

BOOKS

As wheel turns full circle on China

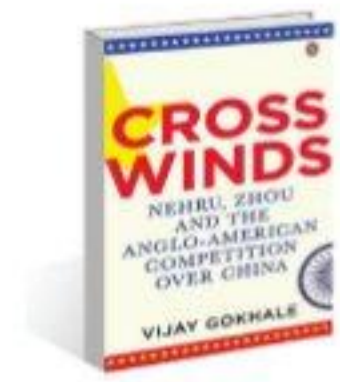
SANDEEP DIKSHIT

At a time when the British are re-entering the Indian Ocean with the AUKUS nuclear submarine project, former Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale examines the early years of post World War-II China when a similar interjection of London's interests in the Indo-US discourse on the Communist regime had cost India dearly.

Gokhale's oeuvre of three books till the present one was squarely set in China. The first, 'Tiananmen Square: The Making of a Protest', was a unique non-western spotlight on the events of April 15 to June 4, 1989, which he had also seen as a young diplomat. 'The Long Game' was a mostly first-hand account of how the Chinese negotiate with India. And the third, 'After Tiananmen: The Rise of China', established how today's China was built by 20 years of faceless leaders at the top who followed the tumultuous Mao years.

In his fourth work, Gokhale casts the net wider. The action flits between metropolises strung around the world, grappling with four crises that followed in succession east of India — the rise of Communist China, conflict in Vietnam-Laos-Cambodia zone and two bouts of Taiwan Straits tensions.

A fledgling India sought to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape in its neighbourhood at a time when the declining British Empire was desperate to main-



CROSSWINDS: NEHRU, ZHOU AND THE ANGLO-AMERICAN COMPETITION OVER CHINA
by Vijay Gokhale.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 256.
₹699

While India is shaping a clear-eyed policy towards China, former Foreign Secy Gokhale advises direct dialogue with US

tain its commercial interests and the emerging superpower, the US, sought complete hegemony over the Pacific while looking for a suitable partner in the Indian Ocean. Both through their ambassadors, envoys, Foreign Ministers and Pres-

ident/PMs strived for New Delhi's ears so that it follows a foreign policy that suited either of them.

Larger-than-life personalities, who may be legends or villains of today, flit across the pages as they seek to read each other's intentions. The fast whirl of diplomatic life was as hectic as it is today; and crosswinds managed to catch each tempest east of India while the Nehru-dominated foreign policy sought to steer its own strategic direction.

The policies of India, the US and the UK were in sync till the Nationalist Government-ruled China. Crosswinds started in earnest on the issue of international recognition of China after Mao Tse-tung displaced the Nationalists. The US wanted to contain China; the British did not want its commercial interests and trading rights to be impacted, while India wanted China as an indispensable partner in post-colonial Asia. At stake was the recognition of Communist China. India was the second non-socialist state to do so. The British followed soon after but during the talks that preceded recognition, Whitehall constantly undermined India with the US while giving a different impression to the South Block.

Gokhale examines three more episodes where the interests of India, China, the US and Great Britain again collided as well as overlapped. As action moves across the diplomatic chequerboard, Nehru's steps that successfully interjected India in confabulations on all three — Indo-China, the

first Taiwan Straits crisis and the second Taiwan Straits crisis — speaks of his sharp political perspicacity.

But Indian interests were impacted by its limitations in framing foreign policy — VK Krishna Menon went for the Geneva conference on Indo-China without even a brief. Reports of his participation are available only in reports filed by *The Hindu's* then London correspondent and the archives of other participant countries. The main actors in all the four incidents were Nehru, his close political associates and a handful of civil servants who tended to associate with British reasoning than the American or Chinese. The cumulative effect was the souring of ties with the US on the one hand and India losing out on securing its interests vis-a-vis China.

The wheel has now turned full circle. Crosswinds are rising because of the re-emergence of Great Power competition in the same theatre. As Gokhale points out, the past is becoming relevant for the future. Britain has quietly expanded its military presence in the Indian Ocean to six naval bases. AUKUS provides geopolitical justification for an enhanced presence in the Indo-Pacific. While India is already shaping a clear-eyed policy towards China, the former Foreign Secretary advises direct dialogue with the US. Because when the British again come courting India since it is a principal littoral state in the region, Gokhale warns, "It would be wise to bear Virgil's words: Beware of Greeks bearing gifts."

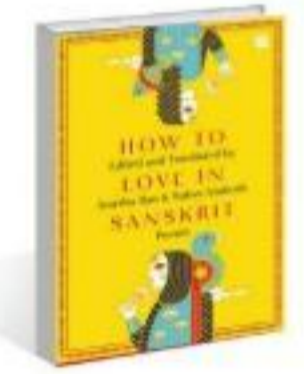


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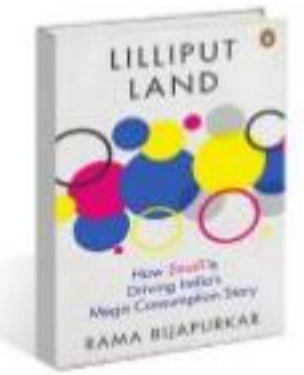
ASIA AFTER EUROPE
by Sugata Bose.
Harvard University Press.
Pages 275. ₹699

The iconic image of Bharatmata by Tagore's nephew in 1905 was the first product of emerging Asianism in the 20th century tracked by Sugata Bose in all its hues — the contradictions, overlaps — and several dimensions, from arts to politics. Closely-written, highlighting the foibles and strengths of leaders and artists who define crucial turns in Asia's political history, this is an academic work by a different type of a don from western universities. From the Subhas Chandra Bose family and a one-term Trinamool Congress MP the focus is on eastern India.



HOW TO LOVE IN SANSKRIT
Edited & Translated by Anusha Rao and Suhas Mahesh.
HarperCollins.
Pages 299. ₹599

The book is an invitation to appreciating Sanskrit love poetry, an introduction to the language itself. There are more than 200 verses in it, written by celebrated writers such as Kalidasa and Banabhatta, as also lesser-known but skilled writers. Around 150 of these are in Sanskrit, 50 in Maharashtra Prakrit, some in Apabhramsha and one in Pali. Translators Anusha Rao and Suhas Mahesh are scholars of Sanskrit and have tried to include something for everyone in this ancient guide to love for modern readers.



LILLIPUT LAND: HOW SMALL IS DRIVING INDIA'S MEGA CONSUMPTION STORY
by Rama Bijapurkar.
Penguin Random House.
Pages 304. ₹699

India is driven by lots and lots of small consumers earning and spending just a little bit each. These consumers are served by numerous small suppliers. Digital revolution now offers the keys to cracking open this tricky market. Digital business models will be the future of competition as they harness the power of small. 'Lilliput Land' helps in understanding the paradoxes and challenges that dot India's market opportunity and discusses the drivers and shapers of its future.



THE LADY ON THE HORSE AND OTHER SECRETS
by Ramona Sen.
Speaking Tiger.
Pages 302.
₹499

Ramona Sen turns the gaze to Calcutta, the city of her soul, once again. Set against the backdrop of the freedom struggle, the Bengal famine and Partition, this is a sprawling family saga exploring the insidious implications of class and caste through the lives of people thrown together by blood ties and fate lines. At the heart of the story is the idea that everything which happens in the present has its roots in the past.

Practical guide for climate-resilient food

DINESH C SHARMA

ERRATIC weather patterns, extreme rainfall events, recurring droughts and flooding are all indications of climate change. The phenomenon is adversely affecting food, water and ecological systems as well as the livelihoods of farming, fishing and other communities. To overcome the food shortage experienced in the middle of the 20th century, we adopted new farming techniques and methodologies such as the use of chemical fertilisers and water-intensive crops. In rainfall-deficit areas, irrigation as well as extensive use of groundwater became common.

Over the past several decades, this food system damaged the ecology as well as food diversity as the thrust was on cereals like wheat and rice and commercial crops like sugarcane, cotton, oilseeds, etc. Still, many local communities in tribal areas, hills and drylands continued to grow and use food crops and varieties which needed little water to grow and were sturdy. The climate crisis has brought such food crops into focus, given that they can be climate-resilient. The current limelight on millets is an example of this trend.



FIRST FOOD: FUTURE OF TASTE
Centre for Science and Environment.
Pages 258.
₹950

It is critical not only to understand the link between climate change and food systems, but also to propose options that are climate-friendly and practical to adopt. The Centre for Science and Environment has been engaged in trying to connect the dots between climate change, traditional food systems and consumers. While general awareness about millets such as bajra and jowar may be going up due to government publicity and marketing hype created by food companies, it is still cursory. There are several local foods — vegetables, fruits, weeds, spices, grasses, nuts and grains — that we don't know

about. The book is an attempt to put together information about such foods and present recipes, including those crafted by leading chefs and nutrition experts. In this sense, it is a practical guide for climate-resilient food.

Many of the forgotten or neglected foods discussed in the book are nutritious and wholesome foods — for instance, *kulfa* or purslane, which is also known as *juni bhaji* in parts of North India and *nunar* in Kashmir. All parts of *kulfa* — leaves, stems, flowers and seeds — are edible and contain several micronutrients and vitamins. Similarly, faba bean or *bakla phali* can be consumed both as a green vegetable and as a pulse along with other legumes. *Karela* or bitter gourd is a popular vegetable and several of its dishes are popular in different regions, but few would know that bitter gourd leaves too can be used in making interesting dishes like *pakora*.

In Odisha, bitter gourd leaves are added to some rice dishes as an additional ingredient. In Karnataka and Maharashtra, tamarind seeds are consumed in different ways — flour from these seeds is used to make *dal vada* or added to wheat dough to make *rotis*. Field bean or *dolichos lablab* is yet another legume-like seed grown and consumed in central India. In the North-

east, tiny and bitter brinjals that look like miniature pumpkins or cherry tomatoes are a part of many dishes. Even the usually discarded kernel of watermelon can be used to make stir-fried *sabzi* as well as jams and pickles. The book is full of traditional as well as new recipes for such food items. Vibha Varshney and other contributors have meticulously collated cultural, scientific and nutrition-related information, along with new and old recipes. They are grouped under different categories — breakfast and snacks, meals, chutneys, pickles, desserts and beverages.

For a climate-friendly world, the dictum should be: 'eat locally-grown food'. The book points out that traditionally grown crops are good for climate and food systems. Edible wilds, it says, can help achieve several of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals related to food security, nutrition, health and biodiversity. However, the promotion and cultivation of these resources should be undertaken in ways that are sustainable and equitable for local communities. Overmarketing can be dangerous, as appears to be the case with millets. The book is an excellent compendium useful for all those interested in climate change, food, nutrition, health and sustainability.

Blending of the personal and the political

DEBASHISH MUKERJI

NOTED film director Govind Nihalani's *Hazaar Chauansi Ki Ma' (The Mother of No. 1084)*, released in 1998, is the story of a woman's gradual political awakening as she probes the murder of her son, referred to by the police simply as 'Corpse No. 1084'. Set against the backdrop of the Naxalite movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with Jaya Bachchan playing the title role, it is adapted from a Bengali short story by Mahasweta Devi. When Bhaskar Roy, the author of 'The Fifty Year Road', asked Nihalani what drew him to the story, he said it was its "blending of the personal and the political".

Roy's reminiscences in 'The Fifty Year Road' are compelling for the same reason. Most followers of English print media since the 1980s would be familiar with his byline. This book covers the tumultuous 50-year period from the time he underwent his *hathe khori* — a Bengali ritual which initiates a toddler into reading and writing — in 1964, to the year of Narendra Modi's taking over as the Prime Minister, 2014.

Roy recalls his parents (both of them freedom fighters, who became government employees after Independence), his grandmother (also a freedom fighter), the West Bengal towns he grew up in (Ashoknagar, a refugee enclave on Kolkata's outskirts, which he calls a "hopeless town" sunk in "inherent gloom" and has little nostalgia for; Burwan, a semi-rural enclave in Murshidabad district to which his mother was transferred, with its "smell of freshly harvested grain and the rattle of bullock carts laden with hay", and finally, Kolkata itself); and the schools and colleges he attended till he post-graduated in English



THE FIFTY YEAR ROAD: A PERSONAL HISTORY OF INDIA FROM THE MID-SIXTIES ONWARD
by Bhaskar Roy.
Jaico Publishing.
Pages 296.
₹599

literature from Calcutta University.

He remembers his early forays into freelance journalism, his first job, his shift to Delhi and subsequent jobs, his infatuations, romance and eventual marriage. Particularly evocative are his memories at moments of departure — from Ashoknagar, from Burwan, and finally from Kolkata:

"Leaving Calcutta is not easy. The city pulls you, holds you back with all its sounds, colours, fragrances, memories and intensely human moments. Hungry after watching a nerve wracking football match, we would go to Dacres Lane to be assaulted by a host of sumptuous smells of cheap food... Deep inside Gariahat Market was Kali Maiti's pice hotel serving French fries as thin and crispy as paper strips... In the Park Street area, you could walk into a passage off the main road and right onto a rectangular lawn or courtyard around which stood neatly arranged buildings. Years later, I discovered the same feature of city planning in London and learnt that these are called *meuz*."

Politics entered Roy's life even as he was a child, with the massive disruption caused by the Naxalite uprising. Like most of those who lived in West Bengal during that period, he is conflicted about the movement — he acknowledges its delusional aims, but also its idealism; the horrors its cadres unleashed, but also the horrors that were unleashed on them by the State. He correctly notes that while it was former Chief Minister Siddhartha Shankar Ray who brought peace back to West Bengal, he is also the most hated man in the state's history for his brutal repression of Naxalite activists.

From then on, Roy weaves the larger story of the country's politics into his own life story with finesse — the Bangladesh war of 1971, the Emergency of 1975, the historic elections of 1977 which ushered in the first non-Congress government at the Centre and soon after, brought the Left Front to power in West Bengal as well (to rule for the next 34 years). He moves through Indira Gandhi's re-election as Prime Minister in 1980, her assassination in 1984, Rajiv Gandhi's ascension as PM, the enormous hopes he raised and swiftly belied.

By then, Roy had moved to Delhi, and, as a political reporter, was able to provide a first-hand account of the emergence of VP Singh, who went on to defeat the Congress and succeed Rajiv Gandhi as PM in 1989; the rise of communal politics in the late 1980s with the BJP capitalising on the Babri Masjid controversy; PV Narasimha Rao's unexpected takeover as PM in 1991 following Rajiv Gandhi's assassination; the shock of the Babri Masjid demolition on December 6, 1992; the 1991 economic reforms which changed the country forever; the political turmoil of the late 1990s which led to three Lok Sabha elections in four years; the coming to power of a BJP-

led coalition at the Centre in 1998; its unexpected defeat in the 2004 elections; the achievements and travails of the two Congress-led governments that followed until it went out of office in 2014.

Among the highlights of the book are Roy's personal encounters as a reporter with a host of leading political actors from the 1980s onwards — Narasimha Rao, Manmohan Singh, Lal Krishna Advani, Mamata Banerjee, Brajesh Mishra (Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Man Friday as PM), George Fernandes and Jaya Jaitly, Somnath Chatterjee, Kamalapati Tripathi, Vijaya Raje and Madhav Rao Scindia, Lalitendra (Mizoram's insurgent leader and later Chief Minister), Subhas Ghising (of Gorkhaland fame) and more. He often reveals unexpected nuggets; for instance, Advani's admiration of the film *Taare Zameen Par*, or Narasimha Rao's view that the English translation of 'One Hundred Years of Solitude' read better than Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Spanish original.

His humanising of Narasimha Rao and Advani, however, does not hold Roy back from his scathing evaluation of both. He emphasises how the former could easily have prevented the Babri Masjid demolition by taking over the entire disputed area in Ayodhya — as he subsequently did — and installing sufficient paramilitary forces around it well in advance, but instead chose to play "a dangerous game" of negotiating with rank communalists. As for the latter, Roy pinpoints him as "the starting point of the chauvinistic, majoritarian politics of the religious right that has flourished tremendously in recent years". At a time when both gentlemen have just been awarded the Bharat Ratna, it is sobering to reflect on the enormous damage to the inclusive, secular idea of India they wrought.

Impossible goals for kids



TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

THE famous poem by TS Eliot, 'The Wasteland', begins with: *April is the cruellest month...* As a student, I used to think March was the cruellest month because it was the time of final exams, the terror of students all over the country. The brain-fever bird, with its plaintive cry, is an early marker of the days that follow. How can we ever forget those harsh alarms set by anxious parents, the misery of leaving a warm bed and the fear that one is not prepared? So deep is this trauma that even now, when I am well past that stage, I get nightmares about an exam that I am about to take, only to discover it is about an unknown subject.

Recurring nightmares aren't the only psychological legacy. Every other day, one reads of a student committing suicide because he cannot take the stress any more or knows that he is never going to make it through that fiercely competitive exam like the JEE. The Kota phenomenon needs a wider study and serious rectification. While the owners of these teaching shops are laughing all the way to the bank, parents who are dying for their children to become 'successful' and earn a mega million salary, are pushed into making insane sacrifices. When will they ever accept that not every child is a Sundar Pichai and that money is not everything? I suppose it is easy for someone like me to pontificate since I no longer have a personal stake in this crazy system, but I do wish to share my concern over where we are headed as a society and as a country if we mindlessly pursue impossible goals for our children.

Mind you, it isn't that this madness afflicts just the pre-JEE generation because the seeds

of this syndrome are sown right from the nursery stage. Children as young as three are forced to get up before they have completed their sleep, stuffed into clothes, loaded with satchels that contain their tiffin, fruit and water bottles and dragged bawling to the bus that will ferry them and scores of other unhappy babies to spend three hours in a pre-school creche. Very likely, here they will be prepared to face the interview for admission into the school their parents ardently wish them to enter.

The very parents who bemoan the ills of the modern school system are also the ones who push their children the hardest

Do such parents even consider what it will mean to a child to become aware of failure even before he is properly potty-trained? Just recently, Prof Krishna Kumar, one of our foremost educationists, wrote about the burden we have placed on our children. He referred to a moving speech made by RK Narayan, a writer who understood and celebrated childhood so well. Many will recall an early televisual which was based on his novel, 'Swamy and Friends', which remains among my most favourite. Playing in dusty village fields with a gang of neighbourhood friends, India saw the carefree life in a small village and fell in love with its residents. Though the focus was Swamy and his naughty friends, there were a host of characters we encountered: schoolmasters, crabby old men, loving grandmothers, postmen and local grocery shops... the list was long and riveting. It uncovered for many of our generation who had never lived in a village or even a small town, the innocent and delightful world of little India.

RK Narayan's moving Rajya Sabha speech, as he ended his tenure there, inspired

Prof Yash Pal, a legendary scientist, to start a movement for lightening the burden of the satchel that schoolchildren lugged each morning. What followed was a series of recommendations to review school textbooks and curricula. Later, schoolchildren were not detained until they reached Class 8 to relieve them of repeated exams and to encourage them to spend as long as they could in a school. Whether these noble policy initiatives worked or not is a separate question. Free meals in government schools was another good introduction to tackle hunger and malnutrition. However, whether these meals were actually edible or hygienically prepared was never properly monitored.

Come now to the enormous amount of useless information that schools are stuffing down unwilling throats. Forget the tampering with right or left versions of history, I am appalled that several new subjects, such as commerce, legal studies and computer programming (to name just a few) have entered school curricula. Naturally, with so many subjects to study, basic information is all that is possible for a teacher to pass on. Many good subjects (ethics and moral science) are tossed out because they are laden with religious overtones. So, throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Study after study shows how ill-educated our children have become. Many cannot do simple arithmetic, read or spell correctly. They learn early on to discard what they will never need: so geography, music, poetry are subjects no longer in fashion. Computers and online teaching have made the class teacher a mere figure instead of being a counsellor and a guru in the true sense. Tagore's Santiniketan and his open-air classes in the lap of nature are dismissed as unworkable now. Ironically enough, the very parents who bemoan the ills of the modern school system are also the ones who push their children the hardest.

Time was when we laughed at the soccer moms in the American suburbs, now there are karate, tennis, cricket moms in almost every Indian gated community. Did someone say Vishwaguru?

For everyone's sake, make cycling safe



RAHUL BEDI

THE death of information technology wizard and avid bicyclist Avtar Singh Saini after being hit by a speeding taxi as he biked in Navi Mumbai last week came as a personal blow. The hit-and-run case brought home once more the vulnerabilities and inherent dangers bicyclists face.

As an ardent cyclist for more than two decades — pedalling 35-40 km in Delhi and Chandigarh daily — I am well aware that all bikers run this formidable risk at all times, be it from two-wheelers, tempos, cars, buses or trucks. Conversely, many drivers consider cyclists irksome irritants, treating them little better than dispensable entities.

In the absence of any cycle-friendly infrastructure across the country, like dedicated lanes, bicyclists remain vulnerable even whilst riding in extreme left lanes. Vehicles invariably give them little or no quarter to manoeuvre, or even honk to alert bikers to their menacing presence, often with disastrous consequences.

Even when roads are relatively traffic-free, like during early mornings, the risk of cyclists being hit remains high, as some vehicle drivers travel on the wrong side and finding the streets deserted and unpoliced, also tend to overspeed. During these early hours, they rarely stop at red signals, further endangering unprotected and defenceless cyclists, who have to be dexterous and alert at all times to dodge even a glancing blow, which can be fatal.

The manner of Saini's sudden death only reinforces the startling findings of a recent study by the Indian Institute of Technology in New Delhi that the per-kilometre 'fatality risk' for cyclists in the federal capital was 40 times higher than for car occupants. A multiplicity of cycling experts and road traffic analysts, however, concurred that these alarming odds were broadly analogous to most, if not all, Indian cities, where the exponential and unchecked growth of vehicular traffic had largely rendered bicycle riding across urban India akin to playing the Russian roulette.

The latest official statistics of cyclist fatalities, numbering 961 across India in 2021, led to widespread disbelief, with a cross-section of cycling professionals and enthusiasts expressing scepticism over such low recorded numbers. Based just on anecdotal accounts, they collectively asserted, the number of cyclists killed by speeding vehicles across India was 'markedly and significantly' higher.

Besides, numerous cyclist accidents, like Saini's, on highways and smaller roads in urban areas either remain unreported or often go unrecorded by the local police.

Instances of cyclists getting killed or injured in accidents, it seems, are too trivial to merit police investigation. It took a celebrity biker like Saini to be killed to flag this stark shortcoming and intrude on public consciousness.

But in all this overarching bicycling

gloom, Chandigarh justifiably stands out as India's most biker-friendly city, with more than 200 km of dedicated cycling tracks, which are continually being extended. This unique phenomenon of earmarked, smooth and wide cycling pathways — on which motorised vehicles rarely, if ever, stray — is being duplicated across the adjacent townships of Panchkula and Mohali. With deft navigation, it's possible to safely crisscross long distances between these tri-cities unencumbered by traffic, even during rush hours.

Besides, unbeknownst to many city residents, Chandigarh also has a designated band of traffic policemen whose sole task is to regulate vehicular traffic for cyclists at busy intersections during rush hours.



In the overarching bicycling gloom, Chandigarh justifiably stands out as India's most biker-friendly city, with over 200 km of dedicated cycling tracks

According to the Global Bicycle Index, formulated by the Paris-based Luko digital insurance company, nine European cities topped the list of the world's 90 bike-friendly places. Configured on six indicators — the weather, bicycle usage, crime and safety, biking infrastructure, cycle sharing opportunities and awareness events — Utrecht in the Netherlands headed the top 10 list. It was followed by Munster, Bremen and Hannover (Germany), Antwerp (Belgium), Copenhagen (Denmark), Amsterdam (the Netherlands), Bern (Switzerland) and Malmö (Sweden). The only non-European city in this index was Hangzhou in China; around a third of its 12.52 million residents are bikers.

Tokyo surprisingly was ranked 24, while the only US city to be featured in the list of 90 cycle-friendly places was San Francisco, placed at a lowly 39.

Cycling's burgeoning popularity as a recreational activity across India, especially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, remains in inverse proportion to incorporating measures to render it safe. After all, as the aphorism goes, biking is a part of the future, as there is something wrong with a society that drives a car to go to a gym. Or, as the Irish writer Iris Murdoch rightly declared, the bicycle is the most civilised conveyance known to man, as other forms of transport grow daily more nightmarish. Only the bicycle remains pure in heart, she said. For everyone's sake, let's all try making cycling safe.

Cast in Bihar's caste mould

ARUN CHANDRA VERMA

THE very name Bhagalpur evokes myriad thoughts and emotions. From being a cradle of education in times past to the inhuman acts perpetrated on captive criminals in the 1970s, and from the world-famous mulberry silk produced here to the communal riots of 1989 that singed and scorched the social fabric, Bhagalpur has been a paradox that has defied definition.

It was here that I got my first posting as Superintendent of Police in early 1984. It was then one of the largest districts in Bihar. The geographical area has now been trifurcated.

I had put in only about four years of service in the IPS and coming from another state, and having studied in a missionary school, knew next to nothing about the undercurrents of Bihar's social fabric. I had little idea of how strongly the intertwined warp and woof of religion and caste shaped day-to-day life. In a way, this was a blessing in disguise, as it allowed me to have a more objective view of men and matters.

I was initially overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenges before the district police, trying to emerge from the shadows and the backlash of the infamous blindings. I was quickly able to come to grips with the task at hand, till I got an entirely new perspective of working in Bihar.

A prominent politician was apparently

unhappy with my work or, more importantly, thought that I was inimical to his interests. He approached the then Chief Minister to transfer me out of the district as I was not doing his bidding. However, not having anything concrete to substantiate his claims, he took recourse to the most specious plea in the state to demonise any government servant: caste.

Now, if there ever was any 'propah' bureaucratic chief executive in Bihar, it was then. He took his decisions based purely on merit. The politician tried to convince him that the SP did not belong to caste 'A', as the CM was led to believe, but to caste 'B', which was against his interests. Now, my surname did nothing to divulge any inkling as to my caste, as 'Verma' is an omnibus expression, and is freely used by nearly all castes in Bihar and elsewhere.

More to humour the local politician, the CM asked the Range DIG about my caste. Being a true-blue Keralite Christian and an ex-Armyman to boot, the DIG apparently told

the CM, 'Hamein kya pata kis jaat ka hai? Ladka kaam theek karta hai, and that is good enough for me!' The District Magistrate was of hardly any help for similar reasons, and no one had the gumption to ask me directly.

To this day, I take it as a compliment that no one knew my caste in a state like Bihar even after having been SP for nearly two years. It is a vindication of my impartiality and objectivity.

But how can something as 'important' as caste, and that too of a senior police officer, remain unknown to a curious politician? It still amuses me no end that to unearth the truth, they started going back to the days when I had just joined as a young probationer, straight out of the National Police Academy.

They made some discreet (and some not so) inquiries, and ultimately came up with this gem. A quick 'search' revealed that when I had just joined duty in the state, a senior DIG, whose surname explicitly said that he belonged to caste 'A', had sent a marriage proposal for his daughter to my mother, then living in Agra. And since he was of caste 'A', so it could be safely presumed that I would also be of the same caste. Problem solved!

The episode educated me how inextricably was caste ingrained in the very being of society, and how important it was to understand the nuances of social balancing.

Last, but not the least, as a fledgling cop, I also learnt that if you dig deep enough, diligent investigation will bring the desired results.

—The writer is a retired IPS officer

To this day, I take it as a compliment that no one knew my caste in a state like Bihar even after having been SP for nearly two years

Manufacturers must take issue of colour quality seriously



CONSUMER RIGHTS
PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

LAST fortnight, a reader sent me a tag that accompanied a pair of pink pants that she had bought online. While the first line of the tag made her happy, the second got her worried. "This garment has undergone exclusive dyeing and finishing to ensure that each piece is unique," said the tag. However, the next line said: "The colour may fade after a few washes, enhancing the vintage look."

Obviously, the manufacturer was making a virtue of the fact that the colour of the trousers was not stable by claiming that the fading 'further enhanced its vintage look'. First, the garment was new and not a vin-

tage garment. Nor was it of a vintage design and style that required fading of the colour to enhance its look. More importantly, the customer had chosen it for its colour and any degradation in that colour was not acceptable to her.

I told her it was best to return it and not waste money on it. I also told her that she must tell the e-commerce site, from where she bought the pair, that the information on the tag ought to be displayed, along with the pants, so that a consumer can decide whether or not to buy a pair whose colour would fade after a few washes.

Interestingly, this was the very point made by a Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission in Bengaluru recently, on a complaint pertaining to fading of a pair of jeans. The consumer's case was that he had purchased a pair of Van Heusen blue denim jeans costing ₹4,499 and after five or six washes in three months, the colour of the jeans had faded. However, when he complained, the manufacturer said the indigo dye used in the garment had a natural tendency to lose colour gradually and fade after every wash, and this was not a defect.

That may be so, but the manufacturer cannot assume that every consumer who buys the jeans knows that. Besides, some consumers may like the faded look, but some may not. So, the label should inform the consumer about the fading nature of the colour to enable the consumer to make an informed choice.

The consumer court in this case held that the failure of the manufacturer to disclose the fading nature of the dye used in the

When we buy clothes, colour is a crucial element in determining our choice. It is therefore imperative that the fabrics retain their original colour

product constituted an unfair trade practice. In addition, failure to resolve the consumer complaint amounted to deficiency in service. The Commission therefore asked the manufacturer to refund the cost of the jeans and pay a compensation of ₹1,000 to the consumer. The case was decided ex-parte because the manufacturer did not respond to the notice (Hariharan Babu AK vs Aditya Birla Fashion and Retail Ltd, date of order: February 5, 2024).

The Consumer Protection Act defines a defect as 'any fault, imperfection or shortcoming in the quality'. Thus, any flaw in the colour fastness makes the product defective. The consumer who is sold such a defective garment or fabric is entitled to not just a refund, but also compensation commensurate with the agony and distress suffered because of such poor colour quality.

One of the earliest cases that came up before the consumer court on this issue was about a bright colour of a silk saree border streaking onto the body of the saree and discolouring it, when the wearer got caught in rain! Imagine turning up at a party in a discoloured saree! Since then, there have been

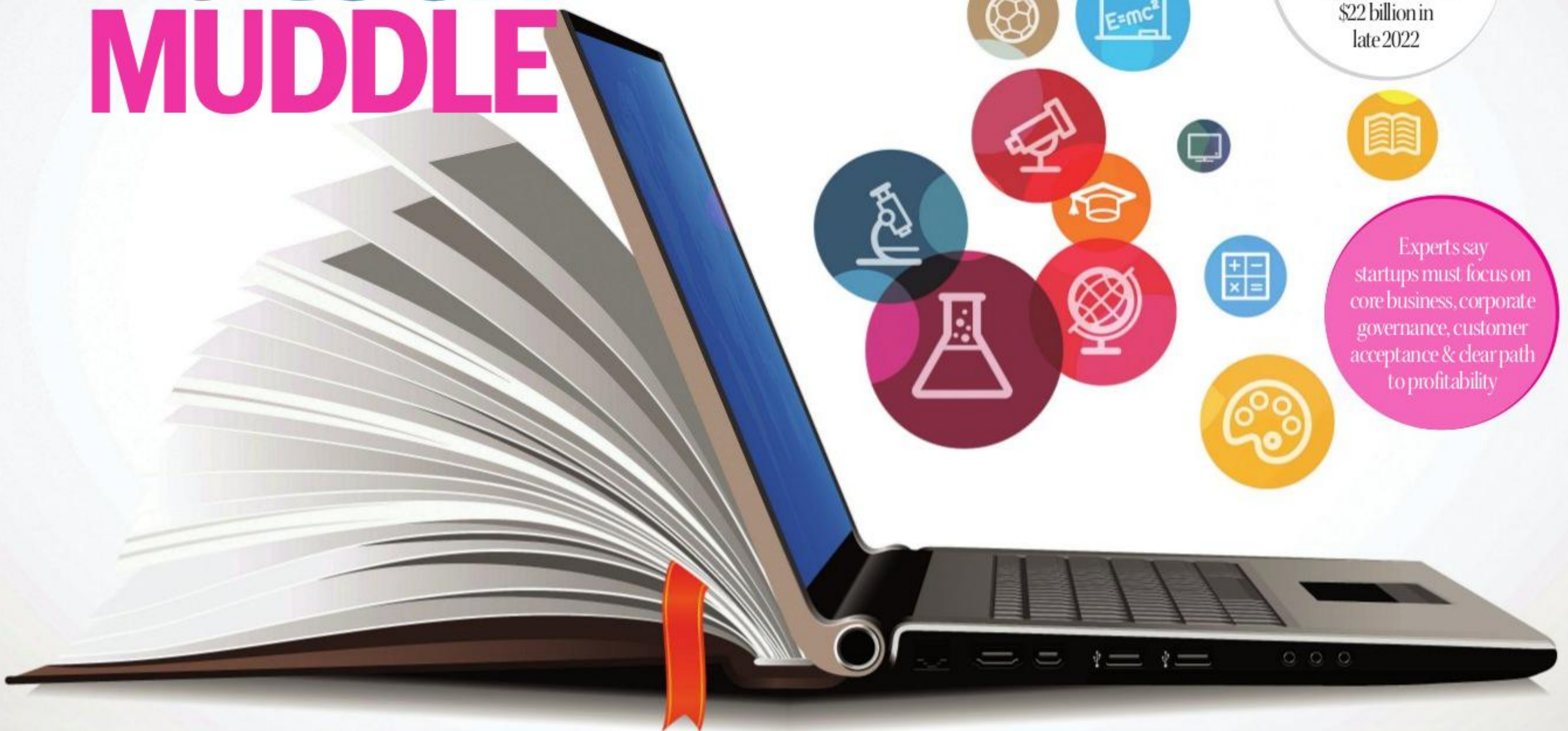
many complaints of sarees losing their original colour after the first wash.

In the Vijayamma G vs SM Silks and Sarees case, decided on June 30, 2017, for example, the District Consumer Commission asked the store to refund the cost of the saree and pay a compensation of ₹3,500 and costs of ₹1,500. This case was also decided ex-parte. The complainant had purchased a cotton saree for ₹998 and stitched the blouse piece, too, that came with it. However, the very first wash exposed the poor colour quality of the fabric.

When we buy clothes, colour is a crucial element in determining our choice. It is therefore imperative that the fabrics retain their original colour. In fact, one of the critical parameters of the quality of a fabric is its colour stability because however good the fabric, if the colour bleeds, then the clothes will not be fit to be worn.

So, it's time manufacturers took the issue of colour quality more seriously and ensured that fabrics and garments retained their original colour. In case of a defect, it is also obligatory on the part of the retailer to refund the cost to the consumer.

Edtech MUDDLE



Presently, the valuation of edtech company Byju's is below \$2 billion, around 90 per cent less than \$22 billion in late 2022

Experts say startups must focus on core business, corporate governance, customer acceptance & clear path to profitability

ANIMESH SINGH

TILL some time back, tutor-turned-entrepreneur Byju Raveendran was the poster boy of India's startup universe. The valuation of his educational technology (edtech) company Byju's touched \$22 billion in 2022. Today, it is less than \$2 billion. The downfall, say market experts, offers a terse lesson for India's corporate sector. The Byju's saga, they add, indicates corporate misgovernance, apart from issues such as overvaluation and costly acquisitions. It also underscores the absence of a mechanism to ensure corporate intelligence.

Byju Raveendran started his edtech compa-



As Byju's struggles intensify, there are valuable lessons to be learnt

ny in 2011, offering services ranging from online tutorials to offline coaching. It attracted billions of dollars from global investors when online education services were in high demand during the Covid-19 pandemic. Reputed venture capital entities like Sequoia Capital, Prosus and BlackRock as well as Qatar Investment Authority backed his company.

Thereafter, Byju's rapidly acquired several edtech firms which specialised in different fields. A hugely successful offline company like Aakash, along with Great Learning and Epic, was taken over by a Byju's company, Think and Learn.

During the pandemic, the firm sponsored the Indian cricket team and even hired football superstar Lionel Messi as its brand ambassador. The focus on brand building apparently overshadowed the core business fundamentals.

After the initial euphoria, when Byju's tablets sold for record numbers for online studies during the Covid-19 restrictions, the sales fell in 2022 once life normalised and people started going to work and children to school. This, coupled with overambitious investments, led to trouble for the edtech company.

Allegations of financial mismanagement surfaced as the company not only ran into losses, but also faced disputes over the non-payment of dues to a host of companies. Investors alleged opacity, which led to the exit of auditing firm Deloitte. The situation reached a flashpoint in January this year with shareholders, led by the Netherlands-based Prosus, convening an Extraordinary General Meeting seeking to remove the company's founder and CEO, Byju Raveendran. They are now seeking complete withdrawal of the family from the firm, even as the founder is fighting a rearguard battle to stay on as CEO.

Meanwhile, complaints of mismanagement have prompted hearings by the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT), while the

Ministry of Corporate Affairs has launched its own investigation into the company's affairs.

A few days back, Byju Raveendran had a public slanging match with shareholders seeking his ouster. The ministry has also decided to fast-track the inspection report. The Enforcement Directorate, in the meantime, has renewed its lookout notice against the founder.

According to Bamik Maitra, former managing partner, Arthur D Little and McKinsey & Company, "Byju's tried to do too many things and lost focus on its core business. As a result, most of its acquisitions, purchased with cashdown payments, notably WhiteHat Jr, were subsequently written down. In Byju's case, investments and expenditures should have been made more prudently. Intriguingly, the Board did not intervene in any of the rash spending decisions of the owners. There was a complete failure of the Board and corporate governance. The company tried to expand revenues in a short span of time. It did not allow any gestation period for its online product to gain customer acceptance and market traction."

A senior market analyst, not wishing to be identified, says corporate misgovernance is a common culprit in such instances and if governments, over the years, had given a thought to having in place a framework of corporate intelligence, then many such "misadventures" could have been nipped in the bud. A case like Byju's, he stresses, could have been avoided had there been a corporate intelligence mechanism in place, which would have brought greater transparency.

There is a need for corporate governance to check the frequency of such instances, says the analyst, adding that in Byju's case, it was clear that all decision-making was centralised and the edtech entity spread itself thin, thus becoming unsustainable. "Also, how a company, which is not even listed at the bourses, became a \$22 billion entity further underlines the lack of corporate monitoring and financial intelligence, and calls for a need to have checks and balances."

Experts say the government needs to step in and set up a corporate intelligence mechanism especially at a time when it has been promoting its Startup India initiative and encouraging entrepreneurs. The frequency of such startups becoming big and then going bust after a few years, they point out, is not only harmful for the corporate sector, but is also demoralising for the growing startup scenario. Scrutiny, thus, is imperative.

"The entire startup universe needs a course correction, and though it is happening gradually, such entities need to keep their revenues and profits within realistic parameters," says serial tech entrepreneur Kunal Nandwani. He blames overvaluation of entities as one of the reasons behind their downfall. Even venture capitalists are at fault, he adds.

"Venture capitalists overvalue startups, as was clearly the case with Byju's, and therein lies the problem. Gradually, the entire business model becomes unsustainable," says Nandwani.

Unlike listed companies, entities like Byju's want to come up the fast way and venture capitalists overvalue them during their initial years, which leads to their failure over a period of time, observes Nandwani.

"Such companies project high advances and returns on investment for a long term, unlike listed entities, which give quarterly or at the most six-monthly projections. There-

fore, when the projections given by such startups fail to match the actual numbers, they face trouble," he says.

Byju's, he claims, indulged in wrong accounting practices and valuation. "Moreover, it paid cash upfront while acquiring companies, which led to a sharp decline in its worth. It entered into unviable tie-ups with the Board for Control of Cricket in India (BCCI), paid \$5 million to Argentinian star Lionel Messi, appointing him as its global ambassador. In the long run, such investments became unwieldy and led to losses," says Nandwani.

Another analyst, not keen to be named, says "while reasonable projections of earnings and revenue, a sustainable business model and focus on core operations are options needed for startups to succeed in the long run, a sense of responsibility also needs to be inculcated in such entities, which are coming up like fast-food joints".

Another startup facing the heat is Paytm Payments Bank, which is under regulatory scrutiny for alleged violations in its business.

Likewise was the case of acquisition of a majority stake in pharma major Ranbaxy Laboratories by Japanese firm Daiichi-Sankyo in 2008. That year, the Japanese firm made its foray into the growing Indian pharmaceutical market and bought a majority stake in Ranbaxy for ₹22,000 crore. However, in 2013, Daiichi filed an arbitration case against Ranbaxy in Singapore. The firm accused the Indian pharma major of concealment and misrepresentation of facts.

The case came after Ranbaxy pleaded guilty in May 2013 of misrepresenting data and fraudulent activities in pursuit of fast drug approvals and paid \$500 million to the US Department of Justice as settlement. However, it was later revealed that Ranbaxy was well aware of the possible repercussions of its alleged improper regulatory filings as far back as 2004.

This, of course, is not the scenario just in India. In November last year, Sam Bankman-Fried was convicted in the US of defrauding customers of his cryptocurrency exchange. Earlier, in May 2023, American

entrepreneur Elizabeth Holmes began her prison sentence for defrauding investors in her biotech startup, Theranos.

"As the way forward, startups should invest carefully and spend investor capital judiciously. The government should also step in and ensure an adequate framework to protect investor rights," says Maitra.

"Corporate governance should be in place. Also, startups should ensure if the product market fit is achieved before thinking of expansion. They should not be too ambitious till there is evidence of customer traction and a path to profitability, at least at the unit economics level," he adds.

Byju's dramatic rise had a lot to do with the opportunity provided by the Covid-19 lockdown and restrictions. The pandemic brought about significant changes in the school system, making online learning the new standard. Edtech companies tapped into the huge potential. Offline education, the conventional counterpart, however, was quick to regain the lost space once the educational institutions opened. The debate over the efficacies of the two options continues.

Hansraj Suman, Associate Professor in Aurobindo College, University of Delhi, says the effectiveness of online classes leaves a lot to be desired as the impact which a physical class can have on students cannot be achieved in an online class.

"In the long run," he says, "as can be seen now, these edtech companies are witnessing a slump in their business as students find attending classes physically any day a more viable option." He also points to the challenges inherent in promoting online education — poor students or those staying in remote areas lose out, and the lack of proper Internet facilities or equipment can have a huge impact.

Byju's current struggles may or may not get resolved in the long run. As the fortunes of the once-glimmering star of the edtech sector turn, it's a wake-up call. It's time lessons are learnt and learnt well by the country's startup universe, which otherwise might burst like the dotcom bubble, which crashed 24 years back after its entry with a bang.

ON TRAIL OF EDTECH GIANT'S RISE AND FALL

Late 1990s-early 2000s Kerala-born Byju Raveendran pursues B.Tech from Government College of Engineering, Kannur, and shows inclination towards teaching, helping students clear competitive exams.

2007 Sets up Byju's Classes. Tastes initial success.

2011 Sets up Byju's with wife Divya Gokulnath.

2015 Launches app.

2017 Gets actor Shah Rukh Khan to endorse the brand.

2018 Attains unicorn status with 15 million users.

2019 Becomes main sponsor of Indian cricket team. Around the same time, Byju's acquires WhiteHat Jr, Aakash, Toppr, Epic and Great Learning.

2022 Signs Argentinian football legend Lionel Messi as brand ambassador. Becomes one of the official sponsors of 2022 FIFA World Cup.

2020 Raises \$250 million from investor Davidson Kempner.



2023 ED raids Byju's parent firm Think and Learn Private Limited for alleged violations of foreign exchange laws. In November, CEO gets show-cause notice from ED for FEMA violations.

2024 In February, ED's lookout circular notice bans Byju Raveendran from leaving the country.



Opinion

SUNDAY, MARCH 3, 2024



Anthony Kim is playing the LIV Golf Tour's third event of the year this weekend at the Royal Greens Golf Club in Jeddah

Guess who's back

Anthony Kim returns to pro golf after a 12-year exile

OVER THE TOP
Meraj Shah

ANTHONY KIM IS everywhere. News feeds are popping up with stories about him; what he's saying about the time he spent away from the game, how he's feeling about returning to pro golf, how much money LIV Golf has paid him to return, what clubs he's using...it goes on and on. The return of the prodigal golfer — once ranked sixth in the world — who just walked away from pro golf at the age of 26 is the stuff that sporting lore is made of. No surprise then that his return has sent the world's media and golf fans into a tizzy. If you've missed the commotion then know that Kim is playing the LIV Golf Tour's third event of the year this weekend at the Royal Greens Golf Club in Jeddah. And you can catch it on YouTube.

By the time you read this on Sunday, all the anticipation would have settled a bit, that was reserved for the very first time Kim teed it up at a pro event since he withdrew halfway through the 2012 season. On Friday, as he teed it up, Kim did look ill at ease. "This guy doesn't give a rat's derriere about anything," on-course reporter Dom Boulet said on the broadcast, "but he really did look nervous on that first tee." After looking down the target a couple of times Kim did what everyone had been hoping for: smashed a terrific drive right down the middle 300 yards down. Fairy tale anyone?

It was too good to last: no one, not even Anthony Kim can come back after more than a decade away from the top echelons of a sport and expect to pick up where he left off. Kim's second shot on the first hole left the broadcasters somewhat perplexed until they realised that the 37-year-old had just cold topped it. An overhead drone might have been an unexpected distraction; there weren't any drone cameras in golf broadcasts in 2012. A messy bogey ensued, and Anthony Kim's comeback was well underway.

Kim was one of the most eclectic players in a game that desperately needed colour and verve. He was brash, wore flashy belt buckles, parted hard, and played out of his shoes. Kim became one of the few players in the history of the PGA Tour to win three titles before he turned 25 but ran into injury issues that culminated with him withdrawing from the 2012 Wells Fargo Championship. Out of action to nurse a torn Achilles tendon, Kim was expected to return to action within a few months. Months turned to years, and finally over a decade passed with the grapevine buzzing with all kinds of theories about what was keeping him away from the game. Earlier this week, Kim was at the range asking Dustin

Johnson for pointers on the finer nuances of using a launch monitor. It just underlines just how long this man has been away from the game. "I'm 37 now...don't know most of the guys out there," he says in a promotional video for LIV. The same isn't true of the younger players who've followed Kim's footsteps on the PGA Tour: stories about AK, have only grown over the years, precipitated by the fact that he didn't just disappear from the world of golf. He disappeared from public view.

During the first round, LIV Golf's CEO Greg Norman popped into the broadcast booth for a chat about Kim. "Whatever happens today doesn't really matter. I said to Emily (Kim's wife) on the first tee today, 'The journey of 1,000 miles starts with a single step, and that first step is his first swing today' and there'll be a process for him to go through," said Norman. "AK will find himself in a better place, not this first round it's not the second round it's not the second tournament, but you start looking when he starts feeling comfortable with himself, the oozing of the talent is going to start coming through."

That's what the world will be hoping to see. Not just because Kim had such promise but because it's clear that he's been through a tough time the last few years. Kim hasn't said that much yet about where he was, what he's been doing, and what's brought him back. But he made it clear that he wasn't planning just to show up every week to take advantage of the no-cut 54-hole event format at LIV. "I would be lying to say that I didn't have certain expectations," Kim said after the first round. "At least even if I played bad (sic), I thought I would shoot around par. It was unfortunate that I made so many unforced errors from the middle of the fairway. That's generally my strength is my iron game. To make so many unforced errors is really disappointing." At the end of the first day, Kim had shot a six-over 76 for his first outing to finish the first round in dead last place. It's unlikely that he's going to ascend that leaderboard this week, but it's a start.

A time will come for me to tell my story, "he carries on in the same video, but for now, I'm just focusing on golf," he signs off. The entire golfing world will be watching this weekend, which tells you precisely why LIV Golf has brought Kim back to play on the tour. The eyeballs that will tune in to watch the Tour's are expected to be much higher this week. "When I think of Anthony Kim," LIV CEO Greg Norman said in a press release announcing Kim's signing, "I can't imagine a more perfect fit for what we're trying to do." If that means putting LIV Golf at the centre of attention in the golfing world, then that's precisely what he means.

Golfer, Meraj Shah also writes about the game

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



Does the NITI Aayog seriously argue that any person whose monthly spend is about ₹2,112 or ₹70 a day in rural areas is not poor? Or any person whose monthly spend is ₹3,157 or ₹100 a day in urban areas is not poor? I suggest that the government give the NITI Aayog officials ₹2,100 each and ask him/her to go and live in a rural area for a month and report on how 'rich' his/her life was

DON'T BE SURPRISED if you wake up one morning and read the screaming headline in the newspapers "No more poor: India abolishes poverty". That is what the NITI Aayog wants you to believe. A venerable institution like the Planning Commission has been reduced to an ingratiating spokesperson of the government. First, it announced that its estimate of the proportion of people who are multi-dimensionally poor was 11.28%. Now, its CEO has announced his discovery that the poor in India are no more than 5% of the population.

The CEO made this astonishing claim based on the results of the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) published by the National Sample Survey Office. The HCES did throw up some pleasant surprises but it certainly did not lead to the conclusion that the proportion of the poor in India amounted to no more than 5%.

Reading data

HCES was conducted between August 2022 and July 2023. It collected information from 8,723 villages and 6,115 urban blocks covering 2,61,745 households (60% in rural areas and 40% in urban areas). We shall assume that the sample was sufficiently representative and the methodology was statistically sound. The aim was to calculate the Monthly Per Capita Expenditure (MPCE) in current/nominal prices. On average, a person's monthly expenditure was:

	Rural India (₹)	Urban India (₹)
Top 5%	10,501	20,824
Average (mean)	3,773	6,459
Bottom 5%	1,373	2,001
Median	3,094	4,963

Median expenditure means that the



The CEO of NITI Aayog has announced that the poor in India are no more than 5% of the population

EXPRESS PHOTO

There are no poor in India

per capita expenditure of 50% of the total population was no more than ₹3,094 (rural) and ₹4,963 (urban). Take the bottom 50%. Go down fractile by fractile. Statement 4 of the Report gives the numbers:

	Rural India (₹)	Urban India (₹)
0-5%	1,373	2,001
5-10%	1,782	2,607
10-20%	2,112	3,157

Let's stop at the bottom 20%. Does the NITI Aayog seriously argue that any person whose monthly spend (on food and non-food) is about ₹2,112 or ₹70 a day in rural areas is not poor? Or any person whose monthly spend is ₹3,157 or ₹100 a day in urban areas is not poor? I suggest that the government give the NITI Aayog officials ₹2,100 each and ask him/her to go and live in a rural area for a month and report on how 'rich' his/her life was.

Observed realities

HCES revealed that the share of food in consumption had reduced to 46% in rural areas and 39% in urban areas. That is probably true because of rising income/expenditure and the value of food consumption remaining the same or rising at a slower rate. Other data confirmed long-observed realities. Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes

are the poorest social groups. They are below the average. OBC are near the average. It is the 'others' who are above the average.

State-wise data also confirm the observed realities. The poorest citizens are those who live in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Meghalaya — their MPCE is below the all-India average MPCE for rural areas. There is only a little difference in the names of states if we consider the all-India average MPCE for urban areas. These states were ruled for long years by the BJP and other non-Congress parties. Surprisingly, demolishing the hype, Gujarat, ruled by the BJP since 1995, hugs the all-India average MPCE in rural areas (₹3,798 vs ₹3,773) as well as in urban areas (₹6,621 vs ₹6,459).

Blind to the poor

What riles me is the claim that the poor in India are no more than 5% of the population. The implication is that the poor are a vanishing tribe and let's turn our attention and resources to the middle class and the rich. If the claim is true —

Why does the government distribute 5 kg of free grain per person per month to 80 crore people? After all, cereals and substitutes account for only 4.91% (rural) and 3.64% (urban) of the total MPCE.

If the poor are no more than 5%, why did the the National Family Health Survey-5 record the following alarming facts:

	per cent
Children age 6-59 months who are anaemic	7.1
All women age 15-49 years who are anaemic	7.0
Children under 5 years who are stunted	5.5
Children under 5 years who are wasted	9.5

Has the NITI Aayog closed its eyes to the children who beg on the streets of Delhi? Does it not know that there are hundreds of thousands of people who are homeless and sleep on pavements or under bridges?

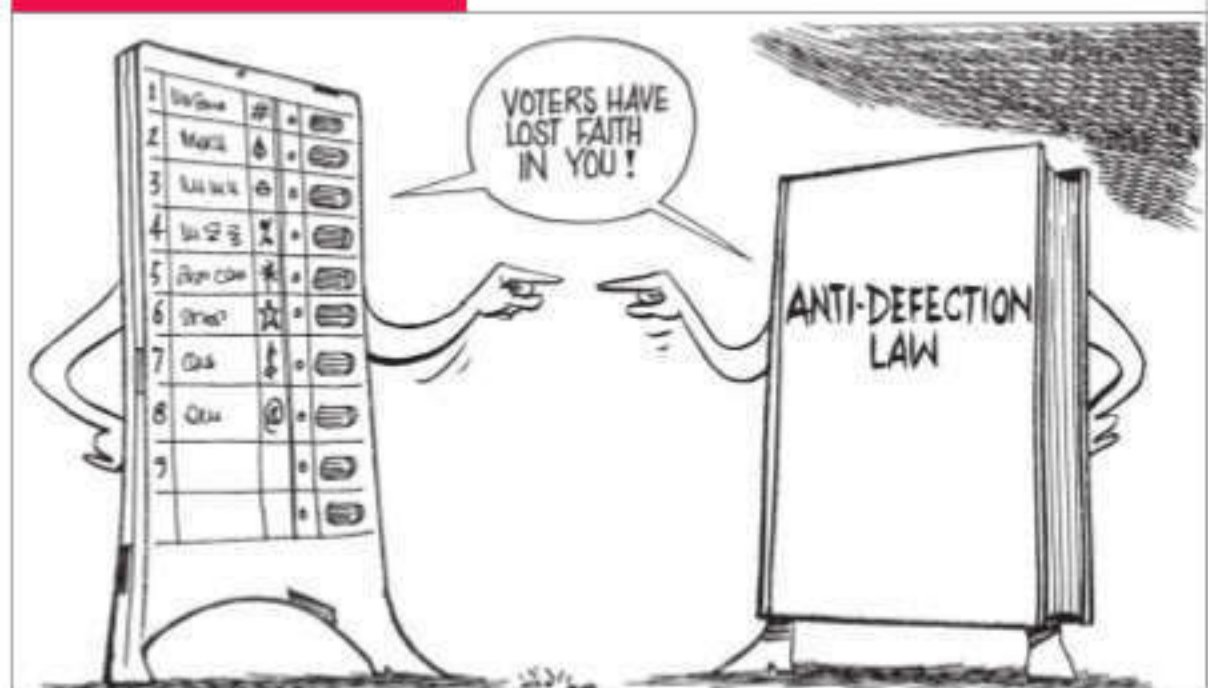
Why are there 15.4 crore active registered workers under MGNREGS? Why do Ujjwala beneficiaries, on average, buy only 3.7 cylinders in a year?

If the NITI Aayog wants to serve the rich, let it do so, but let it not mock the poor. The government may not succeed in eliminating poverty, but it is trying hard to banish the poor from its sight.

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ODD & EVEN

ROHNIT PHORE



FIFTH COLUMN
TAVLEEN SINGH

Misplaced priorities or wrong priorities

IT WAS FROM a two-paragraph story, on an obscure inside page of a newspaper last week, that I learned that only forty-six out of four hundred and eighty-five Indian cities supply citizens with clean drinking water. This is an official figure from a government report. It drew my attention because I am always puzzled about why it is things like the denial of clean water to our citizens that do not become the biggest issues at election time. Why do we in the mighty Indian media think these issues are so inconsequential that we bury this kind of story on inside pages? Why does political wrangling and seat-sharing seem so much more important than they make endless dreary headlines?

Clean water is a need so fundamental that in countries that are truly 'developed' you can drink the water that comes out of the taps in your home. What has gone wrong with Indian policy-making that we

have not yet succeeded in giving our citizens this basic facility? It is not just our poorest citizens who are deprived of clean water. We all are. Those who can afford the filters needed to clean the filthy water that municipalities supply, get them. But for rural Indians and those who live in urban slums, this is a luxury they cannot afford. The result is that more than 5,000 children die in India every day from diarrhoea caused by dirty water. Why is this not the biggest issue in the coming general election?

By coincidence, it was just after reading that story about how few Indians have access to clean water that I happened to catch a clip of the Prime Minister campaigning in West Bengal. He was greeted by shrill cries of "Modi, Modi, Modi" that went on for so long, he had to stop his speech and smile in gratitude. He said that he must have done many good deeds in past lives to get so much love from the people and that he would not betray their love. He would return it by 'guaranteeing' that India would become a developed country someday soon. In fairness to Modi, he has tried harder than any of the Prime Ministers who came before him to make these supposedly small issues into big ones.

It is because he drew attention to the horrors of open defecation that the Swachh Bharat campaign began and because of it that rural sanitation improved hugely. But he then moved onto new promises and selling new

dreams and forgot that our rivers, lakes and other waterways, continue to remain dangerously polluted by raw sewage and poisonous industrial waste.

Having just spent a week driving around Sri Lanka, I can report that between Colombo and Anuradhapura, and between there and Kandy, I came across no visible garbage except in one hill town. For the rest, I was amazed by the spotless villages, small towns and bazaars I drove through. And I marvelled at how pristine the lakes were and how wonderfully clean the temples were. Sri Lanka is much, much poorer than India. If they can achieve 'swachhata', why can we in India not?

Other questions came to mind on my travels. Of these, literacy was the most troubling. If Sri Lanka, despite decades of war and political turmoil, can achieve a literacy rate of 92%, why does India lag shamefully at 72%? Reliable NGO surveys report that even this statistic is more mythical than true. When they conduct their own studies, they find that Indian children leave school without ever learning basic mathematics and reading. Our real problem is not unemployment, but unemployability. But again, these are things that our political leaders prefer not to talk about. Their own children never go to government schools. And the children of high officials go only to the best private schools so that they can get admission to the finest Amer-

ican universities.

Last week came the happy news that the economy has grown at 8.4% in the last quarter. Modi has 'guaranteed' that when he wins a third term, he will ensure that the Indian economy races ahead even faster. And it is true that in a time when the world is in the grip of wars in Europe and the Middle East, it is remarkable that the Indian economy has been insulated from these uncertainties. What worries me when I see the images from Gaza is that the thousands of displaced people living without clean water and basic hygiene are not much worse off than millions of Indians.

Something has gone very wrong with our priorities. Not so much in the past ten years but in past decades. In the past ten years, the reality is that there has been improvement in the choice of our priorities. Modi may not have achieved the standards of sanitation and clean water that he set before us, but he has tried. We must hope that if he wins a third term he will try harder still and not distract from these priorities by reverting to what has memorably been described as the 'opium of the masses'.

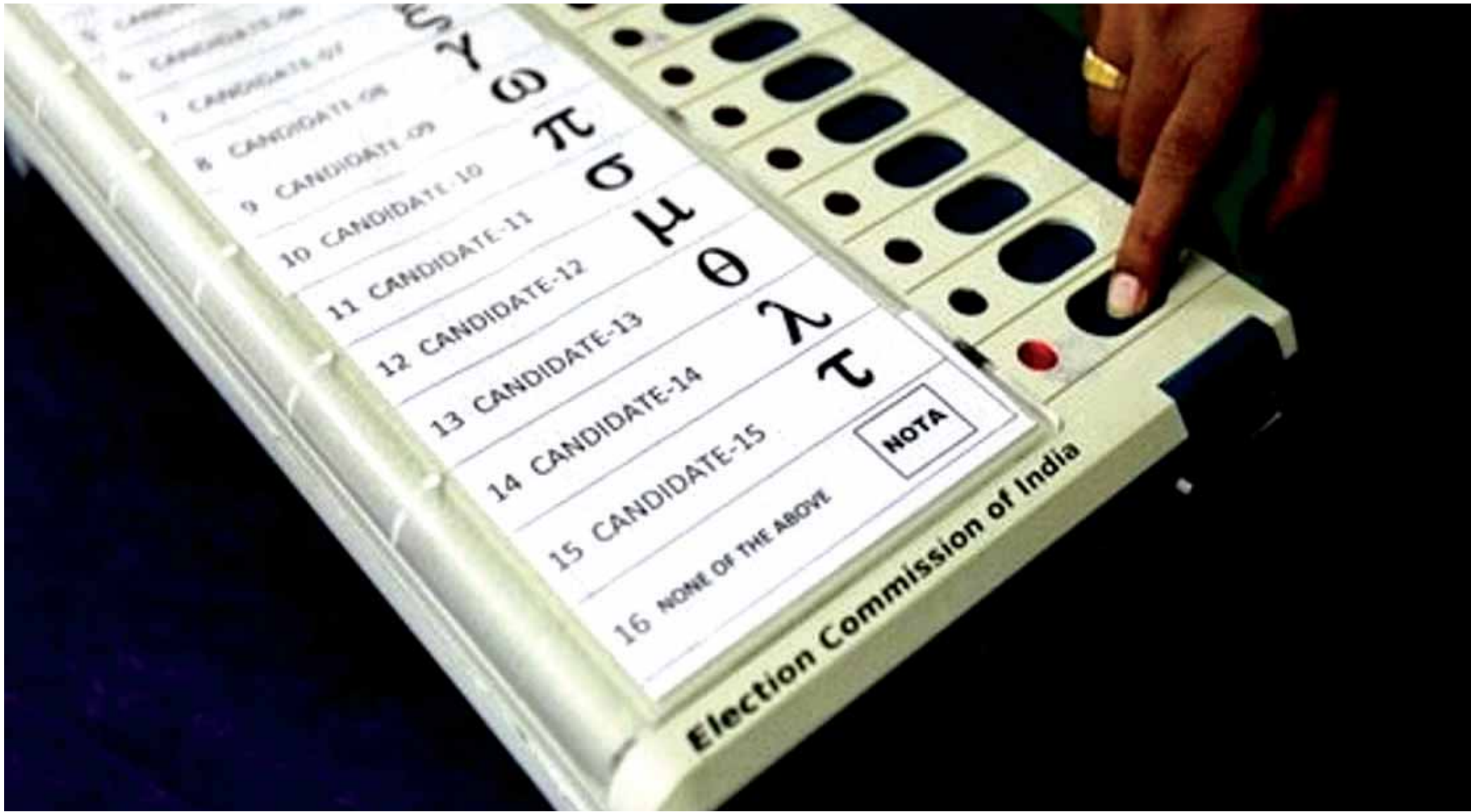
What point is there in building grand new highways and airports, and aiming to land four Indians on the Moon, if we cannot provide our citizens with their most basic needs? As for us in the media, we should be ashamed for always putting political slugfests above more important things.

NOTA: THE SILENT REVOLUTION OR THE ILLUSION OF CHOICE?



ASTHA RANJAN

NOTA CONTINUES TO BE A TOOL OF DISSENT IN THE ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY. IT EMPOWERS THE ELECTORS TO REGISTER THEIR DISCONTENT WITH THE POOL OF CANDIDATES WHILE MAINTAINING SECRECY, THUS PERSUADING PARTIES TO FIELD BETTER CANDIDATES



It's impeccable to christen NOTA in the truest sense of the word as the 'Sankat Mochan' of democracy in political Lanka, as each vote deserves a political Ayodhya, not a chaotic Lanka. With the 2013 judgment of the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India (PUC v. Union of India), a firm position was set that in an exceedingly legal system, electors must be given the right to reject, which owes its genesis to freedom of speech and expression (Art. 19(1)(a)). However, this was substantially necessitated on account that secrecy of casting a vote was duly recognised under the provisions of the Representation of People's Act, 1951, and the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, as being fundamental to free and fair elections. The 170th Report of the Law Commission, 1999, while laying down the chassis of NOTA,

recommended a method to ensure the purity of elections, keep out criminals and other undesirable elements, and minimise the role and importance of caste and religion. Pursuant to this, no candidate could be declared returned unless he obtains at least 50% of the votes cast, and to determine such a percentage, even the negative vote would be treated as votes cast. The report also recommends a 'run-off' and fresh election if candidates fail to secure the requisite percentage. This was endorsed by the Background Paper on Electoral Reforms, 2010. Even in Columbia, blank votes are considered to be valid ones and there stands similar provision to this effect. However, in its press release dated October 28th, 2013, the Election Commission of India clarified while referring to provisions of the Conduct of

Elections Rules, 1961 (clause (a) of Rule 64) read with the Representation of the People's Act, 1951 (Section 65), that even if the number of electors opting for NOTA option is more than the number of votes polled by any of the candidates, the candidate who secures the largest number of votes has to be declared elected. This implies that even if 99% of the electors rejected the candidature of all the candidates, conversely, in defiance of their mandate, the candidate who managed to secure just 1% of the votes could be declared to be returned. This serves as a testimony of NOTA having no electoral value in India, ergo, there's no wrong in deeming it nothing more than a protest vote. Be that as it may, to justify the forthcoming quote "Not all battles are fought for victory. Some are fought simply to tell the world that someone was there on the battlefield"

(Ravish Kumar) in an electoral democracy could set the stage for catalysing NOTA as just a token of gesture which is bound to be unjust. Nevertheless, NOTA continues to be a tool of dissent in the electoral democracy. It empowers the electors to register their discontent with the pool of candidates while maintaining secrecy, thus persuading parties to field better candidates. In the 2018 Assembly election of Madhya Pradesh, NOTA bagged fifth largest tally of votes polled (1.42%) which was more than SP (1.3%) and AAP (0.66%). Similarly, in Karnataka, NOTA secured more votes than BSP and CPI (M) which are national parties. The figures are indicative of the significant usage of NOTA in numeric sense, however, its impact still remains insignificant. The State Election Commission of Haryana deviated from the

practice of Election Commission of India during the Municipal Elections. A notification dated November 22nd, 2018 by the SEC, Haryana deemed NOTA to be a 'Fictional Electoral Candidate'. It further went on to state that if a situation arises where NOTA receives the highest number of votes, then a fresh election would be conducted. All candidates who received lesser vote than NOTA would become ineligible from contesting the re-election. Similar notification was also published by the SEC, Maharashtra in the same year. In yet another development from the past, the Supreme Court issued a notice to the Centre and the ECI on March 15th, 2021 on a PIL which sought a direction to the poll panel to nullify an election result and conduct a fresh poll if the maximum votes in a particular constituency were for NOTA.

For a democracy to survive in its true form it is essential that the best available men should be chosen as people's representative and if electors find none from the roster to be suitable enough, negative voting is necessitated. However, the rationale behind the 2013 judgement of the Apex Court has failed to bear fruits. In a vibrant democracy, voter's choice must be of paramount and if they palpably reject all the contesting candidates, their choice should be empowered by way of a fresh election. In the existing scenario, if we picture the electoral stage as a grand theatre; NOTA plays the role of a silent spectator, leaving no tangible mark on the political drama. Thus, even with the popularity of NOTA among the electors experiencing a significant rise over the years, the question of whether it is 'revolutionary' or mere 'illusory' lingers.

Adaptability is key in today's ever-changing business landscape, and many businesses struggle to keep up with rapid changes. That's where composable architecture steps in as the game-changer. Composable architecture is like the Lego bricks of digital transformation. Brands can create independent, reusable, and scalable building blocks, mixing and matching them to fit their needs. The best part? It's fast. Brands can try new solutions, make changes, fail fast, and learn from failures quickly, making their business more agile. Take the Netflix vs Blockbuster case. Netflix embraced change early on, initially delivering DVDs by mail and then swiftly transitioning to a streaming platform. On the contrary, Blockbuster failed to adapt promptly. Even though they understood that Netflix's approach was the future, they didn't evolve quickly enough. As a result, Blockbuster couldn't keep pace and eventually faced failure. It's a lesson that being late to adjust can lead to significant consequences. The result? Blockbuster went bankrupt, while Netflix became a leader in online entertainment. The lesson? Digital transformation is no longer a choice; it's a necessity. To stay ahead, brands need a flexible and agile architecture, making composable architecture the future of digital transformation. And it comes with benefits:

The Role of Composable Architecture in Your Digital Transformation Journey

VELOCITY
One big plus of composable systems is how quickly you can get things done. Gartner predicts that by 2024, 70% of big and medium-sized companies will focus on composable to make their apps easy to put together. Teams using composable web setups show real business benefits, like faster go-to-market time.

AGILITY:
Composable architecture involves assembling systems through loosely coupled components, creating a modular structure with easily combinable, detachable, and reusable parts. Furthermore, composable architecture minimizes vendor lock-in to a great extent, allowing brands to build piece by piece. If one vendor doesn't have the required technology, a brand can get it from another, creating a customized structure using best-of-breed technologies.

SECURITY
Maintaining and updating codebases in monolithic



MAYANK MISHRA

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structures affects the entire system. However, composable architectures allow alteration in each component independently, making the process far less cumbersome and risky to deploy.

REUSABILITY
The key benefit of composable architecture is the ability to reuse components. The modular

system reuses and connects standards and patterns through APIs. With reusability as a central focus, any existing modules can be reused or serve as the foundation for a new application or service. Furthermore, reusability of components lowers the development costs to a great extent.

QUICKER INNOVATION
Legacy systems are complex to handle and need lots of time and resources to change, keep up, and improve. Besides, multiple teams have to be involved in the entire process. Composable architecture offers a more manageable IT upgrade setup, allowing seamless integration and feature launches. With composable architecture, IT can focus on developing new ideas and giving customers a better experience instead of dealing with routine tasks like marketing and maintenance.

OMNICHANNEL CAPABILITIES
A flexible digital experience platform (DXP) combined with a headless content management system (CMS) makes creating and sharing content smooth. This allows marketers to keep a consistent presence on various digital platforms and devices, all from one central place. They can quickly and easily improve and send out campaigns to reach their target audience wherever they are. While the many benefits of composable make it desirable

for significant brands, they must first check if they have the proper framework to adopt a composable architecture. This can be done using MACH.

MACH

- **M** — Microservices: Independent services connected via APIs.
- **A** — API-First: APIs linking applications or services.
- **C** — Cloud-Native: Applications designed for the cloud, ensuring scalability.
- **H** — Headless: Decoupling front-end and back-end for flexibility.

As the business ecosystem changes, companies are figuring out that composable architecture is not only the future for business continuation but also a smart move as it makes everything work better. Companies like Walmart, Asics, Mantel, and Shell have adopted composable architecture for efficient operations. It's not just a trend; it's the usual way of doing things now. Digital transformation is not a one-time destination; it's an ongoing journey. The process is similar to building a stack of blocks- each piece added on-demand as your business grows. Composable architecture is the foundation of your digital transformation journey. So adopt it now and make the transformation agile and enjoyable. (The writer is VP of Engineering, Contentstack)