



Overkill

Verification of a statistically significant sample of VVPAT slips should suffice

The introduction and use of the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT), an adjunct system attached to the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM), and the provision of counting VVPAT tallies from five random polling booths in every Assembly constituency to be matched with the EVM vote-count, have not assuaged critics of the use of EVMs in Indian elections. Some suggest the fact that the process could be more transparent if a machine audit trail of all the commands that are executed is maintained in the system, beyond just the votes recorded in the EVM's ballot unit and the printed slips in the VVPATs, allowing for an audit to rule out any malicious code. This could indeed make the system more robust and be considered as an upgrade to the existing machines. Others suggest that the use of VVPATs has introduced potential vulnerabilities that did not exist with the standalone nature of EVMs and the technical and administrative safeguards that undergirded the legacy system. This too could be addressed by reworking the safeguards to ensure that the VVPAT-combined systems are as secure and foolproof as the standalone EVMs were. But incomprehensible is the critique from many, including political parties such as the Congress, that only a 100% recount of all VVPATs would suffice, instead of the current method of sampling the number of recounts, in order to have full transparency. The Supreme Court of India has now listed a series of petitions related to this demand.

Despite Cassandra-like pronouncements about malpractices and EVM-hacking, there has been no proof of any actual tampering of EVMs so far. While EVMs, as any machine is bound to, have suffered glitches, and promptly been replaced in the event of machine failures, the critique that they are prone to hacking or manipulation despite the existing technical and administrative safeguards has not been made with any actual proof. The sample counting of VVPATs, across both the general election in 2019 and several other Assembly elections for instance, which allow the voter to confirm whether the mandate matches the choice made on the EVM, have shown that the mismatch between the VVPAT recount and the EVM count has been minuscule – an outcome of trivial errors such as non-deletion of mock polls in the machine before the voting process or errors in manual recording of the final count from the machine. An increase in the recount sample to make it more statistically significant, by making the selected number of Assemblies specific to each State/Union Territory based on the size of the province, or, simply to increase the recount sample in seats where the margin of victory is narrow (say, less than 1% of the overall votes) could be solutions. But to insist on a full recount seems an overkill and a clear lack of trust in the EVM itself.

Wide open

India has a strong contingent at the Candidates chess tournament

Candidates is a familiar word in these times of a general election, but over the next three weeks, it will appear regularly on the sports pages of newspapers as well, across the world. The opening move of the Candidates chess tournament was made in Toronto late on Thursday (IST). It is the mind game's biggest event of the year, and its winners – in the open and the women's sections – will be eligible to compete for the World championship. China's Ding Liren and Ju Wenjun are the reigning world champions. They, along with the rest of the chess world, will have their eyes set on the Canadian city to find out who will emerge as the challenger from among the men and women there. The country that will follow the tournament with the keenest interest could well be India. For, five out of the 16 contestants, eight each in either section, are Indians. R. Praggnanandhaa, D. Gukesh and Vidit Gujrathi are fighting it out in the open tournament, while Koneru Humpy and R. Vaishali are competing in the women's tournament. Remember, only one Indian has played in this prestigious event (open) before – Viswanathan Anand, a five-time world champion, continues to be an inspiration. India's conspicuous presence is a fair indication of how strong it has become in world chess. More proof is provided by the latest World rankings, in which the highest ranked Indian (No. 9), Arjun Erigaisi, is not even playing at the Candidates.

None of the Indians started as a favourite in the open event of the Candidates, though. Two Americans, Fabiano Caruana and Hikaru Nakamura, are the strongest players in Toronto. They are ranked second and third, behind Magnus Carlsen, who has opted out of the World championship cycle, citing a lack of motivation. Russian Ian Nepomniachtchi is another major contender, having won the tournament's last two editions. Alireza Firouzja, the Iranian-born French player, is another player the Indian men have to be wary of. Praggnanandhaa and Gukesh are still in their teens, and this is likely to be only their first Candidates – they are more than capable of surprising the toughest of fields, as they showed at the Chess Olympiad and the World Cup. Koneru Humpy is by far the most experienced Indian in Toronto. A former World Rapid champion, she is one of the main contenders in the women's tournament. Vaishali, Praggnanandhaa's elder sister, is one of the world's fastest improving female players. The women's tournament, which features the former World champion Tan Zhongyi of China, looks more open.

The central government has notified July 1, 2024 as the day on which the recently enacted three criminal laws will come into effect. Section 106(2) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, which provides for a maximum 10 years of imprisonment in the case of a fatal accident if the accused person escapes without reporting to the police or a magistrate, has been put on hold. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) press statement of January 2 said that the decision to implement Section 106(2) would be taken up after discussions with the All India Motor Transport Congress. This was prompted by a strike by truck drivers who alleged that the provision was too harsh. Besides the pending decision with regard to Section 106(2), it will be pertinent for the central government to reconsider a few more provisions of the BNS. These are “petty organised crime” defined under Section 112, “theft” defined under Section 303(2) and two sub-sections of Section 143 pertaining to human trafficking.

A reconsideration of Section 106(2) is significant for two reasons. First, the increase in sentence from five to 10 years of imprisonment for just fleeing the scene without reporting to the police or a magistrate soon after the accident seems disproportionate. There is no other provision in the law with similar consequences. It is not even a case of saving the persons who might have been grievously injured and in need of medical assistance. This clause applies to accidents that cause the death of any person. The only benefit seems to be that the appropriate motor accident claim could be sought if the vehicle details are known. Second, this clause seems to be in conflict with the fundamental right of prohibition against self-incrimination enshrined under Article 20(3) of the Constitution of India. Article 20(3) says that ‘no person accused of any offence shall be compelled to be a witness against himself’.

The Supreme Court of India, in *Nandini Satpathy vs P.L. Dani*, widened the scope of Article 20(3) and held that compelled testimony must be read as evidence procured not merely by physical threats or violence but by psychic torture, overbearing and intimidatory methods and the like. Therefore, disclosure of culpability by informing the police or a magistrate due to fear of enhanced punishment may not qualify the test of constitutionality.

Second, a new offence. ‘petty organised crime’. has been introduced in Section 112 of the BNS. Here, “whoever, being a member of a group or gang, either singly or jointly, commits any act of theft, snatching, cheating, unauthorised selling of tickets, unauthorised betting or gambling, selling of public examination question papers or any other similar criminal acts, is said to commit petty organised crime”.

Offences not defined in the BNS, such as “unauthorised selling of tickets” and “selling of



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The sections on reporting of a fatal accident, petty organised crime, theft and human trafficking have flaws

public examination question papers” are not linked with any special Act. However, the phrase ‘any other similar criminal acts’ of the section is more indefinite and open-ended. While theft and snatching prescribe imprisonment of up to three years (Section 303 of the BNS), theft in a dwelling house or means of transportation gets up to seven years (Section 305 of the BNS), and theft after preparation made for causing death, hurt or restraint in order to commit theft gets up to 10 years (Section 307 of the BNS). Similarly, cheating provides for imprisonment from three years to seven years (Section 318 of the BNS).

Therefore, what will fall within the range of ‘any other similar criminal acts’ is unspecified. Similar criminal acts, *inter alia*, could include criminal breach of trust, criminal misappropriation of property, and receiving stolen property. However, the sentence for these offences varies from two years to 10 years. Obviously, an offence punishable with up to 10 years of imprisonment cannot be called a petty crime, particularly when the maximum sentence provided for a petty organised act is seven years. Therefore, unless some specific maximum limit of sentence is prescribed, this provision may not stand the scrutiny of the Supreme Court. It is important to mention that Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, 2000 was struck down by the Supreme Court in *Shreya Singhal vs Union of India* (2015) as it found the expression “grossly offensive” used in the Section to be open-ended, undefined and vague.

Property theft, a specific value

Third, the offence of theft, as provided for under proviso to Sub-section (2) of Section 303 of the BNS, also needs to be revisited. The proviso to the sub-section says that “provided that in cases of theft where the value of the stolen property is less than five thousand rupees, and a person is convicted for the first time, shall on the return of the value of property or restoration of the stolen property, shall be punished with community service”. The First Schedule to the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) categorises the offence under this category as a non-cognisable offence.

While making theft of any moveable property of less than ₹5,000 a non-cognisable offence may reduce the workload of the police, this may raise some complications that are both legal and practical. First, in cities and towns, while the value of ₹5,000 may not impact the pocket of a well-off person, it is a huge sum for say a daily wage earner. Think of a student whose bicycle is stolen and the police refusing to file a first information report, being a non-cognisable case. He may not be able to afford approaching a court for justice, thus feeling totally helpless. It is known that bicycles are distributed even by the governments to students under welfare schemes to encourage them to pursue school and even

college education. Second, if property offences, of whatever value, are not registered, property offenders will be out of the police radar for surveillance unless they are found to be involved in some other cognisable offence. Legal issues may also arise with regard to the return of such property if recovered with some other stolen or looted property.

Third, if the stolen property of value less than ₹5,000 is not returned or restored by the convict as provided for, the only option available with the court will be to award imprisonment which may extend up to three years – as provided for other cases of thefts (of higher value) in the first paragraph of Sub-section (2) of Section 303, categorised as a cognisable offence in the First Schedule to the BNSS. The interplay between the two parts of the sub-section is intricate. While this obfuscation may be removed by tweaking the definition and adding alternate punishment for such cases for which the value of stolen property is not returned, or the stolen property is not restored, making theft of property of any value a cognisable offence (which would require only a minor change in the First Schedule to the BNSS) will resolve other stated issues of legal and practical implications as well.

No discretion to judiciary

Section 303 of the Indian Penal Code pertaining to ‘punishment for murder by life-convict’ was struck down as being void and unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in *Mithu vs State of Punjab* (1983). One of the grounds of unconstitutionality was that it gave no discretion to the judiciary and, hence, the law was not just, fair, and reasonable within the meaning of Article 21 of the Constitution.

Section 303 of the IPC has been restored in the form of Section 104 of the BNS, by removing the defect for which it was held unconstitutional. Section 104 of the BNS now provides for either death punishment or imprisonment for life, which shall mean the remainder of that person's natural life.

However, Sub-sections (6) and (7) of Section 143 of the BNS which punish trafficking of a child on more than one occasion and trafficking of a person by a public servant or a police officer respectively, and provide only for life imprisonment (which shall mean the remainder of that person's natural life) under both provisions, also seem to suffer from the same illegality as they do not provide any discretion to the judiciary to award punishment.

In view of these points, sub-section (2) of Section 106, Section 112, sub-section (2) of Section 303, and sub-sections (6) and (7) of Section 143 of the BNS (which seem to have serious legal and/or constitutional and practical consequences) need to be revisited before they become operational.

The views expressed are personal

Universities must budge on college autonomy nudge

The National Education Policy 2020 envisions a future where colleges will evolve into autonomous institutions, enhancing their capacity for innovation, self-governance, and academic freedom. To realise this goal, the University Grants Commission (UGC) launched a new regulation in April 2023. Since then, the response from colleges seeking autonomous status has been unprecedented – 590 applications.

Granting autonomy to colleges is essential for promoting innovation, enhancing academic quality, and fostering institutional excellence. Autonomous colleges can tailor their curriculum to meet the evolving needs of students and industries. They can experiment with new teaching methodologies and research initiatives, driving the frontiers of knowledge and contributing to societal development.

Further, autonomy fosters a culture of accountability and responsibility among colleges, as they assume greater ownership of their academic and administrative decisions. This empowerment enhances institutional efficiency and cultivates a sense of pride and identity within colleges, in turn motivating faculty and staff to strive for excellence.

Rankings prove a point

The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) of 2023 suggests a compelling case for the effectiveness of autonomy in enhancing the performance of colleges in India. In the ‘Colleges Category’, with 55 out of the top 100 colleges being autonomous institutions, the NIRF rankings offer insights into the positive consequence of autonomy on academic excellence and institutional effectiveness.

Besides, in the top 10 colleges of the NIRF Rankings of 2023 from the college category, five are autonomous colleges. Having half the top spots occupied by autonomous colleges significantly strengthens the case for autonomy as a successful approach to achieving academic excellence. Higher education in India is



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Universities need to address the concerns of colleges as autonomy does have a transformative effect on higher education

witnessing a marked trend towards establishing autonomous colleges, with the number soon expected to reach 1,000 across 24 States and Union Territories. States such as Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Telangana stand out for their many autonomous colleges, with over 80% of the total count.

The presence of autonomous colleges in States with varying numbers, such as Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Punjab and West Bengal underscores a nationwide interest in exploring the potential of autonomy to enhance institutional effectiveness. Even in regions with comparatively fewer autonomous institutions, there is growing realisation of the transformative effect autonomy can have on higher education.

Address the many post-autonomy challenges

While the UGC champions the autonomy of colleges, unfortunately, some universities have been reluctant to relinquish control for questionable reasons. Therefore, addressing the challenges colleges encounter even after receiving autonomy from the UGC is crucial.

Some universities impose limitations on the extent of autonomy granted to colleges. One common restriction is the imposition of caps on syllabus changes, often allowing only a fraction, typically 25%-35%, to be altered. This constraint hinders colleges from exercising their autonomy, particularly that concerning curriculum development and academic innovation.

One prominent issue that colleges encounter despite being granted autonomy by the UGC is that they often find themselves grappling with delays from universities in recognising this autonomy. Such delays not only hamper the efficiency of the operation of colleges but also undermine the spirit of autonomy, as colleges may still feel tethered to the bureaucratic processes of the university.

Further, even though the UGC gives complete autonomy to colleges, universities frequently exhibit a reluctance to cede complete autonomy

to colleges, particularly in critical areas such as syllabus design, the introduction of new courses, and the evolution of methods for assessing student performance.

While autonomy implies the freedom for colleges to make decisions independently, the hesitation on the part of universities to relinquish control in these areas can impede the ability of colleges to innovate and adapt to changing educational needs effectively. This unwillingness may stem from a traditional hierarchical approach to governance within the university system.

Also, colleges may find themselves subjected to arbitrary fees imposed by the university for the purposes of affiliation. This approach not only undermines the autonomy of colleges but also raises questions about the transparency and fairness of such practices by the universities.

Therefore, the State Councils for Higher Education must ensure effective implementation of UGC regulations on autonomy. Universities must recognise the importance of addressing the concerns of autonomous colleges within the broader framework of higher education reform. They must streamline decision-making processes between colleges and universities, ensuring that autonomy translates into meaningful empowerment for colleges. Moreover, universities must embrace a culture of trust and collaboration with autonomous colleges, allowing them the freedom to innovate and excel while upholding academic standards.

By fostering a conducive environment for autonomy to thrive, universities must help colleges drive innovation, excellence, and inclusivity in higher education through autonomy. Eventually, the successful implementation of autonomy for colleges demands a concerted effort from all stakeholders to address challenges effectively and ensure a vibrant and dynamic higher education ecosystem.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Politics and bonds

It is paradoxical that parties can accept funds through electoral bonds contributed by companies tapping a ‘suspect source of funds’ even as a few leaders in the Opposition are behind bars for alleged money-laundering (Page 1,

“Firms without profits donated through electoral bonds”, April 4). The BJP rode to power on an anti-corruption plank. But, unfortunately, the party has had no qualms about enacting a piece of legislation that enabled corporates to make

contributions to political parties in questionable ways. It is sad that the political culture has become so permissive that the Gandhian ideal, ‘the means should justify the end’, seems to have no takers. **S. Balu,** Madurai

Clean politics?

The Prime Minister often speaks about eradicating corruption and ensuring transparency and effective administration. How then can he explain the dropping of charges of serious corruption against Opposition politicians the

moment they join the BJP? Or at least have investigations into these charges stalled? There needs to be a clear answer or else it will be presumed that the BJP uses anti-corruption agencies as a mode to paralyse the Opposition. Is it a crusade

against the Opposition? Or is it a crusade against corruption?

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



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PARLEY

Bengaluru, often celebrated for being a ‘garden city’, the ‘IT capital’ of the country, and its pleasant weather, has been making headlines this year for facing a severe water crisis following the drought of 2023. The water crisis is also likely to hit other urban centres and rural areas. According to a recent weekly bulletin by the Central Water Commission, even as peak summer is around the corner, most of the major reservoirs in the southern States of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana are filled to only 25% of their capacity or less. Is the urban water system breaking? T.V. Ramachandra and S. Vishwanath discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **K.C. Deepika**. Edited excerpts:

This is not the first time that a major city in India has been hit by a water crisis. What does it say about the water infrastructure in our cities?

T.V. Ramachandra: We see water crises in cities because there is mismanagement of water in most parts of the country. Bengaluru, for example, is undergoing unplanned urbanisation. In 1800, in a city landscape of 740 square kilometres, there were 1,452 interconnected water bodies and about 80% green cover. But today, 86% is paved surface and the green cover is less than 3%. Now, more than 40% of Bengaluru’s water requirement comes from groundwater sources. The city landscape should have been porous to allow groundwater recharge. There is a linkage between surface water bodies and groundwater resources. The city receives about 55-60% of its water requirement from the Cauvery river. But if you look at the Cauvery watershed, during the last four decades or so, 45% of the forest cover has been lost. The Cauvery catchment has 18% forest cover while 75% is agriculture. And then there is another factor, which is climate change.

S. Vishwanath: In the 20th century, we have designed our institutions of water provision as water supply boards. We have to change the paradigm of governance to maintain the water management board, where water not only includes piped water from a river but also local water. The city has rainwater, ground water, surface water, lakes, tanks, river streams. It has wastewater or what we now call used water. All of these forms, if managed well, should be sufficient for the city. So, we have to change the governance of water through institutions, starting from the river basin. We don’t have river basin institutions looking at the landscape,



Residents collect water from a tanker in Bengaluru. PTI

deforestation, sand mining, pollution, agricultural practices, and so on. We have to keep tabs on these and make sure that we do not alter the landscape irretrievably, so much so that the river stops flowing or flows with heavy polluted water. At the city scale, we have to create institutions which are able to be nuanced in their understanding of all forms of water and manage it as an ecological resource. That is the lesson that we have to learned from Bengaluru and all the other urban areas of India.

The irony that many are pointing out is that these are the same cities that are inundated during rains. Where are we going wrong?

SV: Again, the water management process. We have created institutions which operate as silos. In Bengaluru, the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board is in charge of piped water supply. The Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike, with the Karnataka Tank Conservation and Development Authority playing a role, overlooks surface water bodies. Groundwater is with the Groundwater Authority. Wastewater, which flows into drains or lakes, is nobody’s property. And wastewater is what partially causes floods. So, it is bad planning and bad design of our landscape.

The other issue is concretisation and poor construction of roads. Roads are becoming impediments to hydrological flows; they act as dams and barriers.

TVR: First, as mentioned, there are too many agencies. Fragmented governance is the root cause of the problem. Second, most of these state agencies are headed by individuals who lack competence. I would prefer subject experts sitting there. If we manage water well, we will have sufficient water. With 700-850 mm of annual rainfall, we will have about 15 TMC of



The moment the Cauvery suffers, Bengaluru dies. When will Bengaluru realise that it is essential for it to make sure that the Cauvery flows in a pristine condition and is full?

S. VISHWANATH

water in the city. Bengaluru requires 18-19 TMC of water. That means 70% of the water that the city needs is available in the form of rainwater. We need to harvest rainwater through rooftop harvesting in houses or by rejuvenating lakes and retaining the rainwater. If we re-establish the interconnectivity of the lakes, we will solve the problem of flooding; the water will move from one location to the other and there won’t be flooding. When we talk about floods, the government comes up with plans for remodelling, which is nothing but mismanagement of storm water drains. The government concretises and narrows storm water drains, which is against the hydrological principle for any drain.

There are two arguments regarding the Bengaluru situation. One is to depopulate the city by creating new centres of livelihood. The other is to create better water infrastructure. Where do you stand on this?

SV: After the 1991 reforms, considering the kind of capitalist model of economy that we adopted, urbanisation has become irreversible. People were attracted to Bengaluru because of the climate. Then they were further attracted to the city because it became an economic engine and provided great livelihood opportunities. We will continue to grow. If we plan for future growth and set up infrastructure right from the beginning, it is possible to enhance livelihoods and livability and also accommodate the population that will continue to come in. What is failing us is our inability to anticipate or deal with the growth of the city, especially in the periphery. I am optimistic that if we manage resources well, manage our lakes and aquifers and rainwater, and treat wastewater, we can support an increasing population.

TVR: For any city to be livable, we should not cross the carrying capacity. Unfortunately, Bengaluru has crossed the limit. There has been an 1055% increase in concrete area over five decades, 18% loss in vegetation, and 79% loss in water bodies. This shows that we have made a huge blunder. We can hope for the better with good management but where are the managers?

Company donations exceed 7.5% cap by ₹1,377.9 crore in 2022-24

Five firms in 2023-24 and eight in 2022-23 which made political contributions through bonds beyond the original 7.5% cap had negative or zero net profits

DATA POINT

Prasenjit Bose & The Hindu Data Team

The Hindu, along with an independent set of researchers, looked at donations via electoral bonds to the ruling BJP and other parties by companies whose aggregate donation amounts surpassed the original 7.5% cap in 2022-23 and 2023-24. The Finance Act, 2017, had deleted the provision on the 7.5% cap that was in the original Section 182(i) of the Companies Act, 2013. The 7.5% cap was calculated based on the companies’ average net profits during the three immediately preceding financial years, as reported in the CMIE Prowess IQ Database. The findings are as follows:

Fifty-five of these companies were found to have made donations which exceeded the 7.5% cap in two years (2022-23 and 2023-24) alone. The total amount donated above this cap stood at ₹1,377.9 crore, which was more than 69% of their aggregate donation of ₹1,993 crore. The BJP alone received close to 71% of the total donations (₹1,414 crore). The Congress received 10% (₹199.5 crore); the Trinamool, 5.6% (₹113.5 crore); and the BRS got 5.2% (₹105 crore).

Thirty-three companies made an aggregate donation of ₹1,225.7 crore in FY 2023-24 through electoral bonds. Of this, ₹933.8 crore (76.2%) was above the 7.5% cap amount of the preceding three-year average net profits of these companies. Of the aggregate donation of ₹1,225.7 crore of these 33 companies in FY 2023-24, ₹829.5 crore (over 67%) went to the BJP.

Twenty-eight companies made an aggregate donation of ₹767.3 crore in FY 2022-23 in electoral bonds, out of which ₹444.1 crore, i.e., 57.8%, was above the 7.5% cap amount of the preceding three-

year average net profits of these companies. Out of the aggregate donation of ₹767.3 crore of these 28 companies in FY 2022-23, ₹585.3 crore, i.e., more than 76.2%, went to the BJP.

Five companies in 2023-24 and eight companies in 2022-23 which made political contributions through electoral bonds beyond the 7.5% cap had negative or zero net profits, which raises questions on their source of funds and indicates possible money laundering. Companies with negative profits could not have made donations under Section 182(i) of the Companies Act, 2013.

Six out of 33 companies whose contribution through electoral bonds surpassed the 7.5% cap did not report their profits for all the three preceding years. We have taken averages of their reported years only.

If the analysis is extended to previous years up to 2018-19, the amount donated beyond the 7.5% cap will increase significantly.

In a letter addressed to the Union Ministry of Law and Justice dated May 26, 2017, the Director (Election Expenditure) of the Election Commission of India had objected to the amendment to the Section 182(i), saying: “Certain amendments have been proposed in Section 182 of the Companies Act...[and] the limit of 7.5% of the average net profits in the preceding three financial years on contributions by companies has been removed...This opens up the possibility of shell companies being set up for the sole purpose of making donations to political parties, with no other business of consequence having disburseable profits.” These warnings on the setting up of shell companies and possible money laundering, which the data now indicate, were ignored by the Union Finance Ministry, which implemented the electoral bonds scheme in January 2018.

Going the whole hog

The tables show the 55 companies which were found to have made donations more than the original 7.5% cap in the two years, 2022-23 and 2023-24

Key | A: Net profits (FY21-FY23) in ₹Cr. | B: 7.5% of A in ₹Cr. | C: Total EBs bought in ₹Cr. D: % of total EBs donated to BJP | E: Donations above 7.5% cap (C-B) in ₹Cr.

FY24					
Name	A	B	C	D	E
Western UP Power Trans. Co.	167.9	12.6	220	36.4	207.4
MEIL	2576.5	193.2	375	70.7	181.8
Bharti Airtel	-9717	0	143	100	143
M K J Enterprises	53.4	4	111.1	11.3	107.1
Qwik Supply Chain	26.5	2	50	100	48
S E P C Power	-33.1	0	40	12.5	40
Laxmi Civil Engg. Services	116.8	8.8	40	100	31.2
L C C Projects	37.6	2.8	31.5	100	28.7
Genus Power Infrastructures	37.3	2.8	28	89.3	25.2
Birla Carbon India	348.8	26.2	50	100	23.8
W P I L	88.9	6.7	22	68.2	15.3
Aksentt Tech Services	4.4	0.3	15	100	14.7
J W I L Infra	33.9	2.5	10.5	99	8
WCB Tollroad*	8.1	0.6	7	100	6.4
Force Motors	-11.5	0	5.6	100	5.6
Goodluck India	64	4.8	10	75	5.2
Village De Nandi	-15.8	0	5	100	5
Enviro Control	69.4	5.2	10	100	4.8
Ashoka G V R MN Roads^	15.7	1.2	5	100	3.8
Viva Highways	17.4	1.3	5	100	3.7
Capacit'E Infra	48.2	3.6	7	100	3.4
Ashoka HT Road#	15.8	1.2	4.5	100	3.3
Som Distilleries	-0.7	0	3	100	3
Augmont Enterprises	30.4	2.3	5	100	2.7
Ashoka BS Road@	17.7	1.3	4	100	2.7
Prasad & Co.	10.1	0.8	3	100	2.2
Patel Engineering	24.2	1.8	4	100	2.2
Maral Overseas	21.2	1.6	3	100	1.4
Michigan Engineers	24.4	1.8	3	100	1.2
Mount Everest Breweries	14.3	1.1	2	100	0.9
Sundaram Industries	8.1	0.6	1.5	100	0.9
Ashoka Developers & Builders	3.3	0.3	1	100	0.7
Associated Auto Parts	8.4	0.6	1	100	0.4
TOTAL FOR FY24	1225.7	67.7	933.8

FY23					
Name	A	B	C	D	E
Qwik Supply Chain	25	1.9	125	100	123.1
Haldia Energy	337.5	25.3	95	31.6	69.7
Dhariwal Infrastructures	77.5	5.8	50	50	44.2
D L F Commercial Developers	-40.8	0	40	100	40
Birla Carbon India	310	23.3	55	100	31.7
Bharti Airtel	-21716.5	0	20	100	20
D L F Garden City Indore	5.3	0.4	15	100	14.6
Nexg Devices	5.4	0.4	15	100	14.6
N C C	377.9	28.3	40	100	11.7
A B N L Investment	1.7	0.1	10	100	9.9
D L F Luxury Homes	13.7	1	10	100	9
Greenko Energy Projects	-24.8	0	8	100	8
Mohit Minerals	55.4	4.2	12	100	7.8
Best Agrolife	44.1	3.3	10	100	6.7
Authum Investment & Infra	262.9	19.7	25	100	5.3
MEIL	2503	187.7	193	52	5.3
Michigan Engineers	16.8	1.3	6	100	4.7
Ranjit Buildcon	43.1	3.2	7	100	3.8
Pragati Enterprises	0	0	3.5	100	3.5
Arvind Beauty Brands Retail	-24.4	0	3	100	3
Patel Engineering	-15.2	0	2	100	2
Ranjit Toll Road	1.3	0.1	1.5	100	1.4
Panacea Biotech	-87	0	1	100	1
Welspun Enterprises	120.1	9	10	100	1
Arvind Ltd.	107.8	8.1	9	100	0.9
Chowgule & Co.	-71.4	0	0.5	100	0.5
R M C Switchgears	0.4	0	0.5	100	0.5
Angel Fibers	0.6	0	0.3	100	0.2
TOTAL FOR FY23	767.3	76.2	444.1



*Warora-Chandrapur-Ballarpur Tollroad
^Ashoka G V R Mudhol Nipani Roads
#Ashoka Hungund Talikot Road
@Ashoka Bagewadi Saundatti Road Ltd.

We have not trained people to cope with this situation which has risen because of five decades of mismanagement.

I think we should opt for cluster-based development. Our agenda should be to reverse migration, so that youngsters can move to other districts. If we can shift industries to taluk headquarters, those regions will develop. Developing other parts of the country and the State is a requirement. Why should we make sure that everything is concentrated in Bengaluru and make it more unliveable?

Much of the focus is on urban centres. There is not enough attention being paid to regions along the river basins. Isn’t it high time that governments start respecting ecosystems away from the cities that ultimately help these cities thrive?

SV: The question I ask is, how do we create a governance framework which will protect our environment at the river basin scale? We had the Gadgil and Kasturirangan Committee Reports. Both were rejected by people who occupied the Western Ghats or by politicians who manipulated them to do that. Bengaluru exists because the Cauvery. The moment the Cauvery suffers, Bengaluru dies. When will Bengaluru realise that it is essential for it to make sure that the Cauvery flows in a pristine condition and is full of water? This should become a common point of conversation among ordinary citizens. We should not be worried only about piped water or tanker prices. Those are symptoms. The real cause of the problem is environmental destruction. Unless we build the right institutions to manage our systems and resources and bring in expertise, we will continue to suffer.

Every time there is a crisis, we see knee-jerk reactions. What should governments do to secure the future of our cities?

SV: Well-rounded institutions that should be able to understand the problem, define it correctly, and then frame long-term and sustainable solutions.

TVR: The right institutions, yes, but also accountability in the system. We are creating projects just to use funds. Unless we tackle corruption, planning will fail. We should also elect the right people.



To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The  **Hindu.**

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 5, 1974

Nixon to pay up huge tax dues

Washington, April 4: Shortly after a joint committee of Congress and the Internal Revenue Service had issued a report which ruled that President Nixon owed a staggering \$467,000 (Rs. 35 lakhs) in unpaid income taxes and interest, during his first four years in office, the White House announced last night that Mr. Nixon would pay the full amount without a contest. This came as something of a surprise, because until the other day, Mr. Nixon’s lawyers had been saying that if there was an adverse finding, he would appeal against it in the tax courts. Even yesterday, while announcing his decision to pay up, the White House contended that Mr. Nixon could “make a strong case” against the finding that he had improperly deducted the gift of his Vice-Presidential papers to the National Archives, and had failed to list the capital gains from the sale of residences in New York, California and Florida. The White House said Mr. Nixon had decided to pay up because he had promised to abide by the ruling of a Congressional committee when he took his tax case to it last December. It is widely believed that Mr. Nixon chose not to contest the ruling because that would have further affected his political standing. Last night’s White House statement also disclaimed all wrong doing by Mr. Nixon in the matter of the questionable tax returns, by putting the blame for the errors on those who prepared his returns, without “his knowledge or approval”.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 5, 1924

Labour’s Kenya policy

London, April 4: Mr. Thomas received at the Colonial Office privately this morning a deputation headed by Lord Buxton and including representatives of the three political parties the Missionary Society and commercial bodies who support the proposal to appoint a committee to inquire into the whole question of trusteeship of native races in East Africa. The deputation emphasised that there was no necessity for antagonism between the carrying out of the Government’s policy of trusteeship and the development of cotton growing in Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, Nyasaland, and North Rhodesia.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The increase in a vegetarian thali's cost in March: Crisil

7 in percentage. The cost of a vegetarian thali rose to ₹27.3 per plate from ₹25.5 in the year-ago period, owing to the rise in onion, tomato, and potato prices, according to Crisil Market Intelligence and Analysis. PTI

Share of independent candidates to lose deposit since 1991

99 in percentage. From 67% of independent candidates forfeiting deposit in 1957, the share went up to 78% by 1962, showing a diminishing trust in independent candidates, according to the ECI. PTI

The estimated mustard seed output in 2023-24: SEA

12 in million tonnes. Mustard seed production is likely to touch an all-time high in the 2023-24 season in view of a record sown area of 10 million hectares, according to the Solvent Extractors' Association of India (SEA). PTI

The rides completed by ride-hailing platform Rapido

100 crore. Rapido has completed rides across 120 cities, the app which offers auto, bike, and cab services said. Its an app offering employment opportunities to gig workers. PTI

The current FIFA ranking of the Indian football men's team

121 The Indian football men's team dropped four places in the latest FIFA rankings, following a defeat in the second round of the 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifiers. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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On global indices measuring democracy

How do researchers measure democracy? Why is India worried about its ranking on global indices which measure democracy and political participation? What are the strengths and weaknesses of global datasets? Why does India want to make its own democracy index?

EXPLAINER

Saumya Kalia

The story so far:

The V-Dem Institute's recent democracy index termed India as "one of the worst autocratisers". Similar indices have downgraded India's democratic standing in recent years – India is only 'partly free' (Freedom House), is home to a "flawed democracy" (The Economist Intelligence Unit) and is better classified as an "electoral autocracy." The Indian Government has however refuted these assessments. It now plans to release its own democracy index, which, according to *Al Jazeera*, will help India "counter recent downgrades in ratings and severe criticisms by international groups".

Why does India care about a democracy index?

From the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project to Freedom House, there is a consensus that India's democracy is in peril. Ahead of the election season, these indices and "negative commentary" by think tanks and agencies threaten India's sovereign ratings and its ranking on the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, the *Al Jazeera* report noted. India has previously denounced all global rating assessments of Indian conditions, from democracy and press freedom to hunger, human development and happiness. Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar in 2021 called the makers of these indices "self-appointed custodians," who are "not motive-less." The grouse with democracy assessments is that the methodology is flawed, sample sizes are inadequate, and that these indices favour cultural bias and subjective opinion over objective metrics. India, for instance, ranks between Niger (which is ruled by a military junta) and the Ivory Coast, and is in the same category as Palestine. Any yardstick of democracy – be it fair elections or electoral participation – would suggest



GETTY IMAGES

India is "doing as well as any other democracy," Mr. Jaishankar said.

What data do indices use?

There are many approaches to measuring democracy, some using facts, some judgment and some a mix of both. The four broad types of data that these indices use are – observational data (OD) which is data on observable facts, such as voter turnout rates; 'in-house' coding, where researchers assess country-specific information using academic material, newspapers, etc.; expert surveys, where selected experts from a country provide a subjective evaluation; and representative surveys, where a selected group of citizens offer judgments. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has endorsed the use of observational, objective data over judgment-based methodology for

assessments to make them "more broadly acceptable." Others, however, find fact-based metrics "insufficient", and expert intervention necessary, to capture on-ground realities of governance.

Additionally, each index asks and responds to a different question evaluating the health of democracy. While all agree that democracy is a political system in which citizens get to participate in free and fair elections (electoral democracy), indices like V-Dem's, Economist Intelligence Unit and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index assess other dimensions as well: is the democracy 'participatory', are citizen groups and civil society organisations functional? Are decisions made deliberately, in the best interest of all people, rather than through coercion or minority group interests? Is it egalitarian – are economic and social resources

distributed equally? The approach also varies vastly. Some use only two indicators while others have more than 400; the weightage assigned and aggregation model followed also fluctuates across projects. V-Dem's researchers code a series of indicators for 12 areas across media, civil society, political parties, and civil liberties and each area is assigned five experts.

What are the limitations of indices?

The first and the most frequently cited criticism is that there is a degree of subjectivity that tugs at the indices' credibility and precision. Regardless of the scholarly pool and aggregation model used, evaluations are still based on the judgment of researchers and coders, rather than tangible characteristics. V-Dem's "egalitarian" indicator, for instance, assesses the equality of social groups in the political arena – an equivocal question in comparison to say, how many political parties are present in the country. However, a project investigated the degree of expert biases in some indices and found them to be limited. Scholar Paul Staniland, who studied V-Dem's assessment of India since 1947, concurred, telling the *BBC* that "there's not an obvious anti-right-wing bias." Another concern is over the scope of countries included in these indices. Only some survey non-independent and microstates. Smaller countries may thus be overlooked in certain cases. The next criticism is of a perceived ideological discrepancy, partly due to the amorphous definition of democracy itself. Lesotho, which suffered a military coup in 2014, is assigned a higher score than India.

Therefore, there is no singular, perfect democracy index, just like there is no singular definition of democracy. Experts, including Mr. Staniland, agree the indices "capture important big-picture dynamics and trends" in democracy. They offer ways to benchmark the strengths and weaknesses of regimes, and make different components comparable over time periods and geographies.

THE GIST

▼ The V-Dem Institute's recent democracy index termed India as "one of the worst autocratisers".

▼ While all agree that democracy is a political system in which citizens get to participate in free and fair elections (electoral democracy), indices like V-Dem's, Economist Intelligence Unit and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index assess other dimensions as well: is the democracy 'participatory', are citizen groups and civil society organisations functional? Are decisions made deliberately, in the best interest of all people, rather than through coercion or minority group interests?

▼ A major criticism is that there is a degree of subjectivity that tugs at the indices' credibility and precision.

How are symbols allotted to political parties?

Why was the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi denied a common symbol by the ECI in Tamil Nadu?

Rangarajan. R

The story so far:

The Naam Tamilar Katchi (NTK) that secured 3.9% and 6.5% votes in Tamil Nadu in 2019 and 2021 respectively, has been allotted a new common symbol (Mike). The Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) that secured 1.09% and 0.99% votes in 2019 and 2021 has been denied a common symbol (Pot). This has raised questions about the allotment of symbols to 'registered unrecognised parties'.

What do the rules specify?

A party is recognised as a 'national' or 'state' party under the provisions of the Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968 (Symbols Order) by the Election Commission of India (ECI). The criteria for recognition at the State level consists of (a) winning one Lok Sabha seat for every 25 seats or 3% of Legislative Assembly seats or (b) winning one Lok Sabha or two Assembly seats

along with 6% of votes polled or (c) securing 8% of votes polled in a general election. Symbols are allotted to political parties and contesting candidates as per the provisions of the Symbols Order by ECI. In the largest democracy where a sizeable population is still illiterate, symbols play a crucial role in the voting process. A recognised political party has a reserved symbol that is not allotted to any other candidate in any constituency. For registered but unrecognised political parties, one of the free symbols is allotted as a common symbol during an election if that party contests in two Lok Sabha constituencies or in 5% of seats to the Assembly of a State as the case may be.

What is the current issue?

Rule 10B of the Symbols Order provides that the concession of a common free symbol shall be available to a 'registered unrecognised party' for two general elections. Furthermore, a party shall be eligible for a common symbol in any subsequent general election if it had

secured at least 1% of votes polled in the State on the previous occasion when the party availed of this facility. Such an unrecognised party should however apply for a symbol every time in the prescribed format. This application can be made any time during the period commencing six months prior to the expiry of the term of the Lok Sabha or State Assembly as the case may be. The symbols are thereafter allotted on a 'first-come-first-served' basis.

In the above cases, the NTK had secured more than 1% of votes in the last two elections with the common symbol of 'Ganna Kisan'. However, since they applied for that symbol only in February 2024, the ECI had allotted that symbol to Bharatiya Praja Aikyata Party (BPAP), that had applied earlier, based on the 'first-come-first-served' rule. However, the BPAP has not contested elections in Tamil Nadu before. The VCK was declined allotment of a common symbol as it had failed to secure 1% of votes polled in the elections to the State Legislative Assembly

in 2021. The VCK notably has one Lok Sabha MP and four MLAs in Tamil Nadu contesting on the 'Pot' symbol in 2019 and 2021 elections.

What can be the way forward?

The ECI has decided on the applications of NTK and VCK as per existing rules. However, it is counter intuitive from a layman's perspective that the NTK which secured more than 6% of votes polled is not allotted the previous common symbol of its choice. It would be equally baffling for an average voter that the VCK which has elected representatives is ineligible to obtain a common symbol. The two VCK candidates have been eventually allotted the free symbol of 'Pot' by the respective returning officers.

The existing threshold for recognition of a party may continue. The candidates set up by recognised parties enjoy the advantage of being listed at the top of the ballot in the Electronic Voting Machine. Nevertheless, the ECI may consider amending the rules that registered unrecognised parties that secure at least 1% of votes polled in a previous election or have an elected representative in the Lok Sabha or State Assembly, shall have the right to be allotted a common symbol of their choice. This would ensure a fair weightage being given for their past electoral performance and strengthen the democratic process.

Rangarajan R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Polity Simplified'. Views expressed are personal.

THE GIST

▼ The Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) that secured 1.09% and 0.99% votes in 2019 and 2021 has been denied a common symbol (Pot).

▼ The VCK was declined allotment of a common symbol as it had failed to secure 1% of votes polled in the elections to the State Legislative Assembly in 2021.

▼ Rule 10B of the Symbols Order provides that the concession of a common free symbol shall be available to a 'registered unrecognised party' for two general elections.

IN THE LIMELIGHT



A screengrab from Frieren: Beyond Journey's End.

Why the new anime ‘Frieren: Beyond Journey’s End’ is the future of fantasy

In a groundbreaking shift in the genre, Kanehito Yamada’s trailblazing new anime challenges the reign of high fantasy stalwarts with a moving meditation on mortality, companionship and unwavering focus on the ‘little’ moments of life

Ayaan Paul Chowdhury

For over seven decades, J.R.R. Tolkien’s masterwork has stood as the bedrock of the fantasy genre, shaping the landscapes of countless realms that followed. The towering legacy of *The Lord of the Rings* has cast a long shadow over the genre for ages, with few daring to challenge its sovereignty. A few months ago, whispers of a prophetic adversary spread amongst the fantasy community, as a Japanese throne had been usurped.

Dethroning the legacy

For the unversed, My Anime List is one of the world’s largest anime forums that incorporates a user-voting system to rank the all time greats, the anime equivalent to an IMDB essentially. For over a decade, the classic shounen anime, *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* had enjoyed its comfortable reign at the top spot, undisturbed even by the likes of *Attack on Titan* or *Steins Gate*. That was until Studio Madhouse sliced the head off the anime regent with an unassuming fantasy tale that nobody could have seen coming. One that has since rocked the very foundations set in stone by Tolkien and his fantasy loyalists.

While the landscape of anime has witnessed a proliferation of fantasy titles in recent years, Kanehito Yamada’s *Frieren: Beyond Journey’s End* dares to carve its own path amidst the cacophony of familiar tropes and archetypes. At its heart, the series is a subtle rebuke to the pervasive trend of ‘isekai’ (“other-world”), a subgenre that has dominated the anime scene with its fantastical escapades and wish-fulfilment narratives. Unlike the

typical isekai protagonist, thrust into a new world with newfound powers and privileges, Frieren grapples with the weight of her past and the consequences of her choices.

Subverting immortality

At its core, Frieren presents a world reminiscent of Middle Earth. Elves, dwarves, demonic dark lords – the whole gang’s here, but they’re not just going through the motions of a Tolkienian re-enactment. Our titular elf protagonist isn’t just some distant, ethereal being sipping on ambrosia in the forests of Lothlorien, she’s grappling with existential dread like the rest of us mortals. While Tolkien’s masterpiece encapsulates the changing tides through the lens of hobbits and men, Frieren embarks on a similar journey through the eyes of the aloof titular elf.

In established high fantasy lore, the elves stand as paragons of grace and wisdom, their perception of time often distant and detached. Amazon Prime’s excursions on Middle Earth with *The Rings of Power* spin-off series attempted to humanise its elven protagonist, Galadriel, but fell short in more ways than one. Frieren breathes life into this immortality, and expands upon the crippling weight of centuries upon a soul. Unlike many fantasy works where the undying exhibit little acknowledgment of time’s passage or reduce it to a stoic, “Do not cite the deep magic to me witch, I was there when it was written,” Frieren digs deep into the psyche of its immortal protagonist. Through Frieren’s eyes, we witness the fleeting nature of human existence juxtaposed against the timeless perspective of the elves. As the elf forms

bonds with her mortal companions, she confronts the pain of loss and the transient beauty of these moments of intimacy, challenging the notion of immortality as a blessing rather than a curse.

Embracing vulnerability

Central to the series is the theme of companionship, as Frieren journey’s across the land alongside her newfound allies, Fern and Stark. Through every village visited and every encounter faced, the trop learn and grow together, their bond deepening with each passing moment. Textbook Fellowship of the Ring or dungeon party, if you will. But while Aragorn may be brave and steadfast through his trials and Harry is bold and defiant in the face of danger, our ‘hero’ Stark, cries, whines and trembles with fear before striking down a massive dragon in the most glorious fashion. The anime embraces the fragility and imperfection of its characters, imbuing their actions with a sense of vulnerability. Perhaps most striking is the anime’s subversion of traditional power dynamics within the genre. Rather than relying on grand displays of power, Frieren emphasises restraint. The elven mage may wield some of the most tremendous magic in the entire realm, but she’d rather spam basic low-level spells to deal with a problem swiftly and spend her time adding insignificant grimoires to her collection.

Finding meaning in the mundane

What truly sets Frieren apart however, is its unwavering focus on the ‘little’ moments, the quiet exchanges between characters that resonate with profound

meaning. As much as I adore the Rohirrim flanking the sunkissed horizon as King Theoden leads his army towards the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, sometimes, all one could ever ask for is an extra pint for the Hobbits at the Prancing Pony or to be serenaded by Mr Tumnus’ flute while Lucy sips tea, just a while longer.

What has always made fantasy so effective is the escape. The escape to a world so preciously treasured that the mere thought of return to our horrid realities is a devastating punch to the gut. As Frodo Baggins and Sam Gamgee share their tearful final embrace on the shores of the Gray Havens, or as Harry Potter takes one last glimpse of Hogwarts as he boards the train home, or as the Pevensie siblings bid adieu to Narnia as they step through the wardrobe; as much as we’d love for the journey to continue, we must begrudgingly come to terms with the fateful adventure coming to a heartbreaking close. In those aching moments, we see reflections of our own farewells, yearning for just a few more moments of this solace. And it is through the selfsame longing for the little time beyond the end where Frieren truly begins her story. Beyond journey’s end.

Through her touching journey, Frieren offers a meditation on the human condition unlike any other, reminding us of the fragility of life and the importance of cherishing every moment. Unlike the bombast of Tolkien’s Middle-earth, the whimsy of Lewis’s Narnia or even the nostalgia of J.K. Rowling’s Hogwarts, Yamada’s tale not only embraces the high fantasy tropes laid down by the greats, but even throws down the gauntlet with them as a challenge to the status quo.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Some significant events occurred on April 5. Here is a quiz on the different events, birthdays and everything else that happened on the day over the years

Abhinaya. K

QUESTION 1

The voyage of SS Loyalty, the first ship of The Scindia Steam Navigation Company Ltd is considered a marquee day for Indian navigation. In honour of this event, every year April 5, is celebrated as ____ Day. Mention the year in which the day was first observed.

QUESTION 2

This British Prime Minister resigned on this day in 1955. At the time of his resignation, he was 80 years old. Identify the Prime Minister.

QUESTION 3

The primary goal of this

company set up under the sponsorship of the Indian government was to ensure availability of essential drugs to the masses. The company established on this day in 1961 was closed down in 2016. Identify the firm.

QUESTION 4

This poet, considered one of the central figures of the Beat Generation, is said to have been deeply influenced by his visit to India. Identify the poet who died on this day in 1997.

QUESTION 5

The United Nations General Assembly observes the International Day of Conscience on April 5 every year. What is the theme for 2024?



Visual question:

Identify the actress and the character she played in the show *Feud*. The character she played, who was an iconic actress, was born on May 5, 1908. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz:

1. The motto of NATO and the treatise it was taken from. **Ans: ‘Animus in consulendo liber’ (A mind unfettered in deliberation). It is a phrase from the *The Conspiracy of Catiline* by historian Sallust**
2. The North Atlantic Treaty was formed out of the expansion of these two treaties. **Ans: The Treaty of Dunkirk and the Treaty of Brussels**
3. The year France rejoined the NATO’s military command structure. **Ans: 2009**
4. The event wherein Article 5 of the Treaty was first invoked. **Ans: After the September 11 attacks in the U.S.**
5. This country included the strategic goal of joining NATO in its Constitution. **Ans: Ukraine**
6. In 2003, NATO took charge of this armed mission in this territory. **Ans: NATO agreed to take command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan**
- Visual: The significance of this building to NATO. **Ans: First location of NATO headquarters**
- Early Birds: Prashant Nain| Mohd. Amaan| Gurvinder Singh



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

“Organogram (B. S. Ramaiah, Hyderabad)”

“Only a couple of dictionaries have recorded this word. It means ‘a chart showing graded arrangement of personnel in an organisation’.”

“Missive (S. V. Prasanna, Trivandrum)”

“A ‘missive’ is a letter, especially one that is long and serious in tone. It is used jocularly. It also means an official letter.

I received a missive from my wife yesterday.

To the complaint I made, I received a missive from the Municipal Commissioner.

The ‘i’ is pronounced like the ‘i’ in ‘fit.’ The word is pronounced ‘misiv’. The stress is on the first syllable.”

“Fishy (M. L. Muhammadh Haneef, Madurai)”

“ ‘Fishy’ means ‘tasting or smelling of fish.’

The very air was fishy.
Figuratively, ‘fishy’ means ‘creating doubt or suspicion, questionable.’
He is a fishy character.
His report sounds fishy to me.”

“Procure, purchase (M. Pachaiappan, Neyveli)”

“We buy things, small and big, in exchange for money.

I am going out to buy vegetables.
He bought a car last month.

‘Purchase’ implies a transaction of some dignity or importance. You do not purchase vegetables, you buy them.

I want to purchase a flat in this area.

She purchased a diamond necklace for her daughter.

‘Buy’ is used with both expensive and inexpensive things. ‘Purchase’ is used only with expensive things. ‘Purchase tax’ is sales tax on non-essential luxury goods. In India, ‘purchase’ as a verb is more often used than ‘buy,’ perhaps because it sounds more impressive. ‘Procure’ means ‘obtain, especially by care or effort.’

Officials have to procure a certain quantity of rice from the farmers in this area.

I was able to procure this rare coin after considerable search.

‘Procure’ implies planning and care. You buy expensive and inexpensive things. You purchase only things of importance. You procure when you buy with care and planning.”

“Madcap (Sunita Chatterjee, Nagpur)”

“The word is used as an adjective and a noun. A madcap is not mad, but impulsive and reckless.

I don’t like your madcap scheme.

I am not amused by your madcap adventures.

Published in The Hindu on August 13, 1991.

Word of the day

Rangy:

tall and thin and having long slender limbs; adapted to wandering or roaming; allowing ample room for ranging

Synonym: gangly, lanky

Usage: *The man and his wife were tall and rangy with a lot of muscle.*

Pronunciation: bit.ly/rangypro

International Phonetic

Alphabet: /ˈɹeɪŋdʒi/

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

Bad design

PLI for medical devices should be tweaked

The domestic medical devices industry has come under considerable policy attention, particularly after Covid. The focus has been a two-pronged one. First, the performance linked incentive scheme, introduced in July 2020 and expanded in scope in February 2023, marks a concerted move to reduce 90 per cent import dependency in a sector that is worth \$11 billion and is growing at a CAGR of 14 per cent.



Second, efforts have been underway since February 2020 to bring medical devices under better regulatory scrutiny, with the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation building capacity to regulate this technologically complex sector where both engineering and biotechnology come into play. However, the question is whether the PLI scheme for medical devices as well as its nascent regulatory framework could do with some changes. Recently, the Centre said that 13 greenfield projects for manufacturing medical devices have been approved under the PLI scheme, entailing an outlay of ₹3,420 crore for the period FY21-FY28. The eligible products relate to cancer care, imaging devices, critical care devices and implants, as spelt out in the February 2023 circular. The outlay is modest, but the intent is unexceptionable. It could also spur the education ecosystem to provide the necessary skillsets.

However, the PLI scheme raises a familiar apprehension — namely, whether it is tailored to the specific nature of the sector. At the design level, the sales incentive will be given only if incremental sales of ₹60 crore, ₹120 crore, ₹180 crore, ₹230 crore and ₹280 crore are achieved annually in the first five years. These absolute targets are unrealistic, as they do not take into account the diverse market sizes of the eligible products. They can create an entry barrier for small companies which cannot achieve such sales volumes overnight. This is a sector where quality and technological innovation, and not just volumes, should be prioritised. Industry bodies have argued, and not without reason, that incremental sales of 7-10 per cent would be more realistic. The scheme should also take into account the fact that the regulatory requirements for different categories of medical devices could differ.

High risk, ‘class D’ products such as implants require stringent regulatory approvals, while meeting them could exceed the time window given under the PLI scheme. This could create credit and liquidity issues for the enterprise. If this scheme is to attract more applicants, its provisions with respect to sales incentive and the time window for clearances must be re-examined. Besides, the window for PLI applicants must be kept open for more than a month at a time, so that domestic players seeking to firm up tie-ups with foreign partners do not run out of time and miss their chance. India can leverage its scientific talent and unleash both medical and technological innovations, if the scheme is redesigned to create opportunities for all.

POCKET RAVIKANTH



RAVI MITTAL
ADITI SINGHAL
At the beginning of January 2024, a data services company commissioned a ₹500 crore data centre in GIFT City, which can function as a potential data embassy. The International Financial Services Centres Authority (IFSCA), a regulatory body for the GIFT City, is readying a framework for setting up a single window clearance system for data embassies. As per the Interim Budget announcements, the establishment of data embassies in GIFT IFSC will be facilitated through bilateral agreements between India and interested countries. Their promotion in the GIFT City was first announced during the 2023-24 Budget.

This revolutionary concept, still in its early stages globally, has the potential to redefine how nations safeguard their essential digital assets. This piece delves into the origins, advantages, challenges, and legislative framework required to establish data embassies, focusing on pioneering countries such as Estonia and Bahrain.

A data embassy is a novel approach to securing a country's critical digital data amid evolving cyber threats and geopolitical complexities. It involves distributing a nation's critical data and information systems across secure locations in collaboration with other countries.

The primary advantage lies in creating an additional layer of protection against cyber threats. By distributing critical data to remote locations, a country can ensure the continuity and security of its essential information systems, even in the face of large-scale cyberattacks or geopolitical conflicts. This remote backup, situated beyond a country's physical borders, protects against data integrity, availability, or confidentiality threats. The operational advantages extend to providing additional support during times of high demand, such as election seasons or tax return filing periods.

THE PIONEERS
Estonia, a pioneer in data embassies, experienced a transformative event in 2007 when a cyber attack targeted its governance and banking systems. In response, Estonia signed an agreement with Luxembourg in 2017 to establish a data embassy, setting a precedent for other nations. This embassy, located within a dedicated government-operated data centre in Betzdorf, Luxembourg, is a secure backup for critical datasets, including the e-court system, treasury information system, and population register.

Similarly, Bahrain enacted a “Cloud Law” in 2018 to encourage data



India can become a global hub for data embassies

SAFE BET. If the legal aspects are addressed, India, with its focus on digitisation and data privacy, can be a secure destination for the digital assets of other nations

embassies, aiming to position itself as a cloud computing hub. This legal framework provides a basis for hosting foreign data within the country's territorial limits, promoting cross-border data storage and management.

THE CHALLENGES
While promising, the implementation of data embassies presents multiple challenges. Legal challenges involve adapting international systems to govern conflicts, data sovereignty, jurisdiction, privacy laws, and cross-border data transfer regulations. Questions arise regarding the applicability of existing international conventions, such as the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations to data embassies. Moreover, the absence of specific domestic legislation tailored for data embassies may lead to contradictions and challenges. For example, the existing domestic laws in many countries must cover scenarios involving storing and processing sensitive information in foreign countries, resulting in data sovereignty and privacy ambiguity. Operational challenges include

Data embassies represent a groundbreaking approach to securing critical digital data in an interconnected world.

setting up and maintaining physical infrastructure, ensuring robust security measures and addressing complex issues related to communication and coordination between countries. On the other hand, the geopolitical risks introduce another layer of challenges. It necessitates identifying trustworthy host countries, requiring meticulous diplomatic considerations.

Overcoming the challenges requires appropriate legislation to address legal aspects associated with data embassies. A comprehensive legal framework is essential to define rights and responsibilities and clarify jurisdictional boundaries and mechanisms for dispute resolution. This involves clearly defining the ownership and control of the data stored in embassies and establishing principles of data sovereignty. The framework is also critical to establish the legal basis for data protection, privacy, and cybersecurity within data embassies.

Operational guidelines: Legislation can provide operational guidelines, including criteria for selecting host countries, technical specifications for data centres, cybersecurity standards, disaster recovery plans, and ongoing maintenance guidelines.

Compliance and accountability: Legislation should outline the responsibilities and liabilities of all parties, monitor compliance, conduct audits, and enforce accountability.

International governance and standardisation: Legislation can contribute to international governance

structures and standardisation efforts for data embassies, promoting best practices, guidelines and consistency across countries. Standardisation efforts can ensure interoperability and enhance cybersecurity practices. It requires collaboration between governments, international organisations, and industry stakeholders.

Data embassies represent a groundbreaking approach to securing critical digital data in an interconnected world. As nations navigate the complexities of the digital age, data embassies offer a glimpse into the future of secure and collaborative data management, reshaping the global landscape of digital security.

Aspiring to become a global hub for data embassies, India faces the challenge of formulating comprehensive policies and legal frameworks. However, with a growing economy, international standing, and a focus on digitisation and data privacy, India can position itself as a leader in secure data storage by actively addressing challenges and allocating resources.

By establishing data embassies, India can attract foreign and private sector investments, boost its digital economy, and highlight the quality of its IT sector. Additionally, the initiative can create employment opportunities, contributing to India's efforts to become a global hub for data storage.

Mittal is District Collector, Jashpur, and Singhal has over 15 years of experience in large-scale digital transformation projects. Views are personal

Preparing the ground for precision farming

Sustainable agri-waste management can spur demand for cutting edge farm machinery and crop management solutions

S Chandramohan

Around the world, agriculture is shifting to more sustainable practices. The change is due to growing environmental concerns and preference for more sustainable foods. The regulations and the developments in Europe will affect India, given its position as a large and attractive market. The ‘Farm to Fork’ policy in the EU, even if not implemented intensively, would force all stakeholders — farmers, commodity processors and food producers — to redefine and reshape their value propositions. Recent reforms of the Common Agricultural policy have emphasized the integration of environmental and climate objectives into subsidy payments.

The global agri-machinery industry has evolved from precision farming before 2020 to smart farming now, which is the ability to generate and transmit data for efficiency, traceability and sustainability.

Aboard, there are several start-ups, apart from OEMs, which manage all farm operations, provide agronomic decision support as well as manage the

profits and losses of the farmer.

In India, most of the innovations in the past few years have been around supply chain, and largely involving last-mile connectivity between farmers and customers. There are only few instances where precision farming solutions are being offered, and due to cost considerations these are yet to take off.

FUNDING AGRICULTURE START-UPS
The government's recent announcement of a ₹750-crore blended fund for agri start-ups and rural enterprises would hopefully change the scenario in the years to come.

Annually, India generates 500 million tonnes of agricultural residue, offering a substantial business opportunity of around ₹50,000 crore. Nearly 200 million tonnes of this resource remain unused, often resulting in its being burnt.

This underscores the untapped potential for converting agricultural residue into biofuels. The Finance Minister's recent announcement of financial assistance for biomass aggregation machinery is a crucial



TECH. Must be scaled up in farming

initiative. Encouraging farmers to participate in the bioenergy supply chain not only promotes sustainable agricultural waste management but also opens new opportunities for income generation. This will catalyse the demand for cutting-edge farm machinery and crop management solutions.

At the ground level, India is far behind in the area of precision farming. Farm input manufacturers need to move from conventional products to sale of solutions that help farmers maximise output using lower chemicals per

hectare. New precision agricultural tools that enable consistent planting of seeds at optimal depth, pneumatic sprayers and spreaders that can deploy fertilizer more precisely than conventional implements are already being used abroad.

There are today several players abroad who provide software solutions to manage the entire crop life-cycle.

Leading global food companies require traceability, agronomic monitoring, yield forecasting, and improvements in agricultural practices across the supply chain of the product. Low-cost sensors are required to monitor soil nutrients, soil moisture, pest and diseases. Indigenous manufacture of such sensors needs to be encouraged. Our net sown area has almost stagnated at around 140 million hectares and there is little scope to increase it. Intensive agriculture has led to soil and water degradation. There is an urgent need to move towards sustainable farming practices to ensure food security.

The writer is Director & Group President Finance, TAFE Ltd. Views are personal

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VRRR auctions

The lukewarm reception to the three VRRR auctions conducted by the RBI at the weighted average rate of 6.49 per cent highlights the limited appetite of banks to deploy their surplus funds at the given rate. Despite offering a rate marginally lower than the repo rate of 6.5 per cent, further improvements in the VRRR seem challenging. In light of banks holding significant surplus liquidity, they must explore alternative avenues for profitable deployment. Despite Crisil indicating slower credit growth compared to fiscal 2024, banks cannot afford to let their funds remain idle and incur opportunity losses, especially considering the relatively high cost of funds. Under these circumstances,

adjustments to Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR) and Statutory Liquidity Ratio (SLR) might have proven more effective than the VRRR auctions, which only absorbed ₹0.57-lakh crore against a notified amount of ₹3.5-lakh crore. Increasing CRR and SLR could have incentivised banks to lend more meeting the twin objectives of liquidity absorption and profitable deployment of surplus funds by banks.

Srinivasan Velamuri
Chennai

China's industrial capacity
The article, ‘The truth behind China's industrial overcapacity’ (April 4), is an excellent case study of building excess capacity, yet unabatedly surging ahead in economic and

industrial growth. Industrial capacity built over the past five decades has enabled China capture global markets with low-cost exports. Despite ‘Boycott China’ calls in several countries, Chinese exports have been growing. Its virtual monopoly in EVs and solar equipment is likely to continue. All the sanctions by the US and European countries have been largely ineffective.

Vinod Johri
Delhi

Job opportunities
This refers to ‘Working India hobbles along’ (April 4). Despite much buoyancy in economic growth, there has not been a matching increase in generation of employment

opportunities. The two terms of NDA rule did not focus much on addressing the issue of unemployment. Thousands of people migrate every year in search of work from the North to the South and vice versa and engage in construction and other micro businesses. A recent trend in the South is migrant workers are engaged even in agricultural activities, right from planting to harvesting.

RV Baskaran
Chennai

Infra sector development
Apropos ‘Infra development vital to boosting GDP growth’ (April 4), while the services sector has seen strong growth, infrastructure development

is the most critical sector that can play a vital role not only in its contribution to GDP, but also in facilitating faster paced growth of all other sectors. Connectivity has been accorded a high priority in powering the country's growth. However, it needs to be strengthened further, as the pace of development of vital sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing and services, largely depends on greater and better connectivity. Better infrastructure can give the necessary fillip to the faster growth of MSMEs. Infrastructure can become a game changer if private capital flows can bridge the massive funding gap that exists for its development.

Kosaraju Chandramouli
Hyderabad

GST guidelines puzzling

Some of them seem complicated, others less so

Mohan R Lavi

The number 18 has a lot of significance in Hindu mythology — there are 18 Puranas and 18 chapters in the Bhagavad Gita.

Probably taking a cue from the importance of this number, the Central Board for Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) recently issued 18 guidelines to the department personnel on conducting investigations and enforcement. It is mandatory to get an approval from The Principal Commissioner for conducting investigations and enforcement. For four specific instances, the guidelines specify that a written approval from the Principal Chief Commissioner (and not the Principal Commissioner) is necessary.

One of these is if an interpretation is required of provisions of GST laws when the tax is levied for the first time.

Other instances are when summons are planned to be issued to big industrial houses and MNCs, investigations are planned on sensitive matters or matters with national implications, and matters which are already before the GST Council.

Apart from a written permission, the guidelines elaborate that the department personnel should also collect details regarding the prevalent business practices and the nature of transactions carried out.

It would be interesting to see how this guideline is implemented since none of the major terms used in the guidelines (such as big industrial house, major multinational corporations, sensitive matters and matters with national implications) have been defined.

Since GST has always been advertised as a “one nation, one tax”, every levy could have national implications. For instance, would investigations into gaming companies be considered to have national implications warranting a written approval from the Principal Commissioner? The directive to study the prevalent business practices and their implications is welcome and could reduce the intent of revenue maximisation that is prevalent today.

Some of the guidelines could confuse the investigators. One instruction states that if a taxpayer has utilised ITC towards payment of GST on its outward supplies, it is not acceptable for the department to send a



NEW GUIDELINES. Will they clear the air? /ISTOCKPHOTO

summons with a question as to whether the input tax credit was availed.

The guidelines do not provide any alternative to this question which could lead to a situation where the question is not asked at all — taxpayers would certainly not mind this. Over the last few years, some taxpayers have faced multiple investigations on the same matter from different investigating agencies. CBIC has attempted to resolve this in their guidelines by stating that “there may be a situation where it comes to the Commissionerate’s notice that either the DGGI or the State GST department is also simultaneously undertaking record-based investigation of the same taxpayer on different subject matters.

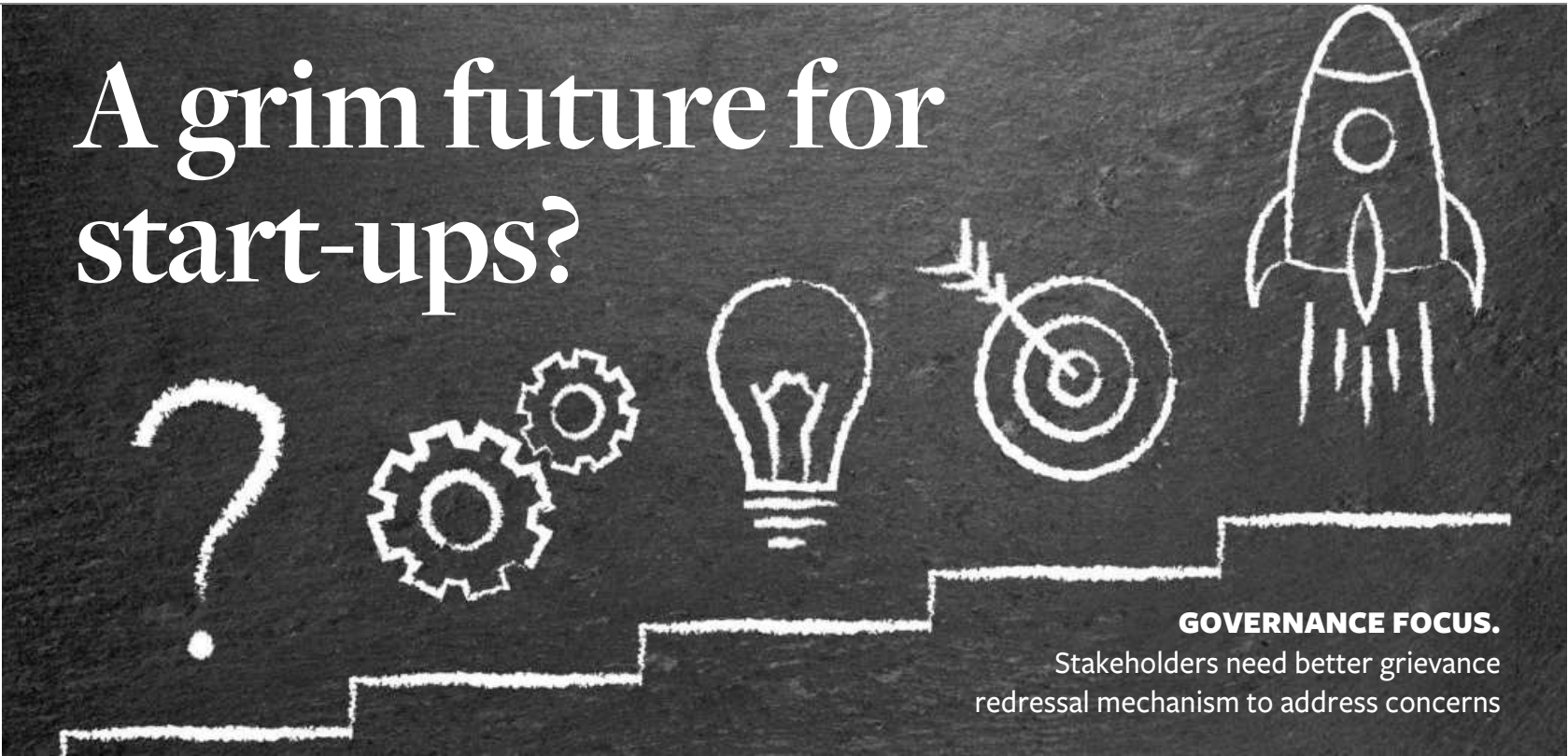
“The Principal Commissioner must engage in dialogue with the other investigating office/s to consider the feasibility of only one of the offices pursuing all these subject matters with respect to the taxpayer, and the other offices consolidating their material with that office. If this outcome is not feasible, the reasons therefor should be confirmed on file by the Principal Commissioner”. Multiple investigations have not been removed from the statute book — the process may have become more complicated.

ASSESSMENT GUIDELINES?

For almost seven years, there has been a disconnect between GST laws and their implementation by some trigger-happy assessing officers. While the latest set of CBIC guidelines has cleared some of the misconceptions about summons and enforcement, the key challenge would be to implement them as instructed in the guidelines.

CBIC would do well to also bring out similar broad parameters to conclude assessments as well.

The writer is a chartered accountant



GITANJALI DIWAKAR, SURBHI KAPUR, NIMMY SARA ZACHARIAH

A year ago, Paytm was lauded by the Prime Minister for its contributions to India’s digital finance landscape. Today, one of its premiere products struggles to revive itself after failing to fulfil certain mandatory compliances.

As a results its share price has plummeted and its reputation has taken a hit. With a series of setbacks, Byju’s is also in a similar spot — from layoffs to mismanaged funds and more. At this juncture, it would be worthwhile to analyse these situations from a legal lens.

Both scenarios mentioned above present a compelling case for the appropriate application of corporate law principles. To begin with, Paytm and Byju’s did not imbibe the essence of fiduciary duty. The term originates from the Latin word ‘Fiducia’ (which means ‘trust’). The principle emphasises on the duty that must be fulfilled by those entrusted with company’s affairs. The conduct of the heads of Paytm and Byju’s depicts a deviation from this principle.

The incidents also throw light upon the proper purpose rule — i.e. the powers bestowed upon an individual must be used only for a specific purpose. The misuse of this power by the leadership of both enterprises led to a decline in their valuation. Consequently, Byju’s saw a downfall in the infusion of funds by

investors. Paytm’s Co-founder, on the other hand, attributed his actions to the wisdom of his advisor. But ignorance of the law is not an excuse.

More importantly, there was a lack of accountability. Each of the key players steered away from the provisions related to directors’ duties (Section 166, Companies Act, 2013). It must be remembered that these obligations not only extend to the company but also to the shareholders, other stakeholders (such as creditors, investors etc.) and even the environment. There was no sense of loyalty or care exercised by them.

JUSTICE, PEOPLE, AND SUSTAINABILITY

These episodes have led to discussions regarding ways to seek justice by parties affected by such developments. However, the obvious options are not as simple as some consider them to be. The law provides for a range of methods to ensure fairness in the corporate governance mechanisms of a venture. But most of these approaches are bound by the Court’s powers. This implies litigation spanning over long periods.

Provisions related to directors’ duties (Section 166, Companies Act, 2013) not only extend to the company but also to the shareholders, other stakeholders (such as creditors, and investors)

To begin with, shareholders can vote to oust the director for his conduct at an Annual General Meeting (AGM). They could also lawfully call for an extraordinary general meeting (EGM) to decide on similar aspects. The aggrieved can also seek temporary injunctions or stay orders against the heads of such organisations.

Courts can punish these authorities for various malpractices or direct them to disclose secret profits and instances involving unfair utilisation of the company and its resources. Arbitration and mediation are also cost-effective options.

The key to a successful enterprise is the human connect. Despite setbacks, companies can always rekindle the bond with the customer by resorting to unconventional methods. The scope of fiduciary duties and shareholders rights is vast and continues to expand. Hence, the law would favour such ways if they are fair and ensure accountability within the corporate governance system.

For example, companies can update their financial information on their mobile apps and websites. This automatically establishes a sense of transparency and is likely to instill faith in the company’s functioning. It also ensures accessibility to the company’s progress and allows shareholders and investors to make wiser and informed decisions. More importantly, it paves way for greater participation by the company’s stakeholders.

Enterprises can also use various communication channels such as emails, WhatsApp groups, and Telegram channel. These avenues are easily

accessible and enhances customer engagement. Companies must not hesitate to reveal their financial position through individual correspondence, despite this being a costly option.

Insider trading policies must be reassessed. The internet thrives on information related to share trading and investments. But there is precious little transparency about the sources of such insights. Effective and meaningful regulations in this regard would, therefore, be beneficial. The public must push for their speedy implementation. Negative connotations surrounding insider trading must be curbed as this practice could benefit investors too.

Although Byju’s recent rights issue has been given the ‘green signal’, one must remember that 45 per cent of its board members voted to oust the CEO at the latest AGM. Paytm’s future has been debated intensely after its Co-Founder resigned from the board of Paytm Payments Bank. Such incidents could have been prevented had these companies prioritised their consumers over profits.

Sustainable businesses are an interplay between customer satisfaction and leadership. Entrepreneurs must not exploit the regulatory grey zones in the fintech and edtech sectors and strive to maintain high corporate governance standards. Therefore, enterprises must be designed to work fairly and lawfully with their customers to ensure a healthy business environment.

Kapur is Professor, Zachariah is Assistant Lecturer, and Diwakar is Independent Researcher at OP Jindal University, Sonapat

Social security options for platform workers

Bornali Bhandari
Ajaya K Sahu

A universal social security system is perhaps the best option to protect gig workers.

The Code on Social Security, 2020 defines gig worker as a “person who performs work or participates in a work arrangement and earns from such activities outside of a traditional employer-employee relationship”.

The NITI Aayog report states that “gig workers can be broadly classified into platform and non-platform-based workers. Non-platform gig workers are generally casual wage workers and own-account workers in the conventional sectors, working part-time or full-time.”

The platform worker has the following characteristics — task/deliverables-based contract between the service provider and the online intermediary (platform); the contract is market/transactions based with costs of transaction failure risks to the intermediaries and; the exact nature of the service provided and price for the service are pre-determined.

Platform work makes the work formal while the worker remains informal. In non-platform gig work, both

work and the worker remain informal.

The second-best solution is a system that is designed for platform workers only, as a first step, with the justification that platform workers work longer hours than an average casual wage worker, while the incomes are comparable or marginally higher (NCAER Report 2023).

For some platform workers (especially in delivery services), the risk of having accidents is higher.

TWO OPTIONS

Here we propose two alternative options for platform workers while they are on a platform job either on a long-shift or short-shift basis.

There are essentially three questions — what to finance, for whom to finance and how to finance.

The ‘whom to finance’ is very clear — the social welfare system is designed only for platform workers while they are actively employed on platforms. One could potentially give them a buffer for three months. After that they lose their social cover. This poses a challenge and the only way to overcome that is to create a universal social welfare system.

On the question of what to finance, it could be full health insurance for the



TRADE-OFFS. Gig workers’ security/JOTHI RAMALINGAM B

worker and their family and pensions, only for the time that they are “active” in platforms and three months thereafter to give them a buffer. A board for social welfare can be formed.

How to finance this scheme? One option is a Rajasthan type of framework, where the funds are derived from each transaction. The trade-off is the ease of doing business may be affected, which in turn may lead to creation of less jobs in this sector.

The other option is a share of the domestic annual turnover of the platform company which is employing platform workers earmarked for this (i.e. is dealing with platform delivery).

Again, it is hard to determine the annual turnover, and the share that is catering to platform workers.

Alternatively, the platform companies directly provide workers with social welfare benefits. Platform companies pay the premium directly to health insurance firms, insuring all platform workers. Their families should get full health insurance. Micro insurance products could be designed. Life insurance scheme for the worker is also important.

The platforms should ensure that the workers earn minimum wages prevailing in the city/State. The minimum wage is equivalent to the net wage that a platform worker earns and not gross wages (including fuel, car insurance and maintenance etc). Platform workers can receive additional benefits from the government.

Policymakers have to walk a fine line between creating jobs and providing workers social protection. One should not create such a high burden on platform companies that they exit.

A universal approach to providing social welfare benefits is better than piecemeal approach.

Bhandari is a Professor and Sahu is an Associate Fellow at NCAER. Views expressed are personal

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

April 5, 2004

Broadcasters turn to mobile tech to fine-tune revenues

A convergence of sorts is expected to happen with television channels planning to use mobile technology to shore up the revenues. Broadcasters such as Star India and Sony Entertainment Television (SET) are in the process of tying up with various telecom service providers to generate additional revenues using wireless technology such as SMS and phone votes.

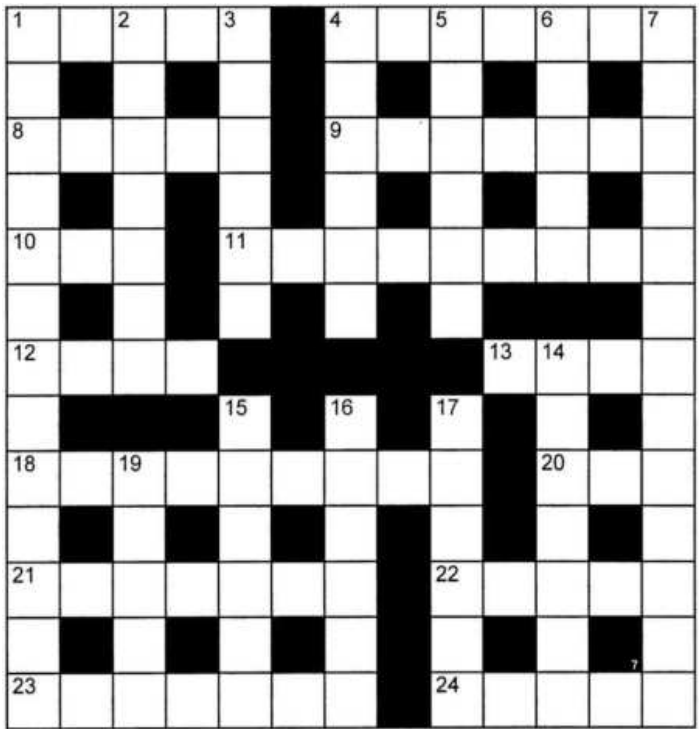
Toyota Kirloskar Auto gears up for global entry

The excitement is almost palpable at Toyota Kirloskar Motor’s (TKM) plant at Bidadi near Bangalore. The countdown for the D-day when the Indian operations will be integrated into Toyota’s new global sourcing strategy has begun. Starting next month, Toyota Kirloskar Auto Parts (TKAP), which is situated adjacent to TKM’s main assembly plant in Bidadi, will start supplying gearboxes to the parent company as part of a new global network of component-manufacturing subsidiaries.

SEZ service tax waiver norms eased

The Finance Ministry has further improved the existing service tax exemption on the taxable services provided to a developer of a special economic zone or a unit in such a zone. It has made obtaining such exemptions much easier.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2411



EASY

ACROSS

- 01. Fast (5)
- 04. Domestic worker (7)
- 08. Peace understanding (5)
- 09. Take one’s ease (7)
- 10. Mat (3)
- 11. Amusement (9)
- 12. Additional amount (4)
- 13. Hare’s tail (4)
- 18. Put an end to (9)
- 20. Digit afoot (3)
- 21. Carrying-bag (7)
- 22. American pleasure resort (5)
- 23. Nuns (7)
- 24. Motif (5)

DOWN

- 01. Fixtures involving same teams (6,7)
- 02. Push-down control (7)
- 03. Greatly fears (6)
- 04. Try hard (6)
- 05. Happens again (6)
- 06. Criminal plea of absence (5)
- 07. Conforming (6,3,4)
- 14. Salt of citric acid (7)
- 15. Face (6)
- 16. Blemishes (6)
- 17. Allow (6)
- 19. Goes over and over (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- 01. Quick to be paid change right at the start (5)
- 04. Vest ran out for the menial (7)
- 08. When fighting stops? That’s right: around start of century (5)
- 09. Lie concerning a hundred on the row (7)
- 10. What’s underfoot with rather unusual green tops? (3)
- 11. Having to go roundabout way may be source of amusement (9)
- 12. Extra amount for Sir Thomas (4)
- 13. Last appearance of hare docked after September 1st (4)
- 18. Finish Lent, say, in a half-side (9)
- 20. Front of golf-club head that often encourages beginners (3)
- 21. The only necessary item of luggage? (7)
- 22. In America it gives a heart to our first motorway repeatedly (5)
- 23. The Pleiades resist changes being made around the South (7)
- 24. Something to be developed in an anthem especially (5)

DOWN

- 01. Having got a light, do so: they’re played by the same teams (6,7)
- 02. It’s a depressing thing to have to use such control (7)
- 03. Is horrified at the thought of Doctor Sade being put out (6)
- 04. Struggle to burst the rivets (6)
- 05. Happens once again to effect cure in ruinous extremes (6)
- 06. After a short former party one has this to say one wasn’t there (5)
- 07. Conforming to a running start (6,3,4)
- 14. It makes an appearance in the box as a sort of salt (7)
- 15. Face six different ages (6)
- 16. They may be served out of court (6)
- 17. Document allowing one to give instruction to hairdresser? (6)
- 19. Car that begins to move (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2410

ACROSS 1. Counterfeit 8. Midge 9. Boaters 10. Extreme 11. Trace 12. Eldest 14. Scotch 18. Vista 19. Reports 21. Trample 23. Tosca 24. Short-change **DOWN** 1. Compete 2. Updated 3. There 4. Ribbed 5. Elastic 6. Tie 7. Waste 13. Shampoo 15. Turns in 16. Hostage 17. Ardent 18. Vital 20. Patch 22. Ass

Out on a wing

HR management is the key in the airline business

Human resource issues in merger and acquisition are some of the toughest challenges for corporations. This is a lesson the management of Tata- and Singapore Airline-owned airline Vistara has absorbed the hard way. Over the past few days, the airline has been mired in chaos, cancelling almost a tenth of its 350-odd daily flights after pilots reportedly called in sick to express their dissatisfaction with new contracts ahead of a merger with formerly state-owned Air India. This is a predicament with which Air India's former owners would have been familiar, not least during the merger of Air India, the flag carrier, with Indian Airlines, the domestic carrier, in 2007. That crisis, which festered for months, should have raised the red flag for the current exercise. If anything, the Vistara crisis presents a good example of how not to manage employee grievances.

Signs of the impending crisis were visible in late February-early March, when some pilots reported a sickout. At the heart of the problem are the restructured pay packages for Vistara pilots to bring them in line with those of Air India. The new salary structure, which pilots were required to accept by March 15, would have resulted in significant pay reductions for first officers, giving them a minimum guaranteed flying of 40 hours after the integration against 70 hours at present. For captains and senior captains, the reduction would be between 52 and 60 hours, respectively. Two Air India unions associated with Vistara pilots have reportedly written to the Tata Group chairman, expressing their concerns. To be sure, this reduction came with a hefty one-time compensation payout but the grievances over new salary packages morphed with other grievances. One is the indefinite postponement by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) of the improved Flight Duty Time Limitation Rules (FDTL) from the original deadline of June 1 under pressure from domestic airlines. The new FDTL, passed in response to pilot complaints across the industry, mandates longer rest periods, fewer night landings, requiring airlines to hire more pilots. This apart, pilots were also concerned about seniority within the merged structure. Several spoke of fears of losing seniority within the merged structure irrespective of flying experience. The issue of seniority is additionally important for pilots because it determines their ability to choose their base and aircraft (whether wide-bodied or narrow-bodied).

Airlines the world over understand that pilots wield a uniquely strong bargaining power within an organisation. Consequential changes in salary structures, seniority, and rostering, therefore, demand energetic management engagement to ensure a smooth transition process. Vistara, however, held a town hall with the pilots after the crisis manifested itself in the marketplace with large numbers of cancellations, delays, and inconvenienced customers. No doubt the experience with the merger of Vistara-Air India, a full-service carrier, will offer lessons for the impending merger of Air India Express with AIX Connect (formerly AirAsia), the Tata group's low-cost offering. The significant commitment by the group in the airline business demands another order of skilful people management at a time when the post-Covid aviation market is growing rapidly. Domestic air traffic alone is expected to grow 8 per cent in FY25, after similar growth in FY24. With pilot-training schools unable to keep pace with demand and quality, all airlines can be expected to be in poaching mode, raising the prospect of mass sick leave becoming a mass exodus.

A unique career

Manmohan Singh served the country in multiple ways

Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's long career in public service came into sharp focus with his retirement from the Rajya Sabha this week. Dr Singh has served the nation in multiple capacities: As an economist, a bureaucrat, a regulator, a legislator, a Cabinet minister, and Prime Minister. Few in independent India will have had as varied, as long, and as influential a career as his. As time passes, it is likely that his tenure as the Union finance minister who introduced liberalising reforms from 1991 onwards will be remarked upon more by historians than his decade in 7 Race Course Road (as it then was). Other economists or politicians could have served as finance minister for that period; and the broad parameters of the reforms that were immediately essential were also generally known and did not require Dr Singh's particular expertise. Nevertheless, the grave earnestness with which the finance minister stewarded and defended the initial phases of reforms did much to restore confidence in the future of India's economy and of its growth story.

The great weakness of Dr Singh's career is also visible in the reminder that it is the Rajya Sabha that he is retiring from. In India, where electoral democracy can and must always trump technocracy, the fact that he never managed to achieve "mass" appeal limited his political impact. This led to what many would decry as the fatal weakness of his 10 years as Prime Minister during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) governments from 2004 to 2014; the apparent division of power between the constitutional executive, led by Dr Singh, and the party and political organisation, which reported to then Congress president Sonia Gandhi. The fact that Ms Gandhi was the first choice of UPA parliamentarians for Prime Minister and she stepped aside and handpicked Dr Singh meant that he would always be in her political shadow. But it must also be said that neither member of this duumvirate aired her or his disagreements in public; when Ms Gandhi's son chose to take on some UPA legislation by physically tearing it on camera, it is in retrospect interesting to note that this was shocking because such conflict was so rare.

Dr Singh may not be given credit for much of what the UPA achieved in terms of poverty reduction, entitlement expansion, and infrastructure investment — especially given that multiple years of his tenure were consumed by crisis-fighting as policy and administration were paralysed by widespread discontent in the middle class and among the bureaucracy. However, the UPA's growth achievements were not inconsiderable, even if they built off the record of the governments before them. Likewise, the current government, which can point with pride to its reform of welfare and the growth of digital public infrastructure, owes much of its success to the policy decisions, such as Aadhaar, which were taken in Dr Singh's tenure. That government was far too weak in terms of its internal political appeal, relying on external approval for its action. But, on the other hand, there was little doubt that it had a respect for competence, technical knowhow, and expertise. Dr Singh's training as an economist was hardly his greatest resource as Prime Minister, but he worked in what now appears to be a different era.

The transformation of war

One has to give the US Army credit for trying to be better prepared for war in the future. The Indian Army would do well to follow that example



ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY

On October 27 each year the Indian Army celebrates Infantry Day, commemorating the bravura contributions of the foot soldiers, the army's largest fighting arm. On this day, in 1947, with Pakistani tribal invaders raping and pillaging their way into the Kashmir Valley, Indian infantry men from such storied battalions as 1st SIKH and 4th KUMAON were airlifted in old Dakota transport aircraft to Srinagar airport to block the advance of Pakistani tribal invaders, who had had reached the outskirts of the city and were poised to capture the airport. Armed with little more than raw courage, the handful of Indian troops blocked the Pakistanis on the outskirts of Srinagar and drove them back to what became the border, ensuring that the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) remained a part of India. To this day, many of the Indian border posts that guard the Line of Control (LoC) display plaques carved with the names of Indian infantrymen who gave up their lives while capturing those piquets.

While honouring the sacrifices of those Indian infantrymen, we must never forget that many of them died in vain, because the military of that time was poorly prepared for the wars it was required to wage. From the recapture of Srinagar, Baramula, Poonch, Naushera and others in 1947; to Jawsantgarh and Walong in 1962; Haji Pir Pass in 1965, to the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, India's combat units very often lost, with catastrophic consequences, the opening battles of the wars they fought. It is the job of planners in New Delhi to ensure that doesn't ever happen again.

Analysing contemporary warfare is made difficult by the fact that the conflict in Ukraine —

Europe's biggest conflict since 1945 — features a mix of old and new. The artillery duels, minefields, and trench warfare are straight out of World War I, and yet, Ukrainian artillery fire is being spotted by drones and adjusted on tablet computers, linked via satellite to the internet. Arriving at solutions requires figuring out what won't change, what is changing fundamentally, and how to apply those insights. The war has also shown the limitations of sheer mass in warfare: If it were merely a function

of deploying lots of troops and tanks, the Russians would have taken Kyiv long ago. Ukraine's success in holding them off, initially employing handheld weapons systems such as Javelin and Stinger missiles, highlights the profound changes underway. This involves a deep study of Ukraine, the Indo-Pacific, and the employment of technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning.

Many scholars of contemporary war are arguing that, although about 90 per cent of the weapons being employed by both sides — including aircraft, tanks, artillery and armoured personnel carriers — were developed and produced in the 20th century, it is the other 10 per cent that will have a transformational impact.

Prime among these is the unarmed aerial vehicle (UAV), being built in numbers by both sides for filming weddings and vacations. These can be adapted to conduct surveillance of enemy positions, or to carry grenades or crude explosives to drop on enemy soldiers. At a higher level of sophistication, Ukraine has received strike drones from the West — e.g., the Turkish Bayraktar TB2, the US Switchblade 300, and Phoenix Ghost, and Australia's ultracheap, Corvo



BROADSWORD

AJAI SHUKLA

Solar manufacturing challenge

The generous subsidies being offered by many countries for local manufacturing along the solar value chain may not quite lead to the expected outcome. In the US, for instance, incentives only partly offset higher production costs.

"Best-in-class modules from Southeast Asia will soon be irresistibly cheap for US developers. Only a handful of suppliers may end up making modules in the US as more factory plans are scrapped," said Pol Lezcano, BloombergNEF's lead US solar analyst.

Local manufacturing is being pushed through a combination of incentives for manufacturing and disincentives for imports. If the import price is low enough even after tariffs, neither lever works. The price equilibrium of a protected market also settles at a level higher than it would without protection — as is the case in the US.

For a nascent industry, a high initial cost can translate into a strategic competitive advantage in the long term as manufacturing volume picks up, as long as the product is not easily replicated. "That is unlikely to happen in the solar industry where the product is completely commoditised," said Lezcano.

Europe has also been nudging local panel manufacturing. Swiss solar panel maker Meyer Burger cited deteriorating business climate in Europe as a reason to shift its focus to setting up manufacturing plants in the US, after announcing the closure of a manufacturing unit in Germany. "The module production at our Freiberg (Saxony) site in Germany was discontinued in mid-March 2024, which shall lead to significant cost savings from April. The solar cell production in Thalheim, Germany, will continue to support production ramp-up of US solar module

manufacturing in Goodyear, Arizona, for the time being," it wrote in a statement last month.

India's decision to re-impose curbs on solar panel imports — after a series of policy turns in an attempt to promote made-in-India panels while also keeping solar power generation ultra-competitive — is positive for manufacturers but would mean higher prices for developers at a time when the global supply glut is pointing toward ever-lower prices.

The world's largest manufacturers are vertically integrated and have gargantuan capacities. China's JinkoSolar, for instance, shipped over 78 gigawatts in 2023. It expects this to increase to 100-110 gigawatts this year. That is more than the combined new-build forecast for the four largest markets after China — the US, India, Brazil and Germany. China could install more than 300 gigawatts this year.

The European Commission started a probe into a solar contract in Romania this week under its Foreign Subsidies Regulation — aimed at investigating the potentially market distortive role of foreign subsidies given to a bidder in a public procurement procedure.

"Solar panels have become strategically important for Europe: For our clean energy production, jobs in Europe, and security of supply," Thierry Breton, the EU's internal market commissioner, was quoted as saying by Bloomberg News. The investigations "aim to preserve Europe's economic security and competitiveness," he added.

Methane control

A few recent developments are set to ensure methane emissions are better monitored and controlled.



VANDANA GOMBAR

Precision Payload Delivery System. The Russians, meanwhile, have become reliant on Iranian-made Shahed self-detonating drones and their own Lancet drones and GPA-guided glide bombs.

Drones fly slowly, are annoyingly noisy, and their communications links can be easily jammed. They can be disabled with bullets, missiles, or electronic jamming devices. According to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), a British think tank, a quadcopter drone lasts an average of three flights in combat. The war is already seeing drone swarms and more are likely in the future, as China and the US mass-produce sophisticated autonomous systems. A Ukrainian official said: "There will be a new type of army. Like there is the air force and there are artillery forces, there will be drone forces. A different army within the army."

The US Army, which believes in being ready for new types of warfare, has set up a new command structure called the Army Futures Command (AFC). As so often, it was a former military person, Senator John McCain (Republican-Arizona), who inspired the AFC's creation in 2018. At that point, the army was reeling from the cancellation of expensive, high-profile weapons development programmes such as the project, which was meant to produce the next generation of armoured vehicles.

McCain was convinced that the enormity of the challenge posed by drones demanded that all the Army's modernisation functions be moved under one roof, with that organisation located far from any traditional military post. It is the job of the AFC and its 20,000 personnel to develop the technologies and concepts that will enable the Army to stay up to speed with developments in areas such as robotics, quantum computing, hypersonics, directed energy, and AI.

The AFC's goal is to prepare the Army for the battlefield of 2040 with projects such as the Robotic Platoon. This would involve integrating crewed and non-crewed vehicles into a single unit, so that the first contact with the enemy is never made with America's most precious weapons system, the infantryman. Instead, a human platoon would need to be made more lethal and survivable in a future fight where pervasive sensors (many of them mounted on drones) will make it nearly impossible to avoid detection.

The Pentagon does not expect to always get it right. It says: "The goal is not to get it really wrong. We want to get a 70 per cent solution, recognize what we got wrong and adapt faster than the opponent."

For all of AFC's brave talk of innovation, it remains part of one of the world's biggest bureaucracies — the US Department of Defense (the Pentagon). It can develop weapons, but it can't acquire them in bulk; that's the job of the Pentagon's lumbering acquisitions bureaucracy. So it remains to be seen how successful this five-year-old command will be in speeding up the US Army's innovation metabolism. But one has to give the US Army credit for at least trying to be better prepared for war in the future than it has been in the past. The Indian Army would do well to follow that example.

The energy sector — oil, natural gas and coal — is one of the main sources of global methane emissions attributable to human activity, the other being agriculture, according to the International Energy Agency. Two-thirds of the 120 million tonnes of estimated methane emissions from fossil fuels in 2023 came from 10 countries — the US, Russia, Iran, Turkmenistan, Venezuela, China, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Canada and Iraq — the IEA said.

The emitters seem to be keen to act on limiting the emissions of this gas, which could trap as much as 80 times the heat of carbon dioxide over 20 years. More than 50 oil and gas companies pledged to limit their methane emissions by the end of the decade at COP28 in Dubai by signing the Oil and Gas Decarbonization Charter.

It has become easier to locate and measure methane emissions, such as through the MethaneSAT satellite. The International Methane Emissions Observatory, which is part of the United Nations universe, has had many wins since its launch at the G20 meeting in 2021. The World Bank's Global Flaring and Methane Reduction Partnership is focused on developing countries. As many as 155 countries are now party to the Global Methane Pledge to reduce emissions, and this is being reflected in national policies. Companies like SLB, formerly Schlumberger, are seeing a lot more interest in their methane emission management solutions as a result.

There is need to be cautious, however. "The United Nations, its related bodies and satellites have supercharged the recent scrutiny from policymakers and investors. Whether this early interest will actually translate into lower methane emissions is far from certain," said Ilhan Savut, BNEF's head of upstream oil analysis.

The writer is a New York-based senior editor, global policy, for BloombergNEF; vgombarc@bloomberg.net

Reconciling 'development' dilemmas



BOOK REVIEW

V KUMARASWAMY

Don't be daunted by the size of this book; it's an easy read because the author views his subject through the eyes of the non-specialist rather than the rarefied world of economists. In fact, Karthik Muralidharan has made good use of his consultations and field experiments for various arms of the Centre and state governments. As a result, it has a dirt-under-the-fingernails quality that our Economic Surveys lack.

Accelerating India's Development is about enhancing development and growth by improving public service delivery. It reconciles the dilemmas of development vs democracy, equity vs efficiency, and numbers vs skills (in

public service staff) in a practical and implementable way. Divided into four sections, the book uniquely demonstrates that criticism need not be the primary language of analysis. The book rightly pierces open the smokescreen of "averages", the most convenient way of hiding the truth, missing opportunities and covering the rot.

Section 1 discusses the plight of politicians and bureaucrats caught in India's "democracy before development" approach. For politicians who lament that they know the best solutions but don't know how to get elected after implementing them, this book holds lots of ideas.

Section 2 is about improving public service delivery and capacity building. It includes compelling ideas on harnessing data, mobilising and motivating staff and raising revenues and allocation based on 70:20:10 proportional to equality, equity, and effectiveness.

The author rightly argues that India is excessively centralised, politically

and fiscally, a legacy of the fears of national disintegration uppermost in the minds of the drafters of the Constitution at Independence. Spending at the discretion of local governments where most services get delivered are 51 per cent in China, 27 per cent in the US and Brazil, and a distant 3 per cent in India. Now that those fears have proved misplaced, it may be time to rethink funding patterns. Many centrally sponsored schemes, the author points out, only lead to "adherence to process and abdication of accountability".

Section 3 discusses five key areas of public service delivery — education, health care, police and public safety, courts and justice, and social protection and welfare. By focusing on facts first, principles and implementable ideas next, and revealing many myths, this section is both convincing and thought provoking.

The pitfalls of our education have been brought out well, as epitomised by the quote of a former education

secretary that "except getting most of the children to school, everything that could go wrong has gone wrong with school education in India". The crisis extends to skills and makes India's hopes for a demographic dividend seem largely misplaced.

The chapter on health care, a sector where the laissez faire solution is intolerable is a revelation. Consider these facts: (i) 80 per cent of India's health care is provided by non-qualified practitioners; (ii) on field trials, for

testing adherence to a standard medical check list and prescription for tuberculosis, diarrhoea, dysentery, and pre-eclampsia, only 71 per cent of the MBBS doctors, 40 per cent of AYUSH doctors and, surprisingly, 44 per cent of unqualified doctors managed all cases



Accelerating India's Development: A State-led Roadmap for Effective Governance
Author: Karthik Muralidharan
Publisher: Penguin
Pages: 832
Price: ₹1,299

productivity and creating jobs — a forgotten goal — find resonance.

The author's idea about practicum training — "training while doing contractual engagement" — seems to hold promise across sectors.

An abridged version of the book

could enhance reach. Politicians are likely to consider suggestions for development schemes that are implementable in one or two years, with results visible in the next two years to give them bragging rights in the next elections. Many of the suggestions would fit this schedule.

The author's ideas about making a common goods and services (GST) rate or taxing factors with inelastic supply like land, need to be more carefully thought out. Even the euro zone has multiple GST rates and has its share of "invoice mills". Suggested reforms on voting may be efficient but suffer implementation difficulties.

If the worth of an economist is judged by "how dirty his shoes are", the book has made a strong case for the author being a potential chief economic advisor.

Overall, it is a must read for bureaucrats and policy analysts, recommended for politicians, and worthwhile for professionals and others with even a cursory interest in the politics and economics of Indian development.

The reviewer is the author of Making Growth Happen in India (Sage)



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

In Kashmir seats, friends turn foes

NC-PDP face-off in three seats in Kashmir will open up the political space, spice up conversation in the Union Territory

The three Lok Sabha seats in Kashmir Valley have put the INDIA bloc in a fix. With the National Conference (NC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) refusing to share the constituencies, the Opposition group will have to take a call on who to back in the Valley. The Congress, in particular, would need to figure out its preferences since both the NC and the PDP have said they would back its nominees in the two seats in Jammu; a common Opposition candidate is likely to be fielded for the Ladakh constituency.

The breakdown of NC-PDP ties is not unexpected: The two parties represent different political constituencies in the Valley and their legacies are very different. Both came together as part of the People's Alliance for the Gupkar Declaration in October 2020 as a response to the abrogation of Article 370. The glue that held the multi-party Gupkar alliance was Article 370, but, clearly, both parties have privileged their electoral goals over the bigger idea of Kashmiri sub-nationalism, embedded in the demand to restore Jammu and Kashmir's special status. That agenda itself lost traction after the Supreme Court of India endorsed the Centre's August 2019 decisions to abrogate Article 370 and divide the state into two Union territories. Divisions within the alliance came to the fore during the 2020 District Development Council elections after the NC was accused of fielding proxy candidates to undercut its rivals. The consensus built around Article 370 collapsed thereafter, with Sajjad Lone's Jammu and Kashmir People's Conference quitting the alliance. The NC and PDP may still stand with the INDIA bloc – both Farooq Abdullah (NC) and Mehbooba Mufti (PDP) spoke at the Opposition's Ramlila Maidan rally on March 31– but considering that they appeal to opposing political visions of Kashmir, their parting of ways was inevitable.

The fracturing of the Gupkar alliance in the Kashmir Valley may, in fact, open up the political space and spice up the conversation, now silent under the heavy hand of President's rule. The diversity of political agents will allow multiple voices to flourish and, perhaps, change the discourse for the better.

Israel's hit on Gaza aid workers is a new low

The killing of seven international aid workers delivering food to the starving people of Gaza marks yet another low point in Israel's bombardment of the enclave. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has offered a tentative apology of sorts, speaking of troops "unintentionally hitting" the aid workers, but evidence that has emerged suggests the convoy of the World Central Kitchen was systematically targeted multiple times, with Israeli forces striking as the aid workers sought to move between three vehicles that were hit one after the other. While there can be no justification whatsoever for Hamas' terror attacks that triggered this conflict, Israel's heavy-handed response is only whittling away support for it across the world. It is also difficult to fathom the goals of the war being fought by the Benjamin Netanyahu government unless it is meant to strengthen Israel's grip on all the territories it currently holds and to remove the possibility of a two-State solution.

The governments of the US and the UK, which have lost citizens in this incident, are facing increased pressure from the public to press Israel for a course correction. There is also a growing clamour for them to stop arming Israel in view of the human rights excesses that have been recorded in the Gaza Strip. The daily toll of deaths will only serve to strengthen extremist elements in the Arab States, which have walked the extra mile in efforts to normalise relations with Israel. Irrespective of all this, Israel has prolonged this war for far too long, and its actions – the strike on the Iranian diplomatic compound in Syria, for instance – carry the frightening prospect of dragging the entire neighbourhood into the conflict. The time has come for Israel to heed global calls to stop the bombardment of Gaza and allow humanitarian aid for the Palestinian people.

{ BEYOND THE BYTE }

Rajdeep Sardesai



Limits of Opposition's 'save democracy' plank

2024 is not 1977: 'Democracy in danger' slogan is unlikely to help INDIA bloc challenge the dominance of the BJP

BJP versus Democracy – a huge banner at the Opposition "Save Democracy" rally at Ramlila Maidan in Delhi was aiming to set the 2024 election agenda. The last time an Opposition gathering focused on a similar narrative was during the historic 1977 election when Indira Gandhi was defeated by a combined force. But a reality check would suggest that 2024 is not 1977 and Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi is not quite Mrs Gandhi.

First, a 21-month-old Emergency in which hundreds of politicians and political activists were jailed cannot be compared to the arrests of two Opposition chief ministers (CMs). While the 'weaponisation' of agencies and their unbridled use against Opposition leaders is a grim reminder of abuse of power and the absence of a level playing field, to suggest that we are entering an "Opposition-mukt Bharat" phase is excessively alarmist at this stage. Just witness the intense seat-by-seat competition in a state like Maharashtra.

Secondly, the Opposition leadership in 1977 was far more seasoned and respected than the disjointed

INDIA bloc, which has struggled to project a united front. The Janata Party was forged overnight by disparate forces such as the Jan Sangh and Socialists, held together by the glue of fierce anti-Congressism. The moral compass was provided by a freedom movement stalwart like JP Narayan. Can any of those gathered at Ramlila Maidan invoke a JP-like sense of principled leadership? While anti-Modism binds the Opposition at the top, the on-ground contradictions have scarcely melted away: the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) versus Congress in Punjab, Trinamool Congress versus the Left-Congress combine in Bengal, even the Left and Congress in Kerala remain at loggerheads.

Thirdly, the Opposition doesn't come into the "democracy in danger" debate with clean hands. Charges of autocratic behaviour have been made against several Opposition CMs in the last decade. Dissenting voices in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Maharashtra (when it was under Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi rule) have also faced punitive action. If the Enforcement Directorate has been a sword arm of the Centre, so has the local police in state capitals.

Fourthly, there is a growing disconnect between the need to preserve democratic values and the citizenry's preoccupations. In 1977, there was perceptible public anger against the stifling of democratic freedoms which manifested itself, principally in North India where the Indira government's

forcible sterilisation drive led to excesses that affected the masses. Recall how South India, where Emergency measures did not directly impact the electorate, stood firmly in the Congress's embrace in 1977.

Moreover, the urban middle class – once a torchbearer of democratic ideals – is a very different socio-economic category now than in the 1970s. In a fast-growing, tech-driven economy, an aspirational, "me-first" generation is increasingly disengaged from political activism unless personal interests are directly at stake. For example, youth angered by repeated paper leaks have hit the street as did farmers during the farm law agitation. But for vast multitudes, clickbait activism where a Dhruv Rathee viral video might be excitedly shared is the limit of public participation in any "battle" to protect constitutional freedoms. In the 1970s – a period of combative trade unionism, committed civil liberty groups and idealistic politics – fighting for democratic spaces mattered. Now, it rarely goes beyond handwringing and platitudinous WhatsApp messages.

Ironically, the last time urban middle-class anger appeared to shake the political class was when Arvind Kejriwal and his cohorts launched the anti-corruption movement in 2011. Billed as a crusade to cleanse politics, it was a well-calculated protest against the entire political class. *Sab neta chor hai* became a rallying cry for anti-establishment sentiment. Now,



The Opposition leadership in 1977 was far more seasoned than the disjointed INDIA bloc, which has struggled to project a united front
HT PHOTO

the wheel has come full circle. From being the face of an "anti-corruption" *andolan*, Kejriwal seeks to erase the alleged Delhi liquor scam taint in the company of those he once vociferously accused of corruption. How can such a political arrangement primarily aimed at self-preservation be credible, or even sustainable?

Paradoxically, the biggest beneficiary of the extreme anti-politician mood created by Kejriwal's India Against Corruption movement is PM Modi, who rose to power on the debris of an embattled Manmohan Singh government. Without being attached to any code of political correctness, Modi has artfully borrowed from Mrs Gandhi's playbook in his attempt to remove all institutional checks and balances to fulfil his over-arching desire for complete domination of the polity.

As an unabashed populist strongman, Modi is arguably politically sharper and more ruthless than even the late Congress PM. Mrs Gandhi's anxieties, fuelled by the vaulting ambitions of her son Sanjay Gandhi, pushed her into declaring the Emergency. Modi, on the other hand, claims to work within the framework of constitutional democracy while systematically pushing it towards an electoral autocracy and religious majoritarianism. Why invoke an

Emergency provision when existing laws are enough to intimidate the Opposition? Or when a mostly pliant media has fallen in line? For example, bail provision amendments to the Prevention of Money Laundering Act were pushed through Parliament as a money bill and then inexplicably ratified by a Supreme Court bench headed by a judge on the verge of retirement, who is now the Lokpal. This is a classic example of a draconian law being used to settle political scores under the guise of "anti-corruption" populist fervour. In the process, the bail-not-jail credo has been overturned and vendetta politics normalised. Which is another reason why it may take much more than just a "Save Democracy" Opposition rally to challenge a domineering politician backed by the most formidable election machine in post-Independence India.

Post-script: A Pew survey in February this year found that 67% of Indians thought that "a system in which a strong leader can make decisions without interference from Parliament or courts would be a good way of governing the country". That figure is up from 55% in 2017. Whither democracy?

Rajdeep Sardesai is a senior journalist and author. The views expressed are personal

Still a long way from rupee globalisation

At the Reserve Bank of India (RBI)'s 90th anniversary celebrations, the Prime Minister pushed for the rupee to be "more accessible and acceptable all over the world." Through the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), Indians can already access rupees in their banks in India to make payments in a few foreign countries so far, which is a good beginning. However, acceptability is a much taller order.

There are very few currencies that are accepted for payments all over the world. The dollar is king and is accepted everywhere; the euro is next best (although I bet nobody in, say, Montana in the United States would accept euros for payments); the yen is a distant third; the Aussie dollar, the Singapore dollar, the Hong Kong dollar, and a few currencies in Europe (which haven't joined the euro) would be flailing fourths. China has been pushing its yuan to make payments in several countries (notably including Saudi Arabia for oil), but its general acceptability is far, far behind the dollar, the euro or the yen.

An important point to note is that, other than the US, all these countries have a trade surplus, i.e., other countries buy more from, say, Japan than Japan buys from other countries. This means there is a natural requirement for the Japanese yen in countries (including India) which run a deficit with Japan (or any of the other surplus nations).

The US is, of course, an exception. It runs a huge trade deficit, so there is no natural need for most countries to need dollars to pay for their purchases. However, the US dollar is the hegemon when it comes to investments. The US markets (equities, interest rates, derivatives) are humongous compared to any other, so anyone who has surpluses to invest – whether countries, companies or individuals – cannot avoid the US markets, which means there is a different kind of natural need for dollars for investment.

There have been efforts, increasingly of late (particularly following the US sanctions against Russia after the Ukraine invasion closed Russia's access to SWIFT, the largest currency clearing and settlement system), to

try to reduce the dollar's hegemony in international trade and investment. But it has been – and will continue to be – slow going, at least for the next decade or two.

Thus, for the rupee to become more acceptable internationally, the first change we have to make is to change our trade in goods from deficit to surplus. This is an extremely tall order. Currently, our exports are just 65% (or so) of our imports. Import growth has averaged about 15% year-on-year (y-o-y) over the past decade or more. Given that domestic Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth is expected to continue reasonably strong, imports will certainly grow by at least that much going forward.

This means that we will need to grow our exports even faster. But, if exports grow at a huge 20% y-o-y, it would still take 10 years for



Jamal Mecklai

our trade to go into a surplus. Given that average export growth over the past 10 years was only 5% y-o-y (from about \$25 billion a month in 2013 to \$40 billion a month today), this looks near impossible, particularly given our continued poor governance which creates multitudinous hurdles – ranging from still painful bureaucracy to a poorly educated workforce – to export growth.

Separately, export growth is also a key requirement for the rupee to get included in the Special Drawing Rights (SDR), which is an artificial currency instrument managed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF uses this for internal accounting purposes and to provide liquidity to world central banks at a time of crisis; the Chinese yuan has been included in the SDRs since 2016.

Being part of the SDRs would require countries to have a need for rupees for their reserves, enhancing its acceptability, albeit on an institutional basis. And Interdepartmental Group (IDG) at RBI released a paper on the internationalisation of the rupee last year, where it said that "our currency should be (i) widely used to make payments for international transactions, and (ii) is widely traded in the principal exchange markets. It will clearly take some time for us to get to this level of internationalisation". The IDG believes this could take over five years.

And, finally, for the rupee to become more widely accepted globally, the Indian forex market will need to be considerably deeper, more liquid, and certainly more volatile (i.e., less controlled) than it has recently been. Again, regulations will need to be loosened to the point where anyone in India can buy or sell foreign currency derivatives without having an underlying exposure. And, equally pertinent, the rules should not be changed back and forth (as we are seeing right now).

While RBI will be the primary driver of many of the changes needed, there will, of course, be many areas (taxation, for instance) where the government will have to have its say, which could also slow things down.

On the whole, we should, of course, celebrate India's increasing global importance; for the rupee, however, it's a much longer road to internationalisation.

Jamal Mecklai is CEO, Mecklai Financial. The views expressed are personal



Through the Unified Payments Interface, Indians can already access rupees in their banks in India to make payments in a few foreign countries so far
AFP

{ JENS STOLTENBERG } NATO SECRETARY-GENERAL

 I don't believe in America alone... I believe in America and Europe together in NATO because we are stronger and safer together

 As NATO turned 75 on Thursday



Quad needs a security thrust to restrict China

As China accelerates its bid for hegemonic control over Asia, the Philippines – vastly outnumbered and out-gunned in economic and military might by its giant northern neighbour – is desperately attempting to put up a spirited defence of its sovereignty, territorial integrity and national honour in what it terms as the West Philippine Sea and China calls and claims in entirety as the South China Sea.

This David-Goliath fight is not a routine bilateral dispute. The regional order in the Indo-Pacific and, by extension, the world order itself are at stake. The increasing tempo of harassment and browbeating of inferior Filipino boats and ships by the Chinese Coast Guard and Navy in locations like the Second Thomas Shoal of the Spratly Islands are meant to provoke and instil fear in smaller Asian countries.

It is a contemporary manifestation of the Greek historian Thucydides's Melian Dialogue, where the overwhelmingly powerful Athens issues an ultimatum to tiny Melos to surrender with the dictat – "while the strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must." Asian countries which do not accept China's maximal 'ten dash line' claims face a stark choice like Melos did – concede to China or fight for existence with no guarantee of external help. Open threats by Chinese Communist Party propagandists that the Chinese Navy can leave Filipino ships "riddled with bullets" and "retaliate without mercy or even sink" them, and taunts that the US "may not dare provoke a military conflict with China" to defend its ally, the Philippines, indicate unambiguously that Beijing operates on the logic of might is right.

During an earlier round of tensions in 2012, China forcibly occupied the Scarborough Shoal, which falls inside the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone and never relinquished it thereafter. Since 2013, China has illegally built artificial islands over 3,200 acres throughout the South China Sea and militarised these acquisitions with weaponry to establish a *fait accompli* of conquest. For governments in the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam and Taiwan, no matter whether they adopt a conciliatory or softer approach to China or put up a tougher posture, the reality is China has been unyielding in its hunger for land and maritime resources. Beijing wants to resurrect its ancient construct of Tianxia – a hierarchical world order in which China is at the pinnacle and smaller neighbours have to kowtow before it.

Under President Xi Jinping, China believes



Sreeram Chaulia

that treating neighbours with moderation amounts to showing weakness. So far, neither direct diplomatic dialogue and negotiation with China nor appeals to international law has protected the rights of disputant countries in the South China Sea. In 2016, the Philippines won a case in an international tribunal of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, which ruled that China's claims were illegal. This did not deter Chinese expansionism or give Beijing even a minor pause in its rapacious conduct.

Given China's Communist ideology – which believes in the superiority of material forces – and its self-glorifying nationalism that seeks to impose its will over Asia, the only practical way to block a Sino-centric regional order is through counter-mobilisation of sufficient military might. Washington's partnerships in the Indo-Pacific do keep some checks on Beijing, but the latter has pushed and poked its way to attaining a predominant position in the region. Indeed, the Quad grouping of the US, Australia, Japan, and India has made bold strides. The AUKUS alliance of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US, is taking shape. But these formations have not yet produced any direct benefit for the Philippines, Vietnam or Taiwan against a marauding China.

The Quad countries' official stance that they are not a military alliance and are not aiming for containment of China has not helped the cause of smaller Asian nations. There is a two-way loop of hesitation at play. Small Asian countries are unsure of how credible the US or Quad could be in getting down to real action in the maritime domain. Quad countries also want to maintain ambiguity to avoid getting dragged into a war with China.

Unless this mutually reinforcing loop of hesitation is overcome, China cannot be halted in its tracks. Xi is a practitioner of Mao Zedong's maxim that "power grows out of the barrel of a gun". Quad, AUKUS and bilateral strategic partnerships in Asia must have a strong security component. India's sale of BrahMos anti-air missiles to the Philippines and its unequivocal "firm support" for the national sovereignty of the Philippines are steps in the right direction. 'Securitisation' of regional partnerships is the only hope. Otherwise, China will keep seizing territory and squeezing adversaries until the world order is remade as per its wishes.

Sreeram Chaulia is the author of the forthcoming book, 'Friends: India's Closest Strategic Partners'. The views expressed are personal

OUR VIEW



The weird tax club has a new entry from Toronto

The Canadian city's 'rain tax' is just one of many peculiar ideas the world has seen. While advocates of odd taxes always present justifications, the impact they have is another story

Taxes and death are two of life's great certainties, we have always been told. The record of both, however, suggests they could also be great oddities, the kind that make jaws drop in wonder. Take taxation, the less morbid of these two. The global club of weird proposals was recently joined by Toronto's plan of a 'stormwater charge.' The idea is to scan all private property (say, with drone-cams), calculate every plot's ratio of hard surface versus soft permeable land, and then impose a punitive levy on excessive hardness. As its name suggests, the motive of this tax—to be bundled in with people's water bills—is to nudge land usage in favour of permeability and thus drainage, making the city less vulnerable to floods. As a solution to an evident problem of impervious concrete in urban zones, it sounds attractive. It even resonates in India, where havoc has been played with natural eco-systems by eco-unfriendly structures popping up. Think of Kerala's 2018 deluge, for example. But the fiscal devil is usually in the details. Since land-use patterns usually respond only slowly to tax incentives, it could be years before any difference is made, especially if Canada's urban living-space crunch worsens. In the meantime, Toronto's rain tax could face stiff resistance from those stuck with concrete and feel unfairly soaked, financially. No wonder reports suggest the plan may fail to go through. A glance at other inventive taxes would show that a 'rain tax' is not the oddest levy policy-makers have come up with. Whether aimed at filling state coffers or altering what people do, weird taxes have caught taxpayers by surprise for centuries. In 18th century Czarist Russia, for example, a tax was imposed on beards. This

was Czar Peter's attempt at making Russians look well turned out—impressed, as records say he was, by clean-shaven men in West Europe. Perhaps it was non-divine retribution that Lenin, Marx and others who played live and dead roles in the Czarist order's overthrow were hirsute revolutionaries. Over in Britain, the state found a way to extort money from the wealthy by levying a window tax. The more windows a house or manor had, the more it was taxed. As this was back in the 18th century, well before Microsoft set off a digital proliferation of these, windows were easy to count. Ease of liability assessment was the driver there. It was progressive too, unlike London's tea tax that brewed an American revolt in Boston. "No taxation without representation" has been a rallying cry ever since. And Americans still prefer coffee, by and large. A quarter of a millennium later, weird fiscal ideas continue to roil politics and rouse debates. In Switzerland and Germany, for instance, there's a dog tax that varies by the canine's weight and breed and whose mop-up is meant to fund public provisions for these pets. Bull Terriers and Great Danes make their masters fork out hundreds of euros for the privilege of straining their hands at a leash. In Sweden, believe it or not, tax authorities have the right to tax folks for giving babies names they disapprove of. If the name is deemed confusing, offensive or difficult to pronounce, families must pay up. Some years ago, as reported, an unhappy Swedish family—never mind surveys, they exist—sought tax relief for naming their daughter Metallica. All this makes Indian taxation sound reasonable. But let's not make too big a deal of it. Who knows what might be brewing in policy circles?

THEIR VIEW

Startup 2.0 is about bottom-of-the-pyramid ventures

ARVIND GUPTA & AAKASH GUGLANI



are, respectively, an adjunct professor of data and digital economy and head, Digital India Foundation; and policy manager, Digital India Foundation.

India's socioeconomic pyramid features several strata with diverse characteristics, with the majority residing at the base—the rural and semi-urban populace. In the vast expanse of our economic landscape also lies a pyramid of opportunities, with layers that range from affluent urban centres to the grassroots of rural India. Traditionally, startups have been synonymous with urban innovation hubs, targeting upper-end consumer segments. However, the Startup Mahakumbh convened recently showed an evolution of the young entrepreneur's view of the Indian market opportunity. A key highlight was its emphasis on inclusivity, with a focus on fostering startups that cater to the unique needs of our nation. Amid the glitz of urban innovation, the event shone a spotlight on startups addressing micro-level problems in rural and semi-urban areas. This inclusive approach not only broadens the scope of entrepreneurship, but also underscores the importance of creating solutions that resonate with the diverse fab-

ric of Indian society. In this Startup 2.0 phase, enhanced access to the digital economy—propelled by affordable internet usage and universal bank accounts, coupled with the convenience of payments via UPI—has incentivized startups to tackle complex issues, notably in agriculture and healthcare, catalysing innovation and inclusive growth. This should give Indian policymakers confidence in the participation of startups in critical frontier domains such as semiconductor manufacturing, drones, space applications and military technologies. At the forefront of this transformation are four pillars. First, the technical architecture supporting artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) integration. Second, newer avenues for capital. Third, greater confidence and participation in the manufacturing of critical hardware to compete in global markets. Fourth, access to diverse data-sets for training AI models. The government's commitment to allocate ₹10,000 crore towards the AI mission highlights the importance of leveraging cutting-edge technologies to drive inclusive growth. By providing support for AI research, the government is paving the way for startups to harness the power of AI to tackle complex challenges across sectors.

The initiative to open India's mutual fund industry to small-ticket investments marks a significant milestone in financial inclusion and saving. By enabling individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to participate in wealth creation, the initiative has the potential to unlock a wave of entrepreneurial capital to empower startups. The focus on fostering an ecosystem of semiconductor research holds immense promise for startups operating in critical deep-tech areas. By investing in semiconductor research and development, India can position itself as a global leader in cutting-edge technologies, providing startups with a competitive edge to build products that serve the interests of our rural communities. This would also help serve the needs of the Global South. Moreover, the majority of AI models around the world are trained to cater to the needs of the top of the income pyramid, and in English. Indian startups have a

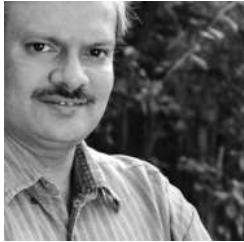
special advantage with access to diverse linguistic data-sets to train AI models, which can make AI offerings accessible and relevant to bottom-of-the-pyramid customers. Acting in conjunction, these pillars are creating fertile ground for startups to thrive, particularly in deep tech, micro-finance, credit aggregation and direct-to-consumer businesses. They are leveraging advanced technologies such as AI, blockchain and quantum computing to address complex problems in fields ranging from healthcare and agriculture to cybersecurity and environmental sustainability. Micro-finance startups are using digital platforms and data analytics to extend financial services to underserved communities. Similarly, credit aggregation startups are leveraging alternative data sources and ML algorithms to assess creditworthiness and provide affordable credit to individuals and small businesses. The rise of direct-to-consumer startups is

reshaping India's consumption landscape by bypassing traditional distribution channels and establishing direct relationships with customers. By leveraging digital marketing, e-commerce platforms and new branding opportunities, they are redefining the way products are marketed, while serving the evolving preferences of consumers. New investments in digital public infrastructure, such as the Open Network for Digital Commerce, Open Credit Enablement Network, Bhashini and the Account Aggregator network, will accelerate the growth of Startups 2.0. These platforms facilitate seamless data sharing, interoperability and innovation, enabling them to scale exponentially and reach new markets. Startup 2.0 represents a paradigm shift in India's entrepreneurial landscape driven by technology, policy support and inclusive growth. By addressing micro-level problems, Indian startups will not only drive economic prosperity, but also foster social empowerment and environmental sustainability. With the government's support and the collective efforts of entrepreneurs, investors and ecosystem enablers, India is poised to emerge as a global powerhouse of innovation and entrepreneurship for those at the bottom of the pyramid.

MY VIEW | FARM TRUTHS

Data on what Indians earn does have plenty to reveal of poverty

Multitudes of workers earning less than minimum-wage levels points to significant deprivation



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Even though the fact-sheet on the Consumption Expenditure Survey (CES) has been officially released, the debate on poverty is far from over. Given that the new CES is based on a completely new survey design, the only way to resolve this issue is to have an expert committee decide on the appropriate poverty line to be used with these CES readings. Until that happens, the debate on poverty is likely to continue. But that does not mean that we can't get an idea of the level of poverty. The best alternative is to examine the level of wages or earnings of the poorest group of wage workers. This is not a new idea. In fact, the initial poverty lines were anchored to the minimum wages of casual unskilled manual labourers, since they inhabit the poorest category of households. Further, the methodology of setting minimum wages is linked to a minimum requirement of food and some forms of non-food expenditure. Minimum wages for unskilled workers in areas with lowest urbanization or rural areas for 2023 was ₹424 per day, as per a government notification. For 2024, it is ₹449 per day. This is lower than the price-adjusted minimum wages of ₹483 in 2022-23, as per the suggestion of the labour ministry expert committee. The updated Rangarajan poverty line for 2022-23 at ₹1,837/₹2,603 per month per person for rural/urban areas, respectively, implies a fam-

ily poverty line of ₹9,185/₹13,015, assuming a five-member family. Based on the actual number of days worked in a month from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), a wage worker with a family to support would need minimum earnings of ₹390/552 per day in rural/urban areas to cross the poverty line. For all of India, it would imply a poverty line of ₹445 per day, slightly higher than the government notified minimum wages. What is the actual level of wages received by casual wage workers? According to labour bureau data, the average wage in agricultural occupations in January 2023 was ₹362 per day. It was higher in non-farm occupations, at ₹412, still lower than minimum wages. Another data source are wages and earnings reported by the PLFS, for which the 2022-23 report is available. According to PLFS readings, casual workers in rural areas received wages of ₹383 in the January-March 2023 quarter. This was only ₹310 per day in case of agricultural workers, lower than the estimate reported by the labour bureau and almost two-thirds of the specified minimum wages. On average, a casual wage worker is earning less than both the minimum wages and Rangarajan poverty line in 2022-23. We also have estimates from

the India Employment Report (IER) 2024. As per the report, brought out by the International Labour Organization and Institute for Human Development, 52% of all casual workers did not receive the minimum wages. 76% of workers in agriculture and 70% in construction got wages lower than minimum wages. It is not just casual wage workers who received wages less than the notified minimum, but also regular workers. The proportion of regular workers whose daily earnings were less than minimum wages was 41%. Together, regular and casual wage workers account for almost half of all workers in 2022-23. And almost 45% of them were earning less than minimum wages. The proportion of workers who earned less than the monthly sum needed to cross the Rangarajan poverty line was a fifth. The IER also confirms the trend of a steady decline since 2011-12 in real wages of regular workers. While casual wage worker wages based on PLFS increased between 2011-12 and 2022-23, the wage growth rate was half the pace observed between 2004-05 and 2011-12. However, for casual wages, labour bureau data suggests a decline in real non-farm wages, with agricultural wages increasing at less than 1% per year in the last decade.

While these are not precise estimates, the wage and earnings data we have is comprehensive enough to suggest a significant proportion of Indians still live in poverty. A similar calculation for 2011-12 suggests that while poverty may have declined since then, it is only slightly lower. The issue is not just of estimation of poverty, but a larger one of declining employment quality in India and meagre earnings for the majority of workers, including better-paid regular workers. The claim of India having eliminated extreme poverty may work as political rhetoric, but it may be at the cost of ignoring the stark reality of poorly paid workers and worsening employment quality.

QUICK READ

While a poverty line needs to be determined for use with fresh data on consumption spending, we have income readings that offer some clarity on the level of deprivation within the country. The issue isn't just of a poverty ratio but of employment quality and meagre earnings. While the claim of extreme poverty being over may feed political rhetoric, it ignores India's stark reality.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

There is no worse tyranny than to force a man to pay for what he does not want merely because you think it would be good for him.

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

THE IDEAS PAGE

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A fortnightly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate



C R Sasikumar

Ahead of this election, the BJP has given a slogan of '400 paar'.
There is more than one way of looking at it

400 paar will end fractured politics

The target isn't about hegemony.
It is to show old faultlines have been transcended



RAKESH SINHA

THE BHARATIYA JANATA Party (BJP), under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has set itself the task of securing 400-plus seats. For party workers, this achievement would reflect an expanded social base and the endorsement of an ideology that was excluded by "mainstream" politics for decades. However, a section of intellectuals decry this rallying cry as an "undemocratic move" meant to marginalise the Opposition.

Democracy is about more than numerical strength. It is an engagement with both issues and the people. It is the precondition for public morality and well-being. The effectiveness of any "number" that a political party or formation enjoys can be gauged by its impact on the collective consciousness of the people. The numerical strength of a political party is delegitimised if it fails in this regard.

PM Modi's undiminished efforts to involve the public in governance and political work and his constant dialogue with the people have placed him in a unique position on the political spectrum. Never before have the masses interacted with the highest political office in a democracy so frequently and with such intensity. The slogan of "400 paar" is meant to test this outreach. It also indicates the end of an era of fractured Indian politics where the post-election composition of the legislature and governments reflected those divides.

Masquerading as champions of secular democracy or social justice, political forces encouraged the segmentation of Indian society. Their leaders enjoyed the fruits of unhindered political feudalism. Their claims to modernity failed, given how their politics operated on the social and cultural planes. This form of modernity creates a psychological condition that pushes even enlightened people to think in terms of narrow identities.

PM Modi inaugurated a discourse that made the socio-economic interpretation of society a *sine qua non* for politics. This was once the monopoly of socialists and communists. His focus on the youth, women, farmers and the poor — what he called the four "new castes" — enlivens Indian modernity. It has the potential to liberate society from the baggage of narrow identities. The era of Congress rule was one of lost opportunities.

In the first general election, Congress under Jawaharlal Nehru secured 364 seats out of 489 — a nearly 2/3rds majority. In the 1962 election, the number marginally declined, but remained more than 70 per cent of the Lok Sabha. However, the colonial pattern continued. In that scenario, despite their diminished strength, the Opposition — including socialists, communists, Swatantra Party and the Bharatiya Jana

Sangh — had an impact both inside and outside the House.

They were not dwarfed merely because of their numbers in the House. Their commitment to pro-people values and their confrontation with the ruling party was intact. They even influenced the inner dynamics of the ruling party. Leaders like Piloo Mody, Minoo Masani, J B Kripalani, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Bhupesh Gupta and P Sundarayya were stalwarts not by virtue of the strength their parties commanded in Parliament, but for their idealism and wisdom. Jana Sangh leader Deendayal Upadhyaya, who was never a parliamentarian, wrote The Two Plans, in which he critiqued European models of economic development and pointed out the reasons for the failure of the first and second Five-Year Plans. He used empirical tools to caution the policymakers and his work drew the attention of leaders from across the political spectrum.

Under Modi, elitism is no longer the basis of the Indian state. Earlier, elections were the only mode for democratic outreach. State programmes and policies have today become visible tools for engagement.

Modi's tenure has been about goals and the passion to achieve them. People want similar rigour and passion in their MPs. Another of the PM's contributions is making party workers the bridge between state-sponsored programmes and beneficiaries. It has enhanced the role and accountability of MPs. Unlike ministers and bureaucrats,

Under Modi, elitism is no longer the basis of the Indian state. State programmes and policies have today become visible tools for engagement. The Opposition lacks both the vision and capacity for action to match the BJP under Modi.

MPs do not have any executive power. Their power emanates from parliamentary privileges granted to them. An MP's popularity and capacity to impact policies depends on how much she/he uses the privilege of the office to represent those deprived and marginalised and links local needs with universal ideas.

India lacks think tanks and organisations that constantly monitor MPs. Anti-incumbency indices for every MP can help keep democracy vibrant. The academia too has failed in this respect — journalistic contributions have been far greater.

Democracy is a competition to win over the people. There are four tools open to a political party to maximise its support base: Cultural philosophy, economic programmes and policies, the hard work of party cadres and the collective moral appeal of the party. A lack in any of them stymies its growth. For instance, the decline of the Indian Left is not due to a radical change in the material conditions of society but due to their failure to address the realities. They spent more time in seminar rooms than with farmers and workers. Similarly, the Congress used its hegemony to hide its shrinking political morality. Shankarrao Deo, once Congress president, expressed the pain of millions of party workers in his three lectures on the decline of the Congress in 1949. Both Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi used their unprecedented mandate to poor effect. In a very short span, their base eroded.

Modi's mission "400 paar" is intended for Amrit Kaal, not hegemony. The Opposition lacks both the vision and capacity for action to match the BJP under Modi.

The writer is BJP MP, Rajya Sabha

Absolute conquest, absolutely

The '400-plus' ambition seems less a statement of the party's aspiration, more the assertion of a government's power



VANDITA MISHRA

IN 2019, THE Narendra Modi-led BJP set itself a goal of 300-plus seats — "Ab ki baar, 300 paar". Five years later, it has ramped up the target. "Ab ki baar 400 paar", it says, as it exhorts workers to ensure at least 370 more votes at every booth, amid talk of crossing the 50 per cent vote share mark. Here's looking at a party that has ambition and says it too.

What could possibly be unsettling about that?

Look again, and 400 is not just a number. It is 400 pieces of a diverse people's multi-coloured mandate. In a country of cross-cutting cleavages and a million moving parts, and seen alongside the BJP's other proclaimed ambition of "Ram Rajya for the next 1000 years", "400-paar" begins to take on the ring of abiding conquest and a permanent majority — not representation that is accountable and moveable, always tenuous and constantly on test.

Listen to the voices from the ground during an Indian election and even among voters who support Hindu dominance as an idea whose time has come, you might hear the argument that the winner should not take all, and not for long anyway. "If this government, or any government, does not do... we will bring in another one five years later", they say, even in the poorest neighbourhoods of UP, MP and Bihar. You hear those who otherwise feel hard-done-by asserting the power of their vote to bring about an alternation of the powerful. They give their vote, others say, to one party in the state and to a different one at the Centre. Because in a "lok tantra (democracy)", no one person or party should be given all the power. Because that could become a licence for "manmaani (unaccountability)" and arrogance, "ahankaar".

The Rajiv Gandhi government had 414 seats. There is a lesson from the life and times of that government that stumbled in many crises — largeness of mandate is no guarantee of better governance, or even greater efficiency.

Underlying voices such as these are an unself-conscious confidence in the existence of preconditions for free expression and change — mutually agreed upon norms and shared rules of the game, countervailing institutions that ensure a level playing field, independent and empowered referees. And no obstacles in legitimate political mobilisation by the Opposition.

Look around you today, however, and a question mark looms large: Is "400-paar" a statement of a party's aspiration or has it become an assertion of its government's power?

Is it the pursuit by the BJP government, with all the resources and agencies at its command, watchdog institutions on mute, of a BJP fantasy of "Opposition-mukt Bharat"? Or a rearrangement of the arena to its advantage, by hobbling national rivals, Congress and an AAP that was spreading its wings, so that it is BJP versus much smaller and narrower regional parties?

Two chief ministers have been arrested on the eve of elections, the second one, Arvind Kejriwal, after the model code of conduct came into force. Congress has been served with income tax notices of thousands of crores, some dating back to demands from 1994-95, as campaigning kicks off in 2024. In the name of fighting corruption, ED-CBI action, under stringent

laws that set a high threshold for bail, selectively and disproportionately targets non-BJP politicians and parties.

This, even as other corruption questions are raised by the electoral bonds data recently made public — concerning the proximity of the purchase of bonds with ED-CBI action, or with the award of business contracts by the government. Meanwhile, a lengthening line of politicians from other parties, corruption cases against them, find themselves magically relieved of pursuit by central agencies on joining the BJP.

The BJP is an all-conquering force in the states too. In Himachal Pradesh, Congress's cross-voting MLAs, who enabled the BJP to help itself to the lone Rajya Sabha seat, have joined it. In Punjab, the old Congress is said to be the new BJP. In Maharashtra, the BJP played a key role in splitting rival parties and then allied with the splinters and shards. In MP, and in several other states, to screen the inflow of Congress workers ahead of the election, it has set up "joining committees". The BJP has already achieved its "Congress-mukt" ambition in the Northeast with an array of Congressmen-turned-BJP chief ministers — Pema Khandu, Himanta Biswa Sarma, Manik Saha, N Biren Singh.

It isn't, though, that should the BJP's slogan come true, a 400-paar government will be unprecedented. Formed after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, the Rajiv Gandhi government had 414.

There is a lesson from the life and times of that government that stumbled in many crises, from Punjab to the Shah Bano case, from Sri Lanka to Bofors — largeness of mandate is no guarantee of better governance, or even greater efficiency.

There is also a sobering contrast: Opposition activity did not come to a standstill even with the Centre ruled by a party with a commanding majority. In fact, it started within the Congress, and spread quickly.

The VP Singh rebellion became the nucleus of the opposition within — Arif Mohammad Khan, Arun Nehru, Ram Dhan, Satya Pal Malik — and later the National Front government, supported by the BJP and Left, which displaced the Congress from power.

The late 1980s and early 1990s also saw a striking rise in regional forces. NTR's Telugu Desam, for instance — though the incident of alleged humiliation by Rajiv Gandhi of an Andhra CM at an airport, said to be the trigger, took place before Rajiv became PM, NTR made it the centrepiece of a "Telugu atma gauravam (Telugu pride)" campaign subsequently.

Compare the '80s with the state of the Opposition today, and the difference is stark. Today, the BJP's political opponents face its aggression at a time when they have been steadily losing their own mojo.

The weak AAP protests in the days after Kejriwal's arrest speak of a party demoralised by the Modi government's declaration of asymmetrical war. But they also point to a party organisation that, despite its flashy successes, is still only a half-formed appendage of the Leader. Other parties, be it BJD or DMK, JD(U), TMC or SP, are struggling with ageing leaders and/or waning organisational capacities.

The fights-to-the-finish that accompany the BJP's war cry of "400-paar" take place in this depleted political and institutional setting. That is why, for the system, the party's high goal strikes a note of warning.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Healthcare is a fundamental right of every citizen, and ensuring equal and unrestricted access, especially for rural patients, is paramount... Authorities must prioritise more resources."
— THE DAILY STAR, BANGLADESH

The healthcare promise

As India prepares for the general election, government can facilitate stakeholders to provide universal care which will also create jobs



ARVIND LAL

AS INDIA PREPARES for the general elections, it's imperative to acknowledge healthcare as a vital investment for the nation's well-being and prosperity. Despite its significance, healthcare often takes a back seat in political discourse. Instead of viewing it as a burden on the exchequer, we must recognise healthcare as a strategic investment that yields invaluable returns in terms of human capital development, economic growth and sustainable development.

The first step towards prioritising health is to acknowledge its importance in the national budget. The government is committed to spending 2.5 per cent of the GDP on health by 2025. Given that India's GDP will grow to nearly Rs 323 lakh crore (US \$3.8 trillion) by 2025, public health expenditure should rise to Rs 8 lakh crore, with the Centre contributing 40 per cent or Rs 3.23 lakh crore. But, the central budget allocation for 2024-25 is Rs 90,000 crore — only 28 per cent.

Addressing healthcare requires a fundamental change in mindset, with the government playing a catalytic role in transforming the landscape, leveraging the strengths of both public and private sectors, leaving behind the trust deficit between the two. By forging strategic partnerships and incentivising the private sector, which caters to nearly 70 per cent of healthcare needs, the government can ensure quality health services and bridge the existing gaps in the health system.

Take the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY). The programme provides a Rs 5 lakh hospitalisation cover for over 60 crore people. With this transformative change, the government moved from the role of a provider to a payer, recognising that providing healthcare services to 1.4 billion people is not a task that either the public or the private sector can achieve alone. More than 34 crore beneficiary cards have been distributed, over 27,000 hospitals have been empanelled (43 per cent private and 57 per cent government hospitals) and 6.5 crore hospitalisations have already been accounted for under the scheme.

Two-thirds of the total money spent goes to private hospitals, which reaffirms patients' preference for private hospitals. Most states have adopted the scheme but a majority of medium and large private hospitals have not joined the scheme, primarily due to low reimbursement rates. In 2018, FICCI analysed the cost of 10 in-patient procedures covered under AB-PMJAY across seven private and two public hospitals, including AIIMS New Delhi. It revealed that the reimbursement rates failed to even cover the costs incurred by hospitals by as much as 75 per cent for some procedures. Since then, the government has commissioned several costing studies under the Department of Health Research and Institute of Cost Accountants of India, for procedures covered under AB-PMJAY, but their findings have not been published. Irrationally fixing rates, without consideration of costs and delays in reimbursements, have acted as a de-

terrent for private providers' participation in several health schemes. To draw more participation from the private sector, reimbursement rates must be corrected and a differential pricing model should be implemented to differentiate hospitals based on their clinical excellence, accreditations, scale and investment in technology.

But as the coverage expands, we will have to address infrastructure gaps in healthcare. India's hospital bed density is 1.3 beds/1,000 population, which is significantly below the recommended 3 beds/1,000 population mark — a deficit of nearly 24 lakh beds. In urban areas, more than 70 per cent of the bed capacity expansion in the last decade has been by the private sector. What is concerning is the slowdown in fresh investments, especially in tier 2, 3 cities and beyond.

The government needs to provide a conducive ecosystem and the private sector needs to reciprocate with quality, affordable healthcare services. It is high time that the health sector be accorded national priority status to make it eligible for priority sector lending, akin to agriculture, education, MSMEs, housing, etc. This is nearly a decade-old appeal from the health sector stakeholders and even recommended by the Group of Ministers on Health in 2020. The government also needs to enable provisions of short-term interest free loans, subsidised loans with long repayment period, special land availability, tax incentives for infrastructure expansion and skilling HR, zero-rated GST, rationalisation of custom duties on essential life-saving items and production-linked incentives for indigenous manufacturing of medical devices and drugs.

Further, strengthening primary healthcare through the 1.7 lakh Health and Wellness Centres (now renamed as Ayushman Arogya Mandirs) and creating a mechanism to cover OPD care under health insurance, will ensure better health outcomes, lower out-of-pocket expenditure and reduce the burden on secondary and tertiary hospitalisation.

Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), also known as lifestyle diseases (diabetes, hypertension, heart diseases, cancers, strokes, chronic respiratory diseases, kidney, liver and mental health disorders) have risen to account for about 65 per cent of all mortalities in the country. NCDs can be largely prevented and controlled by interventions at the primary healthcare level, thus preventing a significant number of complications, morbidity, mortality and instances of hospitalisation.

To support the entire healthcare ecosystem, we need a huge healthcare workforce. It is no surprise that healthcare is the fourth largest employer in the country. Given the astounding number of vacancies against sanctioned posts at various levels of the public health system and the expansion of healthcare infrastructure, the health sector has the potential to add 4 crore jobs. This can be a significant contributor to addressing the unemployment challenge and act as a GDP driver.

The time for action is now, and with adequate political will and commitment, the dividends of investing in healthcare will resonate for generations to come.

The writer is executive chairman, Dr Lal PathLabs and Chair-FICCI Swasth Bharat (Public Health) Task Force. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FALSE CLAIMS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'No free pass' (IE, April 4). Misleading claims and a lack of strict protocols in medical advertising by ayurvedic companies like Patanjali can have harmful consequences. Promoting ayurvedic remedies as an alternative to allopathic medicines risks making people believe that both these treatments can be used interchangeably. Consequently, this practice may also diminish trust in the healthcare system. It also encourages people to self-diagnose, which can cause serious damage.

Arihant Jain, Hisar

ISRAEL'S STRATEGY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A mounting toll' (IE, April 4). Protesters have been demanding that the government secure a Gaza ceasefire deal to allow for the return of Israeli captives and early elections. Though the war began as retaliation for Hamas' attack, innocent children and women have fallen victim to Israel's deep anger. With the blocking of essential food items, it seems that Tel Aviv has adopted famine creation as a war strategy. Israel's reaction to the UN resolution is not encouraging.

SS Paul, Nadia

MISSING THE POINT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Life of a prisoner' (IE, April 4). The prevailing notion that individuals who are incarcerated are beyond redemption perpetuates a damaging cycle. The current prison system suffers from overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and punitive treatment by staff. Denial of basic aid, like a sipper to Stan Swamy underscore systemic deficiencies.

Ajay Corriea, Vasai

A FORCED APOLOGY

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Israel issues rare apology, takes responsibility for strike on aid group' (IE, April 4). President Joe Biden's remarks and the Israeli military's statement expressing grief at the loss of the lives of humanitarian workers make their deliberate silence over the killing of thousands of innocent Palestinians and millions rendered refugees deafening and criminal. Coming from parts of the world with tall claims to commitment to human dignity, this hierarchy in value of human lives and wilful complicity in the indiscriminate and unprecedented violence directed at an entire population is extremely deplorable.

Samiksha, Rohtak

CHARGING UP

Entry of EV majors like Tesla could help catalyse segment. They must meet commitments on investment, localisation

IN MARCH, THE Union government had approved a new e-vehicle policy with the aim to facilitate the entry of global EV manufacturers in the country. The policy involves lowering the duty for EV imports — this has been a long-standing demand for EV majors like Tesla — for companies setting up a manufacturing plant with a minimum investment of Rs 4,150 crore. Alongside, the policy also lays out clear localisation targets that companies have to achieve — 25 per cent by the third year and 50 per cent by the fifth — in order to boost domestic value addition. It would appear that this new policy is evincing serious interest. According to reports, US electric car maker Tesla Motors will be sending a team to India to scout for locations for a \$2-3 billion electric car plant. This is welcome news.

Access to one of the largest and fastest growing markets in the world — India is the third largest auto market behind China and the US — at a time when others are slowing down, will be a big draw for electric vehicle manufacturers like Tesla. While the EV market is currently small in the country, it is gaining traction — in 2023, sales of electric vehicles surpassed 1.5 million, dominated by two-wheelers and three-wheelers as per a recent report by CareEdge. The scope for growth in various segments is immense, especially considering the government wants to increase the share of electric vehicles to 30 per cent by 2030. The reports also suggest the possibility of Tesla building a smaller and more affordable car in India, priced at less than \$30,000. This would increase the likelihood of India being used as a base for the company to export its cars to other regions. Coming on the heels of the rapid expansion in Apple's manufacturing capacity in the country, and movement in the government's semiconductor plans, if Tesla's plans were to fructify, it would be a big boost for the government's Make in India plans.

The entry of global manufacturers will not only provide greater choice to consumers, but will also help bring in the latest technology and promote competition in a sector that is dominated by domestic players. It will help cut carbon emissions and reduce the country's dependence on oil imports. However, care must be taken to closely monitor progress on investment and localisation criteria, and not get swayed by attempts to relax targets in favour of the companies. Further, for increasing EVs' attractiveness and ensuring its faster adoption, the focus should be on ensuring that the charging infrastructure ramps up quickly.

FOR LOVE OF A CHILD

Wealthy Indians travelling abroad to have children through surrogacy points to problems in India's law

THE AFTERMATH OF constricting surrogacy laws has become manifest in the latest trend of urban, economically solvent Indians travelling overseas to have children through surrogacy. A report in this newspaper points to the burgeoning number of Indians heading to the US, Canada, Mexico, Colombia and to countries in east Europe, including Georgia, to avail commercial surrogacy at prices that can range from Rs 6 crore to Rs 50 lakh, depending on the country of choice. The cross-section of people availing it is telling — single men and women, same-sex couples as well as couples with children of their own who want to opt for surrogacy for their subsequent family building. It puts the spotlight on the challenges and lacunae in the regulation of family and reproduction rights in the country.

Progress on the regulation of surrogacy has been incremental in India, where commercial surrogacy became legal in 2002 and saw a rapid boom because of its affordability and the trickle-down economic benefits it afforded women from lower socio-economic strata. The rise of a rent-a-womb industry, with Anand in Gujarat its ground zero, necessitated a regulatory framework that could curb exploitation and malpractices. In 2015, the government made commercial surrogacy illegal for foreigners. A year later, the concept of altruistic surrogacy was introduced. In its present avatar, only altruistic gestational surrogacy that receives no financial or material compensation is allowed. There are other restrictive criteria: Couples can use donor gamete for surrogacy only if medically mandated; the option of surrogacy is accorded to married couples with medical conditions that make conception impossible and to widowed or divorced women. It leaves out live-in couples, LGBTQIA+ couples and single people from its ambit.

This makes for an inherently unequal landscape where the idea of a family is still guided by a patriarchal imagination. It mandates marriage for a heterosexual couple and only recognises need — and not desire for children — as a further eligibility clause. Assisted Reproductive Technologies come at a cost that often make access to them restrictive for the economically weak. A narrow imagination of eligibility additionally accentuates the stigma that single people, especially women, and same-sex couples face for their choices. In February, while responding to a single woman's petition challenging the surrogacy laws as discriminatory, the Supreme Court remarked upon the necessity of protecting the institution of marriage. Yet, laws need to keep up with changing times and aspirations. Surrogacy laws in India need to be mindful of atypical families, endorsed by the apex court in a 2022 judgment, to ensure that becoming a parent does not become the privilege of a few.

QUIET PLEASE

A benefit of 'speech fast' may be better interpersonal relationships. That's something worth staying silent for

IN AN AGE of unprecedented chatter, could silence have a moment? In an interview with The Guardian, the Scottish singer Lulu revealed that on performance days, she rests her "instrument" by not speaking — or even whispering — a word until noon. Following the buzz generated by her practice of "speech fasting", the benefits of silence for mental health, inner peace and clarity of thought have been much discussed, with links drawn to ancient practices in cultures around the world. The irony of all this noise about silence is, of course, besides the point.

But is there such a thing as true silence? Consider what happened when the avant-garde composer John Cage premiered his most well-known — and widely misunderstood — piece. Informally titled '4'33", after the duration of its performance, it featured the pianist David Tudor who came on to the stage, started a stopwatch, sat down before a piano and closed the lid. Not a note was played — on stage. From amongst the increasingly uncomfortable audience came the sounds of chairs scraping, throats clearing and feet shuffling which, for Cage, were the "composition" — as he wrote, later in life, "Until I die, there will be sounds and they will continue after my death."

Of course, the point of the piece was to get people to listen and pay attention to things they usually don't notice. Like how difficult it is to sit in "silence" or, more importantly, that there exists a universe beyond one's own navel. Silence is not merely the sound of no speech — it is the discovery of other lives, other worlds. Not surprisingly, psychologists who study the impact of silence have found that one of the most important benefits of a "speech fast" may be better interpersonal relationships. That's something worth staying quiet for.



RAVISHANKAR PRASAD

TWO IDEAS ARE dominating the political discourse today — the absence of a level playing field and the credentials of democratic institutions. Several of those raising questions have been at the receiving end of the law because of their indiscretions and corrupt activities. There are also those whose support is waning. The Congress, Left and many regional parties have been losing national elections since 2014, as well as elections to assemblies in big states. The Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led BJP and NDA won the Lok Sabha elections in 2014 and 2019 and by all accounts, the coalition is poised to register a decisive victory once again.

The frustration of being defeated repeatedly in elections should not be aimed at institutions. The irresponsible manner in which Rahul Gandhi castigates the media, the Election Commission and even the judiciary is troubling and shameful. He makes false allegations before the media which telecasts them live. Yet, Rahul Gandhi complains that the media is not free.

After 75 years of independence, we must be proud of the evolution of Indian democracy. The people of India know who they are and are confident of defeating any political party or leader, however popular, both at the Centre and states, in case of non-performance, lack of accountability, and corruption. The Indian electorate has changed the narrative of anti-incumbency. If a party or a leader performs, they repose their trust in them and give a fresh mandate. Similarly, they penalise non-performance.

Such voter behaviour has made Indian democracy more stable. Another important factor is the welcome realisation by the people as to who is fit to govern the country and who can be trusted to run a particular state. The real problem is the refusal of Opposition parties, particularly Congress, to come to terms with the fact that voters do not consider them fit to govern India. The people of India trust the leadership and governance record of Modi. They contrast it with the policy paralysis, corruption and the lack of effective action against terrorism of the previous government.



HARMALA GUPTA

THE RECENT VIDEO shared by the Princess of Wales about her cancer diagnosis alludes to a dilemma. As a parent, there is a natural urge to spare your children from bad news but there comes a time when keeping the truth from them may cause more harm. The question is when and how to do this best without causing anxiety.

In India, by and large, children are not told about a parent's life-threatening illness but are left to work it out for themselves. This leaves them confused as they notice changes that they cannot comprehend and sometimes mistakenly think they may have caused. They are unprepared and vulnerable when a parent's condition worsens and they die. Many carry the burden of regret and unresolved grief throughout their lives.

At CanSupport, we see children struggling to understand why they are being ignored by adults or told to fend for themselves. Little things matter. I recall a young girl telling our home care team how much she hated her mother because she no longer bothered to tie her shoelaces before she went to school. Hate is a strong word but that is how children react. They experience emotions that they find difficult to control and do not always have the words to express them.

This is why so often they start acting up and may regress to behaviours like bed-wetting, crying and becoming more clingy than usual. When hard times come, parents and school authorities must work together to provide school-going children with a safe environment, both at home and at school. Classmates, close family and friends also need to be sensitised. Often, the failure of parents



Laments about the absence of a level playing field come from an Opposition that is desperate and corrupt

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GENTLY AND HONESTLY

How to talk to children when their parent has a life-threatening illness

to speak to their children means that they hear the news from second-hand sources that are not necessarily well-informed and may harbour misconceptions — the most common being that cancer is a death sentence. This is another reason children should first hear the news either from a parent or an adult who knows the facts and whom they trust.

Depending on age and circumstance, communication is going to differ. The golden rule is not to overload the child with too much information at any one time but to give it in easily digestible doses. Children are keen observers and even if not told can sense something is wrong. It is important to reassure them that their needs will be taken care of no matter what. Physical gestures like a hug and holding hands, accompanied by simple explanations (but not lies) can go a long way in easing fears. What must be conveyed, more than anything, is that they will always be loved and cared for.

Children are surprisingly resilient — their ability to adapt should not be underestimated. What they need is proper preparation, information and guidance tailored to their age. If a parent feels unable to do it, a professional may be brought in. The advantage of a parent or family member doing this is that it need not be done in a formal setting which can be intimidating to a child.

Facing and talking about death is hard and yet children must be prepared for the passing of a parent who is unlikely to recover. At a younger age, the permanence of death is difficult to grasp. Nevertheless, children do have questions and a natural curiosity, especially when they see physical changes in a parent or

They have seen how a powerful, honest, and performance-oriented leader like Modi can change India's image in virtually every field. Pro-poor governance, remarkable delivery of welfare schemes and sound economic development have made India the world's fifth-largest economy, on its way to becoming the third-biggest. Security has been strengthened and the country gives a befitting reply to border incursions and terrorism. India is no longer seen as a soft state.

The people of India have also seen how PM Modi has upheld the country's civilisational and spiritual values by not resorting to negative vote-bank politics. Despite being invited, Opposition leaders such as Rahul Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi and Akhilesh Yadav chose not to attend the *pran pratishtha* of Lord Ram at Ayodhya. This speaks of the vice-like grip of appeasement politics on them. The parties these leaders represent opposed the triple talaq legislation which was designed to free Muslim women.

We are proud of Indian democracy as well as the judiciary, which has upheld fundamental rights and civil liberties. It has set aside several laws and decisions and delivered historic verdicts, including on the Ram Janmabhoomi dispute. It validated the abrogation of Article 370 and recently granted bail to an Aam Aadmi Party leader. But Rahul Gandhi has criticised the judiciary for its Rafale judgment. When contempt proceedings were initiated, he had to apologise. The Election Commission has done a remarkable job of holding free and fair elections in a huge country with 97-crore voters and nearly 10 lakh polling booths.

Hailing from Bihar, I remember the painful days when ballot paper snatching, booth capturing and violence — even murder — were not uncommon during elections. The EC has taken several courageous steps to ensure a level playing field during elections. EVMs have bolstered the sanctity of the voting process. Several Supreme Court and high court verdicts have upheld the validity of EVMs. When the Opposition loses, they find issues with EVMs and call for the reintroduction of ballot

paper. But when they win, they have no problems with EVMs. This is absurd. We need to remember that the Mammoan Singh government at the Centre was elected through EVM, as was Mamata Banerjee's government in West Bengal. Akhilesh Yadav became the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh through EVMs and the CPM too has won elections in Kerala through EVMs. Recently, Congress came to power in Karnataka and Himachal through EVMs. The Modi-led BJP has similarly been winning national and several elections.

The Opposition's ludicrous argument on EVMs is also of a piece with its attitude towards the judiciary — courts giving bail are a sign of a level playing field but when it is denied, the judiciary is criticised. This is also a sign of desperation. Let us not forget that Congress imposed the Emergency, jailing leaders like Jayaprakash Narayan, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, L K Advani and others.

PM Modi too fought the Emergency as part of an underground movement in which he disguised himself as a Sikh. Many eminent editors were arrested and Supreme Court judges were superseded — this included Justice H R Khanna who upheld fundamental rights during the Emergency. I salute Ramnath Goenkaji of *The Indian Express* for fighting the Emergency. We also need to recall that a section of the Left marched side by side with Congress during those days. Several state governments were dismissed and President's rule was imposed because in many cases, the Congress-ruled Centre developed a dislike for a particular chief minister. Congress's sins in compromising democracy are numerous.

Let us trust the people of India who will again give a fitting reply to those who blame institutions and a lack of level playing field for their losses. Such noises have largely been made by dynastic parties, whose leaders have been exposed for corruption and, in many cases, convicted.

The writer is Lok Sabha MP from Patna Sahib, Senior Advocate in the Supreme Court and former Union Minister of Law & Justice

APRIL 5, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

SIX IN SPACE

INDIAN COSMONAUT RAKESH Sharma entered his new space home for a week-long stay two hours and six minutes after the Soyuz T-11 docked with orbiting Salyut 7 Soviet space station. This is the first time that six people are aboard an orbiting Soviet spaceship. Playing host to Sqn Ldr Sharma, Soyuz Commander Zuri Malyshev and Flight Engineer Gennadi Strekalov were cosmonauts Leonid Kizim, Vladimir Solovyov and Oleg Atkov.

NSA MADE STRINGENT

THE GOVERNMENT HAS initiated steps at an

administrative as well as political level to check extremist activities and reach a political settlement with the Akalis. The Union Cabinet decided to effect some changes in the existing National Security Act, making it more stringent. The 15-day period set for giving grounds for detention is to be increased to one month and approval from the Advisory Board can be had within a year instead of the present six months.

OPPOSITION ON CENTRE

THE OPPOSITION IN the Lok Sabha dubbed the government as incompetent and stepped up the demand for its resignation because of

its inability to handle the Punjab crisis. Home Minister P C Sethi, who replied to a grim six hour debate on the deteriorating situation, however failed to come up with a concrete plan of action to contain the growing lawlessness in Punjab.

LETTERS OF TERROR

FIFTEEN PEOPLE in Himachal Pradesh have received threatening letters from terrorists. This was disclosed by Chief Minister Virbhadra Singh, in reply to a question by Lashkari Ram (BJP) in the assembly. These letters had been written in Gurmukhi in the name of Dal Khalsa, he said.



Before SC: Can states levy excise duty on industrial alcohol?

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM
NEW DELHI, MARCH 4

EXCISE DUTY levied on alcohol is a key component of a state's revenue, with states often adding an additional excise duty on alcohol consumption to drive its income up. For example, in 2023, Karnataka hiked the Additional Excise Duty (AED) on Indian Made Liquor (IML) by 20%.

However, when it comes to 'industrial alcohol', do states have the power to regulate and tax it? This is the question that a 9-judge Bench of the Supreme Court is hearing.

What is the current case before the SC?

The Bench headed by Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud began hearing arguments on April 2 on whether state governments have the power to regulate and control the sale, distribution, pricing and other factors relating to 'industrial' alcohol. Industrial alcohol is used as a raw material to create other products, and is not meant for human consumption.

Entry 8 in the State List under the Seventh Schedule gives states the power to legislate on the production, manufacture, possession, transport, purchase and sale of "intoxicating liquors". At the same time, Entry 52 of the Union List, and Entry 33 of the Concurrent List mention industries, whose control is "declared by Parliament by law to be expedient in public interest".

Notably, subjects in the Concurrent List can be legislated upon by both states and the Centre, but where a central law exists, the state law cannot be repugnant to it. Industrial alcohol is listed in the Industries (Development and Regulation) Act, 1951 (IDRA).

Essentially, the question before the apex court is whether states can regulate industrial alcohol or whether the Centre exercises exclusive control on the subject.

Has the SC considered this issue earlier?

In 1989, a 7-judge Constitution Bench in *Synthetics & Chemicals Ltd v. State of Uttar Pradesh* held that states' powers, as per Entry 8 of the State List, were limited to regulating

"intoxicating liquors" which are different from industrial alcohol.

The SC acknowledged that states' power to regulate consumable alcohol must include the power to "prevent and/or check industrial alcohol being used as intoxicating or drinkable alcohol". But the court found that the taxes and levies in question were designed primarily to increase the revenue collected by the state — not as measures to regulate the use of industrial alcohol, or prevent its conversion to drinkable alcohol.

Essentially, the SC said that only the Centre can impose levies or taxes on industrial alcohol, which is not meant for human consumption.

However, in a point that would be brought up decades later, the SC did not consider its prior Constitution Bench decision in *Ch Tika Ramji v State of UP* (1956) where five judges upheld a legislation enacted in UP to regulate the supply and purchase of sugarcane. This Act was challenged on the grounds that under Section 18-G of the IDRA, the

Centre had exclusive jurisdiction over regulation of the sugar industry.

In contrast to its *Synthetic & Chemicals Ltd* decision, the court held that Section 18-G is not meant to "cover the entire field" and the state still had power to legislate on matters relating to the sugar industry under Entry 33 of the Concurrent List.

How did this lead to the case now before the SC?

In 1999, the UP government issued a notification introducing a 15% fee for any sale made to licence holders under the UP Excise Act, 1910 for "alcohol used directly or...as solvent for vehicles and appear[ing] in the final product to some extent". This was challenged by a motor oil and diesel distributor who claimed that the Centre exercised exclusive jurisdiction over industrial alcohol as per Section 18-G of the IDRA.

In February 2004 the Allahabad High Court struck down the 1999 notification, holding that the state legislature did not exercise power over the general regulation of denatured spirits, only

over drinkable alcohol. It directed the state to refund any fees collected with a 10% per annum interest from the date the fee was deposited. This decision was appealed at the SC, which then stayed the Allahabad HC judgment in August that same year.

In 2007, the court referred the case to a larger bench, noting that the *Tika Ramji* case "had not been brought to the notice of the seven-Judge Bench which decided the *Synthetics and Chemicals* case".

In order to determine whether states can exercise their powers under Entry 33 of the Concurrent List or if Section 18-G gives the Centre exclusive jurisdiction in matters relating to industrial spirits, in 2010 the case was referred to a nine-judge Bench.

What have the states argued so far?

Senior Advocate Dinesh Dwivedi, appearing for the State of UP, said that the phrase "intoxicating liquors" in Entry 8 of the State List includes "all liquids containing alcohol". He said that 'liquor', 'spirit', and 'intoxicant' were used in excise laws before the

Constitution came into force.

He also argued that the Union's power under Entry 52 of the Union List does not include control over "finished products" (such as industrial alcohol after the denaturation process), as that is specifically covered by Entry 33 of the Concurrent List. In order to exercise exclusive control over regulation of industrial alcohol, the Centre would first have to issue an order to that effect under Section 18-G of the IDRA. Without such an order, that control would vest with the states, he said.

Dwivedi also cautioned against adopting an approach that would reduce states' powers, relying on Justice Ruma Pal's concurring opinion in *ITC Ltd v Agricultural Produce Market Committee* (2002). The SC had held that states are not "mere appendages of the Centre... The Centre cannot tamper with their powers. More particularly, the courts should not adopt an approach, an interpretation, which has the effect of or tends to have the effect of whittling down the powers reserved to the States".

The next hearing is on April 9.

NEWS YOU CAN USE

HOW TO CHECK YOUR NAME IN VOTERS' LIST, AND WHAT TO DO IF IT IS MISSING

DAMINI NATH
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

VOTING IN the first phase of Lok Sabha elections is on April 19. Newly eligible voters (those who were 18 years old as of April 1, 2024) must get their names enrolled in the voters' list. Even older voters must ensure that their name is in the list, and has not been struck off for any reason.

Checking the electoral roll

One can check on the electoral roll on the website of the Election Commission of India (electoralsearch.eci.gov.in) or on the ECI's Voter Helpline app. On the site, you can look up your name (i) by your Voter ID, or called "EPIC" (Elector's Photo Identification Card), (ii) by your mobile phone number, or (iii) by your personal details such as name, date of birth, etc.

Provided one has the voter ID handy, or one's mobile number is registered with the ECI, the first two methods are convenient. Checking by personal details may create a problem in returning a response if the Voter ID has a mistake — such as an error in the spelling of one's name.

The voter's list information on the EC website is displayed under the following columns: EPIC Number, Name, Age, Relative's (Father's/Husband's) name, State, District, Assembly constituency, and polling station.

If name is missing in roll

For those who have been registered voters earlier but now cannot find their names in the roll, there is still time to apply to become a voter for Phases 3 to 7 of the Lok Sabha elections.

The ECI carries out continuous updates to the electoral roll till the last date of nominations for the respective phase. In the case of Phase 1 (voting on April 19), the last date for nominations was March 27. The last date for nominations for Phase 2 (voting on April 26) was on April 4. And for phases 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7, the last dates for nominations are April 19, April 25, May 3,



You can apply on the ECI website.

May 6, and May 14 respectively.

ECI officials, however, advise that one should apply to have one's name included in the electoral roll at least seven days before the last date of nomination. To do this, one has to fill in the relevant form, available on the ECI's website.

For new voters

To register as a voter, one must fill in Form 6, which is available on the ECI website. Apart from filling in details like name, gender, address, date of birth and relative (father, mother, husband or wife), the applicant will have to give a self-attested copy of any one of the following documents to prove date of birth: birth certificate issued by competent local body/ municipal authority/ registrar of births and deaths; Aadhaar or PAN; driving licence; certificates of Class X or Class XII issued by CBSE/ ICSE or state education boards if it contains date of birth; and Indian passport.

A self-attested copy of address proof is also needed. One of several documents can be submitted for this purpose, including water/ electricity/ gas connection bill for that address for at least one year, current passbook of nationalised/ scheduled bank/ post office, an Indian passport, a registered rent-lease deed in case of a tenant, or a registered sale deed in case of own house.

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SHUBHAJIT ROY

AFTER PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi amplified an RTI reply on Katchatheevu obtained by Tamil Nadu BJP leader K Annamalai by accusing Indira Gandhi's government of "callously giving away" the island to Sri Lanka, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar reiterated the talking points in the issue — but did not go further.

Asked whether the Indian government intended to "reopen" the 1974 bilateral pact on Katchatheevu, the diplomat-turned politician said the issue was "*sub judice*" — referring to a petition filed in the Supreme Court by former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa.

While the controversy is being viewed as a political brownie-point-scoring exercise by the BJP against the DMK and Congress in Tamil Nadu, it has sparked disquiet in the strategic community both in New Delhi and Colombo — especially since it has the imprimatur of the Prime Minister himself.

Basis of international pacts

When two governments negotiate an agreement, they work with information and understanding of the issue available at the time. In making the best possible decision, governments also take into account possible future scenarios and projections. States are rational actors, and they carry out clear-eyed cost-benefit analyses before deciding whether any deal is worth doing.

Veteran diplomats and negotiators say that there is always a compromise, a bit of give-and-take, in the negotiations. An agreement on what and what not to concede is critical — current negotiations on the India-UK Free Trade Agreement are moving slowly because the two sides have not been able to agree yet on the specific give-and-take that will make the deal worth doing for both.

What makes a good deal?

State parties are expected to abide by the agreements they sign. The fundamental principle of any good deal is that it stands the test of time. If it doesn't, there is a case for



Row was triggered by an RTI question by Annamalai (right). X/ @annamalai_k

looking at it afresh. If it does, there is no reason to revoke or pull out of a deal.

Many of the international agreements that India has signed with its neighbours have helped to maintain peace and mutual cooperation in the region, irrespective of the government or party in power. A recent and pertinent example is that of the boundary agreements between India and Bangladesh.

The 2015 land boundary agreement was ready when the Congress-led UPA was in power. The BJP — which was in the opposition at that time — had opposed it, but after Narendra Modi became Prime Minister in 2014, the party changed its position.

The pact involved an exchange of enclaves located in each other's territories, which had made life for the local population difficult for more than 40 years. When the two governments decided to regularise the enclaves on an 'as-is-where-is' basis, India lost some territory in the net analysis. The opposition Congress, which had negotiated the deal and understood its benefits, did not make an issue of the 'loss of territory', and did not criticise the pact.

India also settled its maritime boundary

with Bangladesh in July 2014, soon after the NDA government came to power. New Delhi, which lost at the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague, accepted the verdict and moved on.

These decisions were taken in view of broader national interests and strategic ties with Bangladesh, which has paid dividends as the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has cracked down on anti-India terrorism in her country, and remained a steadfast friend of India.

Cost of unilateral action

Any unilateral reopening of agreements or reviewing of pacts puts a question mark on India's international credibility, especially if the agreements in question have stood the test of time.

Austin Fernando, a former Sri Lankan High Commissioner to India, told *The Indian Express* that the BJP's attempts to reignite the Katchatheevu issue might be a "vote-puller" ahead of elections, but it would be difficult for the Indian government to step back afterward, which was a "problem".

"It seems that this is only rhetoric for the election. But once they have said something like this, it is difficult for the government to get out of it after the elections, because BJP will win. It is the problem. They and we both should think about it," Fernando said.

Apart from setting a precedent that might encourage future governments to look at reviewing old pacts with neighbours and partners based only on narrow political convenience, there is also the question of India's bilateral ties with countries, and of New Delhi's international image.

Thus, while India's call for a review and modification of the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty with Pakistan has been acceptable in view of the history of war and disputes with that

country, the case of Sri Lanka, a small and friendly neighbour, is different.

Given India's size, population, and economic and military might, unilateral provocations might spook smaller countries, and lead them to view New Delhi as an overbearing regional bully — an image that is unlikely to bring India many diplomatic gains. The new pro-China government of the Maldives has been portraying India precisely in this manner, and there are already smaller "India Out" movements in Bangladesh and Mauritius as well.

There are also consequences for India's credibility with its global partners, and adherence to the rules-based order. This is not the ideal image for an aspiring global power, which wants a seat at global high tables, including at the UN and other international organisations.

It has taken a lot of hard work over decades to build India's reputation as a responsible power. Despite not signing the NPT, New Delhi's exemplary track record at nuclear non-proliferation earned it the exemption at the Nuclear Suppliers' Group in 2008. The Indo-US nuclear deal, and other similar deals followed. The end of the technology denial regime was the fruit of India's responsible behaviour.

On the other hand, President Donald Trump damaged America's reputation by walking out of the Paris Accord on climate change and the JCPOA nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 countries on which his predecessor had worked with international partners. And China's track record of breaking pacts — including with India on the Line of Actual Control — has raised serious questions about its commitment to the global rules-based order.

Sri Lanka has so far been extremely mature in its response to statements in India about Katchatheevu. Foreign Minister Ali Sabry has said that the issue was settled 50 years ago, and there was no need to revisit it. "There is no controversy. They (India) are having an internal political debate about who is responsible. Other than that, no one is talking about claiming Katchatheevu," Sabry said.

Provocative claims by the BJP could cost India some of the goodwill it has earned after assisting the people of Sri Lanka with \$4 billion during the country's economic crisis, and helping Colombo secure a bailout package from the IMF. India should also be wary of Beijing seeking to take advantage of any potential rough edges that develop in bilateral relations.

Who was Iran's Quds Force Gen Zahedi, killed in an Israeli strike in Syria?

RISHIKA SINGH
NEW DELHI, APRIL 4

ISRAELI FIGHTER jets attacked an Iranian consulate building in Damascus, Syria, on Tuesday, killing at least 13 people — including Gen Mohammad Reza Zahedi, 63, who was a senior leader of the Iranian Quds Force.

Four Israeli officials confirmed to *The New York Times* that Israel was behind the strike, "but denied that the building had diplomatic status". Iran has now vowed revenge against Israel. The strikes are another low in the countries' relations, which have long been marked with hostility.

Who are the Quds Force?

The Quds Force is the paramilitary and intelligence wing of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC was set up by the leader of the Islamic

Revolution and Iran's first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in 1979.

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution dislodged the ruling Shah from power, a theocratic or religion-based state was established in Iran. For its protection, the IRGC was created to deal with both domestic and external threats.

"Now highly institutionalized, it (IRGC) remains a force parallel to that of Iran's regular armed forces," according to the think tank Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). It has army, naval, and air force wings, and its total membership numbers around 125,000. Another branch, the Basij paramilitary force, "claims it can mobilize some six hundred thousand volunteers", the CFR note says.

Domestically, IRGC members have been appointed to top government posts over the years. What concerns the rest of the region, however, is the IRGC's military actions, espionage operations, and cybersecurity at-



Gen Zahedi headed Quds Force units in Syria and Lebanon. Wikimedia Commons

tacks. In 2019, the United States designated the IRGC (and the Quds Force as part of it) a terrorist organisation.

Then President Donald Trump issued a statement, saying, "This unprecedented step, led by the Department of State, recognises the reality that Iran is not only a State Sponsor of Terrorism, but that the IRGC ac-

tively participates in, finances, and promotes terrorism as a tool of statecraft..."

Where has the Quds Force been active?

The US and Israel have accused Iran of funding regional proxy groups in the Middle East, such as the Shia militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Palestinian militant group Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Hezbollah fighters have engaged the Israel Defence Forces on the Lebanon-Israel border ever since the October 7, 2023 attacks by Hamas in southern Israel.

When the Syrian civil war broke out in the early 2010s, the Quds Force initially established a limited presence in the country to "protect Shiite shrines", according to the CFR. However, they went on to intervene actively in the war, fighting against ISIS on the side of Syrian government forces, and working with the Russians to keep President Bashar al-Assad in power in the face of strong US opposition to his regime.

Who was Gen Mohammad Reza Zahedi?

Hezbollah said on Tuesday that General Zahedi played a crucial role in helping "develop and advance the work" of the group in Lebanon, the *AP* reported. According to a report in *The Guardian*, Zahedi "commanded units in Lebanon and Syria and was most likely a critical figure in Tehran's relationship with Hezbollah and Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad".

A US Department of the Treasury statement from August 3, 2010, on freezing the assets of several Iranian leaders, including Zahedi, said that he "also acted as a liaison to Hezbollah and Syrian intelligence services and is reportedly charged with guaranteeing weapons shipments to Hezbollah".

The other notable posts Zahedi held included the Air Force Commander of the IRGC in 2005, according to an *Al Jazeera* report. He also controlled the IRGC ground forces for three years. "He spent a year at the helm of the Thar-Allah Headquarters, which is predominantly tasked with ensur-

ing security in the capital, Tehran. From 2016 to 2019, [he] served as the IRGC's deputy for operations as well," it added.

Zahedi was the seniormost Iranian general to be killed since Gen Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the IRGC and head of the Quds Force, was killed in a US airstrike in Iraq on January 3, 2020.

Arab News reported that Zahedi was a "contemporary and close friend" of Soleimani. The two men enrolled in the IRGC while in their early 20s, and rose to prominence during the Iraq-Iran war (1980-88). "It was Soleimani who appointed Zahedi commander of the Quds Force Lebanon Corps in 1998, a position he held until 2002, and to which he was reappointed in 2008," the *Arab News* report said.

The US Department of Defense said in 2020 that Soleimani's killing was a "decisive step" to protect US personnel abroad and that he was "actively developing" plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq.

Prioritising labour reform

The new govt must go in for a speedy rollout of the four codes passed in Parliament

THE NEW GOVERNMENT at the Centre after the national elections should prioritise big-ticket labour reform to improve working conditions, attract investments to spur employment creation and overall growth. Forty-four central labour laws have been subsumed into four codes on wages, social security, occupational safety, health and working conditions, and industrial relations. Although these codes were passed in Parliament between August 2019 and September 2020, they have not yet been notified. Partly, this was to provide more time to industry to internalise these changes and reduce opposition to this reform. Industry has sought greater flexibility to adjust the workforce with the ups and downs of the business cycle. The other major stakeholder, notably, the trade unions, have resisted any effort to make regulations less restrictive as they considered it an unbridled licence to hire and fire! For such reasons, successive governments at the Centre have shied away from this crucial reform, which remains a major lacuna of economic liberalisation since the early 1990s. To its credit, the National Democratic Alliance government has attempted to push through this controversial and nettlesome reform, though it developed cold feet after the initial show of enthusiasm.

As labour is a concurrent subject, the states also have a role in drafting legislation. There is a misperception that they are largely responsible for the delays in the implementation of the four codes as a few states like West Bengal, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and the union territory of Lakshadweep are yet to formulate rules. There is a requirement for pre-publishing the rules made under the codes for public consultation. Most of the states are on board in this regard as 32 states have formulated rules under the code on wages, 30 states under the industrial relations code, 30 states under the code on social security, and 29 states under the occupational safety, health and working conditions code. Clearly, if the efforts of the new government at the Centre to push labour reform are to succeed, it must persuade the laggard states to cooperate. After the elections, experts say they might want to give some incentive to the states to implement the new labour laws.

It also bears mention that certain states like Gujarat and Rajasthan have pushed the envelope on reform much before the four codes were passed in Parliament. Rajasthan passed laws that allowed employers having up to 300 workers — from the earlier limit of 100 — to reduce the workforce without the government's nod. It also raised thresholds for the Factories and Contract Labour Acts, an example that was later adopted by several other states. Impact assessments of such reforms by the VV Giri National Labour Institute and Indian Institute for Public Administration have shown that average plant sizes went up and so did formal employment in manufacturing.

The upshot is that labour reforms help in reviving investments by industry as they provide greater flexibility to employers to cope with the fluctuating fortunes of their business while protecting the interests of workers. These four labour codes would indeed be efficacious if they encourage retraining of workers for new jobs as also upgrading their skills to meet the emerging needs of industry. Above all, they would serve the cause of greater social inclusion by providing a social safety net to the vast majority of unorganised workers, of whom 29.5 crore have registered on the government's e-shram portal.

Amazon's AI stores seemed too magical. And they were

THERE'S A GREY area in artificial intelligence filled with millions of humans who work in secret — they're often hired to train algorithms but end up operating much of their work instead. These crucial workers took the spotlight this week when *The Information* reported that Amazon's Just Walk Out technology, which allowed customers to grab grocery items from a shelf and walk out of the store, was being phased out of its grocery stores. It partially relied on more than 1,000 people in India who were watching and labelling videos to make sure the checkouts were accurate.

Amazon says on its website that Just Walk Out uses "computer vision, sensor fusion, and deep learning" but doesn't mention contractors. The company told *Gizmodo* that the workers were annotating videos to help improve them, and that they validated a "small minority" of shopping visits when its AI couldn't determine a purchase.

Even so, the Amazon story is a stark reminder that "artificial intelligence" still often requires armies of human babysitters to work properly. Amazon even has an entire business unit known as Amazon Turk devoted to helping other companies do just that — train and operate AI systems. Thousands of freelancers around the world count themselves as "MTurkers", and the unit is named after the story of the Mechanical Turk, an 18th-century chess-playing contraption that was secretly controlled by a man hiding inside.

Far from an incident consigned to history, there are plenty more examples of companies that have failed to mention humans pulling the levers behind supposedly cutting-edge AI technology. To name just a few:

Facebook famously shut down its text-based virtual assistant M in 2018 after more than two years, during which the company used human workers to train (and operate) its underlying artificial intelligence system.

A startup called x.ai, which marketed an "AI personal assistant" that scheduled meetings, had humans doing that work instead and shut down in 2021 after it struggled to get to a point where the algorithms could work independently.

A British startup called Builder.ai sold AI software that could build apps even though it partly relied on software developers in India and elsewhere to do that work, according to a *Wall Street Journal* report.

There's a fine line between faking it till you make it — justifying the use of humans behind the scenes on the premise they will eventually be replaced by algorithms — and exploiting the hype and fuzzy definitions around AI to exaggerate the capabilities of your technology. This pseudo-AI or "AI washing" was widespread even before the recent generative AI boom.

West Monroe Partners, for instance, which does due diligence for private-equity firms, examined marketing materials provided to prospective investors by 40 US firms that were up for sale in 2019 and analysed their use of machine learning and AI models. Using a scoring system, it found that the companies' marketing claims about AI and machine learning exaggerated their technology's ability more than 30%, on average. That same year, a London-based venture capital firm called MMC found that out of 2,830 startups in Europe that were classified as being AI companies, only 1,580 accurately fit that description.

One of the obvious problems of putting humans behind the scenes of AI is that they might end up having to snoop on people's communications. So-called "supervised learning" in AI is why Amazon had thousands of contractors listening in on commands to Alexa, for instance. But there's also the broader proliferation of snake oil.

The good news for investors is that regulators are on the case. Last month Ismail Ramsey, the US attorney for the Northern District of California (aka Silicon Valley), said he would target startups that mislead investors about their use of AI before they go public.

In February, Securities and Exchange Commission chair Gary Gensler warned that AI washing could break securities law. He meant it: A month later, two investment firms reached \$400,000 settlements with the SEC for exaggerating their use of AI.

Even when AI systems aren't exaggerated, it's worth remembering there's a vast industry of hidden workers, who are still propping up many high-tech AI systems often for low wages. In other words, when AI seems too magical, sometimes it is.

THE RESERVE BANK of India's (RBI) tighter scrutiny of the credit card industry (recently, it asked Federal Bank and South Indian Bank to stop issuing new co-branded credit cards) is of a piece with its angst about the huge run-up in unsecured retail loans. From a time, not so long ago, when banks almost never gave unsecured loans, least of all to individuals, today we are in a situation where banks and non-banking finance companies (NBFCs) are vying with each other for lending to individuals, many of whom have no credit history, and often without even the most cursory of credit appraisals.

What has changed? For answers, rewind to soon after the asset quality review undertaken during the tenure of former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan and the ensuing crackdown. Spooked by subsequent events that saw regulators and investigative agencies come down on hapless bankers, especially in public sector banks, the latter began to follow the lead of their private sector counterparts: shun large corporates and focus, instead, on retail loans.

In contrast to loans to corporates, retail loans have many advantages: Amounts involved are relatively small, defaults tend to be the exception rather than the rule (though this has since changed with the rampant increase in loans, often to the sub-prime), and best of all, individual borrowers seldom have political clout of the kind corporates possess that often stymies recovery.

Come Covid, and the combination of a dip in economic activity and reluctance of large corporates to borrow and banks to lend to them meant there were few takers for corporate credit. Meanwhile, demand for individual consumption loans, led by fall in incomes and rock-bottom interest

rates, skyrocketed. The net result has been a sharp increase in the personal loan portfolio of banks. In the April-February 2023-24 period banks' personal loan portfolio has grown nearly ₹11 trillion to approximately ₹53 trillion, accounting for a third of the total bank credit of ₹162 trillion. Within the category of retail loans, credit cards are the most ubiquitous and simplest kind of retail loan. Any credit card holder can freely

avail of almost a month of credit without any documentation or scrutiny. With more than one credit card it is possible to juggle dues so that the credit period is elongated. And provided the holder is smart enough to pay dues on time, she can enjoy a loan that is almost interest-free. Customers called 'revolvers' borrow regularly on their credit cards and avoid repayment of these loans by using the facility to pay the minimum amount. Though the cost of rolling over the loans is very high for the borrower, card issuers are happy since the return from these card dues is very high.

It is no surprise, therefore, that card issuance and spending shot up. As of February 2024, the number of credit cards

in circulation is estimated at 100 million, up from 97.9 million in December 2023 of which co-branded credit cards reportedly constituted 10-15%.

Understandably, the RBI is concerned. Though credit card exposures generate high returns since the interest rate on these outstanding amounts is much higher than that on loans, they are very risky as they are, typically, extended to customers who are unlikely to get credit from banks at a lower cost. In the case of Korea, for instance, a Bank of International Settlements paper, *Credit card lending distress in Korea* by Taesoo Kang and Guonan Ma, found that a massive credit card lending boom in 2003 was followed by a wrenching bust. Many credit card issuers were on the brink of collapse as

they struggled with deteriorating asset quality and difficult liquidity and solvency challenges, which in turn exposed the banking sector and financial markets to systemic risk and severely affected the real economy. Weaker corporate loan demand, ample liquidity in the banking system, and lower interest rates in the wake of the Asian financial crisis put pressure

Ring-fencing banking operations from operations of other group companies will mean both card-issuing and other NBFCs are owned by the holding company and not the bank. In such a scenario, problems of an NBFC would not affect the bank



RAMEESH KAILASAM
MOLLSHREE GARG

Respectively, CEO, Indiatech.org and India managing partner, ERM

Europe is at the forefront of climate protection and is leading the global environmental agenda with the goal of becoming the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. In September 2020, the European Union (EU) declared its aim to reduce emissions by 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels.

As part of the Fit for 55 package, the EU is revising its Emissions Trading System, expanding its scope to include new sectors, reducing overall allowances, and phasing out free allowances. While this encourages industrial decarbonisation, it also raises carbon prices, posing a risk of carbon leakage. Carbon leakage could happen if consumers switch to non-EU goods with lower emission reduction requirements or if firms move production to countries with lower production costs and less stringent emission regulations.

To address these challenges and exert global influence on climate change, the EU is implementing the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). Its primary objective is to address greenhouse gas emissions in imported goods, preventing carbon leakage and supporting the Paris Agreement's goals. The secondary objective is to incentivise operators in non-EU countries to reduce carbon emissions. The CBAM aligns with World Trade Organization (WTO) rules and levels the playing field between non-EU and EU-based producers, ensuring fairness and reducing global carbon emissions.

The CBAM, effective from 2026 with a transitional phase from 2023 to 2026, initially applies to specific goods like cement, iron and steel, aluminium, fertilisers, electricity, and hydrogen. The EU

plans to extend its scope to all sectors subject to EU emissions trading by 2030, impacting countries like Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, India, and China.

Internationally, there is a shared understanding of the necessity to establish sustainable development pathways and pursue a net-zero future to avert a catastrophe. However, this transition should be rapid, yet fair and inclusive, especially considering the Global South, which has endured the repercussions of industrialisation primarily driven by the Global North.

It is crucial to acknowledge that many nations in the Global South still have carbon-intensive production processes, and their shift to a green economy may extend beyond 2026. Presently, per capita carbon emissions in the US, Canada, Australia, and the EU are significantly higher than those in South Asian nations like India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar.

The implementation of the CBAM presents difficulties for South Asian countries that have not yet shifted to low-carbon industrial practices. With the CBAM in place, these nations could encounter penalties, diminishing the competitiveness of their goods in the EU market and challenging the notion of a fair transition.

Furthermore, the CBAM creates an inequity by compelling developing nations to surpass their commitments under the Paris Agreement. While India has committed to reducing the emission

intensity of its gross domestic product, it has not committed to carbon emissions levels that are equivalent to the EU's. EU trading partners, including China, view the CBAM as a trade barrier, and some nations, like Turkey, have ratified the Paris Agreement due to CBAM pressure.

India is alarmed by the CBAM, and has been engaging in continuous discussions with the EU on its potential implications. India is among the top eight countries anticipated to be negatively impacted by the CBAM, particularly in core sectors like steel.

Concerns are raised that the EU plan could render obsolete India's free trade agreements and potential agreements with the EU, as prices of exported goods may rise significantly after the carbon tax. The Federation of Indian Export Organisations warns that nearly \$8 billion of exports, primarily steel, iron ore, and aluminium, could face tariffs initially, expanding to cover all goods exported to the EU by 2034.

Indian policymakers advocate alternative measures to address climate change and carbon emissions without unfairly penalising Indian industries. These measures may include proposing alternative policy frameworks, seeking exemptions for certain industries or products, and providing support, incentives, or subsidies to encourage the adoption of cleaner technologies by Indian industries.

In addition to engaging with the EU, India is exploring opportunities to

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

End of a stellar career

Apropos of "Manmohan Singh, man behind reforms, ends his Rajya Sabha innings" (April 4), the flourishing tenures of Manmohan Singh as finance minister and Prime Minister during the most challenging times have been memorable indeed. Remembered as a reluctant politician, he served the Parliament for 33 years. The probes against corruption in 2G, coal etc. were initiated during his tenure and

he was never put to blame. The growth trajectory that India is riding on now is undoubtedly based on his economic reforms. He is free from any political controversy within the United Progressive Alliance or in the opposition, and has always been revered. His silence, though mocked and criticised sometimes, was the most powerful. He will always be remembered as Bhisma Pitamah of the modern Indian economy. —Vinod Johri, Delhi

RBI's long watch

In its long and successful journey of nine decades, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) continues to play a pivotal role in maintaining the country's economic stability, regulating the financial sector, managing foreign exchange, regulating currency issuance, and promoting digital innovation. It is interesting to note that the RBI's balance sheet is bigger than the annual budget of the

government, which is around a staggering 47 trillion. It is gratifying that a ₹90 coin was promoted to mark the occasion of RBI @ 90, which symbolises the bank's incredible and rich history. It is hoped that the RBI will continue its excellent work despite rough political weather conditions in the country and stay relevant in the world economic scenario. —MA Madhusudan, Bengaluru

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

KEEP POLITICS ASIDE, ADDRESS TAMIL FISHERMEN'S ISSUES

HALF a century after India recognised Sri Lanka's sovereignty over Katchatheevu, a tiny, uninhabited island in Palk Strait between India and Sri Lanka, the BJP has charged that the Congress government at the Centre gave away the island and the DMK, in power in Tamil Nadu at the time, was complicit in the act. The BJP has connected this to the seemingly unending crisis of fishermen from the state allegedly facing attacks from Sri Lankans at sea and, worse, being arrested and imprisoned, with their boats impounded by the island nation's navy for crossing the international maritime boundary.

In Tamil Nadu, the BJP's high-voltage attack has evoked quick responses from both the Congress and DMK, which pointed to a 2015 RTI reply from the ministry of external affairs that said the agreement "did not involve either acquiring or ceding territory belonging to India". While the state's two Dravidian parties have long demanded the island be retrieved, fishermen's representatives have slammed the BJP's campaign and questioned why the party did not make any effort to get the island back during its decade in power.

While it remains to be seen how the issue will impact voters on polling day, it is important for the Union and state governments to bear in mind that emotive rhetoric aside, the fishers of Tamil Nadu have genuine problems that are unrelated to the island. Not only are they regularly crossing the international boundary line, but are, to the dismay of Lankan Tamil fishers trying to rebuild their lives after the war and amid an economic crisis, also engaging in the damaging practice of bottom-trawling that is banned in Sri Lanka. The solution is to switch to deep-sea fishing, which the Union government supports but fishers say is unremunerative given the low subsidies. Aside from losing focus of the key issues plaguing the fishing community, the national party's campaign has also been criticised by foreign policy experts as one that can do harm to the country's international standing. It is time to put aside rhetoric and listen to the fishing community—from Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu—and take far-sighted, meaningful action to resolve the issues.

TDP SCORES SELF-GOAL ON WARD VOLUNTEERS

POLITICS is so dynamic that one misstep close to the elections could decisively swing the results. Such a situation is playing out at present in Andhra Pradesh, which goes to polls on May 13. The opposition TDP's alliance with the BJP and actor Pawan Kalyan's Jana Sena is seen as a step in the right direction, notwithstanding the inherent problems. But even before the trio could pacify discontented leaders among their ranks, they have scored what seems to be a self-goal. The TDP has been against the system of ward and village volunteers—introduced by the YSRC government to ensure doorstep delivery of government schemes—as it saw them as foot soldiers of the ruling party. Currently, there are about 2.6 lakh such volunteers.

The Jana Sena had earlier levelled serious allegations against the volunteers, going so far as to claim they could be responsible for the trafficking of women. Against this backdrop, Citizens for Democracy, a forum of intellectuals perceived to be sympathetic to the TDP, moved the high court arguing that the volunteers were influencing voters. The issue ended with the Election Commission, acting on the court's directives, prohibiting the deployment of volunteers. If we look at the issue objectively, there is merit in the fears that the volunteers could influence voters. However, politics being politics, it requires deft handling—particularly when the TDP knows the system has made the lives of rural people, especially the elderly, comfortable. At first it was against the system itself, and following a backlash to Kalyan's remarks, changed its stance to clarify that it is not against the system *per se*, only its politicisation.

Disbursal of pensions began at local secretariats, not people's doorsteps, the other day and visuals of the elderly waiting in queues in the searing weather were all over the place. The YSRC was quick to point fingers at the TDP, which is now desperately assuring it is not against the volunteers. The opposition party has also sought to blame the YSRC, claiming the queues could have been avoided. But the people bearing the brunt of this political slugfest would not go into the merits of the arguments. For them, it is ease of living that has been disturbed. Given that there are over 60 lakh social security pensioners, the fallout could be difficult to manage. If the alliance loses in the assembly polls, one could look at this moment as being the turning point.

QUICK TAKE

HAPPIER HERDS & FEWER CONFLICTS

IT took a decade of legal wrangling to take down a 2.2-km fence in Assam. Conservationists rejoiced when Numaligarh Refinery recently started demolishing the contentious wall bordering its township and golf course that was standing in the way of an old elephant corridor. Cutting off migratory animals from their trails boxes them into tight pockets and makes them restive. The removal of barbed fences near Botswana's Okavango panhandle, which had been erected to restrict disease-carrying animals, reaped results in reduced man-animal conflicts and healthier herds. Some European countries have set up 'animal bridges' across highways. India, which is fighting to keep down animal conflicts, should heed these examples.

OVER four billion—that's the staggering number of individuals around the world who would be eligible to vote in 2024, a year brimming with elections. Traditionally, such widespread participation would be a democratic triumph. Yet, a dark cloud hangs over this year's pivotal contests—the chilling vulnerability of democracies in the age of artificial intelligence (AI).

The vulnerabilities? Not relics of the past. Outdated voter registration systems, electronic voting machines and election management software—these are the gaping holes waiting to be exploited. But the threats have evolved. Social media, as we know, shattered the gatekeepers of information. Anyone could publish, dissemination costs plummeted. Generative AI takes this a step further: It's not just dissemination that's near-free; content creation itself approaches zero cost. Sophisticated content, once the domain of specialists, can be churned out with frightening ease. This is the second shift—the democratisation of deception, with profound implications for our information landscape.

The ever-prescient Jonathan Swift wrote, "Falsehood flies, and Truth comes limping after it." Academics seem to have proven this with social media; people are more likely to share falsehoods, perhaps for their novelty or surprise. AI has the potential to supercharge the problem, making content production and propagation automatic, faster and easier. Researchers at Indiana University revealed a botnet of over 1,100 Twitter accounts seemingly operated using ChatGPT in July last year.

AI's reach extends beyond visuals. It can churn out mountains of synthetic text, fabricate articles, and create a seemingly endless army of fake social media accounts. This is now a world where political discourse isn't a clash of ideas but a cacophony of bots parroting lies to each other.

AI can also effortlessly generate event-based media. Days before a Taiwanese election, every phone buzzed with an air-raid alert triggered by a Chinese satellite. Within 24 hours, Taiwan AI labs observed over 1,500 coordinated social media posts promoting conspiracy theories about the alert, sowing distrust. As many as five posts appeared per minute, many more readable than the typical mill fare.

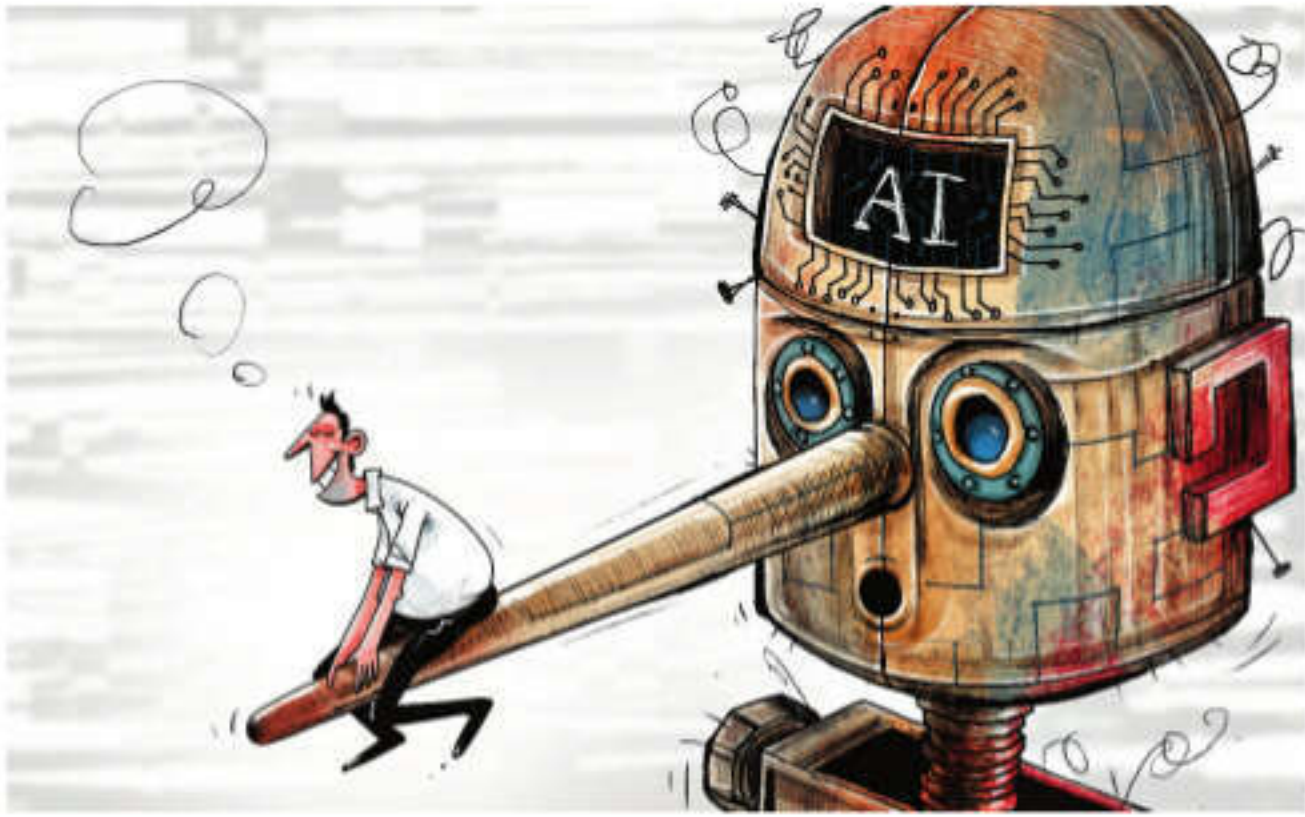
The decentralised online landscape compounds the danger. Users are migrating from monolithic platforms like Facebook to federated social media networks like Mastodon. While fragmentation offers advantages, it creates breeding grounds for misinformation. Each new platform

By allowing the mass production of customised realities, generative AI makes electoral systems vulnerable. Democracies can learn from Taiwan and EU in addressing the threat

DEMOCRATISATION OF DECEPTION IN YEAR OF ELECTIONS

MANISH TEWARI

Lawyer, MP and former I&B minister



SOURAV ROY

becomes a new frontier for manipulation, making content policing more daunting.

But the most dangerous fear is its ability to become intimate with users. In the age of digital loneliness, the biggest trump card for generative AI is it promises to act as advocate and butler. Unlike your search engine, email or cloud storage, AI requires a level of intimacy that goes beyond utility. Imagine a constant companion, working tirelessly in your 'best interests'.

Imagine AI-powered chatbots forging intimate relationships with unsuspecting individuals, subtly shaping their political views. Loneliness, a growing social epidemic, could be exploited to turn individuals into unwitting pawns. Disinformation wouldn't just be broadcast; it would masquerade as friendship. Hannah Arendt,

writing on totalitarianism, described loneliness as a permanent state cultivated by isolation and terror. Totalitarian regimes used this to create a fertile ground for ideological propaganda. During the 2020 US election, the Internet Research Agency linked to the Russian government reached out to targets like Black Lives Matter activists to offer online support and funding.

Truth has always been contested, but AI allows for the mass production of customised realities. Distinguishing fact from fiction becomes an uphill battle when falsehoods are tailored to resonate with individual biases and anxieties. It's not just about fighting fake news; it's about combating the erosion of a shared understanding of reality itself.

So how do we fortify our democracies?

NIGGLES BEHIND THE FALLING CURRENT ACCOUNT DEFICIT

TULSI JAYAKUMAR

Professor, finance & economics; Executive Director, Centre for Family Business & Entrepreneurship at Bhavan's SPJIMR

ly 2.8 times the oil imports in 2023-24.

Further dissecting non-oil imports over the past years (since granular data for 2023-24 is unavailable) from 2018-19 to 2022-23 reveals a steep increase in the imports of certain goods. Thus, imports of vegetable oil surged by 110 percent, fertilisers, crude and manufactured goods by 130 percent, and electronic goods by 34 percent, while gold imports—often vilified for India's Bal-



It's comforting that India's current account deficit has come down for five straight quarters. But private outbound transfers zoomed 84% in the four years to 2022-23. We must remember that rising debt repayment and falling remittances cued in the 1991 balance of payment crisis

ance of Payment woes—experienced only a 6 percent increase over the period.

It is the rising exports of software, business and travel services, and other service exports, that have grown by 5.2 percent on a year-on-year basis, which have helped bridge the gap caused by the trade deficit. Such service balance (net services) has surged by a substantial 28 percent between Q1 2023-24 and Q3 2023-24.

However, the payments toward imports of services reveal another intriguing detail. Payments toward the service item labelled "other personal, cultural, and recreational services" have ballooned by 284 percent, from \$94 million in 2018-19 to \$362 million in 2022-23. Ensuring expenditures on marriages are made within India could

significantly reduce these substantial payments and outflow of precious dollars, besides saving on the travel item as well.

Another cushion available for the current account balance has been private remittances by Indians working overseas. These remittances have grown by 2.1 percent on a year-on-year basis in Q3 2023-24, but by over 16 percent in 2023-24.

An intriguing revelation stemming from a granular analysis of payments related to invisibles is that private transfers from India have skyrocketed by 84 percent over the period from 2018-19 to 2022-23, surging from \$5,795 million to \$10,689 million.

Thus, while the reduction in the CAD itself may give us much-needed solace from a persistently high CAD, especially in the wake of the global financial crisis, it is important to understand how individual items of the current account balance are moving, and the quality of the CAD itself, besides sustainability of such a reduction. As the adage goes, the devil lies in the details, and a more nuanced understanding may be required to ensure a more sustainable and robust current account balance.

Policy makers must heed the shifting significance of items contributing to the new trade deficit. Could industries that dominate the list of new chartbuster imports be prioritised for substantial support/push through policy measures? Moreover, could established, large industries collaborate with India's vibrant startup ecosystem to foster innovation aimed at developing import substitutes? Simultaneously, the escalating trend of service payments by Indians to non-residents would necessitate a different outlook.

It would be beneficial to examine history and recognise India's external payment crisis in 1991 primarily stemmed from an adverse invisibles balance, driven by a significant increase in investment income payments (debt servicing) and a decline in remittance receipts. While India has come a long way since, a cautious approach towards external sector management would continue to be the most advisable strategy.

(Views are personal)
(tulsi.jayakumar@spjimr.org)

Lessons can be learned from Taiwan. Recognising their vulnerability to Chinese interference, Taiwan adopted a 'pre-bunking' strategy. They openly discussed the potential for deepfakes and educated public on how to identify them. By pre-bunking before deepfakes fell into the wrong hands, they inoculated the public. Taiwan's president even filmed himself 'being deepfaked' to demonstrate the ease of manipulation. Pre-bunking takes time, and Taiwan's repeated messaging throughout 2022 and 2023 yielded results. By 2024, when deepfakes did appear, they had minimal effect due to the public's built-up "antibodies".

The second challenge is transparency in training data used for generative AI systems. Access to this is crucial for effective defence. Legislation like the EU's Digital Services Act and AI Act, the UK's Online Safety Act, and India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act—all intended to regulate AI—will come into effect after the elections, after significant damage is done.

If the internet was the most audacious experiment in anarchy and succeeded beyond the wildest imagination of its progenitors, the US's Defense Advanced Research Project Agency, AI is the new frontier as far as tech dominance over the human species is concerned. This is not to argue that the human race should be petrified of the innovation; every technological advance has different implications. Through the use of AI's large language models, a vigorous attempt is being undertaken to replicate the human brain, perhaps the most complex organ among the millions of species that inhabit Earth.

The call for universally agreed rules of engagement across global tech space is growing louder by the minute. There must be a set of common principles that undergirds country-specific legislation. The EU's AI Act provides guidance in the principles that form the substratum of that legislation. They address the risks created by AI applications, prohibit practices that pose undesirable risks, define a list of high-risk applications, set clear imperatives for AI systems for high-risk applications, define the obligations of those who provide high-risk AI applications, require compliance assessment before a given AI system is put into service, and establish a governance structure at European and national levels.

Finally, the fight against AI manipulation cannot be shouldered solely by governments and tech companies. The role of civil society organisations and independent fact-checking would be crucial, too.

However, the moot question is: would it be enough given the way AI is mutating? (Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Quiet contributions

Ref: *Manmohan Singh, a helmsman of the post-Nehruvian era* (Apr 4). Former PM Manmohan Singh always contributed more than his quietude suggested. As PM Narendra Modi commented, Manmohan Singh was so duty-bound that he attended parliament in a wheelchair. It was thanks to his far-sighted policies that our economy did not collapse along with many others during a recession.
M Haneef, Kottayam

Wrong party

Manmohan Singh couldn't do his bit well in his post because he had to dance to the tunes of his own party. He was the right man in the wrong party. That he couldn't prevent the 26 scam, the main reason for his government's downfall, is a case in point.
S Ramakrishnasayee, Chennai

Karnataka leads

Ref: *Follow Karnataka in shift to e-mobility* (Apr 4). Karnataka's moves on EV adoption are an admirable example for other states. EVs require less maintenance, which could save us more in the long run. People must start shifting to EVs rather than fossil-fuel vehicles.
Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

Commercial viability

Ref: *Reverberations from an unequal music* (Apr 4). One of T M Krishna's concerns was the lack of access for the non-Brahmin community to Carnatic music. Did members of other communities find it tough to enter this domain or did many of them not pursue it as it was not seen as remunerative? How many light music singers, Brahmins included, would opt for a career in Carnatic music when they have an opportunity to earn substantially more in their field?
R Kailasnath, email

Raking history

Katchatheevu is a 50-year-old story. Those involved in the decision to hand it over to Sri Lanka are dead and cannot defend their action. Raking up the issue now exposes the bankruptcy of mind. Besides, such insinuations have the potential to affect our relationship with a friendly neighbour.
Raju Mathai, Kochi

Third term

During Modi's first time as PM, common citizens like me underwent a lot of struggle due to demonetisation. The second time, we can't forget the trouble caused to farmers as well as the unnecessary differences created by the NRC and CAA. If Modi comes back with a majority once more, I foresee India facing an elected autocracy.
T Kaish Ditya, Hyderabad

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CONTRAPUNTO

I'd vote for the goofiest candidate. When people outwit leaders, more respected their voices will be

-CRISS JAMI

Message From Teens

Low voter registration among 18/19-year-olds suggests their alienation from politics. We should note this

Everything that one has to wait till 18 to do, is theoretically something one really looks forward to doing. At 18, one can finally vote. For young people in the world's largest democracy, shouldn't this be a powerful coming-of-age moment? An awareness campaign pitches, *Mera pehla vote desh ke liye* – my first vote for the country. But *Apne liye* – for myself – ought to be an equally strong motivation. And yet, **TOI** analysis indicates that only 38% of 18/19-year-olds have registered to vote so far. The disenfranchisement thus indicated is worrying.

Un-settled | One obvious reason is the extent to which the young are not 'settled', unlike their parents. Places they are getting coaching, admission, apprenticeships, jobs (skilled or unskilled), maybe completely different from the family address. This may help explain the low numbers in Bihar and UP, at 17% and 23% respectively. These are poor states with high out-migration. But then why does Chhattisgarh, in broadly the same basket as them, have a whole 54% of 18/19-year-olds registered to vote? There could be social-cultural factors at play in Chhattisgarh that are encouraging democratic participation.



Un-activated | India is in crowded company, when it comes to getting the young to vote. Lowering systemic barriers is the common mobilisation effort, which all countries should focus on. In India's case, delay in activating remote voting for all is clearly costing it young votes, as well as votes of older migrants. But to mention another puzzling contrast, how has the hill state of Himachal pulled off 60% registration while adjoining Uttarakhand crawls at 35%? Telangana has an impressive 67%, next door Andhra Pradesh is 17 percentage points behind. Access is part of the answer. But clearly, not the whole of it.

Un-satisfied | Rich and politicised Kerala has only 38% registration. Richer Delhi, high-buzz heart of national politics, has only 21%. What is going on? Perhaps 18/19-year-olds are refusing to register to vote to express dissatisfaction with the political discourse. Or with the candidates. The numbers show little excitement among first-time voters to head towards the polling booths. And this is bad news for Indian democracy. That its young are not feeling seen and heard. Greybeard moral lectures and talk of voting as duty, would miss the point completely.

Names Of The Game

Who's fighting whom is clear now for 191 LS seats. Candidate selections tell many stories

Nominations came to a close yesterday for the second phase of LS elections. Candidates are decided for 191 seats in 23 states that vote, in one-go or in phases, on April 19 and 26.

Single shot | Tamil Nadu votes in a single phase on April 19. DMK seems the clear frontrunner. But for AIADMK – still unsure post Jayalalithaa – LS elections are a moment of reckoning. BJP roped in several small parties into NDA, and its bringing in PMK as a partner was another setback for AIADMK. Ramadoss's party has significant influence in north TN, and is contesting on 10 of the state's 39 seats. For BJP, it's a battle for the alliance to be number 2, with state leader Annamalai mounting a far more vocal opposition to DMK than AIADMK has done so far.

Double take | Karnataka, which will hold the first of its two-phase election on April 26, is where Modi kicked off his 2024 LS campaign – Kalaburgi being Kharge turf.

While Kalaburgi votes next phase, constituencies that'll see sparks fly, and high-level if not high-quality drama, are Mandya and Bangalore Rural. In 2019, incumbent MP Sumalatha, an Independent with BJP support, defeated JDS's Gowda Jr HDK in Mandya. This time, HDK is NDA's candidate. Sumalatha's threat of fighting HDK as an Independent came up short – she joined BJP on Wednesday. Meanwhile, in Bangalore Rural, it's deputy CM DKS's brother fighting Deve Gowda's son-in-law. One, fasten your seat belts. Two, there's no getting away from family for either alliance.

Three to tango | Rifts within alliances are also all too evident across seats. The most dramatic example is perhaps Wayanad. CPI fielded a candidate against Rahul, and BJP is also in the fray. Kerala, per local pundits, is headed for an interesting election. Congress has lost some of its mojo. And Left vs BJP has become an interesting fight.

Four together | Bihar BJP's Sushil Modi's cancer diagnosis is unfortunate. But as alliances go, four-party NDA is going strong. Nitish is back with BJP. But it's Modi's popularity the alliance is banking on. His combative campaign in Jamui on Thursday was a show of strength. RJD-Congress has a job on its hands.

Handvo homecoming

A simple dish can bring back childhood memories

Jug Suraiya

Recently the small town of Kutch Mandvi moved all the way from the western coast of India to Gurgaon where Bunny and I live.

It wasn't a cataclysmic tectonic plate shift. It involved merely the making, and savouring, of a simple dish called handvo.

I remember eating handvo as a child when we made our annual family visit to my grandmother's house in Mandvi, in Kutch.

This is desert country, and its food is as spare and frugal as its sand-duned landscape. Like handvo, the preparation of which involved elaborate pre-cooking arrangements.

A batter made from dals and rice was fermented overnight in curd, and was ladled out along with grated vegetables into a metal container which was put into a hole dug in the earthen courtyard of the house. Hot embers were placed in the cavity, and the container put atop them with more burning coals on the lid, which was sealed off.

The container would finally be opened to reveal the handvo, with its golden-brown crust which exhaled a tantalising aroma and concealed a soft centre. Bliss was never more ful.

When I mentioned handvo to Bunny she found an online recipe and, thanks to modern technology, made a perfect handvo without digging holes or using fire-hazardous embers. As late the warm handvo with chilled yogurt, I remembered a line I'd read: Home is the food you ate in your childhood. For the first time I understood the full meaning of what that meant.

Eating a madeleine cake inspired Proust to write his monumental *In Search of Lost Time*. We don't have to be Prousts to find our own misremembered homes and times of long ago through the sense of taste.

It's said that when you leave home, you can never go home again because you and your home will have changed too much to be compatible. But if you can't go back to your once-upon-a-time home, it can be brought to you on a plate. All you have to do is to discover your own handvo.

18

ALL THAT'S SHINY

NEED NOT BE LIGHT

THE TIMES OF INDIA
FRIDAY, APRIL 5, 2024

You Can't Get Rich Quick

One time crypto-king Sam Bankman-Fried's conviction for fraud is a cautionary tale for Indians. Beware of financial advice that's exciting or sexy

Chetan Bhagat

Last week, a US court sentenced former crypto star Sam Bankman-Fried, to 25 years in prison. For those unfamiliar, SBF is a 32-year-old MIT graduate. His parents are Stanford law professors. He founded FTX, a cryptocurrency exchange, once valued at a staggering \$32 billion. As recently as 2022, SBF ranked 41st on the US Forbes 400 richest list.

SBF's conviction stemmed from his fraudulent use of customer funds deposited on the FTX exchange, to speculate in crypto markets. This is a story worthy of a movie or web series. More importantly, it serves as a cautionary tale for the more naïve Indian investors.

Getting rich quickly is undeniably appealing, and unscrupulous actors exploit that. SBF did this on a massive scale. However, multiple smaller scams keep happening in the world of finance in India as well.

As per-capita incomes and awareness rise, Indians are flocking to the stock market at an unprecedented rate. According to exchange data, individual trading accounts registered here have surged between 2019 and 2023, from 41 million to 140 million.

This surging audience has given birth to a new breed of social media personalities. Financial influencers, or finfluencers, who claim to provide financial education and literacy. However, many also dispense stock tips, trading ideas, speculative day trading strategies, and other frequently dubious financial advice.

So, it's important to be cautious. Especially of those who entice viewers with the possibility of doubling their money in weeks or months – through day trading, crypto, or penny stocks.

Their videos are filled with technical charts and stock price tables. They post screenshots of their supposed trading profits, often depicting significant gains

within a few months. This is invariably followed by a sales pitch for a course or coaching, designed to get you to invest in them.

However, most of their advice is unsound. Many of the screenshots are fabricated or selectively presented, showcasing profits from a single day while concealing losses incurred on other days.

To add allure to their social media feeds, these finfluencers often flaunt

lawyer. Only chartered accountants can audit accounts. However, in the wild west of social media influencers, anyone with a camera and an inflated ego can dispense their 'expert' investment tips, promising 50% returns in three months.

Sebi, the stock market regulator, has been forced to intervene. In a limited number of cases, fines have been imposed. Some regulations have been implemented regarding registration as a financial advisor. However, we need to



their supposedly affluent lifestyles. They might say something like, 'I bought a Mercedes SUV with all these penny stocks I traded. Want the same car? Here's a link to purchase my ₹5,000 penny stock trading course. Or, here's a ₹10,000 day trading course. Or, better yet, send me all your money and... You get the idea.

These channels and videos garner tens of millions of views. Even if a small percentage falls for them, lakhs of people could be scammed and suffer financial losses. We wouldn't allow someone who isn't a doctor to treat sick patients. Legal advice requires being a

do more in terms of clear guidelines and enforcement.

The problem with good, solid financial advice is that it is boring. It isn't sexy or exciting. After all, the financial industry and money itself aren't inherently thrilling. It's what you achieve with the money you earn that makes life fun.

Here's what constitutes good (but boring) financial advice: Invest in reputable companies or a portfolio of such companies, and hold onto them for the long term. The best advice? Be patient and hold. In other words, shut up and wait.

When UP's Super Don Dies, Who Raises A Cheer?

For some, Mukhtar Ansari was 'mafia nahin messiah'. For most, he was a brazen example of the criminal-politician nexus. His death will likely benefit BJP politically

Pravin Kumar@timesgroup.com



Two police constables have been suspended in Uttar Pradesh for 'praising' gangster-politician Mukhtar Ansari, after the latter's death. The chant of 'mafia nahin messiah hai' was also raised among 30,000+ mourners at Ansari's burial last week. But the numbers of those who have celebrated the death, silently, would be many times greater.

"This is real Holi for me," said Alka Rai, widow of Mohammadabad BJP MLA Krishnanand Rai, who had defeated Mukhtar's elder brother Afzal in 2002 assembly polls. On Nov 29, 2005, Rai and six aides were sprayed with AK-47 bullets allegedly by the Ansari gang.

Ansari had surrendered a month before for his alleged role in Mau riots, and was in jail. Perhaps the last of the big, brazen epitomes of UP's criminal-politician nexus. The question is, who will politically benefit from his death now?

Ghazipur-Mau fiefdoms | Mafia and gangsters, once they turn to politics, often follow a Robin Hood model. Harishankar Tiwari, Virendra Pratap Shahi, Atiq Ahmad and Mukhtar all followed this template. Ansari, thus, had the support of not only Muslims, but also the most backward, Dalits and a fraction of upper castes of Ghazipur and Mau.

Murder was often Mukhtar's weapon to end all challenges. And a long file of SUVs with '786' registration number, complementary intimidation. Political parties, especially SP and BSP, benefitted from Ansari's clout. Quid pro quo was immense.

BSP-SP walkaround | Mukhtar first became an MLA in 1996 on a BSP ticket from Mau and won the next two polls as an Independent. In 2009 LS polls, Mayawati called him 'messiah of the poor' and fielded him against BJP veteran Murlidhar Manohar Joshi in Varanasi.

Joshi barely scraped by, with just a 17,000 victory margin. Ansari brothers then formed Qaumi Ekta Dal; their political empire spread across half a dozen districts of eastern UP.

Mukhtar won from Mau and eldest brother Sibgatullah from home seat Mohammadabad in 2012 assembly elections. Before the 2017 UP polls, they tried to merge QED with SP. Akhilesh Yadav, then UP CM, resisted the move initiated by his uncle Shivalp Yadav. However, Akhilesh himself welcomed the entire Ansari family into the SP fold just before the 2022 state polls and the sons of Mukhtar and Sibgatullah are now MLAs. Afzal is contesting to retain the Ghazipur LS seat as an SP candidate in 2024.

Jail life, king size | Last 18 years spent in jail, Mukhtar turned prisons into his fiefdom. A pond was dug inside a jail to ensure supply of fresh fish; top district officials would drop by to play badminton; a jail superintendent was shot in Lucknow for not implementing the 'no-frisking' clause on his visitors.

Of his 16 murder cases, six were filed while he was in jail. When STF deputy SP Shailendra Singh booked him under POTA in 2004 and sought permission to arrest Mukhtar, he was made to resign within 15 days; the entire STF brass was removed by Mulayam's govt. A year earlier, Mukhtar had played a key role in the defection of BSP MLAs to help MSY form his govt in the state.

Crime parade | Mukhtar's death is unlikely to bring any additional benefit to opposition parties, since the Muslim vote seemed anyway inclined to back the SP-Congress alliance in the coming LS polls.

If anyone will gain from the optics around

Mukhtar's demise, it is Yogi govt. Its iron-hand policy to deal with criminals has many critics, but was one of the reasons for Yogi's record second term in 2022. It is a campaign card this time too.

Govt flaunts how its 'hot pursuit' worked in this case – from zero prosecution through his life, Mukhtar was convicted in eight cases, life-term in two, in the past 19 months.

Communal don | Mau was singled by communal violence in Oct 2005 following the alleged attack on a Ram Lila pandal. Mukhtar roamed in an open SUV carrying a firearm in the town under curfew. This was a turning point. So far, communal amity had been his 'guiding principle' and ensured many non-Muslim supporters and gangsters in his fold. His image now was that of a 'Muslim Bhai'. He surrendered before a Mau court on Oct 25, 2005, in connection with his role in the riots and never left jail thereafter.

When Yogi launched 'hot pursuit' against organised crime, there were 60 gangsters on UP police's target list. Special focus was on the likes of Mukhtar, Atiq and Vijay Mishra. So far, 'ill-gotten' properties worth ₹900 crore belonging to Mukhtar's inter-state gang 'IS 191' (in police files) have either been seized or demolished. Five members of his gang have been killed in police encounters, legal action's been taken against almost 300.

Mukhtar's own admission in his plea before the President that he suffered two heart attacks before Nov 2019 in jail, is now part of UP police's rebuttal to his family's claim that he was slowly poisoned in jail.

Calvin & Hobbes



Is Faith A Limitation Or Blessing Of Intelligence?

Deepak Ranade

Our quest to find answers to the origin of life and the seemingly infinite universe is insatiable. However, the razor-sharp, incisive human intellect, and logic and reasoning are never able to cut through the veil of incomprehensibilities.

Perhaps, one of the greatest minds to walk this planet, Albert Einstein, departed with a sense of despair for being unable to come up with the Theory of Everything that could provide a consensus between his Theory of Relativity, laws applicable to large masses; and Quantum Physics, laws operating in the subatomic realm. It seems he was tantalisingly close to figuring it all out. His epic statement, "the most incomprehensible part of the universe is that it is comprehensible", is a testimony to the angst he was experiencing in his relentless pursuit of the ultimate truth, Theory of Everything. His

undying faith in logic and reasoning eventually made way for something that transcended both.

There is no logical way to the discovery of elemental laws. There is only the way of intuition, which is helped by a feeling for the order lying behind the appearance. Spirituality is the order and science is the appearance. Indic philosophy talks of Purush and Prakriti, Shiv and Shakti that are nomenclatures to address this 'order and appearance'. The most incomprehensible part, Shiv, and the comprehensible part, Shakti.

The unmanifest source, subject, that manifests can never be the object of scientific scrutiny. Science can at best decipher the manifest universe, and yet stumble upon the unfathomable principles that govern the manifest objective universe.

Scientific endeavour will eventually have to shift focus from its obsession with the observed to understanding the observer. Beauty always lies in the eyes of the beholder.

The tangible has to always depend on the intangible for its existence. Does the observer create the observed?

Are the two locked in an inseparable embrace glued together by the bond of observation?

Faith in some higher intelligence, intuition, is that moment of epiphany for the observer when his ego and intellectual quest for answers sublimates to a point of surrender.

Faith never raises questions. It subtly provides recourse. It is the vehicle needed by intelligence to navigate and travel over the unfamiliar terrains of incomprehensibility.

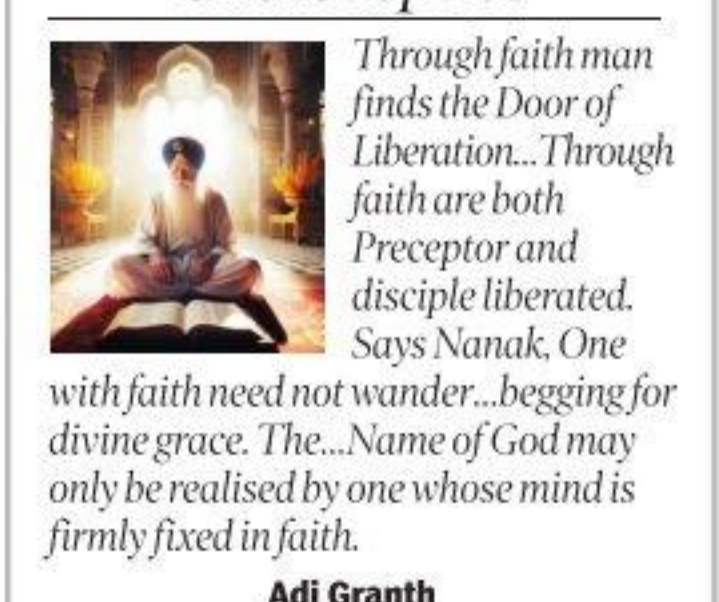
Faith in an anthropomorphic God

tends to be divisive. The faith in the unmanifest that accepts the limitations of intellect and reason will eventually help comprehend the manifest. The Ultimate Truth, the Theory of Everything, lies beyond the domains of the senses, intellect, mind and reasoning. That which cannot be apprehended by the mind, but by which, they say, the mind is apprehended. That which cannot be perceived by the eye, but by which the eye is perceived, as stated in the Kena Upanishad.

Our tryst with destiny will be unravelled only by the harmonious fusion of intellect and a non-divisive faith. A faith that simultaneously surrenders and celebrates. A faith that respects and blends imperceptibly with science to herald an alchemy which blesses him with the realisation that the ultimate truth can only be experienced and never understood.

The writer is a neurosurgeon

Sacredspace



Adi Granth

Tighten Seat Belts, Fly Above Turbulence

Tatas should be able to iron out operational wrinkles

Disquiet among pilots of Vistara, which the Tata group is merging with Air India, has spilled over into flight cancellations that have prompted aviation authorities to seek details of the airline's operations. The issue agitating Vistara's pilots are terms they will be subject to following agreements arrived at between the Tatas and the unions of the much bigger Air India. These terms were settled after drawn-out negotiations between Air India's staff and its new owners, who intend to put the recently privatised airline on a flight to profitability. The unified pay structure applies to pilots of AirAsia India and Air India Express, two other airlines that are part of the Tata group's consolidation of its airline businesses, and has been accepted by staff of these smaller carriers. Pilots of Vistara are not as accepting, given the status of the airline as providing a superior flying experience.

The Tatas, however, have a long experience in takeovers and aligning management cultures after international acquisitions. They also have bandwidth in tackling a large workforce in manufacturing and service industries. Air India was known for its service standards when it was run by the group prior to its nationalisation. The Tatas intend to return the brand to its former glory, and should be able to iron out operational wrinkles in the merger process.

The turnaround of Air India is principally dependent on acquiring a new fleet. Air India, and its primary rival IndiGo, have placed orders for 500 aircraft each, as they try to increase market shares in the world's fastest-growing aviation market. Induction of new jets, and pilots to fly them, can be expected to weaken the bargaining position of unhappy Vistara's pilots. But a solution should be available far before that through negotiation. Overstuffed, unmotivated staff was one of the reasons Air India piled up a mountain of debt and losses under government ownership. The Tatas will be careful to keep staff remuneration and motivation at levels that make running an airline a profitable venture.

Water, Make It a Political Issue

This election season, water should rank high up on the electoral issues list. In fact, it should be politicised. Winter rainfall shortage, groundwater depletion, increased warming due to El Niño and its impact on rains will exacerbate water stress. As politicians promise a grand future in their stump speeches, they need to tell voters of their plan to address water woes. More so, as India's tryst with water stress, if not averted, will short-circuit investment flows, economic growth and jobs, upending the goal of Viksit Bharat. Beacons of developed India like Bengaluru are canaries in the proverbial coal mine.

In 2018, NITI Aayog reported that 600 mn people were living in conditions of high-to-extreme water stress. This is no longer a function of delayed development. Cities, earlier considered immune, are taking the brunt. Increased use of groundwater as urban population grows is no longer a solution. Filling water bodies to construct residential high-rises has slowed groundwater recharge. The situation will worsen. Reservoirs in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh are filled to 25% or less of their capacity. Water storage capacity of 13 east-flowing river basins are deficient to highly deficient. It is not just the south, but reservoir capacities are below last year's levels in other parts of the country too, barring the eastern/northeastern region.

Forecasts of a warmer summer and climate change-induced disruptions in rainfall are already changing life as we know it in our cities. Tankers, transporting water, and interlinking rivers are not the solution. This is a crisis of water planning. Political parties must address this existential problem. Else, what happens in Bengaluru won't just stay in Bengaluru.

JUST IN JEST
It's high time we raise a glass in official events that actually has alcohol

Brief 'Happy Hours' at The Supreme Court

Even as Indian officialdom continues to sniff at anything to do with libations, it was a pleasant surprise to find judicial banter turn to the matter of enjoying a drink — whisky, to be precise. During a Supreme Court hearing, rather aptly on whether 'industrial alcohol' should qualify as the drinking variety — and, thereby, should be taxed as such — Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud and senior advocate Dinesh Dwivedi had a playful exchange pertaining to the good stuff. In reply to Dwivedi's apology for his hair retaining 'Holi colours', Chandrachud quipped whether it had 'nothing to do with the alcohol'. Instead of denying the 'charge' as is wont in officious situations, Dwivedi showed gumption and taste, admitting that he, indeed, was a 'fan of whisky', specifically malt whisky.

It is strange that a country that leads the world in whisky consumption finds celebrating official events with a drink — usually a glass of wine or a flute of champagne — to be taboo. We know the source of the issue — the teetotaler and anti-alcohol barrister from Porbandar. But what this unwritten code has done is left India to view imbibing alcohol as a form of sin. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to suggest that lifting this ban in official circles could help make drinking universally be seen as a social activity, rather than automatically as an anti-social one.

Defence exports have witnessed a considerable uptick, even as some bottlenecks need removing

Into India's Inviting Arms



Harsh V Pant & Kartik Bommakanti

It may not be the age of war, as Narendra Modi reminded Vladimir Putin in September 2022, but a year later, India's defence exports have witnessed a significant surge in 2023-24 with a growth of ₹21,083 crore. In fact, the last few financial years have witnessed steady and methodical increase in India's defence exports to countries including the Seychelles, the Maldives, Mauritius and Ecuador.

These y-o-y increases started primarily in 2017-18, with the trajectory of defence exports hitting ₹4,682 crore, followed by a significant jump to ₹10,745 crore, which represented an increase of an impressive 129.49% in 2018-19. Then, a dip of 15.16% in defence export performance in 2019-20 to ₹9,115 crore was induced by the pandemic. A further decrease ensued in 2020-21, due to the continuation of Covid, by 7.47% to ₹8,434 crore.

The decrease in 2019-20 and 2020-21 was not as precipitous as the surge in defence export growth in the pre-pandemic phase. In the post-pandemic phase, defence exports regained their footing with an increase to ₹12,814 crore in 2022-23, which was higher than in the pre-pandemic year of 2018-19 when exports actually experienced a significant rise.

2023-24 has witnessed a further increase, from ₹15,920 crore in 2022-23 to ₹21,083 crore, representing an increase of 32.43%. Notwithstanding the pandemic serving as a dampener, at no stage before the last decade have Indian de-

fence exports experienced such a steep upward trajectory.

This increase is a direct result of reformist policies instituted by GoI. Three critical factors have enabled this growth:

● **Importantly, less imports** Reduced dependence on foreign equipment manufacturers by way of greater thrust towards tapping into the design, production and manufacturing capabilities of domestic defence PSUs.

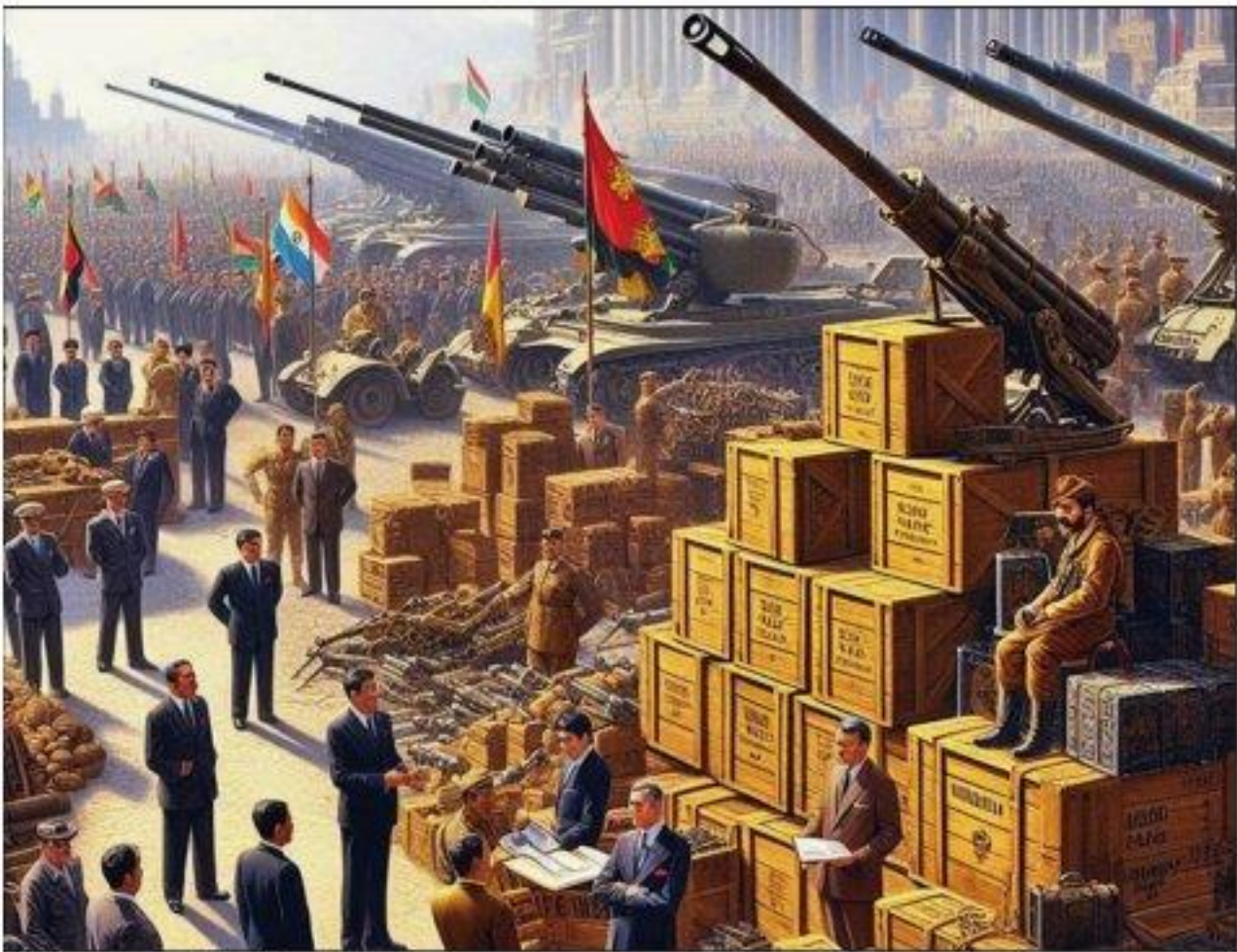
● **Indigenous India** Private companies and startups as part of GoI's Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative. Another critical policy is GoI's decision to create positive indigenisation lists comprising 4,666 items that are now sourced from domestic industry. These items include line replacement units, subsystems and spares, and components.

Of the 4,666 items identified for indigenous development and production under the positive indigenisation list, 2,920 items, or 62.5%, have already undergone indigenisation. With 75% of the acquisition budget under the capital head dedicated to sourcing from Indian companies, GoI has permitted over 40 companies and JVs with overseas original equipment manufacturers (OEMs).

Supplementing this effort is GoI's launch of 'Innovations for Defence Excellence' (IDEX), geared to fostering an ecosystem that generates innovation and stimulates development of technologies through tie-ups with academia, R&D institutions, startups and industry.

● **Def Dip** GoI has engaged in an intensive level of defence diplomacy critical to defence exports. Marketing products to potential buyers from overseas also explains the export surge, coupled with lines of credit, Exim Bank financing for defence exports, and a defence offset policy that allows for integration of weapons or systems in India, which are then exported.

Further, GoI has also assiduously



Defence mechanism

incorporated the role of MEA in augmenting defence exports. Essentially, enlarging the ecosystem and framework for exports — and pivoting towards a whole-of-government approach.

MEA has provided a line of credit to African countries to purchase weaponry and military platforms from India. India's embassies are also being roped in to promote defence exports from India, an additional fillip for dealmaking.

The standout feature from the latest export data is that India's private sector has been the source of 60% of all defence exports, with defence PSUs accounting for the remaining 40% this year. This is significant to the extent that defence PSUs in the Indian military-industrial complex tend to be privileged, in terms of defence contracts and resources by MoD and GoI.

This is why the private sector dominating the defence exportable is all the more remarkable. The 40% contribution of defence PSUs is not negli-

gible. This also reflects the extent to which standards of their products have improved making them exportable.

Yet, challenges remain. Foremost among them is bureaucratic inertia, and obstacles to genuinely integrate the private sector into India's defence innovation and industrial ecosystem. A robust defence industrial base with a dynamic private sector that also shows a readiness to run risks to develop weapons systems is still to be fully realised.

Also, lack of sufficient budgetary allocation, and investment in defence R&D that produces reasonably competitive products for use by the Indian armed forces, as well as items that are export-worthy, remains an issue.

Once the new government takes charge in June, doubling down on defence reforms should be key to building on the present momentum in this space.

Notwithstanding the pandemic serving as a dampener, at no stage before the last decade have Indian defence exports experienced such a steep upward trajectory



GoI has also assiduously incorporated the role of MEA in augmenting defence exports. Essentially, enlarging the ecosystem and framework for exports — and pivoting towards a whole-of-government approach

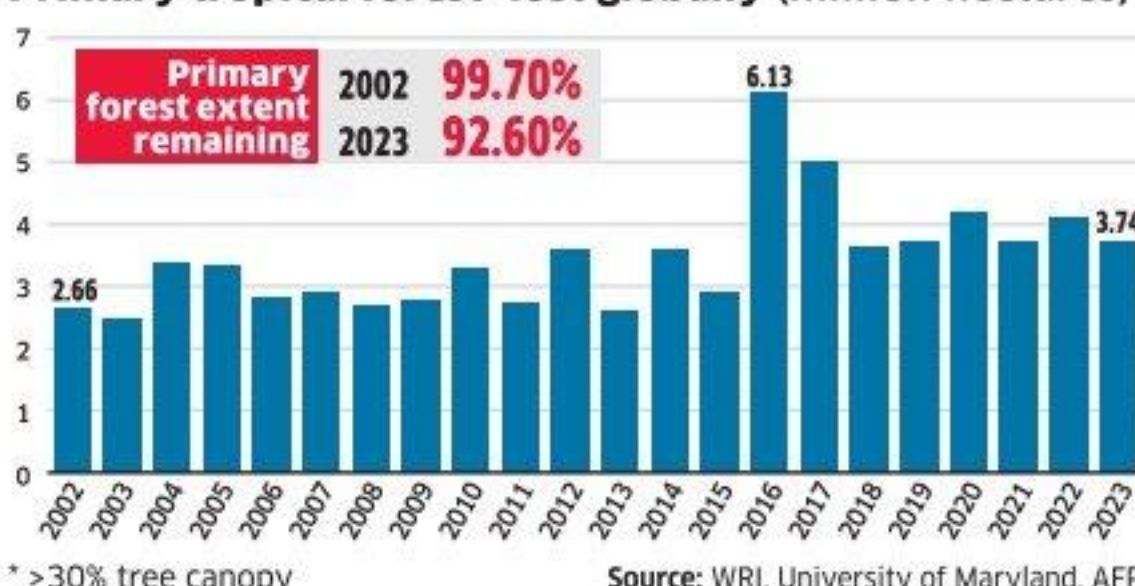
ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

There once was a town in a haze,
Where a heatwave had all in a daze.
They all stripped to their skin,
Said, 'This heat is a sin!'
As they fried eggs on sidewalks for days!

Forest Destruction

Last year, the tropics lost 3.7 million hectares of primary forest, an area slightly smaller than Bhutan, according to researchers in the World Resources Institute and the University of Maryland. This figure is equivalent to losing 10 football fields per minute. Tropical forests absorb carbon and are a vital ally in the fight against climate change, but they are also the most ravaged by deforestation. The 2023 forest loss figure was 9% lower than the previous year, equivalent to 2.4 billion tonnes of CO2 emissions — nearly half of US annual emissions from fossil fuels...

Primary tropical forest* lost globally (million hectares)



Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



Why make scientific claims when our drug is sold based on its magical properties?

Keep AI's Future Open



Amitabh Kant

Rapid evolution of AI offers a unique chance to meld cultures, ideas and knowledge into a unified canvas of innovation. With AI poised to inject \$15.7 tn into the global economy, its role extends beyond mere economic growth to being a pivotal force of societal transformation. This potential has captured the focus of policymakers worldwide, as we witness several national laws, multilateral guidance and global summits to ensure effective regulatory oversight.

However, the pace of AI innovation will surpass the speed at which new regulations can be developed. While regulatory frameworks are indispensable, they are not sufficient to navigate advancements and complex dynamics of the AI sector. A broader, more inclusive approach to governance that transcends conventional regulatory strategies is essential. This approach demands the cultivation of an AI ecosystem rooted in openness and transparency, a fertile ground where deliberation, diversity and even dissent are not just welcomed but are incentivised pathways towards achieving consensus on ethical and responsible AI training, development and deployment.

The global AI community should support and promote the open-source movement. By fostering a dynamic open-source ecosystem that welcomes auditing, adaptation and use, we can create a transparent foundation that benefits technological advancement. There are learnings from India's digital public infrastructure (DPI), which is open source, open API and globally interoperable.

► **No monopolies games** It acts as a great equaliser in the marketplace by democratising access to AI technologies. It guards against monopolisation, ensuring that the interests of a select few corporations or countries do not shape the future of AI. Over 93% of developers

worldwide adapt and integrate open-source code into their projects. An open ecosystem minimises the time and resources necessary to create new applications, democratising access to tools across a broader spectrum of developers. A 2024 Harvard Business School study 'The Value of Open Source Software' reveals that the open-source ecosystem considerably lowers software costs for organisations, reducing expenses by up to 3.5 times. Also, open-source ecosystem's supply-side value is estimated at \$4.15 bn, while its demand-side value is about \$8.8 tn.

► **Cross-pollination** A vibrant open-source AI ecosystem can foster interdisciplinary strategy in AI R&D and implementation, essential for harnessing its potential and building public confidence. Furthermore, a multidisciplinary method will ensure a discourse of ethical, environmental and social elements throughout the AI lifecycle, from ideation to deployment, mitigating many contemporary concerns.

► **More the merrier** For AI to benefit and represent everyone, there must be widespread community involvement in AI development. This level of engagement is beyond the reach of exclusive, proprietary models. Instead, it calls for a thriving open-source ecosystem that fosters diversity and inclusivity, ensuring AI technologies are shaped by a multitude of perspectives and experiences.

► **Transparency triumphs** To combat bias and discrimination in AI, promoting transparency in algorithms is crucial. For instance, Stanford's 2022 AI Index Report underscored that while LLMs have become sophisticated, they also tend to replicate and amplify biases and toxicity from their training data.



Keep a blank slate

reinforcing societal prejudices and power imbalances. The open-source ecosystem can be instrumental in offering a collaborative space for examination and enhancement, ensuring AI evolves as a force for equity, fairness and alignment with societal values.

► **Safety valve** Openness plays a crucial role in bolstering AI safety. It adheres to principles of auditability and accountability, ensuring AI's reliability is rigorously maintained. Allowing for external scrutiny enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of AI models. An open-source ecosystem can provide a much-needed dialogue on audit practices, safety protocols and verification methods, enriching the AI landscape.

► **Real-time data** AI ecosystem can significantly enhance regulatory processes by providing real-time data. Its inherent transparency enables ongoing monitoring and evaluation of AI technologies, ensuring regulators remain informed about the latest developments and challenges.

Narendra Modi recently approved the IndiaAI mission, with ₹10,371.92 cr. With objectives of democratising computing access, enhancing data quality, nurturing homegrown AI expertise, drawing top-tier AI professionals, fostering industry partnerships, offering financial support to startups, focusing on socially beneficial AI projects and promoting ethical AI practices, the mission's blueprint resonates deeply with the open-source philosophy. This strategic alignment will boost India's journey towards becoming an AI powerhouse.

As AI capabilities advance, it will increasingly be intertwined with diverse societal frameworks and functions. Given the swift pace of AI deployment and commercialisation, it's crucial for global stakeholders in AI development to commit to ethical practices that uphold accountability, explainability, fairness and transparency.

Embracing the open-source ecosystem in AI is critical for this. It will ensure a future where tech is developed with a foundation of humane values, ensuring the benefits from AI are shared widely and equitably.

The writer is India's G20 sherpa

BLISS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Walking Through A Rhodo Path

There are trees, and then there are trees. But rhododendrons are truly a joy to behold. Walking through a forest path adorned with red rhododendron trees, which are found in abundance in the Himalayan region, is a sensory delight that is sure to rejuvenate your spirit and tired bodies.

With each stride in the mountains, the air becomes cleaner, infused with the sweet perfume of rhodo blossoms, filling the heart with a profound sense of joy and tranquility. The gentle rustle of leaves and the loud chirps, tweets and squeaks of monals, Himalayan



bluetails and great barbets provide a soothing soundtrack as you walk.

Dappled sunlight filtering through the dense foliage casts intricate patterns on the forest floor, adding a magical quality to the experience. At the end of the walk, there is the refreshing rhodo juice and wine to savour.

Whether traversing this enchanting domain in solitary reflection or in the company of fellow nature enthusiasts, strolling along a pathway adorned with flourishing rhododendron trees can be an enriching journey for the soul. Such encounters leave an enduring mark on the spirit, igniting an insatiable yearning for further exploration and immersion in the wonders of the natural world.



THE SPEAKING TREE

Overcoming Doubts

SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

In Sanskrit, doubt is called sandeha. Deha means body. Sandeha means doubt. They're very close. Doubt is a state of mind. Do you know when there is this state of mind? It is when we are body-conscious or body-bound, and are not aware of the life within us. Doubt is that state of mind where it's not fully alive. Answers cannot satisfy doubt. Hearing and seeing cannot eliminate doubt.

The life in you is dull. On the day you do pranayam or Sudarshan Kriya, you are so alive. Every cell in your body is alive, and then there is no doubt in the mind. You feel so wonderful because of this. There is no split in your consciousness. Doubt is the split. A portion is awake and another major portion is asleep — the unfulfilled state of consciousness.

When the prana is low, you feel unfulfilled. And when the prana is full, you are so fulfilled. So, when you have doubts, do more sadhana, practice. This is called shraddha, faith, the opposite of doubt. It starts with self-doubt — doubting the self, doubting everything and doubting the Divine.

There are three types of faith: in the divine, in the universe and in the world. Faith in your Self, faith in the world and faith in something we do not know, the Divine. Start from anywhere. Any point will lead to all three. When doubts arise in you, meditate, do pranayam and prayers, and see whether the doubts remain. There is a shift in your consciousness.

Chat Room

Black Paint on Guv in Bad Faith

Apropos 'Yes, Bank, No, Governor' by Vinayak (Chat Room, Apr 3), the letter's oblique references are obviously to Raghuram Rajan. Calling him a rockstar pejoratively and then blaming his tenure as governor for NFAs and the Yes Bank crisis amounts to spreading a false narrative for obvious political reasons. Several reports reveal how Rajan provided material evidence on NPA frauds and, for the first time, made us realise their seriousness. Also, the Yes Bank crisis came to light about four years after Rajan left RBI, after his brief three-year stint, in September 2016. You can't blame an RBI governor for frauds allegedly committed within a bank by those who are trusted to safeguard it.

MOHAN SIVANAND
Byemail

Delayed Bail is Criminal, Indeed

This refers to the Edit, 'Don't Make Bail A Coin Toss' (Apr 4). The Supreme Court has rightly issued guidelines to scrupulously follow the laid-down process for early disposal of bail applications, so as to assure the fundamental right to liberty in case of a delay of trials on technical grounds. An accused cannot be treated as a criminal until and unless it's proven in the court. Hence, a delay or discrepancy in filing a full and final chargesheet should not result in keeping a person behind bars for a prolonged period, which goes against the constitutional guarantee of freedom of movement. Of course, a default bail can be cancelled on merit if it reveals commission of a non-bailable crime.

MILIND AVASARE
Mumbai

Food Waste is Eating the World

Apropos the Edit, 'What a Waste Food Waste Is, Stop It' (Apr 2), the fight against hunger often overlooks a hidden enemy, supermarkets and restaurants. Fear of lost profits incentivises discarding perfectly edible food daily, a shocking reality considering millions go hungry worldwide. This wasted food, often packaged in plastic, decomposes anaerobically in landfills, releasing methane, a potent greenhouse gas 25 times more effective than CO2 in trapping heat. While food scarcity demands attention, tackling food waste through targeted solutions is equally crucial.

ANANSHA GODANI
Ujjain

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FIRST COLUMN

NO FOREIGN POLICY IN MANIFESTOS

No political party is telling people about its foreign policy in its election campaign



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

Most large national political parties are busy providing finishing touches to their election manifestos. These documents will hold stated promises, from political parties, if voted to power and most of them would swing between populist measures such as free electricity, water or promise a dream for a developed India in next twenty-five years or so. However, none of the manifestos from political parties, so far, are showing any promise of having dedicated chapters on India's foreign policy outlook, if their group has majority in June 2024. The ruling BJP, which has been power for a decade now, is widely bene perceived to have steered India's foreign policy in direction, where India is seen taking influential positions on the geopolitical theatre. One of the most significant aspects became visible with the party appointing career diplomat Dr S Jaishankar as India's foreign affairs minister, in 2019, thereby bringing in a suitable candidate for the post. In hindsight, it may also be argued that with Mr Jaishankar, a veteran diplomat, having several senior level contacts across the aisle, in US and in China, the Government set the ball rolling for its visual ascendancy on geo political map, culminating in a grand finale of India's G20 presidency with a consensus joint statement.

Dr Jaishankar it seemed delivered on his brief, of managing the volatile tension prevailing between the western world (led by US and Europe) and China, Russia group, to deliver a joint statement during India's G20 presidency. Meanwhile, India continued to posture itself as the authentic voice of the global south, holding a conference just before, the G20 summit.




The global south, has broadly been dubbed by many analysts, as the new nomenclature for Non Aligned Movement (NAM), due to the commonalities. The NAM group of countries (including India) chose a middle path away from the prevailing tensions of the cold war era power blocks (US and erstwhile USSR) a situation, similar, the broad common agendas of global south countries, even though, the realities have changed drastically on ground. India, by assuming the lead position as voice of the global south, engages with every relevant global power (read US and China) for a fair and equitable say in common issues, including climate change, energy prices impacted by war and restructuring of multilateral bodies, to name a few. Prime Minister Modi ensured that India could keep its domestic inflation under control by purchasing west sanctioned, Russian oil, while convincing/communicating policy makers and influencers in Washington DC, New York and several other European capitals about India's position on the war. India in two years moved from being on the verge of being sanctioned to being recognised for the balancing act it played in preventing a nuclear attack on Ukrainian territory by Russia. India meanwhile also managed to expand the bilateral strategic relationship with US moving beyond defence cooperation to a technology partnership, specially, for new and emerging frontiers such as artificial intelligence. With this background, it is hard to believe that the current ruling party at the centre, which has made foreign policy as one its showstoppers for an awed electorate, may exclude definitive statements in its election manifesto. Meanwhile the principal opposition party, except for making few remarks on the West Asia crisis and Ukraine, has steered clear of commenting on Mr Modi's foreign policy outlook. It is hardly likely that there will be significant mention regarding same, in either their individual manifesto or any combined alliance manifesto. At a time when the promise of becoming the world's third largest economy looks real and India gets more integrated with the global affairs, absence of clear stated foreign policy agenda by political parties, may be a yawning gap. *(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)*

Dynastic politics and the mirage of leadership

As India navigates its political landscape, the verdict is clear: Leadership must be earned, not inherited

There is an adage in south India which when translated into English would read like this ; "The moment you see a kid, you can make out the plight of the village from where he hails". This means that the kid can never hide the intensity of the poverty and sufferings he undergoes in the village. This is true in the case of many of our politicians who are out in the street seeking votes from the electorate. The truth that they are misfit as leaders is written clearly on their body language. We can also make out true leaders from their attitudes and behaviour towards society. However hard they try to project an artificial behaviour, their failure as a potential leader would be as clear as



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

daylight. The offsprings of leaders of dynasty politics is a clear proof of the adage mentioned above. The chief minister of Tamil Nadu M K Stalin, who is the president of the DMK, is a case study. Stalin is incapable of addressing a gathering of even 100 persons without the help of a written speech. He has a battery of beauticians in attendance wherever he goes to address public meetings. One

Dilemma of the unemployed youth

The issue of unemployed youth has become a focal point in political discourse. The interpretation of unemployment rates and its politicisation are exacerbating the situation


Youth unemployment is a global concern, carrying significant economic, social and political implications for both developed and developing nations. It's a key focus of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) for 2030, adopted by countries across the world, including India. Recently, the issue gained significant attention in India following the release of the India Employment Report (IER) 2024 by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Institute for Human Development (IHD), New Delhi on March 26, 2024. The report emphasised India's demographic advantage due to its large youth population, which is expected to remain for at least another decade. However, it also highlighted a pressing challenge: the high and rising unemployment rate among youth, especially those with higher educational qualifications, and enter the labour force each year. This issue has grabbed headlines in both national and international media and has become a prominent topic in political discussions and debates. However, the misinterpretation of youth unemployment rates and politicisation of the issue by various commentators and political parties are exacerbating the situation. This article aims to provide a closer analysis and interpretation of this issue. A large proportion in total unemployed population consists of young people, but they make up only a small percentage of overall youth population: The youths made up 83 per cent of India's unemployed population, whereas out of around 361 million total youths and 664 million adults (30+ years) in India, only 5 per cent youth and negligible 0.6 per cent adults were unemployed in 2023. The main point here is that while it may seem like there are a lot of young people in the labour force (both employed and unemployed) who don't have jobs, when you compare it to the total number of youth in the country, it's actually a small percentage. Therefore, when considering unemployment, it becomes clear that this is primarily a youth issue, who often enter in the labour market for the first time and faced greater challenge than the experienced adults.

THE SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITH GRADUATE AND HIGHER EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS OVER THE PAST DECADES IS A GOOD THING

The surplus youth labour force has concealed a significant increase in job opportunities over the recent decade compared to the previous one: A good number of jobs were created for young people from 2012 to 2023 (the recent decade) than from 2000 to 2012 (the previous decade). However, this positive trend was overshadowed by a significant increase in the number of young people entering the labour force in the recent decade. This surge in the youth labour force resulted in a rise in their unemployment figures and rate. Specifically, nearly twelve times more jobs were created for young individuals in the recent decade (7.9 million) compared to the previous decade (0.7 million). However, the increase in the youth labour force was much higher in the recent decade (16.1 million), compared to the previous decade (1.6 million). Consequently, the number of unemployed young people increased more than eight times in recent decade (8.2 million) compared to the earlier decade (0.9 million), leading to an increase in the youth unemployment rate from 6 per cent in 2012 to 10 per cent in 2023. The significant increase in the number of young people with graduate and higher educational qualifications over the past decades is a good thing. However, this has also led to a rise in their unemployment rate, despite there being more jobs generation. This could be because of skill mismatch or rise in their level of expectations and aspirations: To explain further, let's look at trends. In 2000, only 5 per cent of young people had graduate or higher qualifications. By 2023, this had increased to 20 per cent. That's a big jump! During the previous decade, 7.6 million of these highly qualified young people entered the job market. In the recent decade, that number jumped to 24.6 million. But here's the catch: only 6.5 million of

them found jobs in the first period, and 17.5 million found jobs in the second period. This increase in the number of jobs available for highly qualified young people should be a good thing, right? However, the number of unemployed graduates also rose, from 1.2 million to 7.2 million. Also, the unemployment rate among them also increased from 19.9 per cent in 2012 to 28 per cent in 2023. So, even though more jobs are being created for highly qualified young people in recent years, their unemployment rate is still going up. This could be because there are too many highly qualified young people for the available lower number of jobs, their skills don't match what employers need, or there are jobs being created, they often don't meet their expectations and aspirations. The ILO-IHD report also highlighted "Educated youth, whether male or female, want stable white-collar jobs. The economy is generating jobs but not enough secured well paid public sector or white-collar jobs as aspired by highly educated youths. In addition, the technological advancement rapidly affected the demand for skill and certain types of employment." The labour market surveys in India may not be adequately covering the information of youth involved in emerging new types of jobs, which may lead to inaccuracies in employment and unemployment data. This is a problem because emerging digital technology is changing the job market, making it more complicated. For example, there are now jobs in the gig economy and on social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram. These jobs are especially popular among young people. However, there haven't been any studies to figure out how many of these jobs there are, especially since they've become more common after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The national labour force surveys also don't include these new types of jobs because they haven't been defined properly. As a result, the national labour statistics might not count all the jobs that exist, which could make it seem like there are more unemployed young people than there really are. During the report's release, Chief Economic Adviser V Anantha Nageswaran mentioned that it's not always necessary for the Government to intervene in every social or economic issue. He emphasised that businesses should take the lead in hiring more people. He stated, "We need to change our mindset. In usual circumstances, it's businesses, especially those involved in making a profit, that should be doing the hiring." He acknowledged various Government initiatives while also admitting, "There's room for improvement, and I believe the Government is aware of that." From the above discussion, we can see that a significant number of job has been created for young people in recent decade. But there are still employment challenges for young people, especially those who have graduate and higher level of educational qualification because more of them are completing for available jobs. Other factors like technological changes, higher aspirations, and skill mismatches also contribute to this issue. In this context, it's important to interpret sensitive data such as youth unemployment rate with caution and care. Doing so will benefit healthy discussions and debates and also assist both the national Government and other relevant stakeholders in devising appropriate policies for suitable job creation for youth. *(The writer is Professor at Institute for Human Development, Delhi and Co-Author of India Employment Report, 2024. The views expressed are personal)*



BALWANT SINGH MEHTA

clan. The less said the better. In neighboring Uttar Pradesh, people hoped to see a generational change when Akhilesh Yadav was elevated to the post of chief minister and party president. There was no generational change except the fact that an old feudal lord gave way to the new zamindar. All are not Rahul Gandhis too. The Gandhi clan is lucky to be blessed by God Almighty with a wonderful youth. But all political families are not the same as that of the Gandhis and all young leaders are not like Rahul Gandhi. One has to work really hard to emerge as an undisputed leader like him. *(The writer is special correspondent with the pioneer; views are personal)*

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Progressive guidelines

Catholic body attempts to break down barriers

CITING 'emerging challenges due to the current socio-cultural, religious and political situation' in the country, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) has issued a set of guidelines for all educational institutions under its jurisdiction. These include recitation of the Preamble to the Constitution by students during the daily morning assembly, showing respect for all faiths and traditions, not forcing Christian traditions on students of other religions, and setting up an inter-religious prayer room on the campus. The CBCI, the apex decision-making body of the Catholic community in India, has about 14,000 schools, 650 colleges, seven universities, five medical colleges and 450 technical and vocational institutions under its aegis. It is commendable that this influential association has taken the initiative to promote religious and cultural sensitivity and encourage respect for diversity among students as well as staff members.

The Preamble, which is regarded as the soul of the Constitution, showcases the core constitutional values of justice, equality, liberty and fraternity. Displaying it at the entrance to the school building and making students recite it in the assembly will go a long way in inculcating these values in them.

Giving utmost importance to the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation can help the children grow into mature and responsible citizens with a secular outlook. This is imperative in view of the all-pervasive polarisation in the country. The CBCI guidelines can serve as a model to be emulated by all educational institutions with religious affiliations. The Supreme Court had shown the way in January this year by observing that the right of minorities to establish and administer any educational institution under Article 30(1) of the Constitution was not meant to ghettoise any community. A welcoming and harmonious environment on every campus would be an apt tribute to the framers of the Constitution and a key step towards building a truly developed India.

Quake resilience

Strict building code helps Taiwan minimise losses

ON Wednesday, Taiwan was shaken by its most powerful earthquake — measuring 7.2 on the Richter scale — in 25 years, a grim reminder of the seismic risks faced by nations situated along the Pacific 'Ring of Fire'. Yet, amidst the devastation wrought by the tremors, Taiwan's response stands as a beacon of resilience, underscoring a crucial message: earthquakes don't kill, buildings do. The country's location makes it vulnerable to seismic disturbances, and it has invested well in disaster preparedness. In many other countries, buildings fail to withstand tremors because of construction flaws, exacting a heavy toll on human life.

The island nation's stringent building code, a robust seismological network, swift emergency responses and extensive public education campaigns on earthquake safety have proven invaluable. The roll-out of administrative reforms following the devastating quake of 1999 that claimed over 2,500 lives highlights the country's commitment to bolstering its resilience against seismic events. Despite the magnitude of the latest tremor, major losses were averted and Taipei emerged relatively unscathed. It resulted in the loss of 10 lives and damage to infrastructure.

Sadly, in contrast, India continues to grapple with the tragic consequences of poor construction practices and ineffective disaster management. The quakes in Latur (1993) and Bhuj (2001) had claimed thousands of lives. India has much to learn from Taiwan regarding the importance of prioritising building resilience over disaster response. Meanwhile, the tragedy underscores the need for united rescue efforts, transcending the geopolitical divide. Taiwan's strategic semiconduct or industry, vital to the global supply chain, faces potential disruptions, amplifying concerns amid its strained relations with China.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, APRIL 5, 1924

The Bengal situation

WE have sometimes thought that in the present stage of transition, India has far more to gain from the more progressive and pro-Indian of British politicians being in the Opposition than by their being in office. The reason is clear: In the Opposition, they can give all the support they like to those principles for which India has been fighting. In office, they are too often apt to betray a nervous anxiety to show that the difference between them and their opponents is not really so great as the latter imagine, and in some cases that there is no difference whatsoever. On the other hand, the conservatives and diehards who, while in office, would naturally effect a certain amount of moderation, at least in their utterances, become literally wild in the exhibition of their irresponsibility when they are in the Opposition. Consequently, there is no one left to do even lip service to true liberal principles. We are reminded of this truth by certain questions that were recently asked in the House of Commons regarding the position that has arisen in Bengal owing to the refusal of the salary of the ministers. All these questions were asked by conservative members who have never been friendly to the reformed regime and who, in the present case, were in an indecent hurry to get back to the days of undiluted autocracy by killing the reforms, and the minister who answered them showed no greater faith in or enthusiasm for the reforms than his interrogators. One of the questions was whether, in consequence of the rejection of the vote for the ministers' salaries in Bengal, the transferred subjects were going to be transferred to the reserved side so as to enable the Governor to restore the grant.

OPINION

A below-the-belt blow on poll eve

Kejriwal's arrest has shaken the conscience of the nation's right-thinking citizens



TRYSTS AND TURNS
JULIO RIBEIRO

I have met Arvind Kejriwal only once. It was sometime in 2005 or 2006 at a meeting of trustees of the Public Concern for Governance Trust (PCGT). BG Deshmukh, former Cabinet Secretary and former Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister, was the trust chairman at that time. Kejriwal had been invited to meet the trustees and explain to them the work he was doing to combat corruption in the Income Tax (IT) Department in New Delhi.

Kejriwal was a regular recruit to the Indian Revenue Service through the UPSC's civil services examination, the one in which Deshmukh and I had appeared years earlier — Deshmukh got into the IAS and I into the IPS.

Kejriwal used to arrive for work an hour before the official time and set up a small table with a chair outside the central IT office. Applicants for IT refunds or PAN cards could take his help to get their work completed expeditiously without payment of 'speed money'. It worked, but not without ruffling feathers. He displeased many of his colleagues. How many of them are in the Enforcement Directorate (ED) today? Are any of them handling the investigation against him?

Since the PCGT had been established for the express purpose of improving the quality of life of the common resident of Mumbai by monitoring governance, Kejriwal told us of an NGO in the national capital that he was mentoring so that people's woes could be addressed. The trustees of the PCGT were impressed with his commitment to the cause of integrity and justice.



UNDER SCRUTINY: Arvind Kejriwal is accused of unfairly tweaking the Delhi Government's excise policy. PTI

Would, nay could, a man so devoted to values of good governance transform overnight into an ogre bent on fattening himself on filthy lucre? To those who have had a glimpse of his personality, his thinking and his attitude of mind and heart, it seems impossible. Like in the case of AAP MP Sanjay Singh, no money has been traced to him.

The next time Kejriwal came to my attention was when he rode on the back of that great exponent of good conduct and honest, simple living — Anna Hazare. Now, Anna was an institution in my state, Maharashtra. Like many people there, I know most things about Anna. I interacted with him on more than a couple of occasions. Anna is a simple man, but since he has been lionised and feted by so many individuals so many times, the adulation has affected his capacity to weigh possibilities and probabilities calmly.

The combination of Anna and Kejriwal had the promise of becoming a game-changer. But Kejriwal had other ideas. These ideas were not anticipated by Anna or by most citizens who applauded the two for raising the banner of revolt against one of

Among the witnesses the ED has stacked up to prove Kejriwal's guilt, the main one is a co-accused who has turned approver on the promise of a pardon.

the two biggest impediments to India's progress — corruption (the other is communalism). Just as the battle was taking a winning turn, Kejriwal announced his intent to enter the political arena by forming the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

This decision dismayed Anna and sundry other admirers like me. He saw in this move a betrayal by a man in whom he had placed his trust. Anna had always dreamed of himself as a moral force who kept away from

the spoils that politics engenders. But that is a different story. Today, we are concerned with the BJP's intricate plan of extinguishing all credible opposition to its political hegemony.

Kejriwal is accused of unfairly tweaking the Delhi Government's excise policy for the sale of liquor in the Capital. If he had a hand in shaping or changing that policy, I would not be surprised. All political parties need money to operate. They have no means of financing their activities, except kickbacks from contracts and dispensation of favours to business houses. Turnkey deals like the purchase of the Bofors guns or the Rafale jet fighters are the most obvious temptations. Every citizen knows that this is routinely done by governments and condemned by Opposition parties. But the Indian citizen is impervious to such peccadilloes. She/he has accepted it as inevitable.

What the citizen is not accustomed to is the single-minded hounding of Opposition parties and their leaders by unleashing the ED and the IT authorities relentlessly on their opponents to ensure an Opposition-mukt Bharat. Kejriwal's arrest has shaken the conscience of the

nation's right-thinking citizens even more than the IT Department's initial order freezing the Congress' bank accounts for the recovery of IT dues (coercive action has now been put on hold). These are below-the-belt blows delivered by a boxer who viciously pulverises his opponent even though the latter is losing!

The BJP conceived of electoral bonds for financing the costs of fighting elections. Its pickings would hurtle it to victory because Opposition parties would be left with the crumbs. In a country where money is used to buy votes and bring down governments formed on the basis of the people's mandate, it is not surprising that an up-and-coming party like AAP would formulate a scheme to add substance to its piggy bank.

Kejriwal has certainly not used any of the money his party has raised via the alleged kickbacks from liquor dealers, whether they hailed from the South or the North, for his personal expenses. If that is the allegation against him, no one will believe that such a thought could even enter his mind. It is equivalent to accusing the *choukidar* of being a thief!

Among the witnesses the ED has stacked up to prove Kejriwal's guilt, the main one is a co-accused who has turned approver on the promise of a pardon. That same approver bought electoral bonds worth crores of rupees days after he turned approver and was set free on bail. The approver's father, Magunta Sreenivasulu Reddy, has been given the ticket by the Telugu Desam Party, a BJP ally, from the Ongole Lok Sabha seat in Andhra Pradesh.

The old man who delivers my newspapers is my sounding board for what the poorer citizens think of political events. "Poor Kejriwal," he said, "he had done much for the *jhuggi-jhopri* dwellers of Delhi in the fields of education and health and given them free electricity. Now, he will languish in jail unless he joins the BJP!"

“A debt should be paid off till the last penny; an enemy should be destroyed without a trace. —Chanakya”

The tall tales of Rajiv's 'friend'

SHAMSHER CHANDEL

ABOUT 10 years ago, I happened to attend the wedding of a rich businessman's daughter in Ludhiana. I sat at a round table amidst businessmen and was the odd one out. I was introduced to two men, both very suave and dignified, who had come from Gwalior. The three of us sat listening as the others discussed the ever-escalating property prices. Between bites of chicken kebab, they unleashed their sales pitch on the duo.

As soon as the two men found out that I was a journalist, they whisked me off to a quiet corner and bombarded me with questions about my profession and the relations between politicians and journalists.

After I had finished narrating an incident about an election campaign, one of them claimed that he had accompanied his friend Rajiv on the campaign trail. 'It was Suman who managed the entire campaign so well, but the chap (Rajiv) was unlucky,' he said.

He went on: 'You know Rajiv and MS were thick till I broke into their circle and then Rajiv and I became the best of pals.'

After a good half an hour, my curiosity finally got the better of me. I couldn't help asking about this Rajiv they were gushing over. 'Oh... I am talking about Rajiv Gandhi. We were together at The Doon School and were the best of chums. Mani Shankar (MS) Aiyar was our senior. Rajiv was in awe of Mani from schooldays. I was a *bad mash*, but he liked me as well. And Suman was his press adviser.'

Now I knew that he was talking about the Lok Sabha elections of 1991, when Rajiv was assassinated during a poll rally. I asked an obvious question: 'What do you do for a living?'

'Oh, you know, just the usual routine,' he said. 'I wake up around 9-ish, have my morning tea, breakfast and a quick scrub. Then it's off to the billiards room. Lunch is with friends at our *haveli*. After that, there is golf, followed by people visiting me, and then dinner. I usually retire to bed 12-ish.'

On hearing this evasive answer, a man who sat with us at the table said, his grin reaching his ears: 'It seems like a hush-hush land deal is brewing.'

The man from Gwalior said: 'Yes, I have a little piece tucked away in Jaipur. Just about 100 acres of land and I want to sell it in one go.'

'Oh, I am a small fish. For this, you will have to get hold of a shark,' the businessman said before disappearing.

By now, I knew the answer to 'what he did for a living'. I asked him: 'How do you look after your land?'

'Well, back in the 1970s, I used to drive in an open jeep and sometimes, when a chopper was available, I would tell the pilot to raise it to about 1,500 ft. But now, drones are a cheaper option,' he replied.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Role of ED under scanner

Apropos of the editorial 'Bail for Sanjay Singh', the release of the AAP MP and the fact that no money trail has been established call into question the functioning of investigation agencies like the Enforcement Directorate (ED). Has the agency failed in its duty? It is a well-known fact that Central agencies play a crucial role in ensuring a transparent and accountable system of governance. Such bodies must function independently, without any pressure from the ruling dispensation. Over the past decade, such agencies have become mere weapons of the Central Government. The current regime must take necessary steps to dispel the impression that investigation agencies are being misused to target Opposition leaders.

YASH PAL RALHAN, BY MAIL

Misuse of Central agencies

With reference to the editorial 'Bail for Sanjay Singh', the top court has granted bail to the AAP MP, observing that no money had been recovered from his possession and there was no trace or trail of it. It is telling that the ED, which had arrested him in October last year, said it had no objection to his discharge on bail. All this suggests that the AAP leader was put behind bars without any solid evidence. The same could be true for other party leaders, such as Satyendar Kumar Jain, Manish Sisodia and national convener Arvind Kejriwal. The latest development has given credence to the Opposition's apprehension that the ruling dispensation is using Central agencies to settle political scores.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

ED's credibility at stake

Refer to the editorial 'Bail for Sanjay Singh'; the fact that the ED did not object to the grant of bail to AAP leader Sanjay Singh is an indication that the probe agency has not been able to garner substantial evidence to keep him in jail. There has to be some basis for the incarceration of one Opposition politician after another. It is imperative to ensure that there is no political interference in the functioning of Central agencies. Otherwise, citizens would

lose faith in democracy, and the investigation agencies would lose their credibility.

RAJINDER SINGH, PATIALA

Cross-verification of votes must

Refer to the news report 'SC to hear after 2 weeks plea to tally EVM votes with VVPAT'; the people's faith in the prime democratic process of free and fair elections, through which they can choose their leaders, must not wane. Fortunately or unfortunately, EVMs have been made to appear vulnerable to manipulation, and it has sown seeds of doubt in the voters' minds. Only 100 per cent cross-verification of votes with voter verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) during the Lok Sabha elections will strengthen the electorate's faith in EVMs and the electoral process.

HIRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

SC's belated crackdown

The Supreme Court is right to question why the Central Government did not take any legal action against Patanjali Ayurved for claiming that its product could cure Covid-19 and let the firm promote it as a panacea for the disease. This is especially important because the claims were made at a time when the pandemic was at its peak. The answer probably lies in yoga guru Ramdev's proximity to the ruling dispensation. It needs to be looked into. Further, some political leaders had also suggested unscientific practices to drive away the virus. They should be held accountable.

THARCIUS S FERNANDO, CHENNAI

Prepare for heatwave

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has predicted a mix of rain and heatwave conditions across several states, such as Jammu and Kashmir, Odisha, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Punjab, for the next few days. The state governments should be focussed on developing heat action plans, deploying healthcare professionals, promoting adaptive measures in workplaces and creating awareness about the dangers of heatwaves. There is an urgent need to ensure preparedness for the days to come. Residents must be educated about the ways to tackle a heatwave.

ROHAN CHANDRA, ZIRAKPUR

Concerns abound over social media data collection



ATANU BISWAS
PROFESSOR, INDIAN STATISTICAL
INSTITUTE, KOLKATA

A bipartisan Bill that would force Chinese tech giant ByteDance, the parent company of TikTok, to sell the social media app or face a ban for all US devices was approved by the US House in March, reflecting the growing multidimensional unease that US lawmakers feel about Big Tech. While President Biden said he would sign the proposed legislation to ban TikTok if the Congress passed it, it's uncertain what will happen to the Bill in the Senate, and its ramifications are neither simple nor straightforward. With nearly 170 million TikTok users in the US, a ban on the app will undoubtedly hurt millions of businesses, deny artists a platform and ruin the livelihoods of countless creators across the country. Furthermore, as Donald Trump anticipates, it will undoubtedly increase Facebook's dominance. However, national security (or at least a concern on that count) is much more important. In 2020, then President Trump moved to outlaw TikTok and another popu-

lar app, WeChat; later, President Biden reversed that decision. Governments in various countries have banned TikTok on official devices due to concerns about cybersecurity and privacy, perhaps primarily for its Chinese connections. For instance, due to privacy and security concerns, India banned TikTok and dozens of other Chinese apps, including WeChat, in 2020. Several other countries have also enforced a ban on TikTok. In March 2023, Shou Zi Chew, TikTok's CEO, gave testimony before a US congressional committee. Security experts believe that the US government's current concerns seem to be based primarily on the 'potential' for TikTok to be used for foreign intelligence. US lawmakers continue to perceive that TikTok poses a serious threat to national security because of its ties to China. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said that TikTok should be "ended one way or another." Working with a privacy researcher, *The Washington Post* came to the conclusion in 2020 that TikTok didn't seem to gather any more data than the average major social media platform. A 2022 study by the mobile marketing company URL Genius, however, found that out of all social media apps, consumers' personal data was tracked more by YouTube and TikTok. But even if TikTok gathers data comparable to that of



ON THE RADAR: Some experts feel that banning TikTok is like patching just one hole in a leaky boat. REUTERS

other major social media platforms like Facebook or X, that's still a significant amount of information. It includes details about the videos users watch, the comments they make, the private messages they send, and, if they consent to this degree of access, their precise geolocation and contact lists. In addition, according to TikTok's privacy statement, the company gathers user data such as email addresses, phone numbers, age, search and browsing histories, details about the images and videos users upload, and, if consented to, the contents of their device's clipboard, allowing them to copy and paste information into the app. As per several studies, TikTok follows users online even when they aren't using the app. TikTok said the information is used to

Many of the apps we use collect too much information about us. They gather users' data primarily to show them relevant advertisements.

bolster its advertising business. And TikTok is not unusual in this regard; many tech giants employ the same tool on a far greater scale. TikTok is, therefore, merely a product of the broader surveillance capitalism economy, which frequently directs users into rabbit holes of uncertainty. Yes, many of the apps we use collect too much information about us. Typically, they gather users' personal data primarily for their own use to show consumers relevant advertisements. Companies can impact our behaviour in ways we are frequently unaware of by getting more information about our preferences, shortcomings and areas of interest. The Cambridge Analytica incident, however, demonstrated how successfully personal information can be exploited to

even sway major elections. However, more than the app itself, TikTok's ownership and governance policies may be the main cause for concern. TikTok doesn't operate in China, but it's apprehended that ByteDance and, by extension, TikTok, may be forced to cooperate with a wide range of security activities, including perhaps the transfer of data, since the Chinese government enjoys significant leverage over businesses under its jurisdiction. It's thus a loaded gun, not just a smoking one. One worry is that if China were to have access to TikTok's user data, it might be used for intelligence purposes. Another worry is that China might try to persuade TikTok to control what users see on the site, thus inducing a significant impact on US elections, policy decisions and democratic discussions. Security experts emphasise that while these are 'hypothetical' apprehensions at best, they are conceivable, given TikTok's ownership structure and Chinese laws. However, right now, there's no public evidence that China has taken TikTok's commercial data for intelligence or other uses. And Chew has stated that TikTok would reject any request for its data from the Chinese government, which it has never requested. However, there's cause for concern regarding its ability to accomplish that. Thus, it seems that every-

thing depends on how much confidence the US and other nations have in the Chinese government. Experts claim that widespread misinformation and privacy concerns abound on all social media platforms. Thus, concentrating only on TikTok may obscure the wider picture a bit, as many have warned. Actually, many social media companies are believed to sell data to third parties. Therefore, foreign adversaries have enough options for purchasing and obtaining data. Some experts feel that prohibiting TikTok is like patching just one hole in a very leaky boat. What about the future of the hyped US Bill? Experts predict that the Bill will stall, and TikTok may file a lawsuit if it is eventually signed into law. Furthermore, China has the ability to thwart it through a 2020 amendment to its technology export law. And selling the company may not be feasible without the Chinese government's approval. In 2018, US lawmakers had interrogated Mark Zuckerberg about the company's handling of user information, mostly brought on by the startling disclosures about Cambridge Analytica. Zuckerberg made a reform pledge. At that time, Senator Bill Nelson had said: "If Facebook and other online companies will not or cannot fix these privacy invasions, we will." Is it time for introspection after six years?

We need to vote wisely for the sake of participative democracy



NEERA CHANDHOKE
POLITICAL SCIENTIST

THERE was a time, not so long ago, when theorists of substantive democracy scoffed at the two presuppositions of minimalist theories of democracies. One, democracy is a method of choosing leaders who will rule the country for the next five years. Two, democracy is valuable because it enables a peaceful transfer of power from one set of political elites to another. For defenders of substantive democracy, this interpretation is simply unpersuasive. Democracy as a form of rule is valuable not only because it grants all eligible citizens the right to exercise their franchise, but also because it enables the realisation of the foundational principles of a good life: liberty, equality, distributive justice, political participation, the rule of law and the accountability of the elected. These are realisable because substantive democracies

possess a vibrant civil society, an independent media and an impartial judiciary to defend the rights of citizens. With the onslaught of 'elected authoritarians' — a phrase that is an oxymoron at best — most committed democrats have been compelled to put aside their dreams of substantive democracy and focus their attention on free and fair elections. Ahead of the General Election, it is worthwhile to recollect that the electoral process consists of three phases: the pre-election period, voting and the outcome. No one should be able to tamper with the result. This violates the basic right of individuals to choose their leaders, howsoever fractured the outcome of the election might be. We certainly have to ensure that the pre-election process is free and fair. Think of elections as a gigantic marketplace in which the voter has the choice to cast his vote in favour of candidate X, Y or Z. Freedom during the pre-election phase is an essential precondition for democracy because it prioritises choice. A citizen can only choose if he has options. Without options, the right to choose



PEOPLE'S POWER: The right to vote is basic, not only because the voter has the right to opt for a candidate or a political party, but also because voting enables him or her to transition from a subject to a citizen. AN

is completely hollowed out, much like a shopping mall where only one brand is on offer. This is a violation of the basic right to franchise. The right to vote is a basic right, not only because the voter can opt for a candidate or a political party that will rule over him, but also because voting enables him to transition from a subject to a citizen. Members of a society in which one political party dominates like a veritable colossus over the others, either because it has got Opposition leaders imprisoned or has allegedly

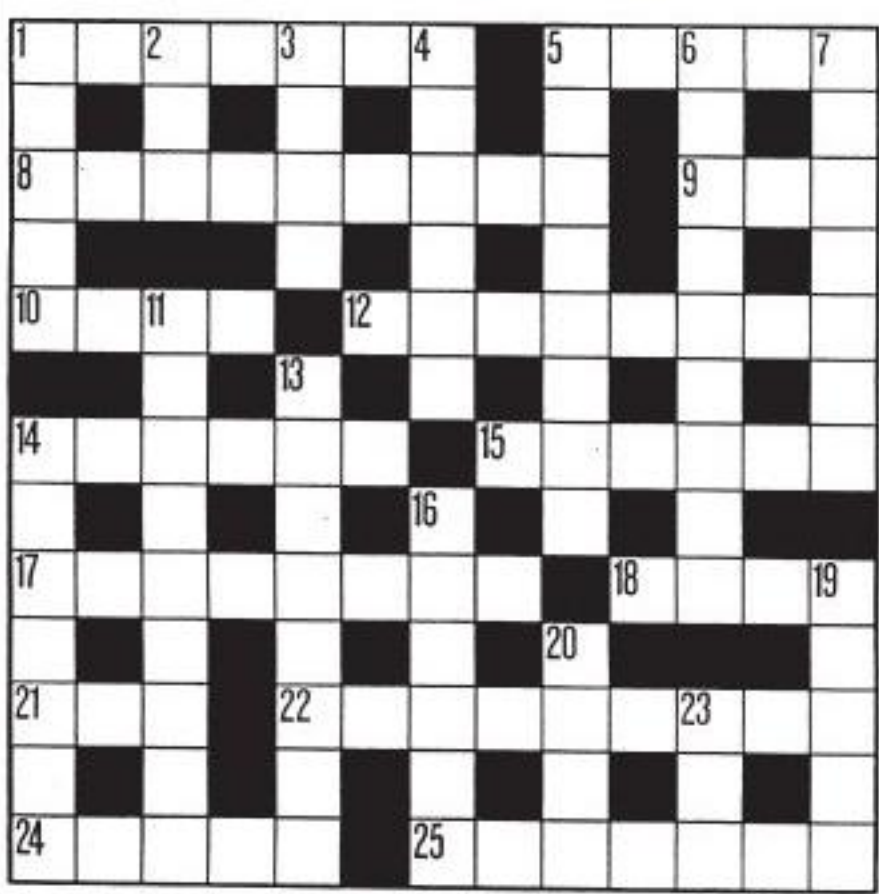
Freedom during the pre-election phase is an essential precondition for democracy because it prioritises choice.

given directions to freeze an Opposition party's bank accounts, are not citizens who have inviolable rights. They are subjects, much as Indians were subjects of the British Empire. Millions of Indians bravely fought for the independence of their country from British colonialism. What were they fighting for, if not democracy? The shift from substantive democracy to minimal democracy, at least for the moment, is largely due to huge disappointment with the way political parties

have misused this form of government. For democrats of this genre, democracy is a 'hurrah' word, simply because it helps realise many things that are of value: from warding off war to ensuring economic growth and wellbeing to making the world a better place to live in. The most persuasive argument for substantive democracy is the right to participate in processes of decision-making protected by a vibrant civil society and the media. This realises the political competence of every individual. Participative or deliberative democracy is a perfect form of modern democracy because it gives each citizen a voice and the right to be heard. Every citizen has the right to be treated with dignity, and the best way to ensure this is to protect a deliberative arena of equals, or at least an arena fired by enthusiasm for equality. A society of equals is a just society. Today, priorities are bound to be different. We always knew that money power ruled. Now we know for certain that politics is bolstered by big businesses, as the data on electoral bonds reveals. Political parties and their agendas are up for sale to the highest

bidder. Processes of decision-making are shrouded in secrecy. A section of the media has become servile; appalling poverty and unbelievably vulgar spectacles mounted by the affluent exist cheek by jowl. Social prejudice against minorities is fomented by cynical politicians to cause a divide in public opinion, and unthinkable discrimination continues to dog the disadvantaged. Our faith in democracy has not been shaken, but our confidence in the party system that throws up politicians who are power-hungry and contemptuous of the fundamental rights granted by the Constitution has been eroded. Indian citizens stand at a crossroads ahead of the Lok Sabha polls. We will vote, but in a society where the advantages of democracy, the rule of law, fundamental rights and an independent media have been steadily whittled away, we are left with only elections. We have to choose wisely, not to facilitate power-hungry candidates to acquire power, but because we want more. We want the candidates we vote for to contribute to the making of the good society we yearn for.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Thorough and detailed (2,5)
5 Student (5)
8 Being exhibited (2,7)
9 Portion of a curve (3)
10 Be open wide (4)
12 Impartial (8)
14 French (6)
15 Sumptuous environment (6)
17 Unquestioning (8)
18 Marjoram, for example (4)
21 Lion's foot (3)
22 With reference to (2,7)
24 Before due time (5)
25 Propose (7)

DOWN

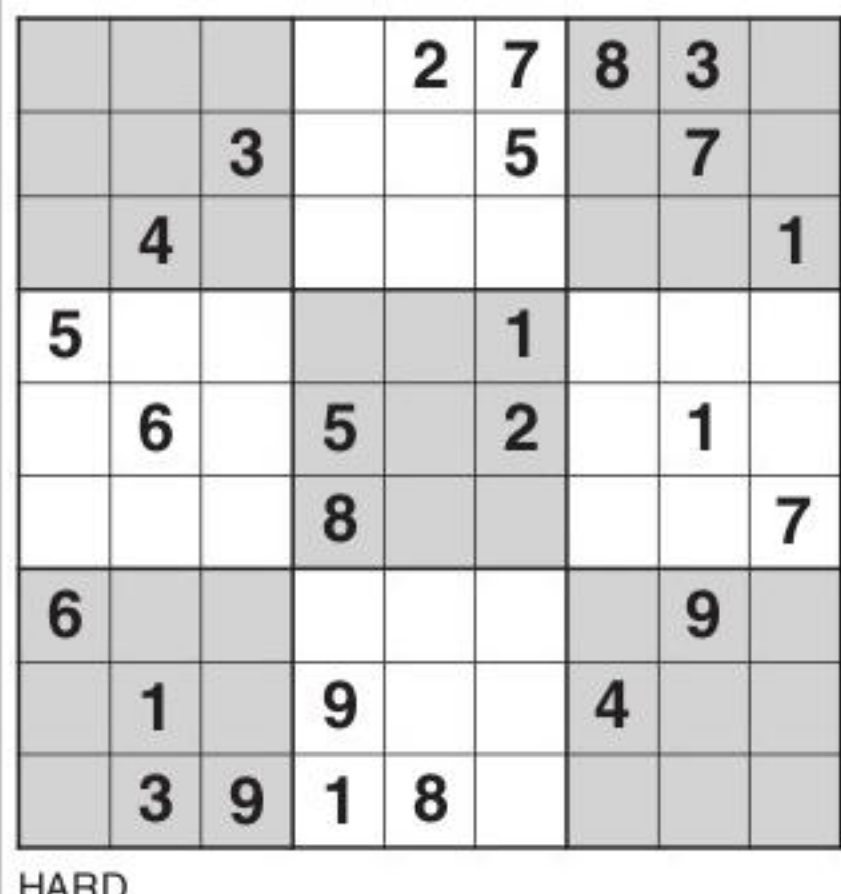
1 Elephant tusk (5)
2 Useless (3)
3 Attitude assumed for effect (4)
4 Rob at gun point (4,2)
5 Bodily structure (8)
6 Commonplace remark (9)
7 In a particular area (7)
11 Self-discipline (9)
13 Armed forces (8)
14 Momentary view (7)
16 River of Iraq (6)
19 Hemmed in (5)
20 Eagerly expectant (4)
23 A cereal plant (3)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Feasible, 5 Such, 9 Oasis, 10 Warhead, 11 Set an example, 13 Age-old, 14 Studio, 17 Turn of phrase, 20 Shut-eye, 21 Usurp, 22 Nude, 23 Alphabet.

Down: 1 Flow, 2 Austere, 3 In small doses, 4 Lawyer, 6 Use up, 7 Hedgehog, 8 Breakthrough, 12 Partisan, 15 Disturb, 16 Appeal, 18 Round, 19 Spot.

SU DO KU



HARD

FORECAST

SUNSET:	FRIDAY	18-44 HRS
SUNRISE:	SATURDAY	06-06 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	35	20
New Delhi	36	19
Amritsar	33	17
Bathinda	35	18
Jalandhar	33	17
Ludhiana	33	19
Bhiwani	32	23
Hisar	35	19
Sirsa	34	20
Dharamsala	29	16
Manali	23	09
Shimla	22	12
Srinagar	16	08
Jammu	33	18
Kargil	13	-01
Leh	11	-02
Dehradun	32	18
Mussoorie	19	14

TEMPERATURE IN °C