Women, Accelerate Progress," shows that Indian leadership is now gaining global recognition for women's

Apurva Garg | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneér@gmail.com

## Political parties must prioritise environmental preservation

Political leadership must prioritise sustainability and combating plastic



t's election time in India

and various political par-

Lties vie for their space in

the hearts of the public. Even

when political parties give

multiple offers, including pro-viding sustainable living in

their manifestos, there is no

part of the planet suffers from anthropogenic activities during this Anthropocene

concrete measure to tackle issues affecting our planet. Even for the few who speak about the environment, the vision is for the future, not In the electioneering process, immediate. What we want is political parties also create lots of garbage containing lots of a manifesto that speaks about plastic materials. During elecprotecting our planet the tions, political parties often moment it comes to power. Every political party stresses use a variety of promotional developmental politics. But materials such as banners, posters, flyers and flags, many what is the use of development if our planet's status is of which are made of plastic or contain plastic compoin a dilemma? The climate is nents. Political rallies, public changing; glaciers and the water table are receding and events and gatherings organised by political parties often water scarcity is severe in parts of the country. We generate significant amounts of waste, including plastic haven't devised a concrete step in managing our garbage, cups, plates and other disposable items. Improper waste even in our capital city. Is it a lack of scientific knowledge? management practices at these events can result in We have one CSIR lab exclusively working on the enviplastic litter ending up in the ronment and many other environment. Why can't the research institutions working Government ban plastic from on similar lines. Still, we fail its production source? After in this? Is it a lack of political manufacturing and selling to the vendors, for namesake, will? Nobody knows the actual reason behind this. Every the official makes some peri-

dors. It's like keeping sweets near a diabetic patient and telling him not to touch them. Plastic pollution has significantly threatened ecosystems, wildlife and human health worldwide. Plastic pollution in oceans is a well-documented problem with devastating effects on marine life. Sea turtles, whales, seabirds and fish often mistake plastic debris for food or become entangled in plastic waste, leading to injury or death. Additionally, plastic fragments, known as microplastics, are ingested by smaller organisms and can bioaccumulate up the food chain, posing risks to human health. Coral reefs, often called the 'rainforests of the sea," are highly sensitive ecosystems that provide habitat for numerous marine species. Plastic pollution can smother coral reefs, blocking sunlight and inhibiting coral growth. Chemicals released by plastic degradation can also harm coral health, con-

(The writer is an adjunct tributing to reef degradation and loss. Political parties can influence public opinion and behaviour through messaging

and advocacy efforts. Parties that prioritise environmental issues and promote sustainable practices can help raise awareness about the harms of plastic pollution and encourage individuals and communities to take action. They should teach their followers to follow clean environmental practices in their party functions and their daily lives. In India, political parties have the power to shape policies and promote initiatives that influence people's attitudes and behaviours toward plastics. So, they should take responsibility.

BIJU **Dharampalan** 

We don't have decades to wait for the results. Already, the global temperature has reached its threshold. Any further increase may cause unforeseen consequences on the life on this planet. We need a political mindset to change our attitude towards plastics and the environment immediately. It will be good if we always remember that we don't have a 'planet B' to sustain humanity.

> faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, views are personal)

### THE EDITOR

### **SC UPHOLDS EVMs**

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## TheStatesman

Incorporating and directly descended from THE FRIEND OF INDIA - Founded 1818

### Rahul 2.0

s India gears up for another round of elections, the political landscape seems to be undergoing a subtle yet significant shift. At the centre of this transformation is Mr Rahul Gandhi who despite facing setbacks in the past has emerged with a stronger sense of purpose but leaves one question hanging in the air ~ has this resurgence come too late for himself and his party. Previously criticised for his lack of drive and charisma, he now exudes determination as he traverses the length and breadth of the country, addressing crowds with fluency and conviction. His evolution from a hesitant speaker reflects a deeper transformation within himself and the Congress party he represents. However, Gandhi's resurgence comes at a time when the political landscape of India is undergoing tectonic shifts. The dominance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has reshaped the contours of Indian politics, with the BJP's blend of ideology and development resonating strongly with some voters. In contrast, Congress has struggled to articulate a coherent message that can effectively challenge the BJP's narrative. Despite this, Mr Gandhi's focus on issues of inequality, unemployment, and democratic values has struck a chord with certain sections of the electorate. By positioning himself as a champion of the marginalised and a critic of the entrenched elite, he seeks to appeal to Indians who continue to grapple with poverty and social injustice. His emphasis on government intervention and redistribution of resources reflects a departure from the neoliberal economic policies that have dominated Indian politics in recent

Yet, Mr Gandhi's path to political redemption is fraught with challenges. The Congress party, once the undisputed hegemon of Indian politics, now finds itself grappling with internal dissent and organisational inefficiency. Mr Gandhi's leadership style, characterised by introspection, may not necessarily translate into effective governance or party management. Moreover, his reluctance to fully assert control over the party machinery and challenge the entrenched hierarchy raises questions about his ability to lead the Congress to victory in future elections. Nevertheless, the significance of Mr Gandhi's resurgence extends beyond electoral politics. It symbolises a broader struggle within Indian democracy to reconcile competing visions of nationhood and governance.

As India grapples with issues of identity, inequality, and democratic erosion, Mr Gandhi's emergence as a credible alternative to the ruling establishment offers hope for a more inclusive and pluralistic future. Mr Gandhi's journey from political obscurity to renewed prominence encapsulates the complexities and contradictions of Indian democracy. While his newfound zeal may not be enough to secure victory in the upcoming elections, it signals a deeper realignment within Indian politics that is both necessary and inevitable. Whether Mr Gandhi can harness this momentum to usher in a new era of leadership remains to be seen, but his journey thus far serves as a testament to the resilience of democratic politics in India.

## **Generation Z**

n ever-evolving global generational dynamics, the spotlight has shifted to Generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2012. Unlike their predecessors, this cohort is carving out a distinct path marked by unprecedented economic prosperity and a redefined relationship with work. At the heart of this phenomenon lies a stark contrast with previous generations, particularly millennials. While millennials entered the workforce in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, grappling with high unemployment rates and stagnant wages, Generation Z is stepping into an era of abundance. Globally, though not in India, youth unemployment is at its lowest since 1991, with Gen Z-ers ~ as those in generation Z are being referred to - benefiting from robust wage growth and ample job opportunities. But beyond the statistics lies a deeper shift in mindset. Millennials grew up believing that a job was a privilege, a notion reinforced by the economic struggles of their time. In contrast, Generation Z views employment as a right, fuelling a new attitude towards work characterised by a desire for autonomy and fulfilment. This shift is evident in the concept of "quiet quitting" and "bare minimum Monday," where Gen Z-ers prioritise self-care and personal fulfilment over traditional notions of career advancement. The rise of the "snail girl" archetype, embodying a slower pace and a focus on well-being, further underscores this departure from the hustle culture embraced by previous generations.

Moreover, the decline in entrepreneurship among Gen Z-ers signals a departure from the tech-centric startup culture that defined the millennial era. While millennials idolised young tech founders and chased the dream of becoming the next tech tycoon, Gen Z-ers are less inclined to pursue entrepreneurship, opting instead for stability and work-life balance. Yet, amid their economic prosperity and shifting attitudes towards work, Generation Z faces unique challenges and criticisms.

Some argue that their higher incomes are overshadowed by rising costs of college and housing, posing potential obstacles to long-term financial security. Additionally, concerns about declining innovation and productivity raise questions about the sustainability of Gen Z's economic advantage. However, it's crucial to recognise that Generation Z is navigating uncharted territory, shaped by the digital revolution and global economic shifts. Their emphasis on self-care and personal fulfilment reflects a broader societal trend towards prioritising well-being over traditional markers of success. As we witness the rise of Generation Z, it's essential to acknowledge the complexity of their experiences and the nuances of their perspectives. They are not simply a continuation of previous generations but rather a distinct cohort with its own values, aspirations, and challenges. Generation Z's economic prowess and unique approach to work hold lessons for us all. Their journey serves as a reminder that success is not solely defined by financial wealth but by a sense of fulfilment and purpose in both work and life.

## India and NATO~II

In the 21st century however, Asia is like it was never before. The Chinese Empire is a modern nation united, or shall we say unified, by a central Communist tyranny. India meanwhile is a united, powerful nation. The existing order dictates a replication of the 'balance of power' in Asia, something that is proving to be anathema to Chinese communists. After decades of economic rivalry, democratic India has outpaced the 'command' economy of a Communist state



been sitting idle all this while. Besides QUAD, which is a formal strategic 'partnership', India has been forging strategic bilateral 'partnerships' with littoral democracies that are similarly under threat by an openly aggressive China, such as Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore, Mauritius, Seychelles, Malaysia etc.

But none of these bilateral defence partnerships is a formal military alliance. In the event of a war with China, it is anybody's guess if they will actively support India or merely support resolutions backing 'poor' India in the UN. And join the loud chorus condemning Big Brother China and whole-heartedly extending strong "moral" support to "peaceful, democratic

Historically, China has always been the dominant power in Asia, or so it perceives itself to be. European major powers are different. When not at war, they have maintained peace through a 'balance of power'.

For centuries, these powers ~ Great Britain, Prussia, France, Spain, Italy, Russia etc. have learnt to live with one another after prolonged armed conflicts had exhausted them, both materially and emotionally. This went on for centuries, till the end of World War II.

In the 20th century, the rise of the trans-Atlantic USA and the appearance of small and medium powers in Europe, and the spread of democracy induced European powers to unite and protect themselves against autocracy. The destructive power of modern technology, especially atomic and nuclear power, acted as a great catalyst for peace. NATO was born.

China was an altogether different story in Asia. For two thousand years, it was the Middle Kingdom ruled by Emperors and independent warlords in the

outlying provinces. Since the dominant Yellow Race comprised the biggest Empire in Asia, it was surrounded by small kingdoms and races lenged, and aided by geography, rately, re-apply.

the Chinese Empire did not o doubt, India has not force their hegemony on their neighbours, including maritime countries.

> As India was hardly a unified nation till the advent of the British in the 19th century, the concept of 'balance of power' in Asia amongst various nations has been somewhat alien to Indian strategic thinking. In the 21st century however,

> Asia is like it was never before. The Chinese Empire is a modern nation united, or shall we say unified, by a central Communist

India meanwhile is a unitpowerful

ed, nation through the magic of its modern Constitution and the marvelous British legacy of strategic dimension in its foreign policy.

The existing order dictates a replication of the 'balance of power' in Asia, something that is proving to be anathema to Chinese commu-

nists. After decades of economic rivalry, democratic India has outpaced the 'command' economy of a Communist state. It is a modern marvel, something that our giant neighbour finds hard

History repeats itself, the European story now repeating in Asia. It is to maintain peace ~ a 'balance of power' in Asia between the two major powers. But the concept is not acceptable to the Chinese, used as they are historically to receive tributes from its small Asian neigh-

The concept is missing from the Chinese political lexicon. As a consequence, India is at the receiving end, facing an existential threat. Lenin, the founder of the Communist movement when confronted with a similar insurmountable challenge famously asked: What is to be done? A time has come when India needs to ask itself the same question. Looking to that bought their survival and the current geo-political sce-Asian overlord. Largely unchal-ship, so to say. Or, more accu-

By definition, India is not eligible. It is not an Atlantic power. Believe it or not, it first applied, so to say, for admission in 1962, as revealed recently in declassified official documents made public by the then Indian Ambassador to US, B.K. Nehru.

The Chinese had suddenly attacked India without provocation and rapidly advanced right up to the Assam valley. There was panic in New Delhi and Prime Minister Nehru sent an SOS to the US President for immediate air cover. He offered to the Americans to let US pilots fly Indian aircraft and bomb the

advancing Chinese troops all along the border in the Eastern sector.

But equally suddenly, the Chinese announced a ceasefire and halted its advance. Incidentally, the US was the military leader of NATO then as it is now. Though India

is vastly superior

today in terms of military strength and capability, the question survives if India can take on the Chinese on its own. The border dis-

**ASHOK** 

**KAPUR** 

The writer is a retired

pute remains unresolved. The two opposing armies remain in eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation in the disputed Northern land border for three years plus. There is an altogether new dimension to Chinese expansionism, and that is extending its maritime bound-

aries in the South China Sea. It has laid claim to almost the entire South China Sea. This is happening for the first time in the 21st century, after it has developed the world's largest Naval force. It has started laying claims to numerous uninhabited islands. It is developing AI (artificial islands) faster than the other AI (artificial intelligence) for the PLA to own these.

All credit to Indian diplomacy to organize QUAD to counter the growing maritime Chinese threat. With the US as the senior 'partner', the other two are friendly Asian democraexistence through tributes to the nario, apply for NATO member-cies under similar threat ~ Japan raised "hope" to the level of and Australia. But India is the only QUAD nation sharing a

long land border with China, the other three are under maritime

The next question arises, what is the nature of the longterm threat? As of now, the Chinese are a continuing threat to our Eastern border. The concern should be about the Chinese long-term strategy in the Eastern sector, coveting a mountainous terrain where, in the famous (or infamous) words of late Krishna Menon, former Defence Minister, "not a blade of grass grows".

It could be just feigning, looking at the current overall Chinese behaviour. They are currently focusing their attention on Taiwan, with their unprovoked brinkmanship in the Taiwan Strait.

As the Chinese, somewhat uncharacteristically, are openly threatening to use force to take over Taiwan, the Strait will become a Chinese lake, affecting India's growing trade with its East Asian friends. According to India's former Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale, the loss of the Taiwan Strait will severely affect half of India's trade flow to the East. It will disrupt supply chains in India's key export sectors such as pharma and electronics. Disruption in submarine cables will affect the flow of data between India and the Silicon Valley.

Unfortunately, Taiwan is in a very unenviable position. A vibrant democracy, the Chinese have relentlessly pressurized an overwhelming number of UN members to de-recognize it in terms of its self-proclaimed 'One China' policy, i.e. Beijing.

The only major power halfrecognizing it is the US. In the event of an attack on Taiwan, US policy is strategically ambiguous. India appears to have no policy

in such an eventuality. This is disturbing for a nation that will be most adversely impacted. In the memorable words of Mr Gokhale, India's "hope" that the Chinese will not use force is akin to the policy of the ostrich in burying its head deep in the sand. As Galbraith put it memorably, the tragedy of India in 1962 was that some Indian ruling politicians had strategy.

(To be Concluded)  $\downarrow$  2,000.



## S ASIAN VOICES

## **Beyond the** first meeting

xpectations are mounting for the first-ever official face-to-face meeting between Presi-dent Yoon Suk Yeol and the Democratic Party of Korea's leader Lee Jae-myung, which could take place as early as this week. The meeting would be a crucial political event that could shed light on how the country's key agenda items will be prioritized after the April 10 general election.

On Friday, Yoon proposed the meeting in a call to Lee. Since then, the two sides have been coordinating the details of the meeting, which is widely expected to offer a rare chance to improve frosty relations between the two leaders in a way that encourages them to seek much-needed legislative compromise and cooperation. It is certainly a positive development that Yoon has finally changed his mind and decided to meet with Lee in person, apparently under pressure from the crushing defeat of his conservative People Power Party in the election.

However, there are concerns about whether the two former presidential rivals will produce any tangible results from the meeting. In the worst-case scenario, the two could just agree to disagree because their views on key issues remain poles apart. On Monday, Yoon expressed his willingness to listen to Lee's opinions. "The invitation (to the presidential office) was made as I want to listen to Chair Lee Jae-myung's opinions as much as possible," Yoon said. "There have been many differences in views between the

### III The Korea Herald

ruling and opposition parties. ... But we can explore agendas related to people's livelihoods, where we can narrow our differences and agree on and talk about at least a few things that we can do to stabilize people's livelihoods."

Meanwhile, Lee on Monday said he would drive home the public sentiment revealed by the general election to Yoon in the upcoming meeting. "The presidential office, the government and the National Assembly should change together," Lee said. "I hope the meeting will be a turning point to restore politics dedicated to the people."

Their latest public comments, however, do not provide a clear hint at how the meeting would likely pan out, especially concerning thorny issues such as the controversial proposal by Lee to dole out 250,000 won (\$181) to every South Korean, the protracted standoff between the government and doctors over the medical school enrollment quota hike and the appointment of a new prime minister. Lee is widely expected to talk about his proposal for the cash handout that will require a fresh supplementary budget and cost around 13 trillion won. The Democratic Party floated the cash handout plan, supposedly aimed at helping people's livelihoods, as one of its election pledges. Predictably, Yoon and the conservative People Power Party are strongly opposed to the plan, slamming it as "populism" in the form of giving out cash that would undermine the country's fiscal soundness. The two leaders are also likely to clash over a "windfall tax" on banks that have profited from recent interest rate hikes if Lee raises the issue during the meeting with Yoon. On Monday, Lee said the Democratic Party unveiled plans to introduce the windfall tax to manage volatile economic situations in a stable way, saying that "more active measures are needed to lessen the burdens on people when oil prices stay high." The government's plan to hike medical school admissions is also likely to be a major issue for the two leaders. About 12,000 trainee doctors have left their worksites since Feb. 20 in protest against the plan to increase the annual enrollment quota of medical students by

#### **LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

editor@thestatesman.com

### Welcome move

**SIR**, Please refer to today's report "Poll panel takes note of alleged MCC violations by Modi, Rahul Gandhi". The decision of the Election Commission of India to issue notices to the presidents of the BJP and the Congress seeking their replies on the complaints it had received alleging violation of its model code of conduct (MCC) in the speeches delivered by the leaders of the two parties, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is a welcome measure and would bolster the faith people have traditionally vested with the poll regulator.

This is for the first time the panel has issued a notice, holding the parties responsible for the violation of the code by their star campaigners. It does not normally require a rejoinder by the Election Commission for a party chief to realise that the party's most important campaigners ought to set high standards of political discourse and observe provisions of

the MCC in letter and spirit. They are expected to contribute to a higher quality of discourse by way of providing an all-India perspective and hence their speeches necessarily need to be judged at a higher threshold of compliance. Nonetheless, the EC decision may hopefully act as a leash on them for the time being. However, there is only so much that the law, rules, regulations and even regulators can do to foster the spirit of democracy, for it is up to the people and their leaders to punish wrongdoers.

> Yours, etc., Khokan Das, Kolkata, 27 April.

#### **Kerala stakes**

**SIR**, This refers to your editorial 'Battle in Kerala' (25 April). Albeit BJP is a dominant force in the North and North West India, its presence in South India is limited, and in Kerala is almost insignificant. The electoral clash is mainly between the Congress led UDF and the Left controlled LDF.

The Left is confident of its local governance, especially in the education and health sectors. The state's performance specially during natural calamities and during the Covid period deserves praise. As a stalwart like Rahul Gandhi is contesting from Wayanad, it would boost up the Congress to regain lost ground. That the Left did not receive a farthing from the eletoral bond scam, despite being in power in the state, should boost its image. Yours, etc., Dilip Kumar Sengup-

Birati, 25 April.

#### **UNJUSTIFIED**

**SIR**, Apropos the news report "ED opposes Kejriwal's plea, claims evidence of his role" (April 26), I would like to comment that the

ED is contradicting its own story. When the ED claims to have recovered evidence of Kejriwal's alleged role in the excise scam, was there any necessity of calling him repeatedly? The ED officials could have gone to his office

#### **DISSERVICE**

**SIR**, The remarks of renowned Congress party leader abroad, Sam Pitroda on inheritence tax are ill timed and uncalled for. They have given a chance to his party's rival, PM Modi, to criticise the grand old party on its ideas on taxation. He twisted the remarks to suit his own message causing Congress to distance itself from them. If the real concern is the widening of the economic divide between haves and have nots in India, the rival camps on the national stage are busy making off the cuff remarks. Rahul Gandhi and his party are talking about socio-economic surveys and redistribution of wealth in an informal manner, whereas Modi and his party are trying to colour them with religious themes. Both parties are doing disservice to the real issues faced by the

Yours, etc., Dr DVG Sankara Rao (ex MP) Vizianagaram, 25 April.

for an in-depth inquiry into the matter. Without holding a brief for Kejriwal, I would like to say that the modus operandi of the ED behind summoning him repeatedly was more for stopping him from participating in the election campaign than unravelling the mystery of the scam.

Since the scam is entirely

based on documentary evidence, which are claimed to be in the possession of the ED, the detention of Kejriwal becomes meaningless. The ED has to prove how Kejriwal tampered with evidence and had it been so why did it not arrest Kejriwal at the first instance? Yours, etc., Arun Gupta,

Kolkata, 26 April.





### CONTRAPUNTO

Ecology is permanent economy SUNDERLAL BAHUGUNA

## Missing In Election

Environment risks are borne directly by people. Yet, it hasn't emerged as a serious poll issue

Tttarakhand has struggled to cope with frequent outbreaks of forest fires this year. Over the weekend, fires progressed up to Nainital, triggering the use of IAF helicopters to douse the flames. Forest fires are not just a threat to lives and property, they also undermine tourism in a state that depends on it. Not that it really mattered in the campaign strategies in the state's LS polls. No observer can be blamed for considering forest fires a non-issue.

Missing anger | Environmental risks in India have been multiplying. Along with it the related costs are rising. These costs are borne mostly by people as mitigation mechanisms such as insurance are not yet sophisticated enough. However, this challenge is seldom an election issue. Political parties are happy to skirt these issues as they don't seem to catalyse an electorate's anger.

Bad air days | The absence of anger is not because the problem is invisible. For example, India's poor air quality is a perceptible



problem. Air pollution may be termed a "silent killer" but its health effects are debilitating. Something that is tangible.

Its economic fallout is huge. World Bank recently estimated the economic costs of India's poor air quality. It concluded that the lost output from premature deaths and morbidity in 2019 was 1.4% of GDP, or \$36.8 billion. Despite the quantification of the costs of pollution it hasn't emerged as a meaningful election issue.

Complexity leads to delay One plausible reason for low priority given to environment-related consequences is the complexity of challenge. It requires bringing together many stakeholders to gauge the trade-offs involved. Subsequently, the benefits of a course of action take time to show up. The nature of the problem is incompatible with the incentives that drive political parties. It's therefore convenient to kick the can down the road.

Outliers needed | Traditional political parties are not going to make an extra effort to address environmental issues in a sustained manner. While it's relatively easy to announce targets such as an increase in installed capacity of renewable energy, dealing with domestic environmental issues is painstaking because of clashing stakeholder interests. This is where India could do with a ground-up green political movement. Their most important contribution globally is mainstreaming the environment agenda. A green party doesn't have to capture power. It needs to capture the imagination to catalyse change.

## Single & Weaker

BJP's manifesto promises it. But joint theatre commands remain elusive

↑ hina recently undertook another major military reorganisation by dissolving PLA's Strategic Support Force (SSF) and replacing ✓ it with Information Support Force for better oversight on cyber, space and tech-driven operations. SSF was created in 2015 as a new branch of PLA alongside PLA's theaterisation exercise that saw seven previous military regions refashioned into five theatre commands.

India's incomplete theaterisation | India, however, has been taking baby steps in the theaterisation process. While BJP's 2024 Lok Sabha election manifesto promises the implementation of joint theatre commands, this comes more than two decades after Kargil Review Committee submitted its report expressing dissatisfaction



with the military structure. Sure, we now have a Chief of Defence Staff to serve as a single point of military advice for govt. But bringing army, navy and air force personnel and assets together under joint commands remains a challenge.

Tricky negotiations | India currently has 17 single-service commands. In case of conflict with China, New Delhi has to mobilise at least seven service commands to Beijing's one joint western

command. However, discussions around India's theaterisation have been plagued by questions about who controls assets that were previously assigned to individual services, and command over personnel.

Rivalries galore Add to this off-record admissions of inter- and intra-services rivalries. Three- and four-star officers want to retain their existing rank privileges, which they may have to give up under the proposed three-joint-command framework - two land-based commands and one maritime command.

**Slow transition** | To promote jointness, Parliament passed the Inter-Service Organisation (Command, Control and Discipline) Bill that will apply to all military personnel who were hitherto governed by separate service rules. Cross-service staffing of army, navy and air force has begun. But the process to create a culture of jointness is too slow. China has raced ahead. If India is to avoid another 1962, it has to quickly flatten its military structure and create joint theatre commands now. Even lessons from the Ukraine war demand this.

## Fit, fight, go straight

Best cheatsheet for your Kerala holiday

**Shinie Antony** 



With the monsoon poised to lash Kerala, you may be dreaming of houseboats, backwaters, they yam and kathakali. If headed for God's own country, here are some tips, so you will eat the sadhya-feast-but not the banana leaf it's served on.

Hydrate with warm jeera water, cool nannari sarbath and sodas like Palakkadan masala, Fuljar, goli. Tea is syrupy unless you ask for 'a without', which means without sugar. There's tender coconut water, buttermilk filled with green chillies and curry leaves, and fresh toddy. "Touchings" can be spicy peanuts, prawns or pickle. Kappa-meen is a pairing of legendary lovers like appam-stew. A non-vegetarian is known as 'non', and served meat ularthiyathu (dry) or porichadu (fry), and fish pollichathu (steamed in

unnakaya, pazham nirachathu, and are routinely diced for chips. Rice is red, Malabar parotas go round and round, salads are called sallas. Papadams are smaller and bubblier than appalams and papads. Halwa is black, red or yellow, made with jaggery and coconut milk; occasionally a

leaves) or vevichathu (reduced with cambogia). Plantains make pazham-pori,

pretty girl is described as haluva. Many English words are passed off as Malayalam. 'Fit' is drunk, 'tight' broke, 'soap' flattery and 'number' a con-job. 'Best' is a sarcastic replacement for 'the worst'. Pompous peeps are said to carry 'head-weight' while 'mouth-looker' (translated from vaya-noki) is usually a man dedicated to staring unblinkingly at women. Hus and hussy are short for husband; an annoying hus, if non, can be easily bumped off with a high-cholesterol diet. If the need to grease palms arises, psst, a bribe is code-named 'something'. Plotting a murder? A 'quotation' (supari) will get you a discount. The dead are called 'close', to clarify they are no longer open to chatting.

With Malayalam cinema now considered international-level, at least by Malayalis, proclaim it publicly in order to start a party. Don't gush-keep it real like our films do – or they'll say 'over *aayee*'. Our actors neither wear makeup nor match steps while dancing. Try martial art kalaripayyatu (payyatu a corruption of 'fight') only if booked into an ayurveda spa for recovery. Gold is our metal and nighty the state costume. Like anywhere else in India, at T junctions a local will confidently say, 'Go straight'. Aiyye is a disgusted Aiyyo. Umma is mwah, so say this only if you are looking for commitment.

## MP's Sound Of Silence

BJP hopes this shows voters' faith in the party, Congress sees flickers of revival. It's difficult to tell either way. But electors going quiet can be troubling for democracy

**Anastasia Piliavsky and Tommaso Sbriccoli** 





Around 8% fewer voters went to the booths on April 19, the first day of Lok Sabha polling in Madhya Pradesh, than in 2019.

This is twice the national average 4% drop in voter turnouts in the election's first phase.

Tough fight | Publicly, neither party has shown unease with the participation plunge, each blaming the other's lethargic voters. In private, however, BJP cadres we spoke to in eastern MP are anxious. They know that even though BJP took the state assembly with no trouble last year, this year for them will not be a walk in the park. The anti-incumbency feeling is palpable across the state, and the six constituencies in Vindhya and Bundelkhand regions that went to polls on April 26 saw fierce battles.

Difficult to read | What makes BJP workers even more nervous than falling turnouts is how closely the voters are now holding the cards to their chests. The campaign took its usual course. A vast army of party workers, bigger than ever, filled the state with thou-

**Special Series on Elections** 

have marched up and down the streets of towns and villages, organised a record number of proces-

sands of posters

and flags. They

sions and rallies, gone door-to-door round the clock. Crores of flowers have been strung into lakhs of garlands to adorn dozens of candidates' necks.

But one crucial electoral ritual has not gone to plan. In the run-up to the elections, the party conducted, as usual, a fine-grained pre-electoral survey. Ordinarily, by the time voters head for the booths, party workers know with great precision - caste by caste, street by street, house by house - who will vote for whom. Since the people conducting these surveys are typically local workers who know their villages and neighbourhoods inside out, they can normally go even further than this, distinguishing voters' honest answers from strategic bluffs.

**Chup-chap voters** | This is not so this time around. Despite their best efforts, party workers are failing to get voters to reveal their choice. "No one says anything about whom they will vote for!" lamented a BJP worker in the district of Dewas. Public spaces, having

been saturated with signage and rhetoric during campaigning, now ooze an eery psephological silence. There is no way to judge how well a politician performed or how effective a party's campaign has been.

Beyond the nerve-wracking suspense into which the tight-lipped electors have plunged politicians, this new



silence is giving this round of elections a general aura of distrust, suspicion and moral disquiet. The ballot itself is of course cast in secret, but normally people are publicly outspoken about their choice. In politics, much as in life otherwise, doing things chup se or chupke se, in

silence and secrecy, morally discredits people, making them suspect of being a dishonest partner or an untrustworthy ally. So people tend to support politicians openly, attend open feasts, display party paraphernalia on the fronts of their homes and even swear political

allegiances in theatrical public rituals. Any politically active person in a village or a town neighbourhood shifting to a new party would put this on public display, lest they acquire a reputation of someone who is undependable and underhanded. At least in village and provincial MP, if the ballot is secret

de jure, it is public de facto.

Minority play | Or so has been the case until now. A nearperfect two-party state, MP has been a reliable stronghold for BJP, which has ruled it with almost no interruptions (apart for a two-year period when Congress won with the support of other parties and independent MLAs) for two decades. Over the past 10 years, even the state's small Muslim minority (under 7%) joined the party ranks. Most of them have not been seduced by BJP's ideology or political agenda, but have voted pragmatically since 2014 to secure basic services, whether water or electricity or any number of licences that every Indian citizen needs at some point in life.

In rural Dewas, many Muslims publicly declared their political turn in small groups that would gather in shops or on village chabutaras, using standard formulae and ritualised oaths.

Something brewing? | This year sees no such performances - and little sense of what revelations the booths will hold. What can this silence mean? While any party at large, as BJP now is, hopes that the silence is of consent, it is also deeply nervous because the sound of silence may just as well indicate brewing trouble. If claims and protests are not heard on the streets, is something brewing behind the scenes chupke se? This anxiety deepens as one looks over the border with Rajasthan, where BJP is having all kinds of unforeseen troubles.

Meanwhile, Congress supporters now have slightly raised hopes. Does the chup-chap electorate - silent on the streets as much as in booths - bode pleasant surprises or even a miracle toppling of the pre-poll predictions? Whatever the parties may hope for and fear, most disturbing is the possibility that the silence signifies the death of opposition or even protest within civil society may be settling in.

The writers are anthropologists

MP (29 seats) has voted for 13 seats in the first two phases. It goes to polls on May 7 for the third of its four-phase election

## 'Witty polymath & institution builder'

Finance Commission chairman fondly recalls his long association with Jagdish Bhagwati, who retires this academic year. Panagariya calls Bhagwati the most influential trade theorist of his generation

**Arvind Panagariya** 



After a spectacular 65-year-long career as the world's leading Jagdish economist. Bhagwati will retire this academic year. So, it is

an opportune time to pay tribute to him. Arguably, Bhagwati is the most influential international trade economist of his generation. Paul Samuelson, the first American to win Nobel Prize in Economics, has described his era as the "Age of Bhagwati in international trade". Paul Krugman, the 2008 Nobel winner for his work on New Trade Theory, has said that had he been on the Nobel Committee that year, he would have awarded the prize first to his teacher Jagdish Bhagwati for his "really insightful work" on Old Trade Theory.

A polymath, Bhagwati has made seminal contributions to diverse fields, including immigration, climate change, development, and political philosophy.

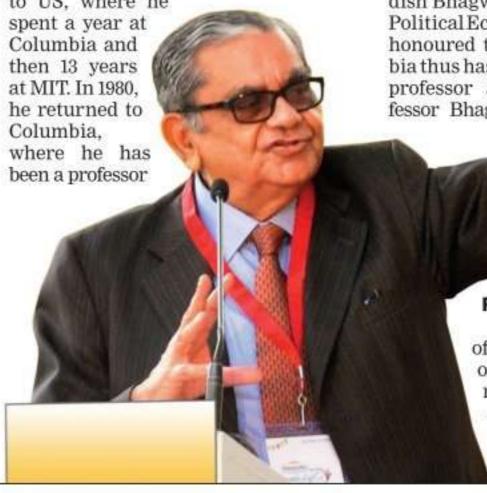
### An architect of institutions

Internationally, Bhagwati helped design World Trade Organisation in his role as economic policy adviser to Arthur Dunkel, then Director General of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. Nationally, his policy writings on India influenced and shaped the thinking of almost all economists and policy analysts who contributed to changing the economy's orientation away from socialism and towards markets.

Beginning with Indira Gandhi, all prime ministers who have served in office a full term or longer have personally known him.

#### Wide spectrum scholarship Bhagwati did his bachelor's in

commerce from Sydenham College in Bombay in 1954 and immediately proceeded to do the Tripos at St John's College, Cambridge University. He then did stints as a visiting scholar at MIT and Nuffield College, In 1960s, he was back in India, spending two years at Indian Statistical Institute and four at Delhi School of Economics. In 1966, he moved to US, where he



and international and public affairs. Bhagwati has written articles in all

with appointments in economics, law,

leading scholarly journals on economics, published books too numerous to count, shaped media debates on the leading economic policy issues of the day, and founded and edited leading economics journals. Several universities have conferred honorary degrees on him.

GOI awarded Bhagwati Padma Vibhushan. Government of Japan has honoured him with Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Star. He also has several prizes named after him. Among them is Jagdish Bhagwati Chair in Indian Political Economy, which I am honoured to hold. Columbia thus has a Bhagwati professor and Professor Bhagwati,

which frequently leads to some confusion.

Rapier pen

Bhagwati writes with wit, often to the great disadvantage of his opponents. I cannot resist giving at least one example of it to give the reader a taste of it. In 1987, George Soros wrote a book,

titled Alchemy of Finance, which Bhagwati reviewed in New Republic. He began the review thus, "Now that Soros has made his fortune, he is eager to tell all. But his aspirations as a writer soar above a simple narrative of his financial dealings. ... He wishes to develop a theory that would equally embrace his mundane financial activities and grander themes such as the reform of the international economic system, Success on Wall Street has given Soros the sangfroid, and wealth the wherewithal, to pursue his dream." Here he turns the knife to administer a devastating blow: "Alas,

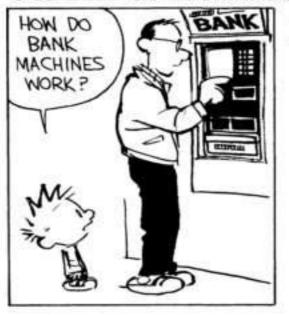
it prompts the question: Money talks, but can it write?" At 90, Bhagwati retains his quick wit and humour.

### Never let go

A model teacher, Bhagwati has no equal as a mentor. Unlike most professors, who support their students at most till they land their first job, he adopts them for life and gives them his fulsome support. The flip side is that the students adore him and have produced as many as six festschrifts celebrating him.

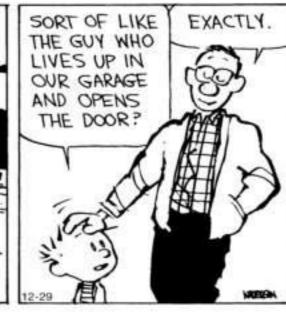
At his retirement party this past April 15, after his students, friends and colleagues had paid him one glowing tribute after another, and his turn to speak came, his opening line, delivered with his trademark mischievous smile, was, "I know I should not believe all this, but I do!" He then became sombre, noting, "Life has been good to me and I could not have asked for more."

#### **Calvin & Hobbes** WELL, LET'S SAY YOU



WANT 25 DOLLARS. YOU PUNCH IN THE AMOUNT ...





### **Sacred**space



People are cowards; don't be worried about them. Go on your way, go on your way dancing ...whatsoever feels

good is good, whatsoever feels beautiful is beautiful...whatsoever makes you happy is bound to be true. Anand, bliss, is the only criterion of truth.

Osho

## There Is No Scarcity Of Anand, Mind It

### Hansaji Yogendra

In Indic philosophy, anand, bliss, is a specific attribute of Brahmn, the ▲ ultimate reality, as well as the highest state of existence for the individual self.

In the Upanishads, anand is one of the three essential attributes of Brahmn, along with sat, existence, and chit, consciousness. These three aspects of the nature of ultimate reality are often expressed as Sat-Chit-Anand. Bliss is, therefore, the experience of unbound, eternal, and unalloyed happiness of the chit, derived from the very experience of existence, that is sat. That is, bliss doesn't necessarily come from a dream life or the life you think you ought to be living. Rather it is an intense state of joy from life, as it is.

The spiritual science of perpetually

being in bliss is all about empowering is unquantified, that is, there is no

ourselves to celebrate and value life as it is. This seems especially difficult for most of us today when we are constantly afflicted with a sense of unworthiness. We think that we do not deserve anand as we are. We expect that the next set of professional or personal or financial achievements will in some way

make us more worthy and more qualified to experience bliss in life. These are the criteria of the ego, not of the spirit, not spirituality. In the spiritual

sciences, bliss is unqualified, unquantified and accessible to everyone by the simple fact of their human existence. That is, you don't need to be anything other than yourself to experience perpetual bliss. And bliss

scarcity of anand; you can be as joyous as you want without it affecting the availability of bliss to others. The basic idea is that our own Self is the very nature of bliss. Yes, you were never meant to be so

worried in life or about life. All you need to do is to learn how to be more blissful. Some basic concepts that can help you be more blissful every day are: First, acceptance - to experience bliss, start by accepting yourself and your life exactly as they THE SPEAKING TREE

> what needs to change or improve. Second, self-love -caring for yourself is not selfish, you are as worthy of love, affection and care as anyone else. And only when you fill your own cup with love can you share it with others.

Third, gratitude - in a culture

are. Avoid dwelling on

obsessed with scarcity and lack, gratitude is a radical act of defiance, an acknowledgment of the infinite blessings in our lives each day. If you think you have nothing to be grateful for, then think of your life without the things you have now. Fourth, purposeto live in bliss, also implies the unfolding of our true soul-purpose. Bliss is the gentle breeze that caresses our spirit in moments of serenity. But it is also the fierce flame of dedication, determination and will-power that motivates us to keep pursuing our deepest goals despite adversity. Bliss, therefore, is not only a sense of euphoria, it is also a deep knowing of our life purpose and the joy that comes from fulfilling work.

While pleasures are temporary and often lead to attachment and suffering, anand is an enduring, intrinsic state of being that transcends the ups and downs of life.

## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## **Reviewing NOTA**

Need to make it a potent option for voters

HE electoral no-show in Surat, where BJP candidate Mukesh Dalal was declared the winner unopposed, has reignited the debate on the NOTA (none of the above) option for the voters. The episode underscores the need for reforms to ensure that the fundamental right of citizens to choose their representatives is not violated or denied. The introduction of NOTA in 2013 on the directions of the Supreme Court was a landmark step aimed at empowering voters and holding political parties accountable.

However, the Surat fiasco highlights the limitations of NOTA in its current form. Lacking teeth, it has repeatedly failed to influence the poll result. The latest outcome has raised questions about the integrity of the electoral process and the centrality of voters in a democratic exercise. Should a candidate be declared victorious without having faced any opposition? Should NOTA necessitate a repoll if it gets more votes than any contestant?

The apex court has issued a notice to the Election Commission of India (ECI) on a plea seeking a repoll in constituencies where NOTA receives the majority of the votes. This calls for a re-evaluation of NOTA's role in the electoral process. While NOTA serves as a symbolic gesture of dissent — a negative vote — its true potential lies in catalysing systemic change and deterring parties from fielding unsuitable candidates. Countries like Indonesia mandate a repoll if NOTA emerges 'victorious', thus ensuring that citizens' dissatisfaction is addressed comprehensively. The ECI must explore ways to enhance NOTA's effectiveness, including considering proposals to annul the elections in constituencies where it bags the highest number of votes. This will compel political parties to nominate candidates with an unblemished reputation. Promoting NOTA — or the right to reject — as a 'fictional' nominee can make it a potent tool of democratic expression.

## UK's Rwanda plan

A temporary solution to a festering problem

AST week, the British House of Lords approved a plan, first proposed by then PM Boris Johnson in 2022, to send refugees to Rwanda. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak reckons that the first flight to Kigali will take off in June. An air bridge is being set up to deport 75,000 refugees who had fled for their lives from war, famine and injustice in their countries. Rwanda has swallowed its pride and accepted £50 million for accommodating the UK's 'undesirables'. Whether all or some of the refugees finally get deported remains to be seen. The Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act, 2024, however, could be a useful diversionary tactic in the upcoming local polls in Britain, with Sunak battling unemployment and rising inflation.

The British plan is not only presumptuous but also small-minded. In contrast, some Third World countries have been large-hearted. Colombia, Uganda and Pakistan figured among the top refugee-hosting countries in 2022, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Arguably the only Western country that has proved to be compassionate during the ongoing migration crisis is Germany. A bigger question is the safety of the people being sent to Rwanda, which is not exactly a beacon of hope when it comes to the protection of human rights.

The fundamental issue is that 10 crore people worldwide have fled to safer shores due to food insecurity, the climate crisis and wars. People's desperation is making the situation worse — around one lakh Indians trying to enter the US illegally were caught or expelled in 2023 alone. Foreign ministers of European nations have privately expressed concern over the huge influx of undocumented Indians. Instead of a quick fix, the UK should lead the international community in finding a permanent and unbiased solution to the migrant problem.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

LAHORE, TUESDAY, APRIL 29, 1924

Governor's speech in Amritsar SIR Edward Madagan, who was given a farewell by the District Board, Amritsar, last week, referred to the Sikh problem and the appointment of the Birdwood Committee. In the course of this speech, His Excellency said: "The Government has had at times to enforce the law when this was broken and to secure peacewhen this was threatened, but it has realised, like the poet, the discomforts of 'being wroth with those we love,' and it has entered with reluctance on repressive measures, however much these may have been necessary in the interests of other communities and the public at large." The reference he made to the "discomforts of being wroth with those we love" is believed to show that the Government is by no means pleased with the infliction of so much suffering on the Sikh community whom it still 'loves'. If this is so, it should naturally follow that the position of this community should be restored to what it was before repression began. His Excellency further said: "Nothing would give me greater pleasure at the end of my term of office than to see things put in place for a complete restoration of the old feelings of confidence between the Government of the Province and the Sikh community." If this is the real object of the Government, the proposed Committee should be asked not only to suggest a satisfactory solution to the Gurdwara problem but also to remedy the subsequent grievances of the community and action should be taken as early as possible to prepare the ground for the "restoration of the old feelings of confidence". We hope that His Excellency will endeavour to give effect to the happy ideal which he has so sincerely expressed in his Amritsar speech.

## Maldives moving closer to China

The development threatens to hit New Delhi's interests in the Indian Ocean Region



**CUDAY BHASKAR** DIRECTOR, SOCIETY FOR POLICY STUDIES

HE results of the recent parliamentary elections in the Maldives threw up a big surprise. While President Mohamed Muizzu's People's National Congress (PNC) was expected to win, the scale of the victory was unprecedented. Voters of the tiny islandnation (population of about 500,000) in the Indian Ocean gave an overwhelming majority to Muizzu's party in the 93member House. The PNC won 66 seats, while its allies bagged another nine, thereby giving Muizzu a super-majority of 75. The electoral mandate gives him the licence to make changes in the Constitution and muzzle the Opposition.

In a complex domestic political churn, Maldivian elections in recent years have seen the emergence of a pro-China faction, thereby posing a challenge to India - which for decades was the principal aid donor and security provider. In a setback for India, then President Abdulla Yameen, who was in office from 2013 to 2018, favoured Beijing over New Delhi. He was accused of embezzlement of funds and corruption and indicted for bribery just before the September 2023 presidential election; the verdict debarred him from contesting.

A last-minute nomination saw then mayor of Male, Muizzu, throwing his hat into the ring against Ibrahim Solih (President from 2018 to 2023) of the Maldivian Democratic Party and winning the election with a slim lead in the second round. Solih was perceived to be empathetic to



ON TOP: Maldives President Muizzu's People's National Congress swept the recent parliamentary polls. REUTERS

India. One of the major foreign policy issues was the tussle between the pro-India and pro-China factions.

It is instructive that Muizzu won the election last year on the back of his 'India out' campaign. Soon after assuming office, he directed that the Indian presence in the Maldives be reduced. As a first step, the new President compelled New Delhi to withdraw the few military personnel who were stationed in the island nation. Muizzu's January visit to Beijing, where Chinese President Xi Jinping welcomed him as an 'old friend', was testimony if it were required - to the extent to which the Maldives was now looking at China as an alternative to India.

Clearly, despite its long-standing ties with the political leadership in Male, India had dropped the ball in late 2012, when a major infrastructure project awarded to the GMR Group was suddenly cancelled. India was no longer the preferred partner for the Maldives. China, which has long sought a foothold in the Indian Ocean, methodically invested in the strategically located island nation. The latest

Muizzu will have to nudge the two Asian giants to work collectively to address the red lights that are flashing.

development will pose a challenge to Indian security planners and hobble PM Modi's vision of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All) in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

The docking of Chinese research ship Xiang Yang Hong 3 in Male on April 25 and the disclosure that this vessel had been inside or near Maldivian waters since January would suggest that Chinese naval/maritime presence in this part of the Indian Ocean will animate the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.

Soon after taking charge as President, when asked if his foreign policy would see a tilt towards China, Muizzu said he would follow a pro-Maldives policy. Major infrastructure projects with Chinese assistance are on the anvil, and the people will be monitoring the tilt towards Beijing to see how this will impact their lives and human security indicators.

The most critical and urgent threat to Maldivian security nay, its very physical existence as a nation — is the danger of a rise in sea levels. The worstcase scenario is that the Indian Ocean archipelago can disappear when the danger mark is crossed. Experts say that by 2050, as much as 80 per cent of the Maldives will become uninhabitable due to global warming. And the dire warning sounded by the World Bank is that if prevailing regional trendlines of global warming and sea rise are not addressed in an urgent and effective manner, sea levels could increase by 10-100 cm in the future. The net result: by 2100, the entire country could be submerged.

Fortuitously, this issue came into focus amid the declaration of results of the Maldivian parliamentary elections. On April 23, the World Meteorological Organisation released its Climate Asia 2023 Report. The findings are ominous for all forms of life on earth, and the gravity of the threat is stark.

According to the report, the global annual mean near-surface temperature last year was 1.45°C above the 1850-1900 pre-industrial average, and 2023 was the warmest year on record. The global average sea levels have continued to rise at a sustained rate of 3.43 mm/year from 1993 to 2023. But the rate of the rise is not the same everywhere.

The rise in the sea levels in the three sectors of the Indian Ocean (north-west, north-east and south-east) was significantly higher at 4.07, 4.44 and 4.19 mm, respectively, than the global average of 3.43 mm. If ever there are 'pro Maldives' issues screaming for policy attention, they are climate change and global warming.

With their geopolitical aspirations and anxieties playing out in the IOR, this is a survival challenge for a small nation that India and China must respond to in a collective manner. The claim to major power status and leadership of the Global South by New Delhi and Beijing has been reduced to a brittle and arid binary. Even as their policy planners pursue ambitious hi-tech projects that subsume cyber, semiconductors, artificial intelligence and spectrum domination, the health of the ocean will determine the viability of planet earth being able to sustain life in an equitable manner. Perched on top of the complex life pyramid, the human species will fall first.

Muizzu will have to nudge the two Asian giants to work collectively to address the red lights that are flashing. It will be an arduous challenge for Male to yoke Delhi and Beijing together.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The highest form of warfare is to attack the enemy's strategy itself; the next, to attack his alliances. — Henry Kissinger

## A taste of goodness

SUMIT PAUL

99

OTELS and restaurants offer a wide array of experiences. More often than not, one Lenters their premises expecting the unexpected. In 2009, I stayed in Jaipur for about a month at a lodge off Mirza Ismail Road. One day, I went to a nearby restaurant and asked for the menu. It was like a slim magazine with innumerable dishes. 'Chhole bhature hain?' I asked. 'Nahin, sahib,' the waiter replied. 'Matarpaneer?' I enquired. 'Paneer hai par matar nahin,' he said. 'Okay then, aloo ka parantha la deejiye,' I said with resignation. 'Paranthe wala cook ghar chala gaya, sahib,' he informed me. Exasperated, I called the manager and asked whether he had a lock. Baffled, he said 'yes'. I told him to lock up the restaurant since it had nothing to offer. However, he did not take offence at my caustic remark. I left in a huff and went to another eatery, where I ate to my heart's content.

I left Jaipur after a few days and came back to Pune. The incident was soon forgotten. A few years later, I visited a restaurant in Gurugram and asked the waiter, 'Huzoor, kya hai?' (what have you got?). 'Taale ke ilawa sab kuchh hai' (except for a lock, we have got everything),' said someone. Flabbergasted, I turned back and was surprised to see the manager whom I had met in Jaipur. He had opened his own restaurant in Gurugram. That day, he had everything that was mentioned in the menu, and the food was scrumptious. We recalled the episode and laughed heartily. The cherry on the cake was that it was a free treat from him. I thanked him profusely and am still in touch with him.

Once, I ordered a vegetarian dish at a swanky restaurant in Lucknow. It was full of chillies. I called the waiter and told him, 'Shorba kuchh zyada hi teekha hai' (this dish is too spicy). The manager immediately came and tasted it. He apologised and served another dish in a jiffy. It was perfect and delicious. What's more, he did not charge me anything and again regretted that the restaurant had served a 'below par' item. I was touched and realised that it was not for nothing that Lucknow was called Shahar-e-tahzeeb (the city of etiquette).

Alas, these heart-warming gestures are a rarity nowadays. Maybe the times have changed. And so have the people and their values.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Voters seek solutions, not slogans Refer to 'Infiltrators, inheritance and des-

peration' (Nous Indica); as the election fervour grips the nation, the BJP has returned to divisive tactics and the Opposition is giving a faltering response, evoking a sense of déjà vu. PM Narendra Modi's recent speech in Banswara, replete with references to infiltrators, mangalsutras and family size, raises concerns. Is this desperation or a calculated move? The BJP's resort to communal signalling underscores its unease. However, economic woes, not religious rhetoric, dominate the public discourse. While the BJP battles complacency, the Congress' confusion impedes its resurgence. Rahul Gandhi's calls for revolution will ring hollow without concrete action. In this electoral maze, the electorate seeks substance over spectacle and solutions over slogans.

**GURDEV SINGH, BY MAIL** 

#### Electorate's wish for progress

With reference to 'Infiltrators, inheritance and desperation' (Nous Indica); in the throes of an electoral battle, the air is thick with desperation and divisive rhetoric. PM Narendra Modi and the BJP's resort to polarising narratives, notably at the Banswara rally, is a disheartening echo of past tactics. This strategic retreat to the 'safety zone' of communal discourse signals more than just campaign fervour; it hints at an underlying fear of losing its grip. The Opposition's entanglement in its own contradictions only adds to the political drama. Yet, it is the electorate's response that will deliver the final act. If the BJP's communal call fails to resonate, it may well be a reflection of the public's weariness with polarisation and a yearning for unity and progress.

SAHIBPREET SINGH, MOHALI

#### The poll promise that was not

Refer to 'Anxiety in the saffron camp': among the election-related issues, the writer mentioned the BJP's reported 'promise' of transferring Rs 15 lakh into every Indian's bank account. But no such promise was made by anyone. What PM Modi had reportedly said was that there was enough black money stashed in foreign

banks to be distributed at the rate of over Rs 15 lakh to individuals in India. Can it be called a poll promise? The black money, if unearthed, should go to the state exchequer, not into the accounts of individuals. Only a naïve person would think otherwise. Though the Opposition keeps raking up the issue, at least an enlightened and well-

informed writer must not do so. WG CDR CL SEHGAL (RETD), JALANDHAR

#### SC right to junk EVM-VVPAT pleas

With reference to the editorial 'EVMs get SC backing'; the Supreme Court has rightly junked the pleas seeking 100 per cent verification of Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) votes with their Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slips. The apex court also observed that the weakness of the ballot paper system is well known and manual counting is prone to human errors. It could also lead to deliberate mischief. The demand for cross-verification of votes by members of Opposition parties was driven by frustration triggered by a number of electoral losses across the country. Notably, Opposition leaders never question the functioning of EVMs when they register a win. The court did the right thing.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

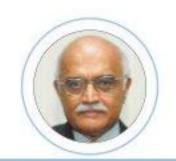
#### Reposing faith in voting system

Apropos of 'EVMs get SC backing'; all right-thinking people must welcome the apex court's rejection of the petitions seeking 100 per cent verification of EVM votes with their VVPAT slips. The SC has ruled out a return to the paper ballot voting system, which used to witness largescale attempts by goons with political patronage to capture polling booths. Candidates now have the option to request an inspection of at least 5 per cent of EVMs in each Assembly segment in every parliamentary constituency within seven days of the declaration of the result. It would deter them from questioning the reliability of EVMs without any grounds. Besides, there remains a scope for continual improvement in the efficacy of the machines through the latest technological methodologies and interventions.

KRISHAN KANT SOOD, NANGAL

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

## How Iran took centre stage in Palestinian movement



VAPPALA BALACHANDRAN FORMER SPECIAL SECRETARY, CABINET SECRETARIAT

CCORDING to the Population Reference Bureau (PRB), Washington DC, residents of the West Bank and Gaza are almost totally of Palestinian-Arab origin: 92 per cent West Bankers and 99 per cent Gazans are Sunni Muslims and the rest are Christians. These are 2002 figures. The PRB says that 2,14,000 Jewish settlers also live in these areas. The demographics might have changed due to the presence of large-scale 'illegal' Jewish settlers, as the US calls them, since February 2024, reversing former US Presi-

dent Trump's policy. However, the religious composition of the Palestinians remains almost the same, according to the CIA's 'World FactBook' (2024). The question is how Iran, with almost 95 per cent Shia population, assumed leadership of the Palestinian

struggle against Israel. The Iran-Israel relations were friendly in 1948, when Israel was born. A 2019 Brookings paper says that historically. Persian-Judaic interactions were friendly as Iran was the guerrilla warfare. They also

only country which did not join the Muslim-majority states in opposing its creation. Also, Iran fitted into Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's 'Periphery Doctrine', which aimed at "a political-security goal of countering Arab hostility through relations with alternative regional powers and potential allies," according to Israeli author Yossi Alpher.

Ben-Gurion forged relationships with non-Arab countries, like Turkey and Iran, whose rulers, like Ismet Inonu and Mohammed Reza Pahlavi (The Shah), had pro-Western orientations. During the Arab-Israeli wars in 1967 and 1973, the Iran-Israel relations assumed strategic depth, with joint projects like Trans-Atlantic Oil, set up in Panama and Switzerland, and a secret Eilat-Ashkelon Oil Pipeline, at a time when Arab oil producers had imposed embargoes on Israel.

Apart from 'Savak'-Mossad intelligence cooperation, a secret Israel-Iran project named 'Project Flower' on advanced missile systems was also reportedly going on, according to The New Arab of October 23, 2023, quoting The New York Times (April 1, 1986).

Around this time, Iranian leftist guerrillas led by the Tudeh Party, and 'Fedaian guerrillas', who were persecuted by Savak, joined the Palestinian pro-left Fatah movement's camps in Jordan and Lebanon for training in



HISTORICAL: Iran was the only Muslim-majority country to not oppose Israel's creation. FILE PHOTO

Iran specialists of

that era say that the

creation of Islamic

Revolutionary

Guards Corps was

a result of Arafat's

suggestions through

Lebanese PLO

leader Naccache.

participated with al-Fatah during the armed combat with the Israeli army. However, this leftist revolution petered out. On the other hand, religious

groups led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini started agitating after the failure of Pahlavi's 'White Revolution'. which was meant to modernise the Iranian society. The Shah had to leave Iran on January 16, 1979, and Khomeini entered Iran on February 1 to lead a theocratic nation.

The first foreign leader to visit Iran was Yasser Arafat, al-Fatah leader, on February 17, 1979. Arafat, who had suffered a crushing defeat in 1970 while attempting to take over Jordan ('Black September'), was looking for a country to support him, although Lebanon had allowed him to operate from its soil. This was based on the November 2, 1969, Cairo agreement, supported by Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser. through which Lebanon perAgency, where three lakh Palestinian refugees lived. Gradually, these camps became the training ground of

revolutionaries of all hues, including Iranian religious revolutionaries like the Liberation Movement of Iran, also called the Islamic modernists, Islamic-Marxist Mujahidin-e-Khalk and Islamist followers of Ayatollah Khomeini. Iran specialists of that era say that the creation of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) was a result of Arafat's suggestions through Lebanese PLO leader Anis Naccache, who had led the 1975 Vienna kidnapping of OPEC oil ministers through Carlos the Jackal.

mitted Arafat's PLO to admin-

ister 16 official refugees'

camps under the United

Nations Relief & Works

Naccache worked with Jalaleddin Farsi, who was then close to Khomeini, to prevent a coup against the latter in the unsettled conditions in Iran. Naccache later recruited Imad Mughniyeh, who rose to become Hezbollah's top man and organised the Argentinian bombings in 1992 and 1994.

The IRGC is Iran's leading fighting force now, numbering nearly two lakh, with overseas responsibilities through the Quds Force. A Council on Foreign Relations paper, updated on April 17, 2024, says that it has regional allies in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon (Hezbollah), Palestinian territories (Hamas and Islamic Jihad), Syria and Yemen. The paper quotes a 2020 assessment by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies that "the IRGC has become the most powerful controller of all important economic sectors across Iran" for funding covert activities.

A December 2023 paper by the Combating Terrorism Centre(CTC) at US West Point Military Academy says that the IRGC does the crafting of its overseas activities through umbrella groups and joint operations centres. It enlists al-Fatah splinter groups and leftist and Islamist groups into a more loyal, militarily cohesive and politically responsive network under the IRGC control. The first experiment was in 1991, when it created the Ten Resistance Organisation at the Tehransponsored "World Conference in Support of the Islamic Revolution in Palestine".

In September 2023, Hamas and Palestinian Jihad started a

joint operations room (JOR) in Beirut. Another joint operational centre of the Hezbollah and Hamas had been functioning since 2021. As per the CTC, this JOR utilises Lebanese Hezbollah as a coordinator between Iran, other Iranian proxies in Iraq, Syria and Yemen and Palestinian groups.

The CTC paper also quotes Yahya al-Sinwar, Hamas' Gaza lead military commander, proclaiming in November 2018 that the JOR would form the 'nucleus of the Army of Liberation'. Consequently, the JOR undertook joint operations by firing rockets at Israel in November 2018 and in 2019.

Surprisingly, the CTC also reproduces impressive propaganda papers circulated through JOR Telegram Channels communications, dated December 29, 2020, on the types of exercises, including launching rockets, simulating taking IDF hostage from a tank, raiding small structures, deploying an Iranian-made Misagh MAN-PADS and using Iranian-made AM50 rifles. The paper refers to videos from the drillon simulated combat divers raiding coastal targets and JOR fighters interdicting mock Israeli sea-borne forces. It also quotes Joe Truzman writing in Long Wars Journal on December 27, 2020, about these exercises.

All these were found utilised by the Hamas during the October 7, 2023, attacks. What, then, was Israeli intelligence doing when such information was publicly available since 2020?

Views are personal

In terms of tangible political

goals, the leadership in Leh

## Poll-time focus on aspirations of J&K, Ladakh residents



**LUV PURI** JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR

OLLING has been completed in parts of the Jammu region, which has two Lok Sabha seats (Jammu and Udhampur), while the three constituencies primarily in Kashmir (Baramulla, Anantnag-Rajouri and Srinagar) and one in Ladakh will go to the polls in May. One needs to pay attention to the issues that have arisen in this border region during the ongoing elections - the first parliamentary battle in J&K and Ladakh since the abrogation of Article 370 on

August 5, 2019. Though the state-turned-UT has only five seats, J&K's electoral impact on national politics is, at times, disproportionate. It provides an entire mosaic of issues that are leveraged in the Hindi heartland. National security concerns impacted the national elections in 2019 as well as in 1999. The Balakot airstrikes after the Pulwama terror attack gave an edge to the BJP in some states in the 2019 polls, while the victory in the Kargil War helped the party in the General Election held in September-October 1999. Many soldiers serving in J&K come from electorally significant like Haryana, Rajasthan, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Bihar. While the BJP has repeatedly described the abrogation of Article 370 as its achievement, the narrative on this issue was relatively muted during campaigning for the Udhampur and Jammu seats that went to the polls on April 19 and 26, respectively. The matter has minimal resonance in these areas. The Congress narrative revolved around issues mentioned in its manifesto, including the promise of the restoration of J&K's statehood.

With regard to the Lok Sabha seats primarily in the Kashmir valley, the implications of the Delimitation Commission report, released in 2022, are becoming evident. The panel merged parts of the Anantnag parliamentary seat with the Muslim-majority Rajouri and Poonch districts, which were earlier included in the Hindu-majority Jammu-Poonch parliamentary constituency. De facto, two culturally distinct Muslim-majority areas on either side of the Pir Panjal mountain range were combined to form a parliaconstituency mentary (Anantnag-Rajouri). Some observers viewed the previous seat, comprising Hindumajority Jammu district and



BORDER CONTEST: J&K has five Lok Sabha seats, including the post-delimitation Anantnag Rajouri constituency. PTI

Sonam Wangchuk's

campaign has

brought global

attention to

environmental

concerns of Ladakh.

Muslim-majority Rajouri-Poonch belt, as a secularising and stabilising force in a sensitive region.

Moreover, the Anantnag-Rajouri constituency, which goes to the polls in the third phase on May 7, is proving to be a logistical nightmare for the candidates and their parties. For instance, if someone has to travel from Poonch to Anantnag, it takes around 11 hours by road, through the Jammu-Udhampur National Highway 1A or through Reasi district. The only road that connects Jammu's Rajouri-Poonch with the Kashmir valley's Anantnag is the historic Mughal road, but it remains snow-clad for nearly seven months.

The main stakeholders,

the National Conference (NC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP), have strongly opposed the demand to defer the May 7 poll in Anantnag-Rajouri, even as some parties, including the BJP - which doesn't even have a candidate for this seat - are keen on a postponement. Within the segment, the contest is between NC candidate Mian Altaf, a scion of an influential Gujjar family, and former CM and PDP leader Mehbooba Mufti. Gujjars, with at least one-third presence in Rajouri-Poonch, had opposed the granting of ST status to the Paharis, as they feared that it would eat into their reservation pie. The BJP has not fielded any can-

majority seats in J&K. The NC is the favourite for

didate on the three Muslim-

the Baramulla and Srinagar seats. Party president Omar Abdullah, who is contesting from Baramulla, faces People's Conference leader Sajad Lone, who has electoral influence particularly in the Kupwara area of the constituency. He and the Apni Party's Altaf Bukhari have tried to cobble up a coalition on both seats, but the NC as well as the PDP have labelled them as proxies of the BJP. In Srinagar, the NC has fielded Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi, a Shia cleric, who faces the PDP's Waheed-ur-Rehman Parra, who was arrested in 2020 and jailed for 19 months under the UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act). The NC and the PDP are seeking votes to "restore the dignity of Kashmiris" in Parliament. After a long Kashmir-centric issues, such as the release of political prisoners, are part of the poll discourse.

Separated from J&K as a consequence of the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019, the Ladakh parliamentary segment, facing the China-controlled Tibetan plateau and Pakistan-controlled Gilgit-Baltistan, has its own issues. The Ladakhi population includes 46.4 per cent Muslims, 39.7 per cent Buddhists and 12.1 per cent Hindus.

and Kargil demands the application of a North Eastcentric Sixth Schedule of the Constitution for Ladakh to protect the fragile ecosystem of the region, as they fear being inundated by outsiders and industrial development. Activist Sonam Wangchuk's campaign, which has given vivid details of the receding glaciers that feed the entire Indus basin and the impact on regional ecology, has brought international attention to the environmental issue. The impact is visible, as the BJP has dropped MP Jamyang Tsering Namgyal and given the ticket to Tashi Gyalson, who is the chairman-cumchief executive councillor of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council in Leh. Hectic efforts among various stakeholders within the Opposition - Kargil's institutions prominent Islamia School and Khomeni Trust School, and the Congress - are continuing to pick a joint candidate.

A cohesive and participatory relationship between the heartland and the periphery is necessary as an antidote to secessionist demands or ethnic fissures and to ensure sustainable peace. This can only be done by being sensitive to the issues that have been highlighted during the elections and that should inform policymaking in the future.

#### **OUICK CROSSWORD**

- ACROSS An unsuccessful
- venture (4,7)
- 9 Precise moment (7) 10 A minor planet (5)
- 11 Change direction (4) 12 Return from
- investment (8)
- 14 Renounce as
- erroneous (6) 16 Defeated (6)
- 18 Rules of diplomatic etiquette (8)
- 19 To loose (4) 22 A narcotic drug (5)
- 23 Baffle (7) 24 Emergency food supplies (4,7)

- 2 Happen afterwards (5)
- 3 Cheerless (4) Achieve (6)
- Unevenly balanced (8) Ostentatiously rich (7)
- 7 Expectation of inherited
- wealth (6,5) 8 Continuing source of
- profit (6,5) 13 Not often found (8)
- 15 Bishop's staff of office (7) 17 Part of the eye (6)
- 20 A synthetic polymer (5) 21 Person opposed to a policy (4)

#### SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Howdah, 4 Stalwart, 9 Bridle, 10 Sidestep, 12 Tutu, 13 Beige, 14 Loaf, 17 Awe-inspiring, 20 For a rainy day, 23 Plum, 24 Leapt, 25 Veto, 28 Euphoric, 29 Genius, 30 Daylight, 31 Unless

Down: 1 Habitual, 2 Whistler, 3 Able, 5 Trig ger-happy, 6 Leek, 7 Action, 8 Tip-off, 11 Keep pace with, 15 Enjoy, 16 In ane, 18 Adhesive, 19 Synopsis, 21 Append, 22 Supply, 26 Gobi, 27 Mean.

### SU DO KU 6 4 8 9 5 8 3 5 3 6 EASY

#### SATURDAY'S SOLUTION 2 3 6 1 8 9 1 9 5 7 4 2 5 6 9 3 1 8 8 3 2 7 4 5 6 3 5 4 1 8 2 9 7 8 9 7 4 3 6 2 1 6 8 2 9 4 5 6 4 9 5 1 8 7 3 CALENDAR APRIL 29, 2024, MONDAY

#### Shaka Samvat Vaishakh Shaka 9 Vaishakh Parvishte 17 1445 Krishna Paksha Tithi 5, up to 7.58 am Siddha Yoga up to 12.26 am ■ Purvashadha Nakshatra up to 4.43 am

■ Moon in Sagittarius sign

SUNSET: SUNRISE:	MONDAY TUESDAY		18:59 HRS 05:40 HRS	
CITY	1023	MAX	-	
Chandigarh		35	23	
New Delhi		40	24	
Amritsar		33	20	
Bathinda		36	21	
Jalandhar		35	20	
Ludhiana		35	21	
Bhiwani		38	24	
Hisar		37	22	
Sirsa		37	23	
Dharamsala		25	14	
Manali		16	05	
Shimla		22	10	
Srinagar		12	08	
Jammu		30	19	
Kargil		16	06	
Leh		12	03	
Dehradun		33	25	
Mussoorie		20	11	

FORECAST