



Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The number of people being evacuated from east Rafah

1 in lakh. The Israeli army said that it was evacuating people from eastern Rafah ahead of an expected ground assault in the southern city of Gaza. According to the WHO about 1.2 million are sheltering in Rafah, after having fled from elsewhere in Gaza. AFP

Singapore Airlines buys sustainable fuel from Neste

1,000 in tonnes. Finland-based Neste will blend Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF), made from 100% renewable waste and residue raw materials, with conventional fuel and deliver it to Changi Airport. REUTERS

The sugar needed for exports, as per industry body ISMA

20 in lakh tonnes. Sugar industry body ISMA urged the government to allow sugar exports to enable them to make cane payments to farmers on time. The government has not allowed sugar exports to boost domestic supply. PTI

Election Commission directs parties to remove fake content

3 hours. The EC directed political parties to remove fake content from their social media platforms within three hours of such content being brought to their notice. The EC also warned against the misuse of artificial intelligence-based tools to create deepfakes. PTI

The number of people killed in Brazil due to heavy rains

83 Brazil's southernmost state Rio Grande do Sul saw at least 83 people killed due to heavy rains. Civil defence authorities have reported 111 people missing, and at least 1,22,000 displaced. REUTERS

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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What is carbon farming?

What are some techniques within carbon farming which can reduce greenhouse gas emissions? What are the challenges in implementing such techniques, especially in developing countries such as India? What are some of the global initiatives?

EXPLAINER

Vinaya Kumar H.M.

Carbon is found in all living organisms and many minerals. It is fundamental to life on earth and plays a crucial role in various processes, including photosynthesis, respiration, and the carbon cycle. Farming is the practice of cultivating land, raising crops, and/or livestock for food, fibre, fuel, or other resources. It encompasses a wide range of activities, from planting and harvesting crops to managing livestock and maintaining agricultural infrastructure. Carbon farming combines these two concepts by implementing regenerative agricultural practices that restore ecosystem health while improving agricultural productivity and soil health, and mitigating climate change by enhancing carbon storage in agricultural landscapes and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The practice is easy to adopt across various agro-climatic zones. It can also help ameliorate soil degradation, water scarcity, and challenges related to climate variability.

How can carbon farming help?

A simple implementation of carbon farming is rotational grazing. Others include agroforestry, conservation agriculture, integrated nutrient management, agro-ecology, livestock management, and land restoration. Agroforestry practices – including silvopasture and alley cropping – can further diversify farm income by sequestering carbon in trees and shrubs. Conservation agriculture techniques such as zero tillage, crop rotation, cover cropping, and crop residue management (stubble retention and composting) can help minimise soil disturbance and enhance organic content, particularly in places with other intense agricultural activities. Integrated nutrient management practices promote soil fertility and reduce emissions by using organic fertilizers and compost. Agro-ecological approaches such as crop diversification and intercropping have benefits for ecosystem resilience. Livestock management strategies including rotational grazing, optimising feed quality, and managing animal waste can reduce methane emissions and increase the amount of carbon stored away in pasture lands.

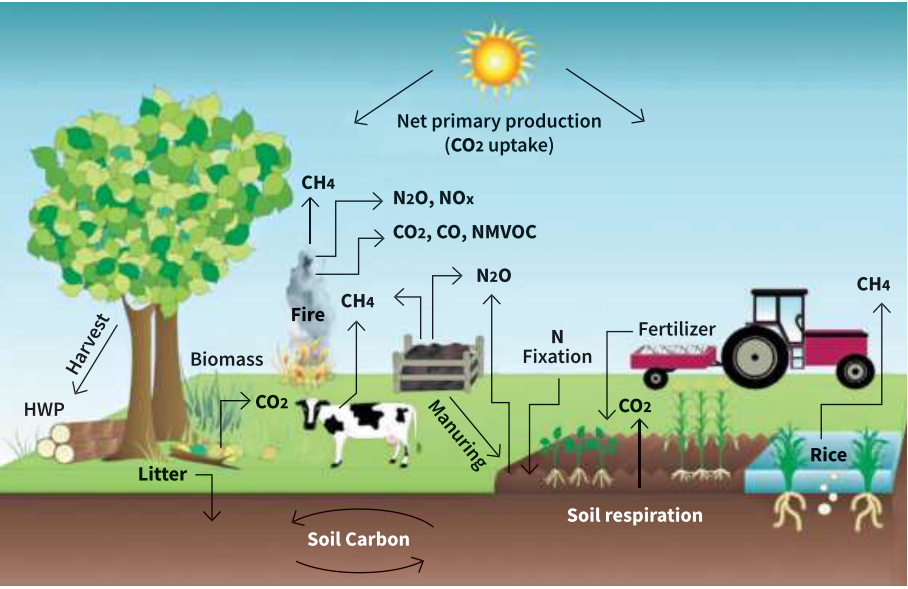
What are the challenges to carbon farming?

While carbon farming does offer numerous benefits, its effectiveness varies depending on multiple factors – geographical location, soil type, crop selection, water availability, biodiversity, and farm size and scale. Its usefulness also depends on land management practices, sufficient policy support, and community engagement. Regions with long growing seasons, sufficient rainfall, and substantial irrigation are best suited to practise carbon farming because they provide the best conditions in which to sequester carbon, through vegetation growth. In regions with adequate rainfall and fertile soil, the potential for carbon sequestration through practices like agroforestry (integrating trees and shrubs with crops) and conservation agriculture (minimising soil disturbance) may be particularly high. On the other hand, carbon farming can be challenging in hot and dry areas where the availability of water is limited, and prioritised for drinking and washing



New ways of farming: A worker loads fertilizer into a tank attached to a large drone, preparing to spray it over the rice fields in the Long An province in southern Vietnam's Mekong Delta, on January 23. AP

The process of emitting and removing greenhouse gas emissions in managed farmland



Source: 'Carbon farming – Making agriculture fit for 2030', a study for the European Parliament's committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety

needs. Limited water availability can hinder the growth of plants, thus restricting the potential for sequestration through photosynthesis. For example, practices like cover cropping, which require additional vegetation between main crop cycles, may not be viable due to the added water demand. Moreover, selecting which plants to grow also becomes crucial because not all species trap and store carbon in the same amounts or in an equally effectively manner. Fast-growing trees and deep-rooted perennial grasses tend to be better at this task – but on the flip side, these types of plants may not be well-suited to arid environments. Further, the adoption of carbon farming practices may require financial assistance for farmers to overcome the costs of implementing them. In the context of developing countries like India, small-scale farmers may lack the resources to invest in sustainable land management practices and environmental services. In sum, while carbon farming holds promise as a mitigation strategy, addressing these challenges is essential to realise its full potential in combating climate change.

What are some carbon farming schemes worldwide?

In recent years, the practice of carbon trading in the agriculture sector has become important around the world, but especially in the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, where voluntary carbon markets have emerged. Initiatives like the Chicago Climate Exchange and the Carbon Farming Initiative in Australia demonstrate efforts to incentivise carbon mitigation activities in agriculture. The processes range from no-till farming (growing crops without disturbing the soil) to reforestation and pollution reduction. Initiatives like Kenya's Agricultural Carbon Project, which has the World Bank's support, also highlight the potential for carbon farming to address climate mitigation and adaptation and food security challenges in economically developing countries. The launch of the '4 per 1000' initiative during the COP21 climate talks in 2015 in Paris highlights the particular role of sinks in mitigating greenhouse-gas emissions. As the oceans and the atmosphere are filled with carbon, and they approach their saturation points, we must manage

the remaining carbon budget of 390 billion tonnes or so wisely.

What are the opportunities in India?

As climate change intensifies, climate-resilient and emission-reducing agricultural practices can benefit from adaptation strategies. Agriculture is crucial in this endeavour. Grassroots initiatives and pioneering agrarian research in India are demonstrating the viability of organic farming to sequester carbon. In this regard, agro-ecological practices in India could yield significant economic benefits, with the potential to generate \$63 billion in value from approximately 170 million hectares of arable land. This estimate includes an annual payment of around ₹5,000-6,000 per acre for farmers to provide climate services by adopting sustainable agricultural practices. Regions with extensive agricultural land, such as the Indo-Gangetic plains and the Deccan Plateau, are well suited to adopt carbon farming whereas the mountainous terrain of the Himalayan region is less so. Coastal areas are prone to salinisation and have limited access to resources, thus limited the adoption of traditional farming practices.

Further, carbon credit systems can incentivise farmers by providing additional income through environmental services. Studies have shown agricultural soils can absorb 3-8 billion tonnes of CO2-equivalent every year over 20-30 years. This capacity can bridge the gap between feasible emissions reductions and the indispensable stabilisation of the climate. So carbon farming could also be a sustainable strategy to mitigate climate change and enhance food security in India. But scaling it up requires concerted efforts to address several challenges, including limited awareness, inadequate policy support, technological barriers, and an enabling adoption environment. Yet promoting carbon farming is in India's interests – to mitigate climate change while improving soil health, enhancing biodiversity, and creating economic opportunities for its adopters. Vinaya Kumar H.M. is an assistant professor of the Agricultural Extension, Office of the Vice Chancellor, Keladi Shivappa Nayaka University of Agricultural and Horticultural Sciences, Shivamogga.

THE GIST

Implementing regenerative agricultural practices that restore ecosystem health while improving agricultural productivity and soil health, and mitigating climate change by enhancing carbon storage in agricultural landscapes and reducing greenhouse gas emissions is carbon farming.

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BUILDING BLOCKS



GETTY IMAGES

Understanding the science behind magnetic resonance imaging

MRI scans are used to obtain images of soft tissues within the body. It is a non-invasive diagnostic procedure widely used to image the brain, the cardiovascular system, the spinal cord and joints, various muscles, the liver, arteries, etc

Vasudevan Mukunth

The story so far:
For those trying to look inside the human body without surgery, magnetic resonance imaging is an indispensable tool. The underlying techniques were worked out in the early 1970s and later in the same decade, Paul Lauterbur and Peter Mansfield refined them to pave the way for their commercial use. For these efforts, they were awarded the Nobel Prize in medicine in 2003, speaking to the significance of the technique and its place in modern medical diagnostics.

What is magnetic resonance imaging?
Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) is used to obtain images of soft tissues within the body. Soft tissue is any tissue that hasn't become harder through calcification. It is a non-invasive diagnostic procedure widely used to image the brain, the cardiovascular system, the spinal cord and joints, various muscles, the liver, arteries, etc.

Its use is particularly important in the observation and treatment of certain cancers, including prostate and rectal cancer, and to track neurological conditions including Alzheimer's, dementia, epilepsy, and stroke. Researchers have also used MRI scans of changes in blood flow to infer the way the activity of neurons is changing in the brain; in this form, the technique is called functional MRI.

Because of the MRI technique's use of strong magnetic fields, individuals with embedded metallic objects (like shrapnel) and metallic implants, including pacemakers, may not be able to undergo MRI scans. In fact, if they have a credit card in their pocket, the magnetic fields will wipe its magnetic strip!

How does MRI work?
An MRI procedure reveals an image of a body part using the hydrogen atoms in

that part. A hydrogen atom is simply one proton with one electron around it. These atoms are all spinning, with axes pointing in random directions. Hydrogen atoms are abundant in fat and water, which are present almost throughout the body.

An MRI machine has four essential components. The machine itself looks like a giant doughnut. The hole in the centre, called the bore, is where the person whose body is to be scanned is inserted. Inside the doughnut is a powerful superconducting magnet whose job is to produce a powerful and stable magnetic field around the body. Once the body part to be scanned is at the centre of the bore, the magnetic field is switched on.

Each hydrogen atom has a powerful magnetic moment, which means in the presence of a magnetic field, the atom's spin axis will point along the field's direction. The superconducting magnet applies a magnetic field down the centre of the machine, such that the axes of roughly half of the hydrogen atoms in the part to be scanned are pointing one way and the other half are pointing the other way. This matching is almost exact: in around a million atoms, only a handful remain unmatched – that is, a small population of 'excess' atoms pointing one way or the other.

The machine's third component is a device that emits a radiofrequency pulse at the part under the scanner. When the pulse is 'on', only the small population of 'excess' atoms absorbs the radiation and gets excited. When the pulse goes 'off', these atoms emit the absorbed energy and return to their original, lower energy states. The frequency of pulse the 'excess' atoms have to absorb is called the Larmor frequency. Its value depends on the strength of the magnetic field and the type of tissue in which the atoms are present. The fourth and final component, a detector, receives the emissions and converts them to signals, which are sent to a computer that uses them to recreate two- or three-dimensional images of that

part of the body.

What are the pros of MRI?
After the big, powerful magnetic field comes on, the MRI machine activates three magnets that produce smaller magnetic fields that are weaker than the main field by about 80-times, if not more. These fields also have a gradient, that is, they are not uniform. These fields interfere with the main field at the part to be scanned such that the resulting field highlights very specific portions, which can be the focus of the scan.

By turning the gradient magnets on and off in specific sequences, the MRI machine can thus scan portions that are just a few millimetres wide. The sequences can also be organised such that the machine scans different parts of the individual's body without asking them to move inside the bore.

In fact, because of the way the machine is built and the magnets are organised inside it, an MRI scan can practically image the body from all useful directions and, if required, in very small increments.

When the 'excess' atoms emit the energy they'd absorbed to return to their lower energy states, the return happens over a duration called the T1 relaxation time. The hydrogen atoms in water have different values of T1 depending on the tissue in which they're present. An MRI machine exploits this fact to show different tissues in different shades of grey. Clinicians may also inject an individual with a contrast agent – typically a gadolinium-based compound – that lowers the T1 time in some tissues, improving their visibility in an MRI scan.

Finally, researchers have deeply investigated the effects of strong magnetic fields on the body. MRI scans don't pose any threats; once the magnetic fields are taken away, the atoms in the scanned part don't remain affected. There is no long-term harm associated with scans. However, a scan's effects on pregnant women aren't as well-studied, so many

scanning facilities simply refuse such appointments.

What are the cons of MRI?
MRI machines are expensive: depending on the specifications, including the strength of the magnetic fields and the imaging quality, they cost from a few tens of lakh rupees to a few crores. Diagnostic facilities pass this cost on to its patients. Based on the clinical requirements, scans often cost ₹10,000 or more each – a sizeable sum in India, especially for those without insurance, and more so for those required to get multiple MRI scans.

These costs are compounded by the discomfort of using the machine. While it's an advantage that an individual inside the bore doesn't have to move for the machine to scan different parts, the individual is actually expected to lie still for tens of minutes, until the scan is complete. If the individual moves, the resulting image will be distorted and the scan will have to be repeated. The problem is exacerbated if the individual is claustrophobic (although some 'open-bore' MRI machine designs can alleviate this issue).

Generating a magnetic field of strength 1 tesla or more – as the main magnet does – is no mean feat. To do so, a heavy current is passed through coils of wire made of a superconducting material. When the setup is cooled with liquid helium, the wires become superconducting and the current passing through them plus the geometry of the wires produces a strong magnetic field. While the wires don't lose any energy as heat – which a non-superconducting material would – maintaining the setup is energy-intensive, which is expensive.

Further, the switching of such heavy currents within the machine, as the gradient coils are operated in sequence, means the machine produces loud noises when operating.

This can be an additional source of discomfort for the individual.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Here's a quiz on constituencies and candidates in the fray in phase 3 of the Indian general elections to the Lok Sabha

Srinivasan Ramani

QUESTION 1
This constituency in Gujarat was host to one of the most pivotal "satyagrahas" against the British government and was led by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. The movement began in June 1928 and was a farmer's agitation protesting a hiked tax levied by the Bombay Presidency. Name the place.

QUESTION 2
This constituency in West Bengal was twice represented by a former President of India. Name the constituency and the ex-President.

QUESTION 3
This constituency in Assam is one of

only four that elected Independents in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. It was won by a former militant of the United Liberation Front of Asom. Name the constituency and its representative elected in 2019.

QUESTION 4
A former Member of Parliament from Madhepura, Bihar, he was also the chairman of a commission that prepared a report that was completed in 1980 and whose recommendations were sought to be implemented by the V. P. Singh led Janata Dal government in 1990. Name the MP.

QUESTION 5
The urban constituency of Agra was twice represented between 1999 and 2009 by this actor. Name the popular actor.



Visual question:
Name this candidate from Kolhapur who is also a descendant of Chhatrapati Shivaji of the Maratha empire.
EMMANUAL YOGINI

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. The location where Bannister ran the race and the occasion for the race. **Ans: At Oxford University's Iffley Road track during the annual match between the Amateur Athletic Association (AAA) and the university** 2. Name the two other runners alongside Bannister. **Ans: Chris Chatway and Chris Brasher** 3. The barrier-breaking time returned by Bannister that has gone into athletics folklore. **Ans: 3 minutes, 59.04 seconds** 4. The feat to which Bannister compared his feat. **Ans: The summiting of Mt. Everest which took place on May 29, 1953** 5. The Olympic champion who was the commentator on Radio BBC for the historic run. **Ans: 1924 100m champion Harold Abrahams** 6. The specialisation of Roger Bannister as a doctor. **Ans: He became a neurologist** Visual: Name this famed rival of Bannister. **Ans: John Landy** Early Birds: Rajmohan. V| K.N. Viswanathan| Jyot Prakash Gulati| Debarati Kar| M. Suresh Kumar



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

The canvas painting is quite beautiful

He is an old fogey who does not understand the importance of art and culture

S. Upendran

What is the difference between 'canvas' and 'canvass'? (N. Prema)
Although there is a difference in spelling, the two words are homophones – they are pronounced the same way. The first syllable is pronounced like the word 'can' and the vowel in the second, sounds like the 'a' in 'china'. Both words are pronounced 'CAN-ves' with the stress on the first syllable. 'Canvas' is a noun, and it refers to the thick fabric usually used to make bags, tents, sails, etc. Artists usually paint on canvas.

We plan to take a canvas tent.
'Canvass', on the other hand, is mainly used as a verb, and when you see this word, think of politicians. When a candidate canvasses for votes, he goes around meeting people and requests them to vote for him. The word can also be used to mean to investigate.
The aging star decided not to canvass for his son or his party.

How is the word 'fogey' pronounced? (Jyot Gulati, Rohtak)
The first syllable 'fo' rhymes with the words 'so', 'no' and 'go', while the following 'g' sounds like the 'g' in 'get', 'gut' and 'glass'. The final 'ey' sounds like the 'i' in 'hit', 'sit' and 'bit'. The word is pronounced 'FOE-gi' with the stress on the first syllable. It is also possible to spell the word, 'fogey'.

According to scholars, 'fogey/foggy' comes from the Scottish 'foggie' meaning 'army veteran'. Nowadays, the word is mostly used to refer to someone who is old, boring and not so stylish – in other words, someone who is 'uncool'. It is quite possible since army veterans were conservative and had their own traditional ways of doing things, the word acquired this meaning.
When you're a teenager, anyone over 30 is seen as an old fogey.

What is the meaning of 'sic'? (T. Sheshadri, Chennai)
The word comes from the Latin 'sic' meaning 'thus', and in English, it is pronounced like the word 'sick'. It appears only in writing; it is never used in every day conversation. Normally, when you use this word in your writing, you wish to make it clear to the reader that the error that appears in the sentence is intentional. Sic is normally used when you quote others; by using this word within brackets, you are informing the reader that it is the speaker or writer whom you are quoting who has made a mistake – not you. If the author you are quoting has written, 'The cats and it's three kittens are ruining the garden', you can reproduce it exactly, and insert the word 'sic' within brackets next to 'it's' – thus making it clear that it is the author who has spelt the word incorrectly.
Fourty (sic) children are reported missing.
upendrankye@gmail.com

Word of the day

Rueful:
feeling or expressing pain or sorrow for sins or offenses

Synonyms: remorseful, contrite

Usage: She looked at him with a rueful smile.

Pronunciation: bit.ly/ruefulpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ruːfʊl/

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Global capability

Services exports have acquired a new dynamism

Two recent studies on India’s services exports, by Reserve Bank of India and Goldman Sachs, have taken a sanguine view of India’s exports, and for pretty good reasons. Goldman Sachs has observed in a report that goes into more granular details, that India has done well to diversify away from IT services exports to expand its global footprint in professional services, thanks to the evolution of Global Capability Centres over the last decade.

However, the factors at work in keeping the services export story going are, besides pricing and global demand, the development of infrastructure, manufacturing through its ‘network effects’ and human capability. The Goldman report notes that India’s services exports have grown at a CAGR of 11 per cent between 2005 and 2023, or double the global rate of growth of services trade. A global tide has lifted digitally delivered services trade vis-a-vis that of goods, with the services intensity in manufacturing also increasing. During this period, India’s share in global services trade rose from under 2 per cent in 2005 to 4.6 per cent in 2023 (11.4 per cent growth in 2023 alone to \$345 billion). While labour arbitrage played a big role in India’s services boom over the last two decades, it is being replaced by a qualitative shift towards professional services.

As for the composition of India’s services exports, computer services accounts for just under 50 per cent, without having changed significantly over the last decade. But in professional consulting services, led by Global Capability Centres (GCC), the share has increased by 11 percentage points since 2005 to about 18 per cent now. While travel, transport and insurance have remained growth laggards, the Goldman Sachs report refers to the potential of the Gujarat International Finance-tech City to transform India’s global footprint in the financial services space. GCC revenues have quadrupled over 13 years from \$12 billion to \$46 billion, and their numbers more than doubled from 700 to 1,580, with engineering research and development accounting for half this revenue. IT and business process management account for the rest, without having grown much. The impact of this transition on the existing workforce remains a grey area. There could be an emerging skills mismatch which needs to be addressed for India to move higher up the value chain.

As a paradigm shift unfolds in services trade, synergies with manufacturing matter more than ever. India’s tech push in logistics could help. The RBI study says that a one per cent rise in global GDP leads to a 2.5 per cent rise in India’s real services exports, while a one per cent rise in India’s real effective exchange rate can result in a 0.8 per cent fall in India’s real services exports. However, both studies contend that demand outweighs the price factor — a point that has important policy implications for those who worry about the role of exchange rate in service exports. India’s inherent competitiveness ought to be the driving force.

POCKET



India makes rapid strides in IPRs

PATENT PUSH. There needs to be a major ramping up of manpower in the Patent and Trademark offices



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO



SANJEEV SANYAL
AAKANKSHA ARORA

India crossed a major milestone in its intellectual property rights (IPR) journey by granting over one lakh patents in 2023-24. This marks a big moment for its innovation and knowledge sector. Till as recently as 2016-17, India used to grant less than 10,000 patents annually. This figure rose to 34,134 patents in 2022-23, but jumped to 1,03,037 in the latest year. The grants are now greater than filings and helping clear backlogs.

This improvement is on account of various factors including a special push to clear pending applications, bolstering manpower, process reforms, digital infrastructure upgradation and administrative streamlining.

Many of the reforms that we had highlighted in our EAC-PM paper *Why India needs to urgently invest in its Patenting Ecosystem?* in August 2022 have already been implemented or are under implementation.

Along with the patent grants, the number of patent applications have also been steadily rising. They increased from around 45,444 in 2016-17 to 92,172 in 2023-24. Equally significant is the increased participation of domestic innovators.

Earlier, applications were dominated by multinational corporations merely extending their foreign patents into India. The share of patent applications by residents rose from 29 per cent to 56

per cent between 2016-17 and 2023-24.

Although India’s recent performance is commendable, the number of patent grants is still far below 3,10,245 granted in the US in 2023 and 7,98,347 by China in 2022. China’s number is admittedly exaggerated by low quality utility patents, but the sheer scale of the innovation effort is impressive.

COPYRIGHT SPIKE Meanwhile, there has also been progress in case of copyrights. Filing and registration of copyrights have witnessed significant growth, increasing from 16,617 filings and 3,596 registrations in 2016-17 to 36,744 and 38,003 respectively in 2023-24. Nevertheless, despite the impressive growth, India still lags very far behind global peers. The US, for example, registered over 4,41,526 copyrights in 2023.

India’s has been historically strong in trademarks and rose to third position in terms of trademark applications in 2022, trailing only the US and China. The filings rose from 2.78 lakhs in 2016-17 to about 4.3 lakhs in 2021-22, but have levelled off in the last two years. Moreover, registrations seem to have stagnated. Trademarks registrations have ranged between 2,50,000 and 3,00,000 annually since 2016-17.

Apart from increasing the manpower, physical and digital infrastructure must also be upgraded in quick time in the IPR ecosystem

Ensuring successful transition to renewable power

Focus on grid balancing, optimal storage capacity and spatial distribution of power demand is needed

Sanjib Pohit

The success of India’s net zero pledge by 2070 rests heavily on India’s successful energy transition in the power sector, as it is responsible for more than 50 per cent of emission.

So, India has gone all out to expand installed capacity of renewable electricity, with a bias towards solar. The report card indicates that there has been a sharp rise in the installed capacity of renewable electricity even though the energy mix of generated renewable electricity does not indicate any sharp spike. In fact, the divergence between generation and installed capacity of renewable electricity is becoming wider.

This trend needs to be reversed. A primary reason for this trend is the way our distribution companies enter into purchasing agreements with the producer of renewable electricity.

A distribution company usually does not insist on supply of power for 24 hours from the producer of renewable electricity but on purchasing their entire production even if it is limited to eight hours in a day — the general production hour of a typical solar-based power plant.

As a result, the risk of purchasing power for the rest of the time of the day

lies with the distribution company, which is dependent mostly on fossil power for same. Barring the new Adani mega renewable power project, almost none of the renewable power companies has attempted to build in solar/wind hybrid/battery storage model for providing uninterrupted power for 24 hours.

If the purchasing agreement insist on buying power for 24 hours from a supplier, we would have seen more such hybrid power projects.

GRID BALANCING, TRANSMISSION Currently our fossil-based power projects are more or less evenly spread across India as coal/piped gas are by and large available all over India. Consequently, the transmission line of India along with substation has been developed accordingly.

On the contrary, the renewable power like solar is by and large being produced in a few States due to land constraint. The potential for wind energy is also observed to be concentrated in a few States. Thus, the existing transmission line and substations may not be able to transmit power over much longer distances.

Furthermore, unlike power from conventional sources, power from renewable sources always exhibits large variation in a day due to vagaries of



RENEWABLE PUSH. Solar power dominates KUMAR SS

nature (wind speed, sunlight, etc).

Thus, in other countries where the emphasis is on producing higher electricity from renewable sources, solar/wind capacity augmentation goes hand in hand with other sources like hydro power or particularly pumped hydroelectric energy storage (PHES) for load balancing.

PHES has emerged as one of the most important sources of hydroelectric energy storage used by electric power systems for load balancing. However, this does not seem to be in much favour in India. Only recently has India woken up to the grid balancing aspect and tenders are being floated for storage of electricity in batteries along with construction of renewable solar plant. Integrated assessment model linked

Even after both rounds of hiring, the Indian Patent Office will have a headcount of 1,960 compared to 8,568 in the US and 13,704 in China.

MANPOWER ISSUES Similarly, the trademark department needs to increase its headcount, starting with filling up existing vacancies.

Third, the physical and digital infrastructure needs to be upgraded urgently to accommodate the expansion. Artificial intelligence search engines, in-house servers, office infrastructure and the country’s overall IPR ecosystem need urgent investment.

In case some readers are concerned by the cost of this expansion, note that the IPR system contributes directly to government revenue even without considering the wider impact on the economy.

The Office of Controller General of Patents, Designs, and Trademarks generated approximately ₹1,392 crore in revenue against an expenditure of about just ₹277 crore in 2023-24. This is a revenue positive area for the government.

The positive shifts in India’s IPR ecosystem is reflected in the improvement in the country’s rank in the Global Innovation Index (published by World Intellectual Property Organisation), where India has moved up from 66th position in 2016 to 40th position in 2023.

Given the momentum, India has a chance to being in the top-20 by 2030 if it gets the above-mentioned things right.

Sanyal and Arora are Member and Joint Director respectively in Economic Advisory Council to the PM. Views expressed are personal

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Digital success

Apropos, ‘Digital Public Infrastructure — a remarkable journey,’ (May 6), India has built a world-class digital public infrastructure that has lessons for many countries. The country has effectively integrated technology into the fabric of its society to ensure economic inclusion for all citizens, while it has been embodied in a robust digital infrastructure enabling cash-less transactions, seamless service delivery, leading to inclusive growth. The digital India’s commitment to sustainable growth is evident in its strategic use of digital tools to

promote digital equity and progress towards SDGs focused on poverty, gender equality, economic growth, and reduced inequalities. **N Sadhasiva Reddy** Bengaluru

Looking ahead

This refers to the article, ‘Next government must go back to basics’ (May 6). India’s labyrinthine tax system has been left intact by successive governments, leaving both the rich and poor aggrieved. The BJP government removed wealth tax to signal it’s pro-rich character. It further brought down the corporate tax. Things meant for

the rich like gold and diamond are taxed the least. But the poor and the Middle Class are forced to pay even for consuming essentials like salt, garment, rice etc. The rising inflation is also hurting the poor as it results in sharp reduction in domestic savings and spending. **AG Rajmohan** Anantapur

Fintechs under pressure

It is hard to understand the logic behind the directive of the RBI to the fintech companies to moderate growth. If there were any lack of regulatory compliance, the RBI could have asked them to fix the issues.

Unfortunately the regulatory body has asked them to slow down which would naturally affect the future plans of the company. The RBI should take all the stakeholders into confidence before making any such announcements affecting them. It is this kind of uncertainty about India that adversely affects the inflow of foreign money into Indian markets. **Anthony Henriques** Mumbai

Fed signals

This refers to the Editorial ‘Positive signal’, (May 6). Time and again, the US Federal Reserve shows its

reluctance to cut rates and remains focussed on reducing inflation to 2 per cent. But the Fed’s slow pace in shrinking its balance sheet and flexibility in its ‘Quantitative Tightening’ are positive signals to India that Fed wouldn’t hike rates anytime soon, which reduces the risk of capital flight. At this juncture of the Indian economy’s fundamentals are strong and with the Fed’s soft pedalling, India can go steady on its Monetary Policies and cut rates only when inflation is well under control. **NR Nagarajan** Sivakasi

Pandemic preparedness

WHO proposals unfavourable to developing nations

KM Gopakumar

The World Health Organization member-states are meeting for two weeks (ending May 10) to conclude negotiations on an international legally binding instrument on the pandemic (Instrument). The idea of an Instrument emerged out of an EU initiative announced at the Paris Security Conference in 2021. The main motivation behind the Instrument is to better prepare the world to face the next pandemic from the hard lessons learned during the Covid-19 pandemic through legally binding obligations mainly on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response (PPR).

The draft Instrument proposes to create obligations to undertake at least nine types of surveillance and data sharing with WHO. Interestingly, there is no regulation by WHO regarding the use of data obtained from countries through the Instrument. Further, it also obligates countries to commit to following the One Health approach, which includes actions to “identify and address the drivers of pandemics and the emergence and re-emergence of disease at the human-animal-environment interface”. The proposal is to develop and implement the modalities, terms and conditions, and operational dimensions of One Health by May 31, 2026.

COMPLETE U-TURN
At the same time, it protects the interest of developed countries and proposes only best endeavour provisions on technology transfer and geographically diversified production of health products required for the prevention and response to the pandemic.

As a result, there is no proposal in the draft Instrument to create binding legal obligations on countries to take measures to ensure the predictable and sustainable supply of health products during the pandemic or inter-pandemic period or after the outbreak of the pandemic.

It shows that there is a complete U-turn on the promise of equitable access through geographically diversified production.

Also, there are still no clear provisions to share the benefit emerging out of the R&D of pathogens fairly and equitably.

According to the Convention of Bio Diversity and Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit



R&D. No clarity on benefit sharing

Sharing, the sharing of benefits emerging out of R&D is a pre-condition to providing access to pathogens or any genetic materials.

Though India is already carrying out most of the surveillance mentioned in the draft Instrument and also might be sharing the data with agencies like WHO, undertaking a legal obligation to share without effective safeguards or the regulation of the use of data by WHO and other actors could be problematic, especially in the light of the potential misuse of such data for strategic and economic ends.

Another area of concern is One Health, which would require further investment in the surveillance infrastructure covering animals, plants and the environment. The obligations on data sharing from one health surveillance could result in the use of such data as a tool to restrict the import of agricultural goods using sanitary and phytosanitary measures. In short, acceptance of obligations on surveillance and health along with data sharing is tantamount to legitimisation of the data extraction agenda of developed countries.

Further, the draft Instrument also proposes regulatory harmonisation, that is, main-streaming of the regulatory standards of developed countries. Implementation of such standards would enhance the compliance cost and, in turn, would compromise affordable access. Regulatory harmonisation is often used by the global pharmaceutical industry to manage the competition from the generic industry

India needs to tread carefully and take a strong position against the unfair proposals in the draft Instrument, which serves the economic strategic interest of developed countries over public health and legitimises inequity in the pandemic PPR.

The writer is a Legal Advisor and Senior Researcher, Third WorldNetwork

Fixing mis-selling in life insurance

BEST PRACTICES. Realistic business targets, board-approved corporate governance policies and financial literacy are vital



MANAS R DAS

Mis-selling of life insurance policies through the bancassurance channel is today hitting media headlines more often than before. For instance, *businessline* dated October 31, 2023, reported that the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) had “formed a taskforce to look into various aspects of the bancassurance channel, including mis-selling.”

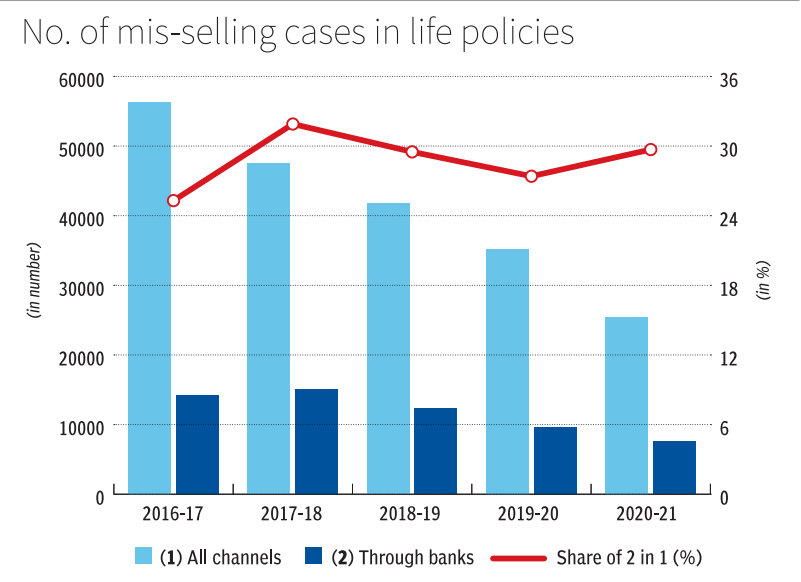
And on April 26, 2024, this newspaper had a report headlined: ‘RBI, IRDAI lens on SFBs for forcing insurance products on borrowers.’

Banking products are largely understood by most consumers, but non-banking products like life insurance are not so easily understood mainly owing to their complexities. Mis-selling can occur if banks’ sales teams don’t explain, deliberately or due to less knowledge, all the features of non-bank products to their potential buyers. Sometimes, the needy borrowers are forced to buy non-bank products.

QUANTIFYING THE PROBLEM
Indian banks forayed into cross-selling in the 2000s to supplement their net interest income with fee income. However, there is still no systematic database on mis-selling. We could collect data for just five years (2016-17 to 2020-21) from various issues of IRDAI Annual Report and Consumer Affairs Booklet. The Chart illustrates the data.

Mis-selling in life policies through all channels as well as through bancassurance gradually declined during the five-year period at a compound annual rate of 18 per cent and 14.6 per cent, respectively. The rate of decline in mis-selling was lower in the bancassurance channel than in ‘all channels’. Further, the share of banks in the total reflect an uptrend. Both are worrisome.

The government, regulators and



insurers including bancassurers are trying their best to rein-in mis-selling particularly in the life segment, as mis-selling potentially generates reputational and fraud risks, which, coupled with strong interconnectedness between banking and insurance segments, may transform into contagion risk for the financial sector.

The following best practices for insurers/bancassurers can help curtail mis-selling.

Targets must be realistic: The business targets need to be scientifically determined, especially in a top-down management system, instead of being ‘ordained’ from the top.

The targets become realistic and achievable when the ground-level environment is factored in. Experience and insight of the entire marketing team must be taken into confidence,

Mis-selling can occur if banks’ sales teams don’t explain, deliberately or due to less knowledge, all the features of non-bank products to their potential buyers.

which requires two-way information dissemination.

Targets — pursue but don’t obsess: Targets need to be pursued sincerely and diligently, without being obsessed with achieving them. There should be sufficient built-in flexibility at each hierarchical level. Also, there needs to be defined timelines for meeting the targets, and the progress needs to be regularly monitored and adjusted for under- and over-achievement.

Quality is important: Achievement of targets needs to be ‘durable’. One should be concerned about the quality and more significantly, at what cost — including physical and psychological cost to the employees — the targets are achieved.

Further, the management has to look at the ‘compromise quotient’, that is, to what extent the company’s ethics and integrity on one hand and consumers’ privacy on the other are compromised.

Corporate policies — ‘carrot’ versus ‘stick’: Corporates must institute definite board-approved corporate governance policies for determining incentives/disincentives as also identifying, fixing and punishing the culprits including those in the top management when a ‘misconduct’ occurs. The policy must balance the ‘carrots’ and ‘sticks’ in an incentive/disincentive programme.

Start-ups need a curated corporate governance framework

Nikhil Bedi
Rohit Madan

The Indian start-up ecosystem has grown rapidly over the past few years, making India the third-largest start-up hub with over 1.14 lakh start-ups and 100+ unicorns. Indian start-ups raised more than \$10 billion in 2023 and expect around 36 per cent year-on-year (y-o-y) increase in start-up funding in 2024. These new-age companies have provided a much-needed push to the economy by developing innovative products and services, thereby generating new avenues for employment and catalysing India’s growth.

While the preceding years saw robust investment activity and favourable valuations for start-up companies, there were many instances of fraud, including misrepresentation of data, revenue inflation, creative accounting, and governance lapses. These have significantly affected the trust and credibility of the industry.

A heightened pursuit of higher valuations by start-up founders, coupled with the “Blitzscaling” phenomenon emphasising top-line growth over the need for robust

systems and processes, has contributed to these vulnerabilities.

Studies show that only 20 per cent of start-ups survive beyond five years, with just 8 per cent surviving beyond 10 years. While there are many reasons for this, the real challenge for several start-ups has been the inability to sustain the frenetic pace of growth. To sustain momentum and build a sustainable business, founders must understand the importance of corporate governance.

EVOLVING LANDSCAPE
A robust governance framework encompasses every aspect of how decisions are made and executed within a company, ensuring adequate checks and controls are in place.

Start-ups require a curated approach when it comes to framing corporate governance principles within this evolving investment landscape. Governance is not a one-size-fits-all concept; it evolves with the stage and maturity of the start-up, the nature and composition of the board, and the external environment.

Start-ups must, at the very least, adhere to the governance standards prescribed by the law, such as annual



A CHALLENGE. Sustaining growth

audits, board meetings, and secretarial compliance. As start-ups evolve and become larger, they must implement an effective whistle-blower programme that provides regular updates to the board on the complaints received and the actions taken. Furthermore, the board should review the related-party transactions to ensure that the required disclosures have been made per the statutory requirements.

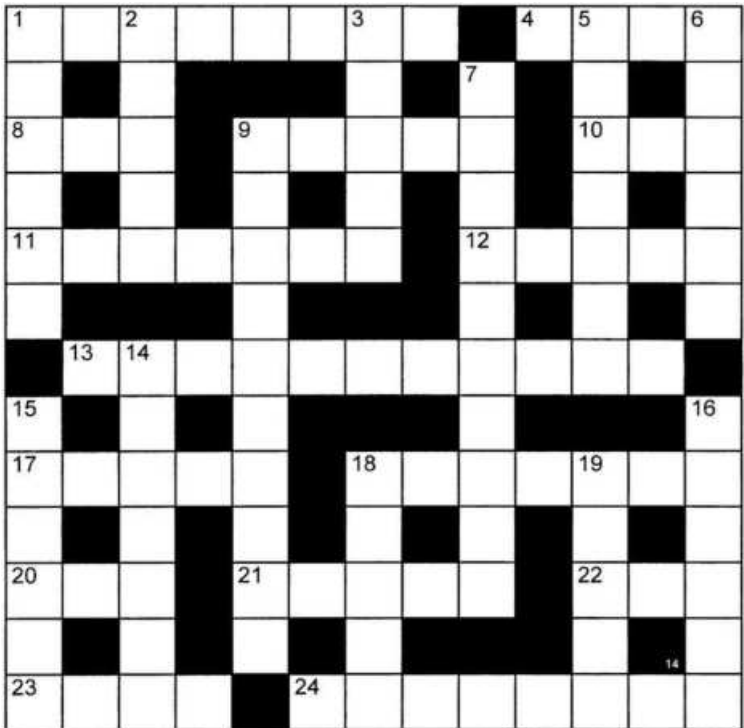
At the growth stage, the board should form a separate risk sub-group to oversee risk management, even if it is not mandated by law or regulation. Key executive management should have

access to the risk dashboard and share it with the board regularly. Founders should work towards building an accounting system as the only reliable source for reporting requirements, including MIS. Start-ups should see governance as a value driver rather than just a legal requirement. Founders must also prioritise diversity, equity, and inclusion in the governance structures to foster innovation and mitigate bias in decision-making.

Indian start-ups have transitioned from being mostly service-oriented to becoming pioneers in revolutionary ideas and product innovation, exhibiting technological effectiveness across sectors. This transformation has solidified India’s position globally and led to comparisons with more developed countries. While founders primarily focus on products and customers, it is equally imperative to acknowledge the importance of a robust corporate governance framework. Corporate governance must focus on the interests of stakeholders to ensure the success of organisations.

Bedi is Partner and Leader, and Madan is Partner, Forensic, Financial Advisory, Deloitte India. Views are personal

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2433



EASY

ACROSS

- Penitent (8)
- Encouragement (4)
- False hair (3)
- Trunk (5)
- Steal from (3)
- Stops working (7)
- Damp (5)
- Inspiration with foolish passion (11)
- Pollex (5)
- Go before (7)
- Tree (3)
- Tracks (5)
- Employment (3)
- Openers (4)
- Not forthcoming (8)

DOWN

- Crouches shrinkingly (6)
- Darkness (5)
- Twists (5)
- Range of columns (7)
- Discount (6)
- Bodies conducting particular business (10)
- Worn, as suit (10)
- Mischievous (7)
- Assail (6)
- Not long ago (6)
- Cost (5)
- Escape (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Study what’s banal and be truly sorry for it (8)
- It will encourage one to get back up in extremes of squalor (4)
- To scold one is artificial when it’s ahead (3)
- Part of the body, sort to be upset with nothing in it (5)
- Roy, for one, will have taking ways (3)
- No longer goes to the office: goes to bed (7)
- Not being dry, is to greatest extent enheartened by one (5)
- Love’s folly turns into aunt, if a change is made (11)
- A handy thing it is to go through the leaves of a book (5)
- Quietly hair will begin to grow bald, yet it will go first (7)
- Tree powder (3)
- Uses reproachful language, being overrun by locomotive? (5)
- Habit displayed by some Jesuits returning (3)
- Lower Manx court musicians may apply themselves to (4)
- Not saying much, but it makes comeback in modern setting (8)

DOWN

- To be in debt when in credit, Sam initially shrinks (6)
- ‘Soft stillness and the _____ Become the touches of sweet harmony’ (M of V) (5)
- Works at lathe and acts in the variety theatre (5)
- Some columns work up to a hundred in tumultuous riot (7)
- Discount a tree uprooted around top of Boulevard (6)
- Their business may be discussed at sittings (10)
- Shabby form of hatred when in the nude (10)
- Anything in New York that might be considered blue (7)
- A bout of illness a non-drinker gets back with no top (6)
- Not long ago it retired out of 24 (6)
- What to pay for prejudice Jude unfortunately neglected (5)
- The Spanish topless woman (unclothed) may escape one (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2432

ACROSS 1. Fractions 5. Cur 7. Roof 8. Farmland 10. Uneasily 11. Star 13. Exceed 15. Cleric 18. Drum 19. Cast-iron 22. Replicas 23. Idle 24. Eye 25. Treadmill
DOWN 1. Fortune 2. Above 3. Oracle 4. Some 5. Chatter 6. Rider 9. Ashes 12. Plate 14. Crumple 16. Conceal 17. Damage 18. Dirge 20. Radii 21. List

Prioritise trade

New markets and harmonised regulations necessary

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has released the data for services exports over the course of 2023-24, and there are lessons that the next government should draw for its trade policy. According to the RBI data, while services exports grew last financial year, they exhibited a deceleration. From \$325 billion in 2022-23, they increased merely to \$341 billion in 2023-24. What has worked for the sector, which has been growing at a healthy rate in recent years, is that services imports have gone down by 2 per cent, decreasing to \$178 billion from \$182 billion. Several reasons can be given for this slowdown, including the impact of weak demand and high interest rates on software-services purchases by global buyers. While there are certainly reasons to stay optimistic about India's services sector, including the interest in building new-style and higher-end outsourcing centres by large companies — so called global capability centres — the recent trend is nevertheless concerning.

Services exports play a crucial role in India's macroeconomic stability. As a vast energy importer, the country has a deficit in merchandise trade that is hard to bring down. Nor have goods exports done their share in reducing the trade deficit. In fact, according to the data from the Union Ministry of Commerce, goods exports in 2023-24 declined by over 3 per cent. The overall trade deficit was about \$240 billion. While this is not so large that it can destabilise India's external account, given the RBI's reserves and reliable capital inflows into India, it is nevertheless a risk to maintain large trade deficits over the long term. It renders India over-dependent on capital inflows, which could reverse in times of crisis.

The government's approach to managing trade deficits has focused on providing domestic subsidies and promoting import substitution. This is often aimed at replacing cheaper imports from China. This policy has been in place for several years now and has certainly aided in domestic production in exports in some specific sectors, such as mobile handsets. But the overall effect of this approach has clearly been insufficient to either boost Indian exports, whether of goods or of services, or to lower dependence on capital flows. It is time for a new set of ideas, ones that are better informed by economic theory and India's history. The new administration that will take office in June should re-examine these decisions and recognise that there is no replacement possible for the policy changes that support the exports of goods and services. In both cases, new trade arrangements and agreements are of paramount importance.

Goods exports need easy access to developed-world markets, as well as low and predictable tariff regimes to allow participation in global value chains. Services exports, meanwhile, require regulatory clarity and harmonisation with major markets. Data localisation and incompatible regulations are unlikely to help in this effort. One such example of required regulatory change is the new privacy law. The government has worked to update data protection legislation in India. But it is vital that new regulatory regimes slot easily into the requirements of major Indian markets such as the European Union. This will allow for greater competitiveness for Indian services exports in such markets. A misguided desire to protect the Indian market through tariffs, restrictions, and regulations has hurt merchandise exports. It should not be allowed to slow services exports as well.

Troubled spice route

FSSAI's action is welcome but belated

In a belated move, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has swung into action. It has asked states to collect different brands of powdered spices for testing. This follows a ban imposed in early April by the food regulatory authorities in Singapore and Hong Kong on two widely sold Indian brands, MDH and Everest, in which the presence of the carcinogenic pesticide ethylene oxide was discovered. Lab reports on samples from India will be placed before an expert committee and a consolidated report is likely in about 25 days. The government is also in the process of formulating guidelines for the use of ethylene oxide in samples of spices for domestic and export markets. This flurry of regulatory activity must be welcomed but it also raises questions about its efficiency and ability to take proactive action.

The fact that India has taken over a month to respond to the complaints of regulators in overseas markets that are significant for Indian spice exporters will certainly raise questions, not least because the crisis over lethal pesticide traces in India's food exports has been festering for a while. Last year, for instance, the US recalled three spice mixes from MDH for containing salmonella bacteria and the media reported a rapid rise in European Union (EU) alerts on pesticide residues present in basmati-rice consignments from India. These developments have a doubly damaging potential. The immediate one is to severely impact a booming spice export business of \$4.25 billion (2023-24), accounting for 12 per cent of global spice exports. At a time when key overseas markets are turning unpredictably protectionist, slow and opaque responses to food-safety complaints is a contrarian signal to send. The second and no less insidious is the public-health implication for a country where public spending on health care remains sub-par.

Dangerously high pesticide residues in packaged food and drink have been an issue that has been tirelessly highlighted by organisations such as the environment and health advocacy group Centre for Science and Environment for more than two decades, without conspicuous response from the regulator. The recent ban by the Hong Kong and Singaporean food safety regulators underlines the dangers. Their scrutiny pointed to high levels of ethylene oxide, which is not recommended for use in food. In other words, its presence in any food item renders it unfit for human consumption, and prolonged ingestion is potentially carcinogenic. The serial rejection of shipments from both these brands by international bodies did not appear to have galvanised the Spices Board, which comes under the Ministry of Commerce, or the FSSAI into immediate action.

Vigilance in food regulation demands more than setting standards or responding to the demands of industry lobbies. Last year, the Punjab government and rice exporters responded to the threat of rejection of basmati-rice stocks by the EU by working with farmers to stop spraying banned insecticides. Their efforts, however, are being thwarted by pesticide manufacturers, a politically powerful lobby in India that has a long history of putting profit before public health. These are issues that the FSSAI urgently needs to address. The health of Indians and India's booming food export industry depends on it.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

A tough time for portfolio managers

Markets are going through a major shift in style and leadership, akin to the 2003-08 bull run

While markets are near new highs, it is not an easy time to be running an equity portfolio. The markets seem to be clearly in the midst of sector rotation or leadership change, and the winners of the past 15 years do not seem to be working.

If one looks at price action over the last two years, since Covid came to an end, the markets have been led by a very different set of winners. Given the duration of this market leadership transition, it seems more than just a blip. Leadership changes of this type typify a bull phase and do not reverse until the bull market ends.

As the share of consumption in the economy has stalled and the investment share of gross domestic product has risen, stocks and sectors exposed to the infrastructure buildout and capex cycle have fared very well. Similarly, there has been a huge surge in the valuations of the public sector undertaking (PSU) stocks. Once considered to be almost pariahs, PSUs are now in fashion. Investors are convinced that the Modi government will unlock the full potential of these companies, which have been experiencing years of underperformance and hence are trading at very cheap multiples. PSU banks, in particular, have made up their entire underperformance compared to private banks, and have been the place to be in financial services.

There is also a strong thematic play in electricity/power ecosystem stocks, as well as anything related to manufacturing and defence. Investors are convinced that through a combination of supply chain diversification and smart use of industrial policy, India has never had a better opportunity than today to gain manufacturing market share. The total addressable market here is huge, and companies can quickly scale 2-3 times given the scale of supply that has to move. In the power ecosystem, whether it be renewables or thermal, India needs a massive power capacity ramp-up and equivalent investment in the grid. Investors can sense the large profit pools in the ecosystem, given the scale of investment needed.

Defence presents a structural opportunity to gain exports share and indigenisation.

The market is clearly signalling from its price action and sectoral leadership that we are back towards a scenario reminiscent of 2003-08. In that bull phase, the market was led by capex-heavy sectors, infrastructure and real estate, and investment-driven sectors. The market was more focused on revenue growth than returns on capital and free cash flow. The so-called quality universe of long-term compounders lagged the markets. This period was the last time quality compounders were actually cheap in India. Investors were chasing growth at any price, and capital investment was greeted with cheers from the markets. Post-global financial crisis, with the Indian capital investment



AKASH PRAKASH

bust and surge in non-performing assets (NPAs), the market's drivers of performance again reversed. From 2009 onwards until very recently, we saw the era of the quality compounder. Quality stocks, typically consumer-facing with high returns on capital, stable and predictable growth in both revenue and earnings and with a good industry structure performed incredibly well. This was the era of consumer stocks and plays on formalisation. While these stocks

delivered reasonable earnings in the 15-20 per cent range, they also had strong multiple expansion, which supercharged their performance. This multiple expansion phase seems to have now ended and we appear to be in the midst of a period of multiple normalisation for the quality universe. As their multiples compress, these stocks have been mostly treading water with limited price appreciation over the past 18 months. Given how expensive they were trading, it may take some more time for the multiples normalisation process to complete. Given their current growth outlook, multiples are still too high for many of the quality compounders and will tend to undershoot as the cycle reverses.

Similarly, we saw value migration from PSU stocks to their private sector competitors. This was most vis-

The absence of a quality mindset

It took several years of bad publicity — ranging from non-standard quality (NSQ) drugs and counterfeit medicines being sold freely in the domestic market to pharmaceuticals exported by Indian firms resulting in hundreds of deaths across multiple countries — before the Indian drug regulator decided to act. At the tag end of 2023, the government and the regulator — the Drug Controller General of India (DCGI) — mandated that all drug manufacturers, irrespective of their size, would have to comply with the World Health Organization's (WHO's) Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) norms. The manufacturers will need to obtain WHO GMP certification by this year.

Before this change, only Indian drugs meant for the US or European countries needed to ensure that they met the quality standards of developed countries. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) inspected manufacturing facilities of Indian drug manufacturers wanting to export to that country. Without its certification, drug manufacturers in India could not sell in the US. Meanwhile, bad publicity is dogging another Indian manufacturing sector. Singapore and Hong Kong recently banned certain spice blends from two prominent Indian brands — MDH and Everest — saying that they contained unacceptable levels of ethylene oxide (ETO), a carcinogen.

The regulator of this sector — the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) — acted swiftly but its actions gave rise to several puzzling questions. The FSSAI ordered testing of all spices manufactured in India to ensure they adhered to its standards and also instructed the Spice Board to ensure that ETO levels were tested for all spices meant for exports. This was the good part. However, it was soon reported in multiple newspapers, including this one, that the FSSAI had relaxed the permissible norms for pesticides in herbs and spices tenfold

before Singapore and Hong Kong raised concerns about ETO levels in MDH and Everest. The FSSAI defended its action, saying it increased the pesticide limit only after consulting experts. Also, reports suggest that the regulator is not necessarily concerned about the ETO limits of spices being sold in India — only those meant for exports.

In a third industry — automobiles — India finally got around to prescribing the Bharat New Car Assessment Programme (Bharat NCAP), based on the Global NCAP. The new cars would be tested to assess their quality and safety in the event of a crash. Until this happened, Indian auto customers would



PROSAIC VIEW

PROSENJIT DATTA

only have a vague idea about how safe their cars were structurally.

There have been many reasons proffered for India's inability to become a global manufacturing hub despite the efforts and plans of successive governments for the past three decades. While problems like higher logistic and power costs, lower labour productivity, and issues with local regulations have often been talked about, the abysmal quality standards of many Indian products generally escape attention.

Successful Union governments, state governments, as well as sector regulators, have often paid little heed to the quality of goods being manufactured and sold in India, or even those being exported to lesser-developed countries in Latin America, Africa, or Asia.

It is not that Indian manufacturers cannot manufacture high-quality products. Any manufacturing unit in any sector exporting to the US, Europe, Japan, South Korea, etc, will meet the higher quality standards of these markets. The goods they export are vastly superior in quality compared to the goods the same manufacturer sells in the domestic market.

Nor is it that the Indian regulations are routinely lax, though that is also the case in many sectors. Indian regulators typically model their regulations based on

altogether. Different parts of Odisha had different land revenue assessment rules under the British. On top of that, the tribals' collective ownership of land needed to be factored in as well. Under her chief ministership, Odisha passed many laws that ensured equity in principle, including nationalisation of the Kendu leaf trade. But implementation was chaotic, and incomplete.

Then came the Emergency. Satpathy's interpretation of the Emergency was interesting. In an address to secretaries on June 28, 1975, the day after it was imposed, she said the idea of Emergency was "not

to extinguish political dissent. The right to dissent is basic in a democracy..." But the way it was conveyed to Delhi by J B Patnaik and Ram Chandra Rath, both leaders aspiring to unseat Satpathy from her perch as a friend of Indira Gandhi, was that Satpathy was plotting to overthrow Mrs Gandhi. Their point of

ible in the PSU/private bank trade, but was also seen in telecom, insurance, and aviation. This trade is also now reversing. PSU stocks are now trading at multiples above their private peers in some sectors and have delivered a huge return alpha over the past 18-24 months. It is unlikely that the PSUs will keep losing share indefinitely. Markets seem to believe that the PSUs can now keep their current market share and have better productivity and profitability. They continue to have scope for operational improvements.

The basic message is that the portfolio construct that made one successful over the last 15 years has been underperforming for some time and is likely to continue to do so until there is full reset of multiples within the quality universe. Portfolio managers who have cut their teeth in the last 15 years have, by and large, only seen the quality trade work. If you were not there in 2003-08, you have not seen the opposite or antithesis of quality driving markets. The market action is quite clear. Leadership has changed. We are unlikely to go back to the old dynamic anytime soon.

Similarly, the trend of mid-cap outperformance is driven by the increasing power of domestic flows, which shows no signs of reversing. Again if one goes back a few years, when foreign portfolio investors were the more dominant source of equity flows, mid-caps would routinely underperform for years on end. Unimaginable in today's context.

Anyone investing over the last 15 years has largely made their money backing quality at almost any price and avoiding PSU stocks and asset-intensive businesses like the plague. This strategy is unlikely to work in the current bull market setup, with mid-caps, PSUs and stocks benefiting from the investment cycle leading the charge.

So what should an investor do? Forget their investment philosophy and latch onto what is working? Jettison their quality names and buy the manufacturing and investment theme? Or should you move in the opposite direction? Use the parabolic price moves in some of the more cyclical stocks and sectors to exit and recycle the capital back into the lagging quality names at cheaper prices, knowing full well that this recycling of capital will hurt short-term performance?

The answer to this really depends on whether you are playing the absolute performance game or relative. Also, whether you are targeting long-term risk-adjusted performance or need to keep up with the benchmarks on a quarterly basis? It also depends on your investor base and their willingness to give you the rope to underperform on a short-term basis in return for better long-term numbers.

The market is going through a major shift in style and market leadership. These shifts happen every few years and are also cyclical. This is why it is hard for any single fund to continue to outperform every single year. Many funds outperform in the long term, but almost no one does it consistently every single year. How to traverse these leadership changes and whether to react depends on the fund objective, patience of the investor base, and ability to sit through periods of underperformance. Whichever way you cut it, portfolio managers have a tough job ahead of them.

The writer is with Amansa Capital

global practices and norms. While some Indian norms — in drugs or foods — are not as stringent as those of developed countries, others compare favourably.

The issue is often that of institutional capacity. Prescribing that all drug companies need to meet WHO GMP is of little help if you cannot ensure whether the firms are actually following the standards regularly and not just at the time of certification.

Similarly, there is no point in subjecting only spices meant for exports to stringent testing for ETO and other contaminants like pesticides, while letting domestic customers consume products that are sub-standard or contaminated.

The argument that micro, small, and medium enterprises lack the capital and resources is a poor excuse for inaction and lack of thinking by policy-makers and regulators. Setting up enough laboratory testing facilities, hiring enough qualified inspectors, and helping smaller enterprises to become better in quality is the job of the government and regulators.

Nor is the argument that meeting quality standards will increase costs tenable. Cost competitiveness can be achieved by improving logistics, reducing power costs and government taxes — without compromising on quality standards. Most cars have a higher sticker price in India than in developed markets because of the taxes levied by the government. And yet, the domestic consumer gets short-changed in terms of quality compared to those in the overseas market, even though the same manufacturing facility may be making both.

Every country that became a manufacturing power did so by raising the quality bar of products made by them, and by ensuring that domestic customers were not shortchanged in terms of quality.

Indian policymakers need to understand this. Equally, the corporate sector needs to understand that without adopting the quality mindset, they can never aspire to be globally competitive.

The writer is former editor of Business Today and Businessworld, and founder of Prosaic View, an editorial consultancy

A turbulent political life



BOOK REVIEW

ADITI PHADNIS

If there is a state in India where politics is both complex and perplexing, it is Odisha. The Biju Janata Dal (BJD) was formed in 1997 by Naveen Patnaik, the son of Odisha's best-known politician, Biju Patnaik, but at the time, Naveenbabu (as he is known in the state) could neither speak fluent Odia nor read and write the language. And yet he is likely to become the longest serving chief minister in India's history. He is on the verge of bequeathing his political empire, not to a politician from Odisha or even neighbouring Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand or Bengal, but to a bureaucrat from distant Tamil Nadu. When it comes to complexity,

there is much that non-Odiyas and Odiyas alike need to learn about the politics, language and ambitions of the state. We know so little.

This book represents a significant effort in that direction. While it is a biography of Odisha's chief minister Nandini Satpathy, it also locates Satpathy's fascinating life in the context of the politics of the state. She was a political figure much before she became a politician: Even before she was a teenager, she was jailed for pulling down the Union Jack from atop a dome in Cuttack's Ravenshaw College. She was fired by communism, but the communist movement itself was going through upheavals and looked askance at her relationship with Devendra Satpathy, a fellow comrade whom she later married. Both were expelled from the party. Satpathy and Indira Gandhi were friends and Gandhi, herself a vulnerable target of attack from colleagues in the Congress, embraced Satpathy as an ally, though outsiders saw her as nothing more than a satellite.

By 1962, she had become a member of the Rajya Sabha from the Congress: In her speech supporting the Emergency imposed on India as a result of the India-China war, she responded as a Communist in the Congress, urging the government passionately not to give up centralised planning. Reading the debate is instructive, not the least because there actually was one — unlike the present. She became a Union minister and though Indira Gandhi pleaded meekly with P N Haksar to give her a more consequential portfolio, she was named only a junior minister. She was promoted soon, and the book explores her contribution to the 1971 war for the liberation of Bangladesh as the minister of state for information and broadcasting. The Liberation Radio of Bangladesh was her brainchild, devised on the advice and recommendation of those working underground, something with which she was completely at ease. It was not just a challenge to Pakistan; it was a way of refashioning Bengali nationalism. But Bangladeshi

nationalism would assert itself virulently later and the book explains that Satpathy translated Tasleema Nasrin's controversial novel *Lajja* into Odia in the early 1990s because she was so distressed at the communalisation and curbs on freedom of expression in that country.

In 1972, Satpathy returned to state politics after she was made chief minister. The government fell but she was able to keep it afloat for another term. The book explains the pressures and pulls within the Congress, with stalwarts like Biju Patnaik always ready to trip Satpathy up, though they shared good personal relations. The chapter on agrarian governance describes Satpathy's commitment to redistribution of land. On this issue, there was no ambiguity in her mind, unlike the rest of the Congress. But ensuring this got done seamlessly was another matter



NANDINI SATPATHY: The Iron Lady of Orissa
Author: Pallavi Rebbapragada
Publisher: Simon & Schuster India
Pages: 271
Price: ₹899

to extinguish political dissent. The right to dissent is basic in a democracy..." But the way it was conveyed to Delhi by J B Patnaik and Ram Chandra Rath, both leaders aspiring to unseat Satpathy from her perch as a friend of Indira Gandhi, was that Satpathy was plotting to overthrow Mrs Gandhi. Their point of

contact was Sanjay Gandhi.

Satpathy resigned from the Congress and joined, first, the Congress For Democracy (CFD) and then the Janata Party. She felt awkward there and possibly also unwelcome. She had rivals there and enemies in the Congress. That was the beginning of the legal problems in which the government embroiled her that would last 18 years.

The author says the quintessential Satpathy was captured in a quote used by *The New York Times*. She told the reporter: "Certain things look very odd to me. For example, why should a man rush up to open the door of my car when I go to the office? I can do it myself"

There is some careless proofing — Naval Tata should have been well healed, instead he is well healed (page 107); Subas Bose, Subhas Bose and Subhash Bose are used interchangeably; in many places, the Janata Party appears as the Janata Dal. The two belong to different eras. But other than that, this book is researched extensively and is evocatively written. It is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the evolution of the politics of Odisha and its political economy.



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Waiting for the voters to turn up

Past the halfway mark, turnout and the Constitution become the talking points

The general elections cross the halfway mark today as another 93 constituencies go to the polls — polling was completed in 190 constituencies in the first two phases. As per the 2019 results, the contest in the first two phases was near even, whereas the BJP swept the seats in the third phase — along with its allies it won 75 of the 93 third-phase seats in the last elections while the INDIA bloc won just 11.

Political parties that have the skills to smell a win or a loss will be better placed to gauge the mood of the electorate by the end of polling Tuesday, something that should make itself evident in their outreach and messaging in the run-up to the fourth phase polling, on May 13.

One of the talking points of the past two phases was the dip in turnout, especially (according to anecdotal evidence) among women in the heartland. An analysis of polling data by this newspaper confirmed there has been a marginal dip in polling percentage-wise but concluded that no inference could be drawn from it. Still, this number will be closely watched, especially because, as an HT analysis shows, the constituencies voting Tuesday have always lagged in terms of turnout. Another talking point was the delay in the Election Commission of India (ECI) releasing the final polling figures. Hopefully, ECI will be quicker this time; the credibility of the institution is under scrutiny.

The BJP campaign led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has mentioned the considerable achievements claimed by the government in its 10 years in power but focused more on the Opposition. The Congress and Opposition parties have claimed that the BJP could do away with reservation for deprived classes, something the party has denied. Expectedly, amidst all the polarising rhetoric, there have also been substantive conversations about the Constitution and where various parties stand.

Their behaviour shows that the electorate is likely both sensitive and respectful towards this founding document of the Republic, which they understand as the guarantor of their rights. All political parties have been quick to recognise this and nuance their positions to dispel any notions that they are disrespectful to constitutional values. This points to a deepening of democracy in the country, wherein the citizens also recognise the centrality of the Constitution in the democracy project.

That would be a welcome change — if only it had not been accompanied by the polarising rhetoric.

West needs to bear its climate funding duty

The refusal of the developed nations to shoulder their fair share of responsibility in the climate crisis is baffling, given the window for action to contain warming to 2 degrees Celsius by 2100 is closing fast. At the Cartagena Ad Hoc Work Programme (AHWP) talks — in the run up to the actual negotiations at the Conference of Parties (CoP) — the United States and other western countries have reportedly pushed to make the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG) contributions “voluntary” for those who “choose to pay”. They have also advocated widening the pool of contributors to include developing nations based on the latter’s “economic realities” and “current emission share”. With all indications of these positions becoming entrenched before the next CoP at Baku, Azerbaijan, hopes of a momentum getting built on the Paris (CoP 21) climate financing targets are fading rapidly.

This development undermines faith in the West’s commitment to meaningful efforts to limit the warming fallout. On climate financing specifically, the weakness of its intent showed when the 2020 deadline for \$ 100 billion in annual funding for adaptation and mitigation measures in developing and least developed economies was not met.

Now, the attempt to split the financing burden makes a mockery of the principle of common but differentiated responsibility that underpins global climate talks. Such evasion of historical responsibility and the fact that the bulk of financing from the West so far has reached the developing and least developed nations in the form of debt, as opposed to grants, erodes trust in the developed world, which, in turn, imperils global climate action.

Developed nations must course correct immediately, given that the climate crisis is a shared condition. If it gets any worse, it does so for all.

Two Dalit narratives in Kharage heartland

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharage represented a strand of Dalit politics that was less strident and accommodative of other caste interests. This time, the contest is defined by a more militant Ambedkarite politics

Among the politicians with the highest stakes in the constituencies that go to the polls today is one who is not contesting. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharage has given the ticket in his constituency, Gulbarga, to his son-in-law and handed over the reins of his campaign to his son, Karnataka minister Priyank Kharage. The transfer of his constituency to the next generation at a time when the Congress president is at the height of his national recognition is likely to be presented as a sign of a fear of failure, but it is also a commentary on the course Dalit politics has taken in India.

Mainstream Dalit politics in India has been deeply rooted in the differing perspectives of Ambedkar and Gandhi. These differences are remembered primarily in terms of Ambedkar seeking separate electorates while Gandhi wanted everybody to be able to vote for Dalits in reserved constituencies. Ambedkar argued that a general electorate in a constitu-

ency reserved for Dalits would lead to the more upper-caste-friendly Dalit winning. Gandhi saw a general electorate voting in a choice between Dalit candidates as a means of forcing the upper castes to recognise Dalit leaders. Nearly a century after that debate in 1932, the differences have moved to one between the Ambedkarite focus on Dalit identity and a more broad-based effort at Dalit absorption.

Mallikarjun Kharage clearly saw himself as a part of the second tradition. When, as a seven-year-old, he witnessed his mother and sister being burnt alive by the Razakars of the Nizam, he could have easily been drawn into an identity-based communal mindset. His decision to instead focus on reducing differences between communities extended to his Dalit identity as well. As he grew into a labour lawyer and then a politician, he focused on issues that went beyond identity, sometimes objecting to being referred to as a Dalit politician.

Playing down his identity resulted in Kharage’s politics focusing primarily on issues affecting the region he represented. Northeast Karnataka is the most backward region in the state and much of Kharage’s politics has been on seeking specific benefits for this region. He has sought projects to develop the region and played an important role in introducing Article 371-J into the Constitution of India. The article provides specific benefits to northeast Karnataka.

Kharage’s inclusive politics paid him rich political dividends. Between 1972 and 2014, he contested 11 assembly

and parliamentary elections and never lost. But his repeated electoral successes over a 42-year period papered over two trends that were making his style of politics more difficult to pursue.

The more significant of these trends was the rise of identity politics. This has been most visible in the growth of Hindutva, but that was not the only identity that was gaining greater mileage. Caste identities also began to gain greater importance in the political scheme of things, and Dalit identity was no exception.

The politics of Dalit identity has taken on diverse forms. There is the growth of Ambedkar as the symbol of Dalit identity, which is presented with varying degrees of assertion. Within this larger picture, there has been the growth of sub-Dalit identities as well. In Karnataka, there has been considerable debate over the share of the Left sect and the Right sect of the Dalits. This issue dominated the discourse around this round of ticket distribution in several reserved constituencies in the state. Irrespective of the specific type of Dalit identity that was being highlighted, identity politics eroded Kharage’s Dalit-led inclusive politics.

It did not also help that Kharage’s efforts to develop northeast Karnataka had less success than he may have hoped for. Karnataka has been a state where much of the growth is concentrated in a single urban district, Bengaluru. Government resources into backward districts did improve growth in those districts, but



With Kharage’s Dalit-led inclusive politics beginning to fray around the edges, it faces the same challenges in 2024 that it did five years earlier

the savings from that growth tend to be invested in Bengaluru. As a result, while the districts of northeast Karnataka did see some growth, it was nowhere near as rapid as that of other districts in the state, notably urban Bengaluru. As the income gap between northeast Karnataka and Bengaluru widened, the region was seen as remaining backwards despite governmental efforts. Being the politician who represented the region for over half a century, Kharage took much of the political blame. In the 2019 parliamentary election, Kharage was defeated for the first and only time in his political career.

With Kharage’s Dalit-led inclusive politics beginning to fray around the edges, it faces the same challenges in 2024 that it did five years earlier. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has put up the man who defeated Kharage in 2019 and he has been aggressively presenting his Dalit identity. His campaign has been built around an agitation against the desecration of an Ambedkar statue. Kharage has himself begun to articulate the Ambedkarite position more frequently than he did in the past. But his entire politics is centred around building consensus and does not sit easily with aggressive identity politics.

In stepping back from the fray,

Mallikarjun Kharage has handed over the politics of his constituency to the next generation of his family. His son, Priyank Kharage, has used his position as minister in the Karnataka government to present a much more assertive Dalit identity. He often leads the charge against the BJP in the state assembly as well as on social media. He would want to marry the inclusiveness of his father’s politics with the assertion of a Dalit identity that has become an essential requirement in Karnataka’s Dalit politics.

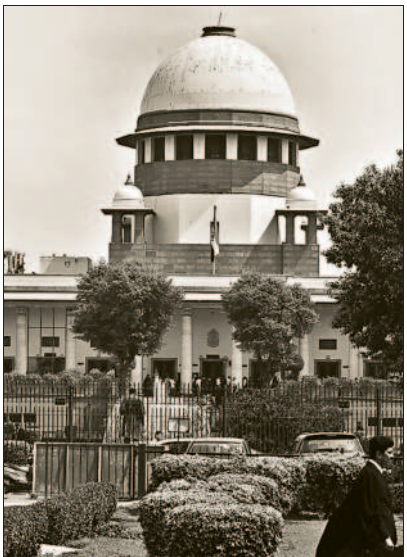
Whether the next generation of Kharages can defend Mallikarjun Kharage’s electoral legacy will leave its mark on the national stature of the Congress president, but what happens in the Gulbarga parliamentary constituency will also be a commentary on whether the current emphasis on Dalit identity will necessarily wipe out other perspectives of Dalit politics. The political fortunes of this and other reserved constituencies will provide the next round of evidence in the never-ending interest in the sometimes conflicting perspectives of Gandhi and Ambedkar.

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SC verdict in DMRC case raises a slew of questions

India’s attempt to project itself both as a country where it is easy to do business and as a hub of arbitration has received a jolt with the recent judgment of the Supreme Court (SC) in *Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) v Delhi Airport Metro Express Pvt. Ltd. (DAMEPL)*. The legal struggle that began in 2012 was thought to have been settled when the SC dismissed a review petition in 2021. It has now been exhumed through a curative judgment: An award delivered in 2017 has been set aside in the name of correcting the “miscarriage of justice” in the exercise of “curative jurisdiction” of the SC. To say the least, the judgment has sent disturbing signals down to national and international commercial and legal circles. In the case of *Rupa Hurra v Ashok Kumar* (2002), the SC pronounced the scope and ambit of curative power. Article 142 of the Constitution of India bestows curative jurisdiction upon the apex court. It is a wide power. But the greater the power, the more sparingly it should be used. In fact, it should be exercised only in the rarest of the rare cases: One, to prevent an abuse of the process of the court; and two, to cure “gross miscarriage of justice”. In order to establish these grounds, a party would have to prove either a violation of principles of natural justice, or bias of the judge, i.e. the judge’s close connection with the subject-matter, or with one of the parties to the lawsuit. These legal contours are well settled. The *DMRC v DAMEPL* judgment has upset the apple cart.

The commercial dispute between the DMRC and DAMEPL underwent different legal spheres — from the arbitral tribunal, which pronounced its award in 2017, of ₹8,000 crore in favour of DAMEPL, to the Single Bench of Delhi High Court (HC), which upheld the award in 2018, to the Division Bench of the HC, which set aside the award in 2019. Thereafter, from the Division Bench of the SC, which restored the award in 2021, to the dismissal of the review petition and confirmation of the award also in 2021.



The judgment will continue to tax the legal imagination for many years

to a Full Bench of the SC, which has allowed the curative petition filed by DMRC and set aside the award recently. To say the least, the judgment has opened a Pandora’s Box.

First, the concept of “finality of judgment” has been jolted. If decisions can be flipped like this, when does a legal dispute come to rest? How long do litigants run to seek justice?

Second, the apex court has sieved through the evidence in detail. Such an exercise of judicial power has raised interesting legal questions. Whether in the exercise of curative jurisdiction, the court can critically examine the merits and demerits of the case or not. Whether by re-appreciating the evidence, the court has overstepped its curative jurisdiction or not. Despite its hope of not opening the floodgates to the curative petition, has the apex court let in a Trojan horse?

Third, the SC judgment may encourage judicial interference in arbitral cases. The more complicated the arbitral process becomes, the less it will be accepted. This judicial overdrive has scared the arbitral world. The judgment has destabilised the entire arbitral structure.

Fourth, ease of doing business demands a simple, speedy, effective, and efficient dispute resolution system. Investors instinctively dislike convoluted and flippant judicial processes. The judgment may convince foreign companies not to invest in India and persuade domestic companies not to go for public-private partnerships. For, the judiciary appears to be loaded on the side of the public sector undertaking. Such a judgment will have disastrous economic consequences.

Fifth, while the apex court has cloaked its reasoning under an attractive argument — not to reconsider the final judgment of dismissal of appeal and dismissal of review petition “would be oppressive to judicial conscience and cause the perpetuation of irreparable injustice” — there are several questions that arise. Would such needless interference not cause “perpetuation of irreparable injustice” to the thousands of litigants caught in the arbitral web? Wouldn’t such a “landmark judgment” be oppressive to judicial conscience? Such judgments justify what the authors of *Court on Trial: A Data-Driven Account of the Supreme Court of India* have said: The SC gives people easy access to the apex court, but not to justice.

Sixth, the SC has cast the die against the arbitration process. Since Rome has spoken, it will take years to wash away the stain. The judgment will continue to tax the legal imagination for many years.

And seventh, while dealing with the curative petition filed in the case of the Bhopal gas tragedy, the apex court dismissed it. Yet, while dealing with a curative petition filed by a State-owned company, the court ruled in favour of it. The judgment lends credence to the growing popular image of the SC not as a court of law and justice but as an executive court. Such misplaced views can weaken the faith of the people in the judicial process.

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{ EMMANUEL MACRON } FRENCH PRESIDENT



The international situation means that we need to have a European-Chinese dialogue more than ever. Europe is at a turning point, which requires us to face and overcome structural difficulties

For Indian students in the West, a souring of dreams

On October 3 last year, the United States (US) Supreme Court gave Indian students a welcome reprieve they had long sought. It forever rubber-stamped the lawfulness of the Optional Practical Training (OPT) programme, the central magnet that draws international students to American colleges and universities. OPT allows international students to work for one year after graduation with a virtually-no-questions-asked Employment Authorization Document. Most Indian students pursue graduate degrees in science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM). The STEM OPT extension expands the work benefit to three years. OPT is a critical perch to seeking permanent employment, getting sponsored for a Green Card (permanent residence), and settling down. It fulfils a dream that first develops when a student completes the 12th-grade board exams.

However, as Indian students who will soon leave for American shores await receiving their I-20s and the coveted F-1 visa stamp from a US consulate, things are not so sweet in the land of milk and honey. Several studies have shown that US companies, especially staffing firms, exploit OPT students to force work for low wages under stressful, enslaved conditions. The number of OPT visas issued is unlimited, making it an employer’s market. The government refuses to regulate employment conditions and bring the bad guys to justice.

H-1B math doesn’t work. To apply for a Green Card (immigrant visa), Indian OPT students have to convince employers to hire them on dual-intent H-1B visas. The law authorises 85,000 new H-1Bs to be granted yearly, of which 20,000 are reserved for applicants who earned a Master’s degree or higher from a US educational institution. The competition for H-1B visas is so intense that the American government resorts to a lottery, which, for this fiscal year, concluded on April 1. The lottery is held just once a year, so a STEM OPT student technically has three chances of winning it.

An Indian student is not restricted to only the 20,000 reserved quota, however. The 65,000 general H-1B visa pool, which attracts applications from every aspirant worldwide, including professionals from Indian tech majors, welcomes Indian student applications too. But the students are up against stiff

competition and hefty corporate law budgets. Students failing to win the H-1B are forced to return to India.

The wait for a Green Card could exceed a lifetime. Even if a student wins an H-1B visa, a significant milestone in an Indian student’s journey in the US, not everything is green on the green card front. It is, again, a matter of supply and demand.

US law grants 140,000 green cards annually for employment-based applicants but stipulates that these be distributed across all countries, with no country receiving more than 7% of the allotment. So India gets 9,800 green cards a year, a pittance. With nearly 60,000 new Indian H-1Bs entering the line annually, the backlog is so long that it currently takes about 80 years to get a green card. During the wait, Indians have to seek H-1B transfer approvals when they switch jobs or get laid off. That apart, a Goldman Sachs report said last March that generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) could impact 300 million jobs globally, with 37% of US jobs in architecture and engineering, the kind that Indian students seek, at risk. Accordingly to Layoffs.fyi, a website that tracks tech industry layoffs, 1,185 tech companies laid off 262,582 employees in 2023. The lower demand for employment hurts Indian OPT and H-1B employees even as more Indian students flock to America.

The situation in Canada is similarly glum. A YouTube short documentary called *Borrowed Dreams: The Canadian Experience*, highlighting housing, health care, education, and employment issues, has garnered over 200K views. Indian students in the United Kingdom continue to struggle with that country’s strict rules for post-graduate employment and its terrible economy. Diaspora Indians contribute immensely to India’s foreign exchange reserves, and Indian students are the seed that breeds that proud diaspora. India remains the source of the globe’s human capital, and the Modi government has aggressively promoted this fact as a competitive advantage.

But when the western dream fails to materialise, Indian students should reconsider whether they are better off at home in one of the world’s fastest growing economies.

Rajkamal Rao is managing director, Rao Advisors LLC. The views expressed are personal

OUR VIEW



Universal healthcare is a must for Viksit Bharat

Wider health insurance coverage, as with India's accident care plan, is welcome. But it's a stopgap at best. We should aim for an efficient state-run healthcare system that covers all

Considering India is among the countries with the highest number of road accidents in the world, it's welcome news that victims are on the Centre's policy agenda for help. Too many lives are lost in such accidents. Prompt medical attention might have saved many of these lives. Those in dire need sometimes get turned away or face the danger of delayed treatment while hospitals figure out who will pick up their bills. Delays can harm even patients whose health is insured, as prior approvals for cashless procedures can take hours in a loop of claim checks. Given this backdrop, the government's plan to facilitate cashless accident emergency care is thoughtful. On Monday, *Mint* reported that the ministry of road transport and highways has a scheme in the works that would provide up to ₹1.5 lakh of cashless treatment for every victim of a traffic mishap. This facility will be available to all without exception, regardless of whether they are covered by a health insurance policy or not, and will cover hospitalization for up to a week from the incident's date at all facilities under the Ayushman Bharat plan. With payment assured, treatment refusals and delays should drop. The money so spent would be reimbursed through the Motor Vehicle Accident Fund, which was set up in January 2022 to compensate hit-and-run victims. The purpose of this fund will be enlarged accordingly.

While further details of the scheme are still awaited, its planners seem keen to keep its fiscal cost low. The extent to which medical bills can be passed onto insurers of people's health and/or vehicles is being explored. Talks are said to be underway with general insurers on using a part of the premium paid by vehicle owners for

third-party coverage. If put in place, such a programme would save lives. In spirit, it would follow Ayushman Bharat, a scheme of subsidized health coverage aimed at greater insurance inclusion. The logic of such safety cushions draws upon the 'law of large numbers': As the numbers under watch go up, events in the real world get closer to a pattern that theory says is most probable. So, the more people we cover, the more reliably we can attain payout stability, plot future expense trends and sustain the insurance cushion. As road crashes offer us a pile-up of data to analyse, the latest proposal's fiscal math can be worked out quite easily.

Expanded insurance works well for quick welfare expansion, but it's a stop-gap arrangement at best. Ultimately, a Viksit Bharat must provide direct healthcare services via a network of reliable facilities that attend to everyone promptly, efficiently and costlessly (or cheaply). This is what sets apart the world's happiest countries. The predictability benefit of large numbers applies to state-run health systems too. If this is leveraged well, the rigmarole of insurance could be left out of the welfare deal. A robust public health system would also restrain runaway prices charged by the private sector, whose domination, profit orientation and large bills are what make health plans so vital in India. Moreover, unequal access to quality services is a problem far better solved directly than through insurance; going cashless under the latter tends to require too many okays for people to count on, especially if precious time is ticking away. While private medical care should be free to thrive, subsidized state provisions are a must. Unless we intend to proceed along a suboptimal path as our economy expands, fiscal planning for a big upgrade of services should begin.

GUEST VIEW

Our approach to the regulation of cryptocurrency needs clarity

Efforts at reining in crypto haven't yielded results and the path ahead is riddled with cryptic clues



MITALI MUKHERJEE is director, journalist programmes, at Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, and author of 'Crypto Crimes'.

In March this year, Sam Bankman-Fried, founder of the now defunct crypto exchange FTX, was sentenced to 25 years in prison on the back of fraud and conspiracy charges. In an interview over email to *ABC News* a few weeks later, he wrote: "It's most of what I think about each day."

It is certainly what many others think about as well. Prosecutors say conservative estimates of losses from this fraud stand at \$8 billion for FTX customers, \$1.7 billion for FTX investors, and \$1.3 billion for Alameda lenders. Once the richest and most influential man in crypto, Fried or 'SBF' was the creator of the hugely successful crypto trading exchange FTX and the Alameda Research trading firm. His crypto empire came crashing down in November 2022, an outcome of multiple acts of financial fraud and deceit, all spearheaded by him.

The collapse of FTX marked a hellish patch for crypto currencies that sank to multi-year lows. After peaking at \$3 trillion in November 2021, the FTX debacle saw the value of the overall crypto market slump to a two-year low of \$796 billion. It also prompted a much needed regulatory crackdown.

Here in India, the relationship between regulation and crypto has remained fuliginous at the best of times. The three key protagonists in the crypto tale—the Reserve Bank of India (RBI),

Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) and the government—have at different times held diametrically opposite views on cryptocurrencies. Of the three, it is clearly the central bank that has always been the most strident in its criticism and distrust of the crypto ecosystem.

However, it is the government that appears to have wound itself and policy action in knots. A cryptocurrency bill has been in the works since 2021, but still hasn't seen the light of day. What came in its place in 2022 was a tax whammy. Crypto currency trades in India attract a levy of 1% tax deducted at source (TDS) along with 30% capital gains tax, without any provision of offsetting crypto losses. The government categorized crypto assets as "Virtual Digital Assets," while refusing to address the moot question of whether they were legal or not. "Whether it is legitimate or illegitimate is a different question. But I will tax [crypto gains] because it is a sovereign right to tax," finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman said on the matter.

For an industry that has often resembled the dotcom bubble in its narrative, regulation in India has constantly shied away from addressing the who, what and how of crypto. Crypto believers swear that this is the answer to financial democratization and crypto sceptics say it's just fraud spelt with a 'c'.

When I started collating the numbers around crypto trading in 2021, data by research firm Crebaco showed that about 15 million Indians had invested in cryptocurrencies through Indian exchanges. New sign-ups were driving close to a 150% month-on-month surge in trading volumes. The government and policymakers were clearly nervous. Crypto was popular with the younger generation and there was a visible trail of incidents across India involving kidnapping, extortion, money laundering and drug deals where crypto coins were the weapon or ransom currency of choice. So, even as a clear policy eluded

crypto, two decisions were taken. The first was a hefty tax, perhaps aimed at curbing trading enthusiasm; the second was a notification released in March 2023 that brought crypto currencies and other digital assets under India's anti-money laundering law. The PMLA intent here was to check money laundering by essentially placing the onus of transparency and checks on Indian crypto exchange platforms.

However, things haven't worked out as planned. By the end of 2023, a report by think-tank Esya Centre reveals that about 3-5 million Indian users shifted to offshore platforms, resulting in \$3.8 billion worth of trading volume moving out of domestic exchanges. It's a loss of users and of taxes. Clearly, neither the 30% tax nor the PMLA inclusion has been a deterrent for those trading crypto; only a nuisance. One that private network connections have helped circumvent. Even as the information technology ministry blocked access to overseas platforms like Binance, Kucoin and Bitfinex, India-based crypto platforms and entrepreneurs have quietly moved business to locations like Dubai, probably because neither Indian policies nor the stress of staying based in India seemed appealing anymore.

While India's crypto industry continues to play a guessing game of 'what next' with regulation, what's clear is that our lack of policy clarity has never helped. The US has learnt the hard way that it needs to do more than just battle a stream of crypto-related litigation. The UK, EU, Singapore, Japan and Australia have moved forward with cogent regulatory frameworks for digital assets. For India, step one will be identifying who is taking charge of the situation. Should it be Sebi, which has purview over other financial markets? Should it be RBI, which is our bank regulator and monetary authority? Or should it be yet another body, a hybrid with financial and digital overview? The bigger question of regulation, however, isn't who. It is why.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health is the most shocking and inhumane.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

MY VIEW | MUSING MACRO

University campus dissent: The kids are (not) alright

AJIT RANADE



is a Pune-based economist.

The title of this column refers to a famous song by Pete Townshend of the iconic rock band, The Who. Part of their debut album in 1965, it captures the spirit of youth culture of the 1960s—rebellious, trying to break free from tradition and stereotypes and yet somehow also meet society's expectations. The Who's innovative, defiant and unruly style influenced many future generations of rock bands. The song itself has lasting appeal and has been covered by other artistes and there is also a recent movie by the same name. *The Kids are Alright* has become a catch-phrase representing the resilience and potential of youth as they face daunting challenges. It is the restless, resistant and resilient youth who rouse the social conscience when others are silent.

As Israel continues to brutally bomb Gaza, the kids in America are not alright about it. Across the country, college campuses have erupted with student protests, asking their universities to divest from all companies that do business with Israel. They want to end

partnerships with Israeli universities. They are calling it a 'genocide,' as nearly 40,000 Palestinians have died, the majority of them women and children. Palestinian flags have gone up on campus greens. College administrators have been trying and failing to defuse the tense and escalating situation. Encampments have sprung up on the campuses of elite Ivy League colleges like Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Columbia, all the way to mid-west institutions in Michigan and Texas and places like Berkeley in California. The police have had to be called in, and there have been hundreds of arrests. These students are taking the risks of expulsion, disciplinary action and damage to their careers. These include many foreign students, including those from India. Student unrest has also spread to France, England and Australia. Even the faculty in many places have joined forces with students. It is a great testimony to youth power that the powers that be, whether in Washington, Wall Street or Silicon Valley, can no longer be reticent and have had to respond. Even the President of the US has shown some sympathy, although officially the US continues to stonewall all resolutions to restrain Israel at the United Nations. Some US lawmakers have asked Columbia's president to resign, while others warned

that colleges should not cave into "right wing" pressure. The protests have divided lawmakers and social commentators, but the students themselves seem united the US.

This is not the first time that students are leading the voice of conscience in America. In the 1980s, college kids across campuses forced divestment in companies that did business with South Africa. This was their protest against its apartheid regime back then. Much earlier, in the 1960s, there was massive and decisive student unrest against the Vietnam war.

The present pro-Palestinian student-led movement will prove to be a watershed in the evolution of America's relationship with Israel. The word 'genocide' has gained currency in the discourse on what is going on in Gaza. Israel's response to the 7 October brutalities of Hamas that killed innocent civilians is increasingly seen as disproportionate and unjustified. The US can no longer instinctively side with Israel no matter what the latter does.

The social conscience and global awareness of American kids stands in stark contrast to the recent clueless fumbling of placard-holding young protestors in Delhi. These college students from a prestigious university, when asked by a journalist on camera, unfortunately exposed themselves as ignorant youth who had probably been unwittingly coddled into doing political propaganda. They seemed to have no idea what they were supposed to be protesting. Their answers provided much comical relief in the style of late-night TV comedy shows of David Letterman and Conan O'Brien, who routinely parody the clueless. The troubling aspect is that these were college kids who are supposed to be socially and politically aware. They represent human capital of the future. Of course, it is totally inappropriate to extrapolate from one hilarious episode, but the difference in what's happening on American campuses and this scene on the streets of Delhi, both on live television at the same time, is telling.

Whatever complaint you may make about American institutions of higher education, that they have become prisoners of 'woke-ness,' that political correctness is out of control, or that the diversity agenda has gone too far (all of these being favourite grumbles of Donald Trump supporters), you cannot deny that US universities remain bastions of free speech and creative thinking. They push the envelope, be it on social norms or science. They still attract the brightest and most competitive applicants from all over the world. The current predicament of university administrators is not that they want to suppress dissent against Israeli policy, but how to achieve a balance between free speech and providing a safe non-violent environment to all stakeholders, none of whom should feel intimidated. Within the boundaries of the college, where even the police cannot enter without permission, freedom of expression is sacrosanct. This is a *sine qua non* for a stimulating environment where science and art can flourish, where knowledge and insight can bloom. India's universities must also become that crucible where the dynamic human capital of tomorrow is forged—by healthy debate and dissent, by fearless questioning and exploration. Only then will our kids be alright.

As in America, our campuses should also become the crucibles where human capital is forged

MY VIEW | UNCOMMON SENSE

MINT CURATOR

Startups have a lot to learn from long established organizations

From teams and advisors to 'good bureaucracy' and governance, vital lessons can be drawn from the longevity of large firms



HARSH MARIWALA & ABHEEK SINGHI
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When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant that I could hardly stand to be around him. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.” This quote, often ascribed to Mark Twain, captures the disposition that young companies sometimes have towards large ones. In this article, we focus on what startups can learn from established organizations.

Get trusted advisors and challengers: Entrepreneurs bring passion and conviction to the business, and they are often in love with their ideas. The founder is larger than life, almost like a force of nature, and this is celebrated—both within the company and in the media. Think of Jobs, Musk or Zuckerberg in the global context or Agarwal(s) and Bansal(s) in India. Sometimes, this passion leads to spectacular success, but this could also lead to blind spots, poor investments and suboptimal outcomes. Behaviours that drive a startup’s success also paradoxically increase the risk of an early failure. Startups can greatly benefit from having someone play the role of a trusted challenger or advisor to the founders by holding a mirror and helping maintain a balance—a role often played in a large company by some board members or external advisors.

Build a team of owners: Many startups have a super(wo)man entrepreneur driving initial success but as the business scales up, it becomes increasingly difficult for one person to do everything. Winning startups recognize the need for a senior team with complementary skills to scale up the business and empower the team in a balanced manner. Consider how the Google founders and investors hired Eric Schmidt as CEO as early as 2001 (Google was founded in 1998) and also carved out the roles between themselves thoughtfully. The same philosophy applies to the entire senior team that emerges. As the business scales up, it is important to focus on the employee value proposition with the same dedication as the consumer proposition. Some readers may recall a print advertising campaign that Marico ran targeting not consumers but employees. In our view, startups need to think of the human resource team as product managers for the organization. Most importantly, founders need to delegate but not abdicate. As the organization grows, their role expands to not doing everything, but ensuring it gets done.

Focus on reality metrics: During various startup booms, metrics ranging from eyeballs and monthly active users to gross merchandise value (GMV) have been fashionable, but only for a while. Sooner than later, the focus shifts to what established companies have always known: the topline is vanity,



bottom-line is sanity and cash is reality. Startups that relentlessly focus on relevant operating and financial metrics are the ones that attract investors in the long run and succeed in becoming large companies. These metrics would, of course, change depending on the nature of the business and stage of the market’s development. For example, in the fast-evolving e-commerce market, the focus has shifted from GMV to unit economics to overall profitability and the underlying drivers for the same, be it the transaction size, demand density or associated advertising revenue. Identifying the right metrics for the business, measuring those and improving performance helps build the business for long term.

Develop a 'good bureaucracy': Startups are known for speed, action and individual initiative, but these can sometimes lead to chaos, arbitrariness and confusion. Bureaucracy, on the other hand, is associated with insistence on procedure and documentation. In academic usage, bureaucracy is sometimes characterized as comprising hierarchy (division of labour and specialization), continuity (a defined structure), impersonality (independent of individuals) and expertise. Large companies have systems and processes so that the organization can be run efficiently for the long run. Startups can benefit from embracing ‘good bureaucracy’—by setting in place fit-for-purpose systems. Striking an apt balance between creating the right struc-

tures and processes to support decision making while leaving room for managerial discretion should be the desired outcome. In our view, that sweet spot is always a work-in-progress for the best companies as they adapt to the changing context.

Go for governance from Day One: Governance starts with but is much more than mere compliance. Sometimes startups feel that this aspect can be taken care of “when we become larger.” This attitude is a recipe for disaster, since core governance principles have to be embedded in the business’s DNA and ways of working from the very start. The starting point is being clear on the distinction between the entrepreneur and the organization. The media has reported several disputes between boards or investors and founders in the last year, some on account of the *Laxman rekha* or dividing line between the individual and institution getting crossed, and others due to a culture of taking short-cuts or not following due process. Startups that eventually succeed start thinking of governance from Day One. Getting the right investors and advisors is really what helps founders build businesses for the long run.

In our last article, we wrote about what traditional large companies could learn from ‘startup cheetahs.’ In this piece, we make the point that startups also have a lot to imbibe from the wisdom and longevity of established elephants.

These are the authors’ personal views.

GUEST VIEW

Artificial intelligence holds the key to urban resilience

JUSTINA NIXON-SAINTIL



is vice president and chief impact officer at IBM.

The cities that some 4.4 billion people call home are increasingly at risk of catastrophic climate-driven events. Rising sea levels and flooding threaten coastal megacities like New York City and Jakarta, and extreme heat waves, like those that afflict cities across South Asia and the Middle East each year, are projected to become more frequent and severe.

While our built environments and infrastructure are being tested by unpredictable weather and changing populations, many urban communities are facing heightened climate-related health and economic risks. Dangers such as air pollution and natural disasters can be especially acute in developing countries, where they threaten to drive more people into poverty.

At the same time, cities contribute disproportionately to the broader challenges we face today. Cities already account for an estimated 70% of global carbon dioxide emissions and 78% of energy consumption, and these figures could grow in an urbanizing

world. According to UN-Habitat, the share of people living in urban areas is expected to increase to 68% by 2050.

Clearly, cities will play a central role in how the world addresses climate change. One factor that could give cities much-needed support and unlock opportunities for building greater resilience is artificial intelligence (AI). If developed and deployed responsibly and ethically, AI could potentially accelerate urban climate solutions, enable science-based and sustainable development, and deliver innovation at an unprecedented pace, allowing us to put the most vulnerable communities first.

But the first step is to improve our understanding of AI’s many potential applications as a tool for resilient cities. For example, the challenge of handling vast amounts of data is a major obstacle to modelling future climate scenarios accurately and making informed planning decisions. Fortunately, through the power of AI, foundation models and geospatial analytics could help us visualize our cities in a new way.

Consider the metropolitan areas facing severe and changing weather patterns. With real-time and historical climate data and AI-powered predictive capabilities, governments could introduce new tools for disaster

response and readiness. Everyone, from ordinary citizens to those tasked with protecting and maintaining critical infrastructure, could be better informed and prepared.

AI also has the potential to help make city operations more sustainable at every level, thus reducing cities’ outside emissions and environmental impact. Intelligent software applications could integrate AI to analyse buildings’ energy usage, water consumption, and waste management, providing insights that allow communities and organizations to make more responsible decisions about sustainability.

Moreover, with the addition of connected devices to drive in-depth data collection, safety measures such as urban infrastructure maintenance could be more effective and efficient than ever before. Think of all the bridges and roadways threatened by unprecedented weather events. When combined with AI, the uses of data extend far beyond basic monitoring and reporting.

Nor will AI’s urban applications stop there. The technology has the potential to optimize public transportation and traffic planning to achieve more sustainable urban transit. It could help to identify the best locations for expanding much-needed green space, while also preserving urban biodiversity and natural resources.

Governments, public-service providers and non-profit organizations alike have growing opportunities to access and explore AI tools, such as through requests for proposals and pro-bono programs, like those offered by IBM.

However, recent research shows that while 69% of cities are already exploring or testing the uses of generative AI, only 2% are implementing it. As IBM’s chief impact officer, I know that access to technology and the skills required to use it effectively can be major obstacles to implementation.

The need for greater access becomes all the more urgent when one considers the unequal distribution of climate-driven

threats. Within our cities, problems like air pollution and a lack of access to clean energy disproportionately affect the poorest and most vulnerable residents.

These are the communities that have the most to gain from AI.

We all have a responsibility to make AI solutions support vulnerable populations. That means providing equal access to climate tools, supporting training in AI and related skills, and also creating programs designed to respond to the specific needs of historically marginalized urban populations. Upskilling, especially, will play a key role in accelerating vulnerable communities’ adoption of climate-mitigation and adaptation tools. The private sector can do its part by forming partnerships with public agencies and working closely with organizations that are already engaged in supporting vulnerable communities.

By embracing AI and putting it to work in the fight against climate change, we can help make our cities safer, more adaptable, and more sustainable. The technology to give people the tools to anticipate, address, and recover from climate-driven events is here. But it is up to all of us—communities, governments and companies—to put it to the best possible use. ©2024/PROJECT SYNDICATE

GenAI’s big drawback is that it doesn’t reject clients’ bad ideas

Amazing but slavish creative tools can’t really rival human minds



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Creativity on command may not work out as well as AI purveyors say

Yael Biran has worked for the last 25 years as an animator for mostly corporate clients, capitalizing on her talent for colourful illustration, movement and figuring out what her customers want but don’t know how to articulate. Recently, she was “freaking out” about her work. She had big expenses on the horizon and her usual workflow of about a dozen annual projects had dwindled to three in the past year. The reason: artificial intelligence (AI).

More of the clients and creative agencies she worked with were trying to do animation work themselves and she suspects they were using AI tools for it. Biran is resigned to what that means. Another animation veteran she knows just retrained to be a gardener, and Biran is mulling new paths too, but she has a stark warning for what clients are about to lose: the people who challenge your terrible ideas. “What we give to clients is the ability to say ‘no’ to their ideas,” says Biran. “They’re not visual people and they know what they think they want. And then a lot times it really needs tweaking. Sometimes in a major way.”

The content that generative AI models can now conjure can look as good as anything created by humans. Creative agencies have been using tools from New York-based video generation startup Runway to develop concert backdrops for Madonna and graphics for CBS’s *Late Show With Stephen Colbert*, often saying it saves them hours or weeks of work. Earlier this year, actor and movie producer Tyler Perry said he was halting a \$800 million studio expansion because of OpenAI’s video generator Sora, whose capabilities he called “mind-blowing.”

Critics of the tech say that will lead to a flood of boring, derivative work in film and TV since AI tends to spew a pastiche of pre-existing art, like Biran’s swirling watercolour figures or the quirky cartoons. But when companies use AI to generate animations for their own marketing, the effect could be worse thanks to the relative lack of visual, creative thinkers among their ranks. They’ll use AI tools to churn out graphics that—as with Hollywood’s overuse of CGI—look impressive but fail to make a meaningful impression on other humans.

One design agency, for instance, tried making a short animated film graphic for a British health-care provider that was meant to train doctors on their bedside manner. The script said medical professionals should listen carefully to their patients and avoid behaving like they were going through a checklist. Yet the resulting animation showed a physician

sitting with a patient and a giant list being marked off above them. That’s not how visual communication works, says Biran. “People will see a checklist and go away thinking, ‘checklist.’”

When corporate clients try putting together a slideshow, they’ll also gravitate toward displaying some the same text already being spoken in a presentation, but that can make a presentation more confusing. There’s a reason for the phrase ‘a picture paints a thousand words.’

Images can elevate subtext and advance a message, but figuring out which images are best requires people who are skilled at thinking visually, like Biran. “We think in pictures, and we gravitate towards metaphors,” she explains. “And so we can help identify the subtext.”

Corporate clients often believe they are visual thinkers too, perhaps because so much of the content people see online now is visual on platforms like TikTok, YouTube and Reels. But passively consuming graphical content doesn’t mean you can do a decent job making it.

“AI can clearly enhance our capabilities, but some clients are now questioning the need to hire creatives,” says Leila Makki, who runs a video production company for brands and agencies. A big reason may be the anticipation of OpenAI’s Sora. “They’re genuinely uncertain, but dismissing creatives for AI is short-sighted and counterproductive.”

Businesses would do well to avoid outsourcing too many aspects of creative work to artificial intelligence, even as they shift much of their marketing spending—which for North America and Europe tends to hover at around 9% of capital expenditures—to generative AI. Biran predicts that in a few years, more companies will realize they need visual thinkers “and they will circle back and ask for our help.”

That may be an optimistic view, given that generative AI models are becoming more sophisticated, with the possibility of greater reasoning capabilities to boot.

But companies will also need people who understand visual communication to challenge their ideas, and they won’t get that from sycophantic AI models that don’t actually experience colour and sound. They’ll get that from humans, who will need to be paid. ©BLOOMBERG

The Indian **EXPRESS**
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Getting past 2019



MAIDUL ISLAM

BJP has ambitious targets for West Bengal. Its challenge is to make corruption charges against TMC a poll issue

CLEAR THE BILL

Government must sort out issues related to delayed payments to micro, small and medium enterprises

MICRO, SMALL AND medium enterprises are a key part of the Indian economy. Not only do they account for a significant share of the country's manufacturing output and exports, they also employ a sizable section of the labour force. However, among the considerable hardships they face, the lack of access to credit and the issue of delayed payments are particularly serious. Micro and small enterprises, as several studies have shown, account for a majority of the annual delayed payments. Over the years, the government has taken steps to make matters easy for these enterprises. For instance, it launched the Samadhaan portal to monitor the outstanding dues to these enterprises. In the Union budget 2023-24, the government also introduced a provision to ensure timely payments to MSMEs. The typical payment cycle of MSMEs ranges from 90 to 120 days. This large window tends to create mismatches between an entity's cash inflows and outflows, thereby increasing its working capital requirements. The new provision tried to address this issue by aiming to secure payments to MSMEs within 45 days of the supply of goods and/or services. This was a well-intentioned move. However, it has ended up having unintended consequences.

According to a report in this newspaper, larger companies are trying to circumvent this provision by cancelling orders to registered MSMEs as they prefer the longer payment cycles. In fact, they are now placing orders with unregistered MSMEs, who they would rather prefer to deal with as it gives them greater flexibility in operations. The new provision "allowed for deduction for larger companies" against payments to these enterprises "only after they are paid". Not being permitted to "make deductions in their tax returns" would only increase their tax liability. There are also reports of the bigger companies trying to "force suppliers to cancel their MSME registration". After all, the larger companies exercise considerable negotiating heft against their MSME suppliers. This asymmetry in relations has also resulted in a worrying development: MSMEs are choosing to deregister in order to make sure that they do not lose their orders. At the end of last year, the total number of MSMEs registered on the Udyam registration portal stood at 3.16 crore. This includes informal micro-enterprises registered on the Udyam Assist Platform, which according to more recent data stands at 1.5 crore.

The government has initiated conversations with stakeholders for possible solutions to straighten out issues. It has also sought suggestions on ways to ensure "timely clearance of MSME bills". Delayed payments have hobbled the working of these enterprises for long. They also have difficulty accessing low-cost credit. Appropriate steps must, therefore be taken to resolve the issue related to the window of payments at the earliest.

PETTY POLITICS

Former Punjab CM Channi's comments on Poonch terror attack show a cynical disregard for imperatives of national security

IN THE CUT and thrust of an election, barbs are exchanged, and accusations made. Much of this is, of course, campaign rhetoric. Yet, even after accounting for what is par for the course during electioneering, the back-to-back statements by former Punjab chief minister and Congress Working Committee member Charanjit Singh Channi cross an important line. On Sunday, Channi all but called the attack by militants in Poonch — in which an Indian Air Force corporal was killed and four others injured — a false flag operation. "This is a stunt to make the BJP win, there is no truth in it. Getting people killed and playing politics over their bodies is what the BJP does," he said. This even as his leader Rahul Gandhi called the attack "sad and shameful". The BJP accused Channi of disrespecting military personnel's sacrifice and demanded an apology from the Congress leadership. Rather than doing so, Channi doubled down a day later. While he expressed pride and admiration for soldiers, he also accused the BJP-led government of not doing enough to probe the 2019 Pulwama attacks — in which 40 soldiers were killed — for political reasons.

In a vibrant democracy, national security should be debated and some of its aspects even contested. Of course, security and safety of military personnel is a very valid issue for debate. What is not is to bring in the imperatives of electoral politics to a terrorist attack. Senior leaders of the ruling party and government have often alluded to military operations to score political points on the campaign trail. One popular refrain has been to underline how the government goes "inside enemy territory to strike" (*ghar mein ghus ke maartein hain*) or how a political party has been a "disciple" of Pakistan.

This conflation of military operations, national security, and muscular nationalism may be good politics but it's certainly not good strategy. Mud flying thick and fast on the campaign trail doesn't exactly lend itself to reasoned debate and discourse on national security. It also reduces the sacrifices of India's armed forces a pawn in games of political one-upmanship. That's why the Congress should get Channi to apologise to the families of the soliders — and accept that he crossed a line.

DON'T BURN THEM OUT

Fast bowling talents such as Mayank Yadav have to be nurtured — not rushed back to action after an injury

FOR THE FIRST time, India unearthed a fast bowler in Mayank Yadav who could consistently bowl over 150kph, triggering raves from fast bowling legends around the world such as the Australian great Brett Lee. Inexplicably, Mayank, the 21-year-old Delhi cricketer who plays for Lucknow Super Giants in the IPL, is already facing a threat of repeated injury breakdown. He was sidelined first due to a "side strain", which according to Lee usually takes "3-4 weeks to recover" but was pushed into an IPL game this week and once again broke down in the middle of the game. He has been virtually ruled out for the rest of the tournament. Questions have to be asked about the mismanagement by the franchise, especially as at the toss before the start of the game, the captain KL Rahul would claim that he "pushed the medicos and trainers" to accelerate Mayank's recovery and that it's "important that he (Mayank) gets out of his head that he is injured". A stale whiff of old conservative thinking evaporated from the episode.

It brings into focus two competing factors: Short-term urges of IPL franchises which desperately seek those two points to move ahead in the competition vs the long-term vision of Indian national team which would usher Mayank gradually into the big league and get him ready for the all-important Test tour of Australia in December. It's not as simple as asserting that it was the franchise which groomed, selected, and unleashed him in the big league. Does that give it a license to push Mayank hastily through a vulnerable injury recovery stage?

Injuries can happen anytime, but mismanaging or wrongly diagnosing the recovery period can break down a talent irrevocably. Better scientific counsel and patience is needed to handle fragile talents who are just finding their way in competitive cricket. Perhaps it's not Mayank who needs to get out of his head that he is injured, but the decision makers who need to get into their head that he is injured.

THE 2024 LOK Sabha election campaign in West Bengal has generated more heat than the scorching summer the state is experiencing. However, the voter turnout in the first two phases showed that the average voter is less enthusiastic about going to the booth on polling day than in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Given that elections in West Bengal are mostly held during the summer, the weather is not the sole reason for the low turnout.

Although one has to wait for all seven phases to make a proper assessment, especially because 36 more seats (85 per cent) are going to polls in the subsequent five phases, two factors may explain the turnout when compared to the previous two Lok Sabha elections that were seen as Modi wave elections. First, compared to Trinamool Congress, the BJP's booth-level organisation is weak. This was also noted in the 2021 assembly elections, the municipality polls in 2022 and the panchayat elections in 2023. The BJP's organisational strength has declined in West Bengal after the party's loss in the 2021 assembly polls. This may affect the BJP since the booth-level worker ensures the party's voters turn up at the polling stations. Several grassroots organisers from the Hindi heartland that were essentially part of the broader Sangh Parivar came down to West Bengal to assist the BJP's Bengal unit in the 2019 and 2021 elections. They do not seem to be present in large numbers in the current polls. They might be primarily busy working in the Hindi heartland states like UP and Bihar, where elections are also being held in seven phases.

The absence of significant sections of the migrant workers is another cause for low turnout. The post-Covid situation has created job-related uncertainties for the state's employable population. Many have migrated to other states. Given the precarious nature of

Generally, the BJP gets more votes in the Lok Sabha than the Vidhan Sabha elections in West Bengal — a trend for over three decades since the 1991 elections held at the height of the Ram Mandir movement. The BJP leadership is primarily banking on Sandeshkhali incidents and the corruption charges against the Trinamool. In the last few elections, particularly after 2014, corruption allegations like Ponzi schemes and teacher recruitment scams did not cut much ice with the voters in Bengal. Trinamool has capitalised on welfare schemes, Mamata Banerjee's charisma and a crafty campaign narrative of celebrating Bengali identity against BJP.

their employment, most migrant labourers did not take the risk of coming back on polling day. Travel is also not easy on their pockets.

The absence of migrant labour from polling is likely to hurt the TMC, given that a number of government-sponsored schemes cover low-income families in West Bengal. A sizeable section of the families of the migrant labourers are beneficiaries of the state government's welfare projects.

The BJP's top leadership has reportedly set a target of 25-35 seats in West Bengal. This ambitious goal is not just a number but also the party's tactic to rejuvenate its workers. Matching even the last Lok Sabha figures of 18 seats could be challenging, given that the BJP's vote share came down by over 2 per cent in the 2021 assembly elections compared to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The party was only leading in 12 Lok Sabha seats if one calculates the 2021 assembly election results. Since then, BJP candidates have come third after Trinamool and Left-Congress candidates in several by-polls and municipality polls. The Left appears to have improved its organisational strength in some areas thanks to a new generation of leaders.

The BJP's spectacular rise between the 2011 and 2021 assembly elections was due to four reasons. First, the rapid decline of the cadre-based Left parties was filled up by another cadre-based party. The BJP, which got only 6.14 per cent votes in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections and 4.06 per cent votes in the 2011 assembly elections, jumped to 17.02 per cent and 40.64 per cent in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections, respectively. It was a time of continuing electoral decline of the Left.

The Left did manage to put up a fight against the ruling TMC in the 2016 assembly polls by making a seat-sharing arrangement with the Congress, and the BJP vote share came down from 17.02 per cent in the 2014

Lok Sabha election to a little over 10 per cent in 2016 assembly elections. However, after the 2016 assembly polls, the Left and Congress could not resist the BJP becoming the state's principal opposition party. Second, the rise of the BJP in West Bengal, particularly after the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, was partly due to the impact of the BJP-led central government's power and financial resources to influence the voters. Third, the slow but steady rise of the RSS organisation after 2011 helped the BJP expand its wings in West Bengal.

Finally, a section of the Trinamool leadership has flocked to the BJP in the last few years. This has made the BJP's West Bengal unit a curious mix of Congress *gharana* politicians and the old Hindu Mahasabha and RSS-trained cadres. This ensemble has created conditions for intra-party rivalry within the state's BJP.

Generally, the BJP gets more votes in the Lok Sabha than the Vidhan Sabha elections in West Bengal — a trend for over three decades since the 1991 elections held at the height of the Ram Mandir movement. The BJP leadership is primarily banking on Sandeshkhali incidents and the corruption charges against the Trinamool. In the last few elections, particularly after 2014, corruption allegations like Ponzi schemes and teacher recruitment scams did not cut much ice with the voters in Bengal.

Trinamool has capitalised on welfare schemes, Mamata Banerjee's charisma and a crafty campaign narrative of celebrating Bengali identity against BJP. West Bengal also has a history of voting against national parties. How will the average voter react to the opposition campaign against Trinamool in 2024?

The writer is a political scientist at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. Views are personal



SHAHID JAMEEL

PEOPLE ON SOCIAL media and even some mainstream channels are having their "we told you so" moment this week after the pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca "admitted" in court to the side effects of its Covid-19 vaccine, manufactured and marketed in India as Covishield.

This follows a story in *The Telegraph* of the UK on April 28 about a class action suit brought against the company. The report says, "AstraZeneca has admitted for the first time in court documents that its Covid vaccine can cause a rare side effect," a condition called Thrombosis with Thrombocytopenia Syndrome (TTS), which translates to blood clots and low levels of platelets (a type of blood cell that prevents bleeding).

The key words are "rare side effect". What does that mean?

Australian Department of Health and Aged Care found TTS in people who had taken the AstraZeneca vaccine to be "very rare" — 2-3 per 1,00,000. In April 2021, the World Health Organisation's Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety computed this risk for the UK and EU to be one in 2,50,000 and one in 1,00,000, respectively. Such data is unfortunately not available for India, even after reportedly using 1.75 billion (or 175 crore) doses of Covishield. The risk is likely to be similar for Indians as well.

To put this in perspective, the global risk of dying in a traffic accident is 17.4 deaths per 1,00,000. For low-income countries, this risk is 24 deaths per 1,00,000, and for high-income countries, it is nine deaths per 1,00,000. So, the risk of TTS in those who took the AstraZeneca vaccine is about 5 to 12 times lower than the risk of dying in a road accident.

Medicine is all about risk versus bene-

DON'T DEMONISE THE JAB

'New' disclosures by AstraZeneca don't take away from the vaccine's value

fit. If the benefits of a drug far outweigh the risks, we use it. The hugely successful oral polio vaccine, which has been instrumental in eradicating polio from most of the world, including India, has a one in 2.7 million risk of causing vaccine-associated paralysis. To that one child, the risk is very high but for public health, the benefits are extremely high. And therefore, we use it.

Can we test for these rare risks before a vaccine is approved? A risk of one in 1,00,000 will not show up in a clinical trial that has 30,000 volunteers — half getting the vaccine and the other half a placebo. This was typically the size of phase 3 trials for Covid-19 vaccines. Should we then have clinical trials with millions of volunteers (where would we get so many volunteers?), spread over many years, and at a huge cost to inform of a minuscule risk before a vaccine is approved? That makes little sense. Further, such a vaccine would be useless for a pandemic caused by a newly-emerged pathogen.

The rare events become visible only after a vaccine is rolled out and millions of doses are administered. A multi-country observational study on the Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca vaccines was published in the journal *Vaccine* on April 2, 2024. It showed that these vaccines increase the incidence of Guillain-Barré syndrome, an autoimmune disorder that leads to neurological symptoms and brain clots within 42 days of receiving the vaccine. About 200 cases were found among 99 million people who were studied — a risk of one in 5,00,000. A separate study of 6.7 million people in Australia found a risk of one in 5,00,000 to one in 1.3 million for brain and spinal cord inflammation in people receiving these vaccines.

The value of such studies is two-fold.

They establish the safety of these vaccines in very large populations and real-world conditions. They also alert scientists to potential (albeit low) risks associated with the RNA and viral vector platforms. Future research will focus on making these vaccine platforms even safer.

In India's election season, Covid-19 vaccines have once again attracted political attention. However, using vaccines for political one-upmanship can be detrimental to public health. In a study that evaluated over 5,00,000 deaths in the states of Florida and Ohio (in the US) during the pandemic, excess mortality was significantly higher for Republican voters than Democratic voters after Covid-19 vaccines were available to all adults, but not before. This was attributed to political rhetoric that reduced trust in science in general, and vaccines in particular. We should not repeat the same mistakes.

Vaccines remain the most effective of public health tools. A modelling study on Covid-19 transmission and vaccination from Imperial College, London, estimated that vaccines saved 14 to 20 million excess deaths in just the first year of use. A Working Paper from the US-Asia Technology Management Center at Stanford University estimated that India prevented around 3.4 million excess deaths due to its Covid-19 vaccination programme.

The bottom line is that these "new" disclosures by AstraZeneca are neither new nor worth worrying over. We should stay focused on improving public health everywhere and for everyone. Vaccines will remain central to those efforts.

The writer is a virologist, and currently a Fellow at OCIS and Green Templeton College, University of Oxford, UK

MAY 7, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

ADIVASIS HARASSED

SOME ADIVASI LEADERS in the Raipur district of Madhya Pradesh were handcuffed, arrested and harassed for filing a writ petition in the Supreme Court against the practice of bonded labour in the area, according to a commission appointed by the court to inquire into the incident. Under pressure from vested interests, "the administration made a clumsy effort to terrorise the petitioners," according to Krishak Mazdoor Sangh activists.

OCEAN OF CONFLICT

PRIME MINISTER INDIRA Gandhi said in

Bombay that in spite of our peace policy, we have to be prepared to face any eventuality and threat to peace. She said the Indian Ocean had become an arena of superpower rivalry. "It is difficult for a developing country like India to compete with the other advanced countries, yet we have to work out ways and means to achieve high levels of sophistication," she said.

INDO-PAK TENSIONS

DEFENCE MINISTER R Venkataraman has said that India is prepared to meet any threat on its frontiers from Pakistan, which has stockpiled sophisticated imported military

equipment. He showed concern over massing of Pakistani troops on the Ladakh border. He dismissed suggestions that India's defence expenditure was high.

PRESERVE CONSTITUTION

OPPOSITION PARTIES ARE set to resist; any move by the government to amend the Constitution for the purpose of protecting legislative and parliamentary privileges from judicial scrutiny. The CPI-M, the largest opposition group in both Houses of Parliament and the ruling party in two states, has made it clear that it is against any amendment to Article 32 of the Constitution.



To auction or not

Telecom policy, including spectrum allocation, is best left to TRAI and DoT, not courts



RAJAT KATHURIA

THE 3G SPECTRUM auction of 2010, held in the wake of the 2G scandal of 2008, was a blessing at the time, for it achieved two objectives for the beleaguered process of air wave assignment to telecom operators. One, it ensured transparency in the process of allocation of scarce spectrum and two, it resulted in a revenue windfall for the government. The auction Rs 67,718.95 crore as per the government. This was a massive amount, even if significantly less than the notional — and, if I might add, illusory — Rs 1,76,000 crore that was estimated as loss to the government by the then CAG, when spectrum was given away on a “first-come-first-served basis” (FCFS). Reams have been written about this. What was a blessing then, has turned into a curse now, but it is not my intention to delve into the past. Rather, the purpose is to argue that auctions, in the current format, are inimical to the sector’s growth and downstream competitiveness and that the historical lack of institutional integrity is adding to the challenge.

The year 2010 was a defining moment for Indian telecoms. Until then, spectrum was administratively assigned, and thereafter by auctions. The pre-2010 administrative assignment of spectrum suffered from a lack of transparency, favouritism and avoidable scandals. The Supreme Court thus ordered the government to auction spectrum for “all time to come”.

The phrase “all time to come” was not pronounced in a vacuum: It was in retaliation to the bitter political economy associated with administrative spectrum assignment, including the half-baked and bungled FCFS method. It was also a telling comment on the government’s incapability to assign spectrum transparently by any other method. Spectrum is desirable for its own sake, and in a democracy like ours, its value multiplies manifold. Besides, if resources are to be generated in the process, these should go to government coffers, rather than unscrupulous individuals and private corporations, so that the money can be used for financing public goods.

No one could possibly quarrel with these arguments. Except that resources can be generated by means other than auctions. Think of toll roads that are coming up all over the country. Their existence has spawned businesses, generated tourism, and led to efficient transportation of goods to railways and ports. The income tax and GST revenue thus generated is also money for the government to spend on much-needed public goods. For telecoms, the backbone of Digital India, downstream competitiveness of user industries relies heavily on robust connectivity. Providing spectrum at a reasonable upfront fee to operators, thus helping firm-level efficiency and promoting competitiveness, would do what toll roads have done for the government. As the maxim goes, American roads are not good because America is rich, America is rich because American roads are good. That was the 1960s. Today’s carrier is digital infrastructure, of which spectrum is a vital input.

There are many dots (including DoT or



CR Sasikumar

the Department of Telecommunications) to be connected to even put this on the agenda for discussion. At the outset, the government will have to be amenable to giving up a bird in hand for many more later — just as investors do for long-term gains. Another consideration against auctions is that the revenue outcomes have been mixed. The direct and indirect opportunity costs of unsold spectrum due to high reserve prices have been steep. The auction regime worked well when demand exceeded supply, either genuinely or artificially engendered. It is quite revealing that 100 per cent of the spectrum was sold in only one of the seven auctions that have been held. That was in 2010, close on the heels of the 2G scam. Are auctions the only route to transparency?

On April 22, the DoT moved the Supreme Court to modify its 2012 order to allow administrative allocation of spectrum in select cases, where using the auction route is either not technically feasible or not desirable, such as for space and satellite applications. The recently-passed Telecom Act, 2023, specifies that only limited and narrowly-defined cases, including spectrum for BSNL, will be given on administrative basis. There are reportedly 19 such cases.

It is the government’s prerogative whether it uses auctions for these or other types of assignment. It could have easily arrogated to itself the power to assign spectrum in the best interest of the country in the Telecom Act, 2023. This is a policy decision and ought not to be subject to a Supreme Court decision from over a decade ago, which directed that all spectrum will be assigned by auction for all time to come.

Situations and market dynamics change and, hopefully, so do institutions. The DoT is

giving itself the benefit of doubt that it can, under changed circumstances, assign spectrum through administrative procedures that will stand the test of transparency and legitimacy. Or it doesn’t wish to, and is taking aim from the Supreme Court’s burdened shoulders. Whatever route the assignment of spectrum takes, it is a policy decision and under normal circumstances ought to be decided by the policy maker — which is the DoT.

I recall a time when the newly-established Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) was engaged in telecom tariff fixing, a power that it has to this day. It was 1998 and the regulator was involved with what was known as “tariff-rebalancing”, thereby reducing the cross subsidy from long distance to monthly rentals. This was necessary to attract competition and to keep the incumbent public sector undertaking, BSNL, afloat. Naturally, when competition arrives, the incumbent would lose market share and subscribers. That is inevitable. The CAG told TRAI that its actions were prejudicial to the revenue interest of the public sector and, as a consequence, overstepped into policy, beyond its audit function. This example is just for the purpose of illustrating the importance of specialists and expert bodies executing functions entrusted to them because these can have far-reaching implications. Thus, policy for the telecom sector is best left to TRAI and DoT; to auction or not to auction is a task given to them and they should be responsible for it and be made accountable.

The writer is dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences and professor of Economics at the Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence.

Views are personal

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“China will continue to support Europe in achieving strategic autonomy, and the more Europe develops, the more stable the West will be; Europe should also open its minds, embrace and support China to advance Chinese modernisation.”

— GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

Search for the decisive edge

While photo finishes cannot be written off, BJP’s political push in Karnataka has come with a recognition of its weaknesses



SRIKAR RAGHAVAN

I HAVE BEFORE me an edition of the famous periodical *Lankesh Patrike*, from September 1994, with a scathing cover headline that translates to: ‘November Elections, Five Parties in the Fray, Five Hundred Scoundrels, Innumerable Problems.’ Numerous photographs of leaders outline the headline. Inside, a two-page article mourns the many evils bedevilling the assembly elections of that year — rampant corruption across parties, lack of genuine leaders, communal tension — all of which remain prime issues that the average voter must navigate even today. *Lankesh Patrike* had created, in the Eighties and Nineties, a daring adversarial discourse which revelled in mocking the corrupt political class. As the decades rolled by, media houses became targeted by increasingly bad actors on the political stage, who have now become elephants in the room that cannot be made to budge.

Today, the political establishment comfortably secures court-mandated gag orders that prevent journalists from publishing any potentially defamatory content. Reports show that there are presently more than 600 suits registered against media houses in Bengaluru courts, involving 23 politicians from the BJP, eight from Congress, and three from the JD(S). The most shocking repercussion of such unprecedented immunity came to light recently in the context of the serial sexual abuse incident involving Hassan MP Prajwal Revanna, who had secured for himself a gag order last year. Three days before the Lok Sabha polls in Hassan this April, a bevy of pen drives were distributed across Hassan, carrying thousands of videos where Prajwal is allegedly seen abusing and molesting women — the victims include helper-women in the Revanna household and wives of local JD(S) workers and police officers, who have been traumatised by the predatory and feudal establishment into keeping fearfully silent. Prajwal has fled the country, but will eventually have to return and face the consequences. It is ultimately the patriarchal underbelly of the political class that has come fully unveiled in the course of the last two weeks. It is a cesspool, and a shockingly shallow one at that. His father HD Revanna was arrested on Saturday after allegedly trying to kidnap and intimidate a witness. All this is a death knell for the JD(S), whose sharp fall from grace is going to open up a fresh political vacuum in the future.

The BJP’s political push in Karnataka had begun soberly with a recognition of its weaknesses — it had denied its most fervent hardliners a ticket, and entered into a desperate alliance with the JD(S), once its staunch enemy, to consolidate their Vokkaliga vote-base in south Karnataka. Carrying neither the anti-corruption wave

of 2014, nor the rhetoric of 2019’s surgical strikes, this is the first time the BJP is organising itself solely around an unfluffed Modi factor, which is poised to yield only diminishing returns. Having hastily recognised this, the campaign retreated to familiar ground — communal tension. The murder of a Congress legislator’s daughter by a Muslim man became a war cry around which the BJP’s campaign coagulated, seemingly oblivious to the fact that entitled men knifing women has become a distressingly common occurrence around the country, cutting across religious boundaries. This kind of politicking is, of course, an old trick. In 2017, the tragic death by drowning of a young man named Paresch Mesta in Uttara Kannada had been funnelled into allegations of torture and “jihad”, spawning violent protests and a bandh. The CBI concluded later that it was merely an unfortunate accident. There are numerous other such instances.

The 14 seats of the northern half of Karnataka that go to polls on May 7 will largely hinge on the Lingayat voter-base that dominates the region. The BJP presently holds all 14 seats, but fighting within their own cadre, rebellion against the dominance of the Yediyurappa family, the impact of the Congress’ guarantee schemes on women and aggrieved farmers facing acute drought, will all be factors that are going to significantly dilute the BJP’s vote bank. Dingaleshwar Swami, head of a Lingayat mutt in Shirahatti, has deemed the task of defeating Pralhad Joshi (the sitting four-time MP from Dharwad) to be no less than a personal *dharma yud-dha*, having also criticised his non-performance in matters of health and education over the last 20 years. The contest in Shivamogga is intriguing as well. It is a three-way battle between KS Eshwarappa (who is personally engaged in an ego-duel with Yediyurappa), BY Raghavendra (son of Yediyurappa), and Geetha Shivarajkumar, (daughter-in-law of the film star Dr Rajkumar). The Rajkumar family is enormously well-respected across the state and carries a legacy of philanthropy, with a particular emphasis on the education and rehabilitation of girls and women from disadvantaged backgrounds. Geetha Shivarajkumar also happens to be the daughter of former chief minister Sarekoppa Bangarappa, whose legacy is strong in the region. These could potentially supply the decisive edge.

While photo finishes cannot be written off, pollsters have predicted that the Congress is likely to win between 13-18 out of the 28 Lok Sabha seats in Karnataka. As the world’s largest voting exercise proceeds apace, the overarching theme of this election season — hate, bile, and slander — continues to keep level with the rising mercury. One hopes that civil society will recognise why political accountability, empowerment of women, economic distress, and climate change must ultimately override the manufactured optics of caste, communalism, and hero worship.

Raghavan is an independent writer and researcher from Mysore. A New India Foundation fellow, his book, Rama, Bhima, Soma is forthcoming

A confusing foundation

Undergraduates appearing in UGC-NET exams will make higher learning more elitist



SHIVANI NAG

RECENTLY, THE UGC chairperson announced that students with four-year undergraduate degrees can now appear for the National Eligibility Test (NET), an exam that certifies eligibility for lectureship in colleges and universities in India, and PhD programmes. Earlier, the eligibility for both was a Masters’ degree. In other words, if one qualifies for the NET after a four-year undergraduate degree, one can now teach other undergraduate students. Which universities would recruit these fresh undergraduates? Will these be the universities with the Institution of Eminence tag, and high NAAC ratings, positioned as the Harvards and Oxfords of India? Would it be the local public colleges which provide education to lakhs of first-generation university-goers who dream of social and economic mobility through quality higher education? It is not difficult to imagine for whom the quality of higher education stands further compromised.

The chairperson added that candidates could appear in a subject in which they want to pursue a PhD irrespective of the discipline in which they have obtained the four-year bachelor’s degree. According to him, “This step will help replace the need for separate entrance tests conducted by individual universities and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).” It is, he added, the aim of the UGC to dismantle the perception of PhD as an “elite qualification”.

A PhD or a doctorate in philosophy is a

degree awarded after a candidate carries out rigorous original research for a period usually longer than two to three years. If a Master’s degree in any discipline is seen as a “specialisation”, a PhD reflects a research scholar’s ability to think creatively, ask new and insightful questions, explore them rigorously and systematically and, through this process, enable newer insights that challenge and advance existing theories and concepts. For this, a student would need to be conceptually and methodologically informed and able to use these skills for observation and analysis. This is not to say that a PhD programme should not itself aim to strengthen the conceptual and methodological tools of the research scholars, but there is a huge difference between strengthening and refining existing tools and aiming to introduce and instil them in a short period of one year. To further suggest that the hierarchies across degrees, from undergraduate, postgraduate and research levels are indicative of “eliteness”, is dangerous. To confuse a foundation attained through immersed and rigorous engagement with concepts with “eliteness” is a grave undermining of the academic process.

A rigorous conceptual and methodological preparedness at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels must be the aim. What we instead find is consistent dilution of this responsibility by first eliminating the MPhil programmes and now even the need for

postgraduate degrees. It also appears to be a misinformed understanding of PhD-level research when one sees separate entrances as a hurdle, rather than as a useful modality to align the research interest of a student with a supervisor who is an expert in the given field, in an institution with the necessary resources to support the research. As a university faculty engaged with teaching and research for the past decade, it is clear to me that the inequities of our schooling systems have only become more glaring with time. It takes considerable mentoring and work to help students transition from a system that requires confining oneself to textbooks, to reading original and more advanced works and writing analytically and reflectively. Also, in the case of social sciences in particular, the development of questions that hold possibilities to advance an existing knowledge discourse requires active, critical and reflexive living and participation in social spaces. This, in turn, requires an entry into the various theoretical and conceptual frameworks that provide us with the vocabulary to talk about it. This is how theories on gender, caste, class, group processes, identities and many other aspects of the human world have evolved and transformed. As a student of Psychology, the undergraduate programme was crucial in helping me become familiar with the focus and language of the discipline, but it was in the postgraduate programme that a deeper ex-

ploration of concepts became possible. Thereafter, work in clinics and classrooms enabled me to see the potencies, contradictions and gaps in the current theorisations. In the last few years, it has not been uncommon to find PhD candidates appearing in interviews without their own questions, but willing to adopt the questions of the supervisors as their own. The several critical researches that have managed to challenge the status quo would not have been possible without newer questions emerging from locations that were, till then, denied opportunities to ask and research. A related concern is also that if undergraduate degrees were to be sufficient for undertaking PhD research, it would actually lead to further “elitisation” of higher education as only those with existing linguistic and academic capital would be able to take the risk of pursuing a four-five year research programme in the absence of sufficient mentoring and preparation period.

What we need today are more publicly-funded research institutes with better infrastructure and more fellowships. This would be meaningful for individual students and the country, only if the requirements for rigour and the active provisions for sustained mentoring are not diluted.

The writer is an assistant professor at the School of Education Studies in Ambedkar University, Delhi

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FREE SPEECH MYTH

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Campus and camp’ (IE, May 6). The crackdown on pro-Palestine protests at Columbia University and other campuses across the US is an assault on free speech and academic freedom. Silencing dissent only deepens the wounds of injustice and undermines the values that the US claims to uphold. Condemning Israel’s excesses is not tantamount to anti-Semitism. It is a legitimate form of protest, rooted in the principles of human rights and international law.

SSPaul, Nadia

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Campus and camp’ (IE, May 6). The demonstrations in US campuses have divided the democratic party like never before. The Biden camp has to perform a juggling act wherein some voters are not antagonised by the US stand on Gaza. The US can not abdicate its leadership of the liberal world. On the other hand, the university authorities are confronting a difficult question: When does a protest cross the line? In the crucible of the current moment on US campuses, its future citizens will hopefully learn about the potential and limitations of democracy.

Shubhada H, via email

QUESTION FOR VOTER

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘The

Maharashtra challenge’ (IE, May 6). PM

Narendra Modi has never lost any opportunity to target the INDIA bloc, calling it opportunistic and unholy. Paradoxically, for the BJP, clash of interests among its alliance partner Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena and Ajit Pawar-led NCP, is of its own making. Lack of reconciliation and failure to face the Opposition will mar its chance for “400 paar”. This election will also be a challenge for the electorate of the state. PM Modi had vowed to root out corruption. Instead, the party’s “washing machine” has salvaged corrupt alliance partners and awarded them lucrative ministerial berths. The question is: Will the public respond?

LRMurmu, New Delhi

PRIORITISE YOUTH

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Jobs picture in perspective’ (IE, May 6). The youth represent the future of our nation and it is important to equip them with quality education and skills. It’s noteworthy that numerous highly qualified young individuals opt for employment abroad. This necessitates an examination of the reasons behind this and the formulation of policies to bolster domestic job opportunities. Prioritising youth employment and demanding the implementation of policies geared towards education and skills development are paramount for fostering overall national growth.

Ajay Corriea, Vasai



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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com



Boeing's Starliner aboard an Atlas V rocket to be launched on Tuesday. Reuters

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

WITH VETERAN SUNITA WILLIAMS ON BOARD, BOEING'S STARLINER SET TO LAUNCH: WHAT IS ITS SIGNIFICANCE?

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, MAY 6

Boeing's Starliner spacecraft, carrying two NASA astronauts, will be launched by an Atlas V rocket from Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida, to the International Space Station (ISS) on Tuesday.

This will be Starliner's first crewed test flight. If the mission is successful, Boeing will become the second private firm to be able to provide NASA crew transport to and from the ISS, alongside Elon Musk's SpaceX.

What is Boeing's Starliner?

Starliner is a partially reusable crew capsule, officially known as CST-100 (crew space transportation). The capsule, which is 5 m tall and 4.6 m wide, consists of two modules. One is the crew module, which can accommodate seven astronauts — although, for trips to the ISS, it will be modified for four astronauts and cargo. The crew module can be reused up to 10 times, with a six-month turnaround.

The other is the service module — the powerhouse of the spacecraft — which supplies electricity, propulsion, thermal control, air, and water in space. This module is not reusable.

What is the mission objective?

The main objective of the mission is to see how Starliner fares in space with a crew on board. It is supposed to dock with the ISS a day after the launch, and return to Earth after around 10 days.

But before Starliner automatically docks with the space station, the crew members, who are NASA astronauts Barry 'Butch' Wilmore and Sunita Williams, will test flying it manually. The crew will also test seats, onboard life-support, navigation systems, and the system that moves cargo into the ISS. The space suits worn by Wilmore and Williams will also be tested — these blue suits are around 40% lighter than their predecessors and have touchscreen-sensitive gloves.

On the return journey, NASA and Boeing will be keeping an eye on the spacecraft's heat shield and parachutes. They will slow the descent before airbags open to soften the moment of impact with the ground — unlike other crew cap-

sules, Starliner will land on the ground and not in the sea.

How has Boeing's journey been?

After NASA retired its space shuttle fleet in 2011, it invited commercial space companies to help it transport astronauts and cargo to the ISS. Two companies got the contracts: SpaceX and Boeing. While SpaceX has been ferrying astronauts to and from the ISS since 2020, Tuesday's launch will be Boeing's first crewed flight.

Starliner's first uncrewed flight had come after four years of delay. Although it was set to take off in 2015, the company postponed it to 2019. When it did finally happen, a series of software and hardware failures thwarted the spacecraft from getting into its planned orbit and docking with the ISS.

It took more than 80 fixes for Starliner to make its first successful uncrewed flight. Even after achieving the goal, there were concerns about the performance of some thrusters and the spacecraft's cooling system. Additional problems were found subsequently — there were issues with the safety of wiring and parachutes. As a result, Boeing delayed the launch of Starliner's first crewed flight from 2023.

Why is the mission significant?

The mission's success is crucial for both NASA and Boeing. Currently, NASA has only one private company, SpaceX, which can take its astronauts and cargo to the ISS. Starliner getting approval for conducting routine flights to and from the ISS would give NASA a second option.

The success, however, is more important for Boeing. The launch of Starliner has come at a time when the company's airline business — entirely independent of its space program — has been plagued by safety issues in recent years. For instance, in January, a door-size panel blew out of a Boeing 737 Max, leaving a gaping hole shortly after takeoff.

If Starliner completes its objectives, it will help Boeing rebuild its reputation. "The company has been working on the spacecraft for so long, they have had a few problems with the test flights and there's a lot riding on this," Dr Simeon Barber, a space scientist at the UK-based Open University, told the BBC.

EXPERT EXPLAINS

FAIZAN MUSTAFA



IN ELECTION season, India is debating fundamental constitutional questions around reservation. Can a secular country like India have religion-based reservation? Have Muslims ever been given reservation by reducing the quota for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), or Other Backward Classes (OBCs)? Does reservation for SCs that is limited to only certain religious denominations amount to reservation based on religion?

Reservation & Constitution

The Constitution of India moved away from equality, which refers to equal treatment for all, to equity, which ensures fairness and may require differential treatment or special measures for some groups. The Supreme Court has held that equality is a dynamic concept with many aspects and dimensions, and it cannot be "cribbed, cabined and confined" within traditional and doctrinaire limits (*EP Royappa vs State Of Tamil Nadu*, 1973).

Formal equality is concerned with equality of treatment — treating everyone the same, regardless of outcomes — which can at times lead to serious inequalities for historically disadvantaged groups. Substantive equality, on the other hand, is concerned with equality of outcomes. Affirmative action promotes this idea of substantive equality.

The Constitution of 1949 dropped the word 'minorities' from Article 296 of the draft constitution (Article 335 of the present Constitution), but included Article 16(4) that enabled the state to make "any provision for ...reservation...in favour of any backward class of citizens which...is not adequately represented in the services under the state".

The first constitutional amendment inserted Article 15(4), which empowered the state to make "any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes".

Article 15 specifically prohibits the state from discriminating against citizens on grounds *only* of both religion and caste (along with sex, race, and place of birth). After the Supreme Court's judgment in *State of Kerala vs N M Thomas* (1975), reservation is considered not an exception to the equality/non-discrimination clauses of Articles 15(1) and 16(1), but as an extension of equality. The crucial word in Articles 15 and 16 is 'only' — which implies that if a religious, racial, or caste group consti-

tutes a "weaker section" under Article 46, or constitutes a backward class, it would be entitled to special provisions for its advancement.

Some Muslim castes were given reservation not because they were Muslims, but because these castes were included within the backward class, and reservation was given without reducing the quota for SCs, STs, and OBCs by creating a sub-quota within the OBCs.

The Mandal Commission, following the example set by several states, included a number of Muslim castes in the list of OBCs. The Supreme Court in *Indra Sawhney* (1992) laid down that any social group, whatever its mark of identity, if found to be backward under the same criteria as others, will be entitled to be treated as a backward class.

Kerala: Muslim sub-quota

Religion-based reservation was first introduced in 1936 in Travancore-Cochin state. In 1952, this was replaced by communal reservation. Muslims, who constituted 22% of the population, were included within the OBCs.

After the state of Kerala was formed in 1956, all Muslims were included in one of eight sub-quota categories, and a sub-quota of 10% (now 12%) was created within the OBC quota. Unlike the faulty report of the Mandal Commission which concluded, on the pattern of Hindus, that only 52% Muslims were OBCs, in Kerala and Karnataka, from the times of the Hindu *maharajas*, Muslims were seen as having been drawn overwhelmingly from the "untouchable" and other "low" castes, and were thus included among the backward classes.

Karnataka: JD(S) decision

The Third Backward Classes Commission of Karnataka headed by Justice O Chinnappa Reddy (1990) found, like the Havanur (1975) and Venkataswami (1983) Commissions, that Muslims fulfilled the requirements for being considered among the backward classes.

In 1995, the government of Chief Minister H D Deve Gowda, who is currently an ally of the BJP, implemented 4% Muslim reservation within the OBC quota. Thirty-six Muslim castes which are part of the central list of OBCs were included in the quota.

Deve Gowda's JD(S) had criticised the decision of the Basavaraj Bommai government to scrap the Muslim quota before the Assembly polls of 2023. The Supreme Court subsequently stayed the Bommai government's decision.

TN: Backward Muslims

The government of M Karunanidhi passed a law in 2007 based on the recommendations of the Second Backward Classes Commission headed by J A Ambasankar (1985), that provided within the 30% OBC quota, a sub-cate-

gory of Muslims with 3.5% reservation. This did not include upper-caste Muslims. The Act gave reservation to some Christian castes, but this provision was subsequently removed on the demand of Christians themselves.

Andhra Pradesh & Telangana

The question of giving Muslims reservation along with 112 other communities/ castes was referred to the Andhra Pradesh Backward Classes Commission in 1994. In 2004, based on a report by the Commissioner of Minority Welfare on the social, economic, and educational backwardness of Muslims, the government provided 5% reservation, treating the entire community as backward. The High Court struck down the quota on the technical ground that the mandatory consultation with the AP Commission for Backward Classes was not done. It also held that the minority welfare report was bad in law because it laid down no criteria for determining backwardness. (*T Muralidhar Rao vs State of AP*, 2004)

However, the court held that "reservations for Muslims or sections/ groups among them, in no manner militate against secularism, which is part of the basic structure of the constitution". Relying on *M R Balaji vs State of Mysore* (1962), the court noted that "Muslims or for that matter Christians and Sikhs etc., are not excluded for the purpose of conferring the benefits under Articles 15(4) or 16(4)".

In *M R Balaji*, the Supreme Court observed: "It is not unlikely that in some States some Muslims or Christians or Jains forming groups may be socially backward. That is why...though castes in relation to Hindus may be a relevant factor to consider in determining the social backwardness of groups or classes of citizens, it cannot be made the sole or the dominant test in that behalf."

In *Indra Sawhney* (1992), the Supreme Court held that "in a particular state, Muslim community as a whole may be found socially backward. (As a matter of fact, they are so treated in...Karnataka as well as...Kerala...)"

Following the 2004 HC decision, the AP government referred the issue to the Backward Classes Commission. In 2005, based on the Commission's report, the state promulgated an ordinance declaring the entire Muslim community as backward, and providing 5% quota.

But the HC struck down the ordinance in *B Archana Reddy vs State of AP* (2005) on the ground that the benefit could not be extended to the whole community without proper identification of social backwardness of Muslims by the Commission. The five-judge Bench of the HC reiterated that there is no prohibition on declaring Muslims as a community socially and educationally backward, provided they satisfy the test of social back-

wardness. Thus, the failure of the Commission to recognise the heterogeneity of Muslims became the basis for the rejection of its report, and of the ordinance based on it.

The state again referred the matter to the Backward Classes Commission and, based on its report, enacted a law in 2007 giving reservation to only 14 Muslim castes such as washermen, butcher, carpenter, gardener, barber, etc. Similar occupational castes of Hindus were already in the list of backward, and enjoying reservation. The schedule of the Act explicitly excluded 10 'higher' castes among Muslims such as Saiyed, Mushaik, Mughal, Pathan, Irani, Arab, Bhora, Khoja, Cutchi-Memon, etc.

But this Act too was struck down by the HC. The final word on its constitutionality is awaited from the Supreme Court.

After the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh in 2014, the TRS government in Telangana passed a law in 2017 proposing 12% reservation for OBC Muslims on the basis of the reports of the G Sudhir Commission and the Backward Classes Commission.

The Sudhir Commission found that in educational attainment, work participation, and household-level possession of land, Muslims were behind SCs, STs and Hindus in general. Since the proposal would take reservation beyond the 50% mandated by the Supreme Court in its *Indra Sawhney* judgment (1992), it was referred to the central government for inclusion in the Ninth Schedule. But the Centre did not bring the proposal to Parliament.

Sachar, Misra panels

The Justice Rajinder Sachar Committee (2006) found that the Muslim community as a whole was almost as backward as SCs and STs, and more backward than non-Muslim OBCs. The Justice Ranganath Misra Committee (2007) suggested 15% reservation for minorities, including 10% for Muslims.

Based on these two reports, the UPA government in 2012 issued an executive order providing 4.5% reservation of minorities — not just Muslims — within the existing OBC quota of 27%. Since the order was issued only a few days before the Assembly elections in UP, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Goa, and Manipur, the Election Commission asked the government not to implement it. The AP High Court quashed the order, and the Supreme Court refused to stay the HC's order.

Article 341 of the Constitution and the 1950 Presidential Order state that only Hindus are entitled to inclusion within SCs. However, Sikhs were included within SCs in 1956, and Buddhists in 1990. Muslims and Christians remain excluded. It could be argued that this too, is 'religion-based' reservation.

Prof Faizan Mustafa is Vice-Chancellor, Chanakya National Law University, Patna

What is SFJ, alleged to have links with AAP?

ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, MAY 6

DELHI LIEUTENANT-Governor V K Saxena on Monday recommended a National Investigation Agency (NIA) probe against jailed Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal for allegedly receiving political funding from Sikhs for Justice (SFJ), a New York-based pro-Khalistan organisation that is banned in India.

Sources in the LG House told *The Indian Express* that the recommendation was made based on a complaint by Ashoo Mongia of the World Hindu Federation, a diaspora-based Hindu advocacy organisation. Mongia alleged that Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party received \$16 million from SFJ for "facilitating the release of Devinder Pal Bhullar and espousing pro-Khalistani sentiments".

'Ballots not Bullets'

SFJ was founded in 2007 by Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a US-based attorney who is



Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, founder and chief of the SFJ. File

currently in his late 40s. According to its website, SFJ seeks to achieve "self-determination for the Sikh people in their historic homeland" in "Indian held Punjab", and "establish a sovereign state, popularly known as Khalistan".

"It was formed with the overt recognition that the wanton use of violence had been the Khalistan movement's Achilles heel," Terry Milewski, Canadian journalist and the author of *Blood for Blood: Fifty Years of the Global Khalistan Project* (2021), had previously told *The Indian Express*. Pannun's motto was "balloons not bullets", Milewski said.

Thus far, SFJ's most notable activity has been the so-called 'Referendum 2020' for the secession of Punjab — specifically the Indian

state and not the Pakistani province — held among the Sikh diaspora in some cities.

"The rules and identification requirements are farcical," Milewski told *The Indian Express*. "I have a friend in London who logged on online to register to vote, put down Angelina Jolie as his name, and was successfully registered for the vote. Pannun and his ilk put up random, unverifiable numbers hailing the referendum's success," he said.

Doublespeak of Pannun, SFJ

Despite supposedly "turning a page" from the violence-ridden Khalistan movement of yesteryears, SFJ and Pannun have not been shy to glorify terrorists and mass murderers.

For instance, the campaign headquarters for the 'referendum' in Canada is named after 'Shaheed' (martyr) Talwinder Singh Parmar, the mastermind behind the 1985 Air India bombing which killed 329 innocents, and remains the most deadly mass murder in Canadian history. SFJ has also repeatedly hailed Indira Gandhi's killers, Beant Singh

and Satwant Singh. In a viral video from 2020, Pannun promised to gift new iPhones to anyone who flew the Khalistan flag in honour of 'Shaheed' Beant Singh.

"Terrorists have been an absolutely essential part in SFJ's iconography ... SFJ has completely contradicted themselves," Milewski said. And SFJ does not stop at simply glorifying terrorists. Pannun himself has often mounted veiled threats at Hindus and other non-Sikh members of the Indian diaspora.

Banned in India

India refers to Pannun as a terrorist, and has banned SFJ under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967. The Home Ministry's 2019 notification issuing the ban says: "In the garb of the so-called referendum for Sikhs, SFJ is actually espousing secessionism and militant ideology in Punjab, while operating from safe havens on foreign soils and actively supported by inimical forces in other countries."

Currently, almost a dozen cases are registered against Pannun and SFJ in India.

IndiGo's wide-body order: Why is low-cost, long-haul a difficult model?

SUKALP SHARMA
NEW DELHI, MAY 6

AFTER PLACING the world's largest commercial aircraft order for 500 Airbus A320-family narrow-body aircraft last year, IndiGo has now ordered 30 wide-body Airbus A350-900 planes. Deliveries are set to begin in 2027; in addition, IndiGo has purchase options for another 70 aircraft of the A350 family.

India's largest airline wants to make a mark globally with non-stop, long-haul flights from Indian airports. However, long-haul, low-cost is a difficult model to crack. Wow Air, Norwegian Airlines, Thomas Cook, Air Jume, and XL Airlines could not succeed, and AirAsia X has been struggling. Examples of profitable long-haul budget operations such as Scoot, Jetstar, Cebu Pacific, Tui, and French Bee are more the exception than the rule.

Problem of costs

The core business principle of low-cost

carriers (LCCs) is to minimise costs in order to offer low fares and fill up the aircraft, while still earning a profit. Higher costs limit their pricing power, and shrink the gap with full-service carriers (FSCs).

Airlines flying longer routes with larger aircraft have relatively less control over fuel expenses, which are determined by international oil prices, and tend to have a disproportionately high share in the cost structure. Latest wide-body aircraft like the A350 are a lot more fuel-efficient than earlier generations of planes, but it is not certain they can make a decisive difference in favour of low-cost, long-duration travel. At the same time, wide-body aircraft are a lot more expensive than narrow-body planes — the new-generation wide-body planes even more so.

Also, wide-body planes require additional crews due to the length of the journey, and that adds to costs. The rapid turnaround times and high capacity utilisation levels that budget carriers thrive on can be challenging to achieve on a sustained basis in long-haul

operations. Maintenance and repairs cost more and take longer for wide-body aircraft.

Network planning

Network planning is a big factor when it comes to success and failure in commercial aviation. In the case of the low-cost, long-haul airlines, the importance of the network design is even greater.

An airline's network design is shaped by a number of factors, including demand and competition, so there is no one winning formula. However, aviation sector experts point to a few common elements in the network designs of some of the relatively successful long-haul, low-cost carriers.

As in the case of successful short-haul LCCs, these elements broadly include operating more routes with few or no competing airlines and with low overall flight frequencies, instead of trying to break into competition-heavy, high-frequency routes. Operating

from multiple points instead of one major hub might be a better network design for LCC operations even in the long-haul segment.

In other words, the global experience with successful LCCs has shown that they tend to perform better financially with point-to-point networks and a focus on serving latent demand and even stimulating it on the not-so-busy routes. And they often try to fly to and from secondary airports, which are cheaper than large ones.

EXPLAINED AVIATION

Low-cost, some frills

The positioning of the low-cost product matters. A barebones, no-frills product without much comfort and amenities may not be attractive for long-duration flights. But adding more amenities — more comfortable seats, in-flight entertainment and ovens to enable hot meal service — add to the costs.

Airlines apply various solutions and innovations, some of which are not exactly in line with what LCCs have traditionally repre-

sented. These are often called hybrid products, offering a mix of LCC and FSC features.

Thus, carriers have introduced dual-class cabins, offering business class or premium economy-like seats and service for a higher price. Some offer in-flight entertainment, power outlets, and hot meals to economy class passengers, perhaps for an additional price. Some of these airlines are even offering all-inclusive bundled fares, in addition to the standard LCC practice of unbundled fares in which flyers pay extra for everything from seat selection to luggage allowance to food and drinks on board.

IndiGo's possible path

IndiGo has not provided details of the potential routes on which the A350s will be deployed, their cabin configuration, or amenities on board. In a recent investor call, IndiGo's chief executive officer Pieter Elbers said all options were open.

However, there are signals that IndiGo could go for a dual-class cabin configura-

tion, with some premium economy or business class-like seats complete with a few bundled services — sold for a notably higher price than the regular economy class seats. IndiGo currently offers all-economy cabins on almost all its flights.

For in-flight entertainment, the airline is already running a trial on a bring-your-own-device (BYOD) basis on its Delhi-Goa route. It would be interesting to see if it graduates to seat-back screens on its A350s, like the Paris-based long-haul LCC French Bee.

On network design, Elbers said IndiGo would be looking to offer direct international flights from multiple points in India, in line with the multi-hub network designs of most successful long-haul LCCs. Given the growing demand for international travel and IndiGo's strong domestic and short-haul international network, this model could work well in long-haul operations with strong potential for domestic-to-international and even international-to-international connections.

Growth & redistribution

They’re not mutually exclusive for developed nations like India. Growth must ensure improved income for majority

IT’S A DEBATE that has been going on for ages. What does India need more: Growth or redistribution of wealth? That’s the reason why every upbeat story about India’s growing economic clout seems to be inevitably accompanied by sad string chords bemoaning the abysmal state of India’s social indicators. The overall consensus among economists seems to be that while growth is necessary for poverty alleviation or improvements in social indicators, the poor need access to human capital, the key inputs to which are education and health, in order to take advantage of growth opportunities. There are also those who say that some inequality is needed to propel growth. Without the carrot of large financial rewards, risky entrepreneurship and innovation would grind to a halt. In 1975, Arthur Okun, an American economist, argued that societies cannot have both perfect equality and perfect efficiency and must choose how much of one to sacrifice for the other.

The debate, however, has been taken to an absurd level in this election season by the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party. The Congress manifesto says nothing about redistribution and talks only about a nationwide caste census that will reveal an accurate picture of the socioeconomic position of communities across the country. But Rahul Gandhi has steadily ratcheted up the rhetoric, framing the caste census not just as a means but as an end. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has seized the opportunity to make allegations that the Congress wants to grab the wealth of the growing middle class and give it away to those with “a lot of children”. India certainly deserves a better-quality debate on such a sensitive issue.

It’s a fact that governments all over the world face the difficult task of balancing fiscal prudence, welfare spending, and economic growth. The Modi government, despite its heavy spending on welfare, thinks India should pay more attention to economic growth as a primary means of decreasing poverty rather than expending more resources on curtailing inequality as redistribution will be better achieved if the size of the pie increases. In an essay titled “Perspectives on the Inequality Debate in India”, Chief Economic Advisor V Anantha Nageswaran says that for a developing country like India, where the growth potential is high and the scope for poverty reduction is significant, the focus needs to remain on rapidly growing the size of the economic pie. But detractors argue that the process of growth — whether it enriches crony capitalists more or the masses — is as important as the growth number itself.

It’s obvious that shorn of politicking, both sides have valid arguments. The fact is even those who seek greater social sector expenditure do not argue against growth, nor are those who argue for growth against redistributive transfer. But the problem with those who argue for growth is that they see this as the end in itself, while, for those who argue for greater redistributive transfer, growth is only a means of achieving a larger objective. Growth in itself is a meaningless objective if it is not accompanied by improvements in incomes for the majority. Nobody in his/her right mind would object to growth if the process of growth is also accompanied by redistribution of resources among classes of households. The short point is growth and redistribution are not mutually exclusive to each other. That’s not only good economics, but also good politics.

A clean technology trade war shows how empires fall

HOW DOES A great trading nation cope with the realisation that its glory days are over?

For the first country to head down that path — Britain — the outcome was an identity crisis that’s still ongoing after more than a century. As the US pauses at the same crossroads, it needs to consider whether free trade or protectionism promises the more prosperous route.

In Chicago, the Union Stock Yards sprawled over an area half the size of the old City of London, employed tens of thousands, and processed enough meat to feed 80% of America’s population. Henry Ford copied the Yards’ production-line innovations in Detroit to build car factories on a scale the world had never seen. In Ludwigshafen south of Stuttgart, Britain lost its early lead in chemicals to BASF SE, whose vast integrated plants gave Germany a near-monopoly by 1900.

The resulting policy was Imperial Preference, which promised to impose steep levies on imports from outside the Empire. It was a dominant political tendency until the Second World War shattered Britain’s pretensions to global hegemony. Its shadow has fallen across the UK’s anguished relationship with the European Union’s trading bloc ever since.

The parallels with present-day America as it confronts China’s manufacturing prowess are striking. As in late Victorian Britain, a dominant power is being confronted with a rival that’s better endowed with land and labour, and fast catching up in terms of capital. Furthermore, China is prepared to invest and build on a scale that overwhelms the competition. Like Henry Ford — who consolidated every process in his vast River Rouge complex, and even sought to own coal mines, iron ore pits, and rubber plantations to supply raw materials — China’s dominance of the clean technology supply chain looks close to absolute.

It produces 84% of the world’s solar modules and 86% of its lithium-ion batteries, as well as 67% of the nacelles that join wind turbines’ blades to their towers, and 70% of electrolyzers for manufacturing green hydrogen, according to BloombergNEF. About 60% of the world’s electric vehicles were sold in China last year, according to the International Energy Agency.

Exports of its cheap, high-quality autos are already roiling the global car industry, causing increasing fears in Washington that they’ll wind up outcompeting home-grown players.

Britain’s attempt to use trade to win a previous century’s economic race was brief. Imperial Preference was only policy from 1932 (when the country introduced a 10% across-the-board tariff oddly similar to the rate now being floated by Donald Trump) until the era of liberalisation that followed World War II. For all the angst of the early 20th century, the UK remained a top-five manufacturing power alongside France and behind the US, Japan, and Germany until the 2000s, when first China and Italy, and then South Korea, India, Mexico and Russia overtook.

The fate of the nations that committed more firmly to protectionism was less forgiving. Latin American countries started the postwar era richer than most of their Asian counterparts, and introduced high tariffs as a way to build up local industries in contrast to the free-trading approach of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea. The outcome was sclerotic manufacturing sectors, growth that sputtered after an initial burst of enthusiasm, and a debt burden that lingered for decades.

The US won’t head down a path as grim as that. Its population, abundance of resources, capital, and technological expertise will make it a top-three power for as long as any plausible projections extend. But the situation at the dawn of the colonial era in 1750, when Mughal India and Qing China each accounted for more than a quarter of the world’s industrial production, seems a much more plausible outcome for the 21st century than one where protectionism in one great power cuts another one off from the rest of the world.

Washington’s accustomed hegemony may be harder to maintain in a future where multiple continent-sized industrial economies are jostling for primacy. Still, it will be all but impossible if America retreats into an isolationist shell.

● KEEPING TABS ON EXPENSES

HISTORICAL DATA DOES NOT CONFIRM SIGNIFICANT JUMP IN CORPORATE CAPEX POST-ELECTION

Poll effect on capex

NIKHIL GUPTA

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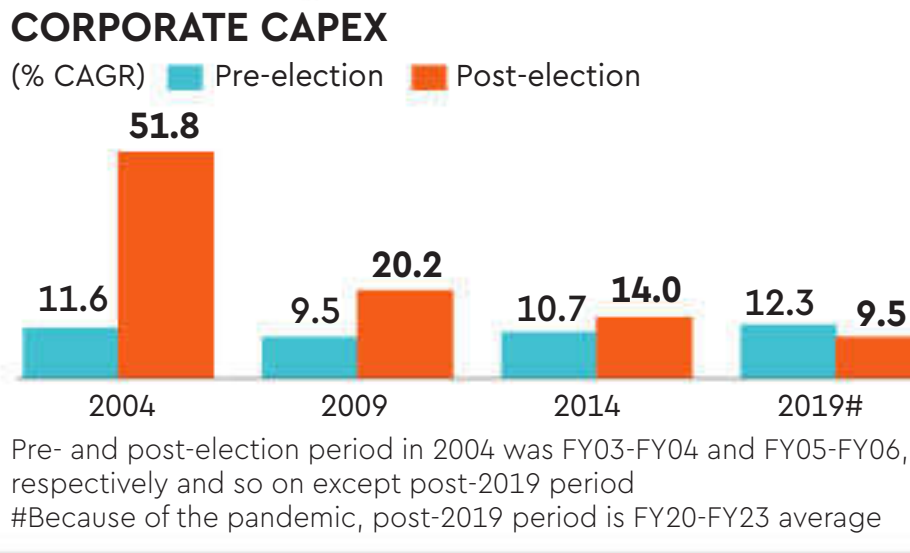
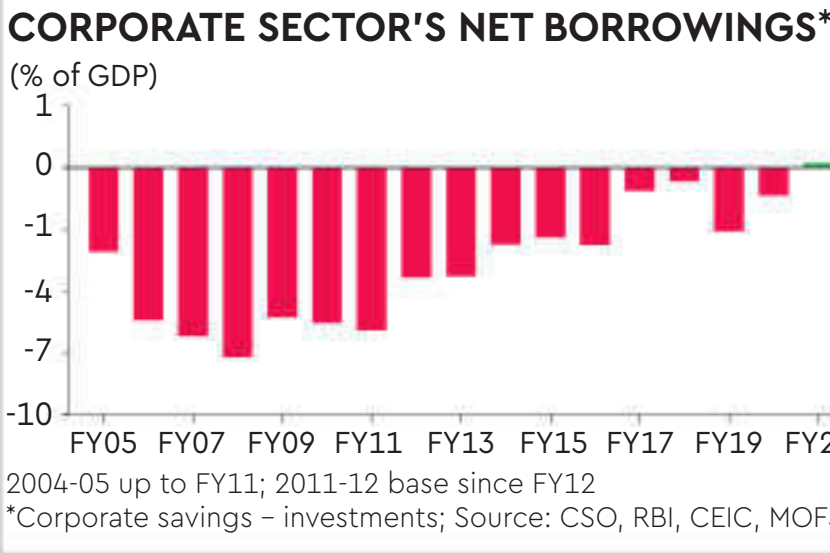
investments are significantly lower than their peak (or a decade ago) levels, corporate savings are nearly equivalent to the peak level observed in FY08.

Consequently, the corporate sector has shifted from being a huge net borrower (higher investments vis-à-vis savings) until the early 2010s to being a marginal borrower in recent years. During the past seven years (including the pre- and post-pandemic years, i.e. FY17-FY23), its net borrowings have averaged only 0.8% of GDP, compared to 7.7% of GDP in FY08 (see graphic). On the one hand, the lower net borrowings of the corporate sector reflect its muted confidence (or the need) to invest; on the other hand, it signifies the capacity that the corporate sector has to increase its capex whenever it chooses to do so.

In any case, it is the weak corporate investments (or lower borrowings on their part) that are keeping India’s CAD contained, despite a sharp decline in HHNFS. If HHNFS remains low (to which many commentators do not give too much importance right now) but corpo-

rate investments pick up (as is almost unanimously believed), the CAD will undoubtedly widen. This is exactly what happened in all three previous episodes of investment recovery in India in the late 1980s, mid-2000s, and early 2010s. This brings us to the second question: Will corporate capex pick up strongly from FY25 onwards after the elections are over, assuming political stability? We resort to historical data to answer this question, and while it does not take our hopes away, it also certainly does not provide a lot of enthusiasm. A look at the movements in corporate capex — in nominal terms — in the pre- and post-election two-year periods since 2004 confirms that while it picked up strongly in the post-election period vs. the pre-election period in 2004 and 2009, the growth difference was not significant in the last two elections (2014 and 2019).

Although almost all election years were influenced by certain events/developments, there are two key takeaways: post-election growth in corporate capex has been better than the



Multilateral institutions at a crossroads



AMOL AGRAWAL

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Views are personal

As the developing world rose in prominence, it created its own entities. Countries are rejecting multilateral trading and forming blocks for bilateral trading

THE 2020s IS a decade of introspection, as it figures several anniversaries of significant global developments. The events around World War I (WWI) and World War II (WWII) will have their 100th and 75th/80th anniversaries respectively. The breakdown of Bretton Woods and the oil crisis in the 1970s approach their 50th anniversaries. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the market reforms of the 1990s will mark their 25th/30th anniversaries. And 2024 marks the 80th anniversaries of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the 30th anniversary of the World Trade Organization (WTO). These institutions are not just facing crises but also threaten to derail years of human progress.

In the 25-year period of 1914-39, the world witnessed two deadly world wars. The inter-war period also saw the Great Depression, which destroyed economies. The world leaders, while fighting WWII, were also worried about promoting peace after it. There were broad agreements that harsh reparations on Germany post-WWI had fuelled the conditions for WWII. Another reason was restoring the gold standard exchange rate system, which led to deflating economic conditions. Countries also resorted to becoming increasingly protective in the period leading to a collapse of global trade. The onus was thus on creating multilateral economic institutions to address these malaises.

Leaders from 44 nations gathered at the Mount Washington Hotel in Bretton

Woods, United States, in 1944. The group was led by John Maynard Keynes from the UK and the American Harry Dexter White. From July 1-22, they debated vigorously and agreed to form three global institutions to address the problems.

The first was the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), to provide financial assistance to war-torn European economies. The second was the IMF, whose purpose was to monitor exchange rates and provide reserve currencies. The third was the International Trade Organization (ITO), for fostering international trade.

How have these institutions fared?

The IBRD, after helping with the reconstruction of Europe, became a part of the larger World Bank group that comprised other institutions such as the International Finance Corporation, International Development Association, etc. The World Bank continued its role as a development financial institution, but has always been criticised for not being very effective.

The IMF did not have a major role immediately after WWII, as countries adopted fixed exchange rates based on the US dollar, that were stable. However, after the breakdown of Bretton Woods in 1971, there were multiple financial and currency crises in emerging economies.

The 2008 crisis also brought the IMF to the limelight, and this time it was helping developed economies.

The story of the ITO was very different. While the leaders quickly agreed to establish the IBRD and the IMF, they decided that the time was not ripe for an ITO. Instead, they formed a General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade to gradually open borders. After many talks and deliberations, the countries finally decided to establish the WTO, and not ITO, as part of the Marrakesh Agreement in 1994. The WTO was successful in the initial years in lowering trade barriers, but the global financial crisis and the pandemic have given rise to protectionist sentiments, blunting the WTO and threatening its progress of the last 30 years.

How do we reflect on the anniversaries of these institutions today? Before we answer this question, it is interesting to note that the world is facing similar events in the first three decades of the 21st century as it did in the 20th century. Both periods saw a major global financial crisis, a pandemic, the decline of the major superpower, and so on. There has not been a world war, but some voices are suggesting how we are getting there. JP Morgan, in a recent letter to shareholders,

stated that “we may be entering one of the most treacherous geopolitical eras since World War II”. The economic outlook of the IMF and the World Bank are full of words like “geopolitical tensions” and “geoeconomic fragmentations”. Interestingly, the word geopolitics was also coined during WWII.

Ironically, these institutions that were set up to help overcome crises are facing their own crises. Their governance remained with the developed world, with the US controlling the World Bank and Europe controlling the IMF. They paid scant regard to the concerns of the developing world. As the developing world rose in prominence and the developed world faced a crisis, the former created its own institutions. The WTO was more democratic, but is facing an existential crisis. Countries are increasingly rejecting multilateral trading and forming blocks for bilateral trading.

Keynes, the architect of these institutions, watched these horrors play out closely. In 1920, he wrote *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, chastising the Allied powers for blaming WWI on Germany. In 1922, he was asked by global media houses to cover a major conference in Genoa attended by major central bankers. While the conference became a referendum for socialism, Keynes noted that the real dangers were from those who rejected international harmony for national glory. He will most likely be turning in his grave to find how we have learnt nothing from history.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Crop diversification

Crop diversification in the paddy-growing states of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh is badly needed, failing which we are going to face acute shortage of freshwater due to the continuing depletion of the water table. Farmers have always been reluctant about shifting to alternative crops. The big farmers have to take the first step as they can afford to

experiment with sowing of alternative crops. The agriculture department of the respective states, with the help of experts, should use their resources to guide the farmers in growing alternative crops. The farmers should be enlightened on their produce, saleability, and commercial viability. It’s high time to slow down paddy cultivation in these states if we want to save water for the generations to come. It will be

but a small sacrifice to secure their future. The government needs to be serious about agricultural development and at the same time save these states from a crisis of underground water shortage. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Lukewarm turnout

The lukewarm voter response in the first two phases of the ongoing Lok Sabha elections begs several

questions to explain their apathy. Is the weather a deterrent, or is it a disillusionment with governance, scepticism towards nominees, or lack of faith in electoral procedures including the electronic voting machine? There is a pressing need to rekindle voter enthusiasm and participation in the electoral process. —CK Subramaniam, Navi Mumbai

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

GODREJ BUSINESS SPLIT A LESSON FOR FAMILY ENTERPRISES

THE Godrej group has amicably split the family business into two, without the melodrama seen in many other family-run businesses. Corporate India has seen disputes in family-run businesses getting nasty, ruining the group image. Such disputes also shake investor confidence and affect the medium- to long-term performance of a company. The Godrej family business split is a lesson for family-run businesses to adopt a more practical approach when it comes to succession planning and division of business. Ultimately, the name and prosperity of the family members depend on the success of the business they run.

The Godrej family business has been sorted into an ‘enterprises group’ and an ‘industries group’. The first comprises Godrej & Boyce and its affiliates, with presence across industries such as aviation, defence and IT. It will now be controlled by Jamshyd Godrej as chairperson and managing director, Nyrika Holkar as executive director, and their families. The industries group—which includes the listed companies Godrej Industries, Godrej Consumer Products, Godrej Properties, Godrej Agrovet and Astec Lifesciences—will have Nadir Godrej as chairperson and will be controlled by Adi Godrej, Nadir Godrej and their families. Both the groups will continue to use the Godrej brand. The split clearly shows that the family adopted a business-first approach while trying to accommodate the ambitions of the next generation.

Unfortunately, not many business families are able to execute such a plan and end up going public with their differences. The Singhanias of Raymond have been in a bitter family feud over the control of the company. Baba Kalyani of Bharat Forge has been in a legal battle with his sisters over the partition of the company. There are others like the Murugappas and Kiroloskars who have also been engaged in bitter succession fights. Of course, who would forget the fight between the Ambani brothers two decades ago? Such disputes put a big question mark on the future of family businesses. Investors would always be wary of such eventualities unless the family members devise a cordial succession plan years in advance of a forced reckoning. In India, 350 out of the 500 top listed companies are family-owned. So it’s important for the country’s economy that these companies manage family disputes well.

ANDHRA SIDES MAKE SIMILAR PROMISES

AN election manifesto may be hotly debated in the media and among intellectuals, but when it comes to the common man, not each and every point is discussed threadbare. A few standout promises percolate to the grassroots. This time though, manifestos have become a talking point both at the national and state levels, especially in Andhra Pradesh, which is going to have the Lok Sabha and assembly polls simultaneously on May 13. Notwithstanding social media distortions, people broadly understand what the Congress is promising—a caste census, quotas beyond the 50 percent cap and the rather confusing wealth redistribution statement of party leader Rahul Gandhi. The BJP’s manifesto is generally understood to mean continuing development. There is, of course, the debate on reservation as well.

The contrast gets interesting in Andhra Pradesh. Incumbent Chief Minister Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy has come up with what he terms a “pragmatic” manifesto, while the opposition TDP-Jana Sena combine is out with a Praja Galam document full of freebies and the promise of creating 20 lakh jobs. This is ironic because former chief minister and TDP chief N Chandrababu Naidu and Jana Sena supremo Pawan Kalyan have been accusing Jagan of emptying the treasury by distributing freebies. The two allies have promised ‘Super Six’ guarantees including free bus rides for women, unemployment dole of ₹3,000 a month, ₹15,000 per year for every school-going child, three free gas cylinders per family every year, ₹20,000 aid for farmers, and ₹1,500 a month to every adult woman; not to forget the ₹4,000 social security pension for the elderly. Compared to this, Jagan has marginally raised what he has been implementing for the last five years. His government has spent around ₹2.7 lakh crore on welfare schemes, which begs the question how much the TDP-Jana Sena manifesto would cost the state exchequer.

Naidu claims he knows how to create wealth and distribute it, while Jagan keeps asserting his record in keeping promises. In essence, both sides are offering more or less the same with a few variations. The only question is who can better convince voters. The track record is on Jagan’s side; the ability to market his document on Naidu’s. Interestingly, TDP ally BJP has neither signed up for the joint manifesto, nor does it have its own state manifesto. Silence, sometimes, speaks volumes.

QUICK TAKE

PLAN FOR THE BIG CATS

THE news that the government is trying to bring over cheetahs from Kenya—after seven of them brought from Namibia died—again raises the question of their survival. Thirteen adults and 14 cubs remain from the first lot that belongs to a south-east African sub-species of the predator; the current effort is to bring an eastern African sub-species. Given that their enclosures have not proved to be escape-proof, one big worry is about the unprecedented mix of two big-cat sub-species. The first effort upended forest-linked livelihoods and regional ecological balance. For a reiteration of such a costly, inessential move, the least we can ask for is a clear plan.

I drove over to Udhagamandalam or Ooty the other day. The idea was to spend two precious nights in cooler climes, enjoy a much-craved-for break and come back refreshed. Ooty was cool for sure. Additional bonus: It rained cats and dogs. Thunderstorms were the norm. The traffic on narrow mountain roads was jammed, and reminded me of good old Bengaluru and its bumper to bumper traffic. Every tourist attraction I passed made the traffic move slower: There were people everywhere. All in a hurry, but nowhere to go, thanks to the traffic jam.

This holiday was no holiday really. I can imagine the plight of the holiday-goers coming in from distant locations and standing in sweaty queues to get their entry ticket to the Botanical Garden, the Rose Garden and the brand new Karnataka Siri Horticulture Garden.

Ooty is a big holiday destination for literally everyone. Come school holiday season, everyone makes a beeline to the queen of the hills. Just to get jammed. Chaos is most certainly a big part of the Indian holiday for sure. A lot of us enjoy it as well.

Even as I bemoan the state of the tourist as she knifes out a holiday from the chaos, I equally pity the life and times of the locals. Every hill station like Ooty, Kodaikanal, Yercaud, Shimla, Nainital and more has a local populace. This populace is of two kinds. Those who live there, having bought into a hill-station lifestyle for one. This segment is full of complaints. This segment even moves out during the busy season, unable to bear the sight of what happens. The second segment of people are those who make a living out of the tourist populace. Every hotelier, restaurant, cab driver, tourist guides and their ilk love this season. This is the time money is made. Even out of the mayhem.

As tourist destinations in India struggle to manage tourist populations, overcrowding and over-clutter of every kind, the world is waking up to the buzz phrase of tourism over-exploited: overtourism.

Is overtourism here then as a monster to be battled by local populace? The tourist and the local have a love-hate relationship. A Goan hates and loves the tourist. The one who makes money out of the tourist loves it all. The one who is a resident and hates all that the tourist brings (which includes noise, clutter, alcohol, drugs and more) hates it completely. There is nothing in between. What’s the solution then?

Public interest litigations have been the norm in this space. There are scores of people who come out and object to every piece of overcrowding and every piece of

Some well-known tourist spots are underprepared against nature’s vagaries and seasonal rush. One way out could be to charge a tourist tax and use it to help lesser-known destinations

HOW TO DEAL WITH THE EPIDEMIC OF OVERTOURISM

HARISH BIJOOR

Brand Guru and Founder, Harish Bijoor Consults



SOURAV ROY

noise-pollution that destroys the old ecosystem for which the destination has become what it has become today.

Recent examples of solutions that dot the overtourism space are interesting items to take note of. The Madras High Court, for one, has issued a notification that vehicles that enter Ooty and Kodaikanal from May 7 to June 30, 2024, need to procure a pre-registered e-pass for entry and use. A clean way to control in advance what goes in and out of these high-traffic holiday destinations. In many ways, this is going to pave the way for controlled and monitored tourism. In many other ways, spontaneity will die, and hard planning and control will replace it all.

Tourism as we know it across the most happening spots across the world will change as local populace protest. The earning part of the local populace will still want the tourist in, but will want it all regulated as well. The non-monetising part of the populace will want it all stopped completely. The key idea is to get back to the pristine ways of cool Coonoor, or equally the pristine hygiene heights of Mount Everest. In many ways, the concept of rewilding seems to resonate with every destination that has been over-exploited. Must a section of Machu Picchu be declared a no-tourist zone for ten years just to let it rejuvenate and go the natural way?

As of now, the whole over-exploited parts of the tourism world are up in arms. Those that have not woken up yet, will. Tourism has traditionally been considered a nice and happy activity that gets people

3 PARTIES COMBINE TO MAKE BENGAL A BIPOLAR CONTEST

THE election battle in West Bengal is moving southwards with the third phase of polling on Tuesday, when the quiet shift in political strategy of anti-BJP consolidation will unfold in full strength, threatening Narendra Modi-Amit Shah’s fantastical ambition of winning 20-35 of the state’s 42 parliamentary seats. The contest in the 36 seats where elections will be held over the next five phases will be competitive and three-cornered. Election 2024 is different: this time, the Trinamool Congress, the Congress and the CPI(M)-led Left Front are competing to defeat the BJP.

Having a common foe does not make the election easier for the contestants. It does, however, make it easier for voters to choose, because there are only two sides in the fight—against the BJP or for any of the other three. There is a ripple in West Bengal’s politics that the CPI(M) is set to make a small but significant comeback by reversing the outflow of its votes to the BJP that was evident in the 2019 Lok Sabha and the 2021 assembly elections. The big jump in BJP’s vote share to just over 40 percent in 2019, up from 17 percent in 2014, happened because there was a sharp fall in the CPI(M)’s vote share—from nearly 30 percent in 2014 to 7.5 percent in 2019, as the bulk of voters shifted right and a smaller number shifted to Trinamool.

The Congress and CPI(M) failed to win even one seat in the 2021 state assembly elections; in 2019, the CPI(M) was reduced to nil and the Congress salvaged two seats, including the party’s former Lok Sabha Leader of the Opposition Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury’s Baharampur constituency, which he has held from 1999, and Malda Dakshin, a family stronghold of the legendary A B A Ghani Khan Choudhury.

The anticipation is the CPI(M) will return to centre-stage Indian politics via a change of fortune in West Bengal, starting with Murshidabad, where state secretary and politburo member Mohammad Salim is contesting against BJP’s Gauri Shankar Ghosh and Trinamool incumbent Abu Taher Khan.

The re-entry of the CPI(M) as a strong contender would be bad news for the BJP. The shift of voters from the CPI(M) to the BJP evident in 2021 and 2019, and fed its ambitions of winning big in West Bengal. It transformed West Bengal electoral politics into a bipolar contest from a three-cornered or four-cornered fight.



SHIKHA MUKERJEE

Senior Journalist based in Kolkata

The perception is that CPI(M)’s voters and its workers are returning to the party fold. The perception also is that votes will be transferred from the Congress to the CPI(M) as part of the seat sharing arrangement. And then there is the political message that is being delivered by all three parties turning the 2024 election into an anti-BJP consolidation. The expectation for Murshidabad is that this



Trinamool, Congress and CPI(M) are together trying to paint the BJP as an anti-Bengal party. An incipient revival of the CPI(M) under Mohammed Salim could decide this equation. At the last few elections in the state, the BJP profited from Left voters turning to the Right

will deliver a win for Mohammad Salim. All this implies in the remaining 36 seats, voters are being nudged to decide tactically—to choose the best candidate to defeat BJP. The Trinamool, Congress and CPI(M) campaigns have changed to focus their attacks on the BJP, painting it to be anti-West Bengal. Remarkably, all three parties have identical lists covering the failures of the Modi regime and its communally divisive policies—joblessness, inequality, price rise, corruption, Mandir politics and selective sympathy for women.

The choice for voters has boiled down to one big question: will West Bengal benefit or suffer from electing a BJP representative? By reminding voters that the

Centre has always discriminated against West Bengal, treated it in step-motherly fashion, as former finance minister Ashok Mitra famously said, the trio has invoked a deep-rooted distrust. The Congress, CPI(M) and Trinamool’s coordinated efforts in the 17th Lok Sabha, spearheaded by Mamata Banerjee, that the Modi regime deliberately withheld people’s money due for MGNREGA jobs and housing subsidies has stirred memories of past injustice.

The CPI(M), instead of scattering its dwindled political capital and resources, has concentrated its efforts on 10 seats, all of them in South Bengal. In some seats, like Serampore, held by Trinamool leader Kalyan Banerjee, and Jadavpur, where the ruling party’s youth icon Saayoni Ghosh is the candidate, the CPI(M) has decided that it needs to regain ground.

The strategy is to win small and regain voters in other places, especially younger voters. As party boss Salim admits, the CPI(M) lost the confidence of an overwhelming number of voters who belonged to families that had supported the party across generations. The party lost support in urban strongholds like Jadavpur, just as it lost support in rural strongholds in Hooghly and the old Burdwan district, now split in two.

Riding on the back of the opposition consolidation, the CPI(M) is working on reviving the rural base and reconnecting with urban voters. It seems to have banked its hopes on constituencies where the Trinamool appears weaker for a variety of reasons, and in the expectation that votes from the Congress will be transferred to give it an advantage in an election where there is no pro-Modi wave.

The CPI(M)’s optimism is based on a hunch that the political mood is changing and the balance that was tilted after 2014 between the Right and the Left, with the Middle holding the Centre, is likely to be restored in 2024. The revival of the Left is therefore crucial to the collective opposition’s expectation that the tide may be turning again.

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MAIL BAG

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Eradicate ragging

Ref: UGC bid to give teeth to anti-ragging measures (May 6). The incidence of suicides that follow the ragging of newcomers by senior students in professional colleges is terrible. It is high time the concept of ‘ragging’ is eradicated from the minds of students by strictly implementing the UGC’s recommendations.
S Chockalingam, Kottaram

Appalling behaviour

Many times, anti-ragging rules are framed but their implementation remains on paper only. This menace has been so appalling that many freshers have committed suicide. Let us hope the positive steps initiated by UGC will bring a change and freshers will enjoy a congenial atmosphere with their seniors in their institutions.
Ram Saran Singh, Bengaluru

Balanced perspective

Ref: *Katchatheevu in headlines again after 5 decades* (May 6). The Katchatheevu issue has many historical, political and geopolitical dimensions. We can understand India’s worries about China influencing the area, which also affects our fishermen. This pushes us for a more balanced perspective that would include Sri Lanka’s sovereignty concerns and the importance of dialogue for resolution.
Ashribad Sahu, Rayagada

Spiritual quest

Ref: *The saint behind 30 percent of Kashmiri idioms & proverbs* (May 6). Picking up the thread from where it was left in her earlier article about three women saints, the author has excellently narrated the life story of Lal Ded. Her long and unquenchable spiritual quest for life truth was matchless.
R Sampath, Chennai

Water problems

In this oppressive heat during this summer, the Southern Railways’ move to reduce the supply of water in trains is unfortunate. Some passengers in a few intercity and long-distance trains were made to suffer because of this, which is appalling. With trains running at full occupancy due to the summer rush, water scarcity on trains needs to be alleviated early.
S Sankaranarayanan, Chennai

Moderate speech

While canvassing in the northern states, the prime minister is seeming quite severe against the Muslim community. The Indian government is already at loggerheads with Pakistan, Maldives and China. This sort of hate speech against Muslims may lead to disquiet among countries with large Muslim populations.
Kiruba Arul, Palayamkottai

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

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

Resident Editor (Telangana): T Kalyan Chakravarthy * Printed and Published by R K Jhunjunwala on behalf of Express Publications (Madurai) Private Ltd., at H.No.6-3-1113/1, B.S.Makta Lane, Somajiguda, Near Grand Kakatiya Hotel, Punjagutta, Hyderabad – 500 016 and printed by him at Sakshi Press, Plot No.D-75 & E-52, Industrial Estate (APIE), Balanagar, Medchal-Malkajgiri District, Telangana. Hyderabad: Vol. 48, No. 108 RNI Reg. No. 32719/77. Phone: 040-23413908. * Responsible for selection of News under the PRB Act. Copyright: Express Publications (Madurai) Private Ltd., All rights reserved. Reproduction in any manner, electronic or otherwise, in whole or in part, without prior written permission is prohibited.

Neo-Orientalism and Its Discontents

Rightly calling out Occidental double standards

Orientalism is alive and kicking. This was one of the key takeaways from S Jaishankar's interaction with this paper last week, where he also reminded us that tackling neo-Orientalism isn't about India getting prickly, but the need for the world to engage with, and understand, India's PoV. This applies for the world, but clarity must begin at home. Which it has. The foreign minister's take on a post-Western monopolistic narrative was an argument for India's own voice to be heard — no longer via ventriloquists — by world powers, which themselves have changed in the post-Cold War landscape. Jaishankar called out something that was known, but spoken only sotto voce earlier — that 'there are self-proclaimed people with different interests' and what the West preaches, practises, its agenda, its objectivity 'or lack of it' must be factored in.

Gone are the days when a handful of countries emerging victorious out of a world war fog defined what was geopolitically and geoculturally kosher and what wasn't. The multipolar world that India advocates isn't the 19th-century version of ceaseless geopolitical competition, but one in which countries like itself are not just seen but also heard. Neither does India share China's hegemonic world view where anti-Westernism is a neurosis suited up as foreign policy. India is the world's fifth-largest economy, home to a sixth of humanity's population. It is also a microcosm of a world encompassing both rich G7 countries as well as least developed nations. This gives India the moral (read: political) heft and prerogative to push back against double standards — whether as depicted by sections of Western media or voices representing states. What's sauce for the Western goose should be sauce for the Indian gander.

There is much to be said for Mary Lathrap's call to 'judge softly', and to 'walk a mile in his mocassins/ Before you abuse, criticise and accuse'. But it is also important to come across as not being hypersensitive to critique. Mature democracies respond with reasoned argument, not in fits of piques or knee-jerk sulks.

Look a GIFT IFSC Horse in the Mouth

The move to allow non-bank FPIs domiciled in GIFT IFSC to issue offshore derivative instruments (ODIs) is expected to cash in on the surge in investments after they were introduced last year. Till now, the facility in Gujarat was restricted to banks domiciled in IFSC, and the interest in ODIs among non-resident investors (NRIs) to gain exposure to Indian securities is strong. These instruments also provide issuing FPIs a hedging tool, which enhances their appeal. ODIs, or P-notes, were once the dominant channel for routing overseas investments into Indian markets. But they have lost their lustre after disclosure rules were tightened. ODIs, however, retain a draw among investors seeking confidentiality.

Alongside easing of ODI issuance in IFSC, there is a need to address tax treatment of these instruments. They become even more appealing to NRIs if capital gains are exempted on their transfer. Income from ODIs issued by banks domiciled in IFSC carry this exemption. The main attraction for NRIs of ODIs issued by IFSC entities is certainly under Indian tax law, instead of reliance on treaty benefits. Tax benefits can be denied on issue of beneficial ownership for ODIs issued abroad. Treaty abuse conditions don't apply to ODIs issued in IFSC.

This should make for a compelling case to investors seeking confidentiality, certainty and, of course, post-tax returns. The regulatory structure is built to favour IFSC as a gateway for capital to India. Aside from policy support, IFSC must build a full suite of financial services offerings to be able to take on older, more established, financial centres to become a significant node for routing capital. Phased policy reduction should increase the level of engagement NRIs will seek from IFSC.

JUST IN JEST
More than anyone else, we are most (over)familiar with our politicians' mugs

New Gods of Our Calendar Art

Politicians in India are quite divine. We mean that literally, not in a qualitative sense. For, truer than the unverified 'fact' that god created humans in his/her own image is the verified fact that humans create their god(s) in their own image(s). And if there be any doubt who is top in the image stakes, with their visages visible from every nook, cranny and granny's window, it has to be our politicians. Billboards, newspapers, rolling scrolls at the bottom, top, corners of our TV/online feed, adverts, notices, news — a politician or a dozen will be staring at you every day.

There is a hierarchy of plenitude. The Great Leaders® make maximised appearances, mostly by their own, or, on many other occasions, with other deities. This bombardment of countenances of bhagwans and devas/ devis (there is a hierarchical difference) makes us, owners of functioning pairs of eyes, much more familiar with these mugs — smiling, stern, smilingly stern or sternly smiling — than those of our partners or family. This is the new secularised calendar art, the new Ravi Varma lithos, the new pantheon of mythology that India has built over time giving politicians, above everyone else, movie stars included, the visibility that was once only given to gods and sub-gods. And you know what they say about familiarity breeding... instant recognition.



STATE OF PLAY Fissures have appeared in the 'coalition of democracies' to counter China Xi Jinping Among Pigeons



Pranab Dhal Samanta

The global democracy combine meant to counter China is under stress, allowing Beijing the space to leverage differences to its advantage. It's a 'watch out' moment for big democracies like India and the US, which, in their election year, are faced with a heated domestic political environment that only adds to the complication.

The problem stems from within the loosely-termed 'coalition of democracies' that has taken shape over the past 5-6 years to work at ways to derisk from China. The agenda, by now, is also quite elaborate — from building alternate supply chains and curbing China's access to critical technology, to defence collaborations and exploring new geopolitical and economic arrangements.

So, where's the challenge? Mostly within, and among, democratic nations, which can be broadly understood across three parameters:

- Adjustment issues between Western liberal democracies and other democracies.
- Mutual suspicion among liberal democracies.
- Economic pressures arising from the reset with China.

This political collaboration rested on a broader conception of democracy, not just limited to the Western liberal frame. To quite an extent, this required Western democracies to adjust their outlook, given the nature of threat at hand. And this happened as the US built on the Quad, included India, and made a broader outreach

China has used this opportunity to try and play itself back in Europe, with Xi currently visiting France, and then Serbia and Hungary



Chairman Meow shaking things up

across smaller democracies in the Indo-Pacific.

The challenge always was how to balance these strategically vital relationships — founded as a response to new geopolitical realities — with pressure groups within liberal democracies. That has proved difficult as some key decisions the US took betrayed a compromise somewhere.

For instance, the Biden administration took a call on a condition-less withdrawal from Afghanistan, which resulted in Taliban usurping power. This was confirmed by then-US special representative on Afghanistan reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, who struck the deal with Taliban, in his interview to the House Foreign Affairs Committee inquiring into US withdrawal.

This had a debilitating impact on the fledgling but democratically-elected government in Kabul. The US withdrawal had a psychological impact and negatively affected the relative balance of power for the government, he conceded.

This was not the best signal to weaker democracies in the region, which

was further complicated by the shadow games played in Pakistan. Eventually Imran Khan was jailed, and the Sharif brothers found themselves in favour.

In Bangladesh, the yardstick was different. Despite Indian advice, the US, echoing Pakistani lobby groups in Washington, questioned the legitimacy of recent Bangladesh polls that saw Sheikh Hasina return to power. As a result, Beijing waded into troubled waters and invited her to visit China. She is considering the request seriously and may make a stopover in Delhi.

The fact is, weakening India's hand in South Asia is not in US interest. In some cases, it ends up helping China. In other words, the old idea of selective application of the liberal democratic frame disregarding interests of non-Western democracies may not sit only with new realities, but could also prove counterproductive.

The second parameter of mutual suspicion among liberal democracies is best demonstrated in Europe. Here, a challenge is arising out of the big churn in US domestic politics, which has forced the major powers in the con-

tinued to set aside big defence and security budgets, particularly in the light of the Russia-Ukraine war.

According to the 2024 IMF World Economic Outlook, France, Germany and Italy are starting at less than 1% real GDP growth. This is not helped by the perception that the US has, in fact, gained from big gas deals with Europe as an alternative to Russia, as well as from a phenomenal increase in defence sales. The mutual suspicion has entered a realm of uncertainty amid prospects of a second Trump presidency.

China has used this opportunity to try and play itself back in Europe. Xi Jinping is currently on his first trip to Europe in five years, visiting France, Serbia and Hungary. He hopes to navigate the most difficult obstruction — the EU itself — in these conversations. In Budapest, Xi will show solidarity with Hungarian president Viktor Orbán, whose 'Eastern Opening' strategy envisages greater cooperation with Beijing.

The third point on economic pressure is an interconnected one, visible in the reach-out from Germany, Italy and the Netherlands to China. Olaf Scholz was in Beijing recently. And while Italy has pulled out of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) last November, plans are afoot for big-ticket visits.

The Netherlands, home to MNC ASML, which has a virtual monopoly over advanced microchips production machines, is under economic pressure to ease restrictions on exporting these machines to China. Xi took this up strongly with Dutch PM Mark Rutte during his visit to China in March.

Interestingly, the Netherlands is still among the biggest importers from China in Europe. Along with Scholz, Rutte, too, is trying to walk the fine line between China and the US.

On a broader plane, however, what's clear is that what was seen as a big democracy partnership to counter China is on somewhat shaky footing now, largely due to insecurities caused from actions among and within democracies. The worry is that having waited it out on the margins and absorbed considerable pressure, China has now shifted gears to move in on democracies in doubt, if not in turmoil.

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THE SPEAKING TREE

University: Nature Guide

SOMA CHAKRAVERTY

As a child, Rabindranath Tagore found the school atmosphere claustrophobic and restrictive. His mission was to take education beyond the confines of a classroom and direct it towards personal and intellectual development rather than exam-oriented bookish knowledge. To him, nature was the most fertile ground to provide free and fearless environment for growth and encourage creative pursuits. In Santiniketan, he found the sky unobstructed to the verge of the horizon. In nature, Tagore found a sakha, a guiding spirit.

Proposing the name of his dream project, Tagore said, 'Visva-Bharati represents India where she has her wealth of mind which is for all.' The motto of the university reads Yatra visam bhavatyekanimam — where the world makes home in a single nest.

He believed that without giving due recognition to its cultural heritage such as music, dance, finer arts and folk arts, a nation lacks self-expression. Tagore visited several countries to raise funds for his dream project and talk about universal brotherhood.

On his trip to Japan, he said, 'I try to assert in my words and works that education has its only meaning and object in freedom — freedom from ignorance about the law of nature, and freedom from passion and prejudice in our communication with the human world.' Tagore dreamt of unity of humanity to overcome bondage, barrier and boundaries.

May 7 is Rabindranath Tagore's birth anniversary

Chat Room

Today, Vote and Elect Our Polls

The lukewarm voter response so far in the ongoing Lok Sabha elections exposed her apathy. Is the weather a deterrent, or is it disillusionment with governance, scepticism towards nominees/parties, or lack of faith in electoral procedures such as EVMs? Indeed, there is a pressing need to rekindle voter enthusiasm and participation. The scorching heat can discourage voters, especially in regions prone to extreme climates — leading to voter inertia and a feeling of disengagement from the process. Even freebies could not boost voter morale and hot weather came as an excuse for election boycott.

CK SUBRAMANIAM
Navi Mumbai

Triangular Tactic At the Roundtable

This refers to ET Roundtable, 'India Can't', in the Name of Open Economy, Open Up its National Security to Work with China: Jaishankar' (May 6). The details of India's evolution over the years are in external affairs minister S Jaishankar's answer to the question on how India's foreign policy has changed. In a nutshell, there is clarity about approach, action and caution — a potent trio in GoT's decisions. The primacy given to national interests, the message being sent out to nations like China and the way in which the recent standoff with the Maldives was dealt with exemplify this tri-headed approach.

K PARAMESWARAN
Kombatore

And Words Are All I Have

Apropos 'Life and Letters' by Narayani Ganesh (Speaking Tree, May 6), there is no joy greater than reading a book and encountering a new idea or revisiting an existing one with fresh insight. This elevates one's thinking and provides a new perspective on the vast world. Walt Disney expressed it perfectly. 'There is more treasure in books than in all the pirates' loot on Treasure Island.' Bookish knowledge may be sufficient to navigate the world, but is not enough. Knowledge and wisdom are like two wings of a bird; if you trim one, the bird cannot fly. In a world where we're numbing our intuitive minds with smartphone scrolling, reading offers a better alternative.

MRITUNJAY JHA
Byemail

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Seaweed Market

The global seaweed market tripled in the past two decades, hitting \$17 billion in 2021, representing a small but rapidly expanding slice of the fisheries and marine resources sector. Seaweed exports totalled about \$1 billion in 2021, with a few countries controlling the global market. Here's a list of top producers and exporters...

Top 5 seaweed producers

Country	Million tonnes (live weight)
China	21.58
Indonesia	9.09
S Korea	1.85
Philippines	1.34
N Korea	0.60

India, which is the main seaweed producer in South Asia, reported production at 23,300 tonnes (live weight) in 2020. India mainly produces green seaweeds, followed by red and brown seaweeds. In FY 2023, India's seaweed exports were \$0.73m while imports were higher at \$2.89m

*A versatile marine macroalgae

Top 10 seaweed exporters

Country	2021, \$ million
S Korea	254.63
Indonesia	225.34
Chile	106.03
China	53.48
Ireland	40.89
Peru	38.49
US	24.60
Japan	20.95
Canada	19.20
Philippines	14.26

Source: UNCTAD, FAO

Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



If 'to be or not to be' is the question, the safest answer is 'may be'.

SANJEEV RAJ JAIN

Don't Fall for AI-Washing



Rohit K Singh

India's consumer market is a thrilling gold rush. Tech-savvy citizens with rising incomes are snapping up the latest gadgets and services, eager to embrace a smarter future. But amid the excitement, they face a cunning bandit: AI-washing. This deceptive marketing play uses the allure of AI to mislead consumers into believing they're buying supposedly cutting-edge products when the reality is far less glamorous.

AI-washing is a form of manipulation in which companies misrepresent their offerings to capitalise on the buzz surrounding AI. These companies often tout buzzwords like 'machine learning', 'deep learning' or 'AI-powered machine' without providing substantial evidence of any AI functionality.

Imagine you're sold a 'revolutionary AI-powered' refrigerator that promises to optimise food storage based on your dietary needs. However, on closer inspection, you discover a pre-programmed setting masquerading as 'intelligent technology'. This is the essence of AI-washing. Companies exploit the public's current fascination with AI to inflate product value and dupe unsuspecting consumers.

Here's why Indian consumers must be concerned:

► **Erosion of trust** Imagine the disappointment of buying a 'smart' washing machine that boasts AI-powered fabric recognition, only to find that it uses basic temperature settings. Such misleading claims erode trust in the 'smart' market and discourage innovation, hindering the development of AI solutions for India.

► **Premium 'tax'** AI integration comes with a hefty price tag. When

companies slap an AI label on a product, they justify a higher price point. Consumers end up paying more for features that might be basic or fabricated. This financial exploitation hurts individual wallets and creates an unfair advantage for companies employing deceptive marketing tactics.

Here is how an Indian consumer can navigate this AI-washed marketplace: ► **Question buzzwords** Don't be hypnotised by fancy jargon. Ask: how does AI work in this product? What specific problem does it solve that a traditional method couldn't? Look for quantifiable benefits, not vague promises of 'intelligence'.

► **Dig deeper, compare smarter** Don't rely solely on marketing materials. Delve into tech reviews, compare brand features and seek independent assessments of the product's AI capabilities. Look for reputable publications and organisations known for their unbiased evaluations.

► **Function, not fiction** Shift your focus from the buzzword — 'AI' — to real features and functionalities. Does the product address a real need in a convenient or efficient way? Does it offer genuine value for the price point?

► **Prioritize benefits over flashy marketing** Don't be afraid to engage directly with companies. Ask them to explain the specific AI algorithm used and how it impacts the product's performance. This can expose vague claims and hold

companies accountable for their marketing strategies. ► **Spread the word** Talk to friends and family about AI-washing. Share your research and observations. We can collectively push back against deceptive marketing practices by promoting informed consumerism. Together, we can build a smarter marketplace built on transparency and trust.

In the US, Securities and Exchange Commission chairperson Gary Gensler has warned businesses against AI-washing, or making false AI-related claims, likening it to greenwashing — form of advertising or marketing spin that deceptively uses environment-friendliness as PR — which has been the target of regulatory crackdowns. Combating AI-washing requires a collaborative effort. Regulatory bodies in India, like Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA), can play a crucial role by: ► Developing clear and concise guidelines for companies using AI terminology in advertising in association with regulatory bodies like Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI). ► Implementing stricter penalties for false advertising claims. ► Encouraging independent testing and verification of products that claim to use AI through the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) and other such entities. The media also has a critical responsibility: ► Publishing investigative reports. ► Holding companies accountable for misleading claims. ► Educating consumers about AI-washing. India's consumer market is brimming with potential. All stakeholders — consumers, regulators and media — should work together to create a transparent and thriving ecosystem. By fostering informed consumerism and promoting responsible AI development, we can ensure that the Indian gold rush ushers in a future powered not by hype but by genuine innovation that benefits all. Remember, a smart consumer is the key to unlocking a brilliant future.

The writer is former secretary, consumer affairs, GoI



The Fatal Eggs

Mikhail Bulgakov

Professor Vladimir Ipatievich Persikov... He was exactly fifty-eight years old. He had a wonderful, pestle-shaped bald head with tufts of yellowish hair sticking out at the sides. A cleanly shaven face, a protruding lower lip that gave Persikov's face a permanently capricious expression.


Small, old-fashioned glasses in silver frames on his red nose; small, sparkling eyes; tall, round-shouldered. Spoke in a screeching, high-pitched, croaking voice, and one of his many eccentricities was shaping his right index finger into a hook and squinting whenever he was speaking confidently and authoritatively.

And since he always spoke authoritatively for his knowledge of his fields of study was absolutely phenomenal, those conversing with Persikov would see the hook quite often.

Outside his fields — that is, zoology, embryology, anatomy, botany and geography — Professor Persikov rarely said anything at all. Professor Persikov did not read the papers or go to the theatre, and his wife had left him with a tenor from Zimin's Opera House in 1913, leaving him the following note: 'Your frogs make me shudder with intolerable disgust. I will be unhappy my entire life because of them.'

Translated from Russian by Michael Karpelson

THE FATAL EGGS
MIKHAIL BULGAKOV



A thought for today
Let me pull myself out of these waters. But they heap themselves on me; they sweep me between their great shoulders; I am turned; I am tumbled
VIRGINIA WOOLF, *The Waves*

Shame, Misdirected

In the Revanna case, women continue to be brutalised by failures to protect their identity

Prajwal Revanna is, by most accounts, in Germany. He left Hassan soon after it finished polling on April 26. Between then and today, when Karnataka's remaining LS seats go to vote, the sexual assault allegations against him have escalated in gravity and political heat. You could say of all this, it's the start of the journey of justice. But for many of the women who appear in the videos, on whose basis an SIT probe is proceeding, it appears to be the start of new torture. As the videos gain circulation in Hassan and reveal their identities, women have been fleeing their homes, without the luxury of a diplomatic passport or a European destination.

Don't mislabel this | It doesn't help them that many media reports refer to the videos as 'sex tapes'. There are clear signs that nothing so benign is underway here. What is being indicated is sexual harassment to rape, on a mass scale, with the enormous political power Revanna's family wields in the district providing the core frame of reference.



Don't continue electronic abuse | In the seminal Nipun Saxena case, SC underlined the importance of protecting the identity of rape and sexual abuse victims: "Unfortunately, in our society, the victim of a sexual offence...is treated worse than the perpetrator of the crime." The persons who dumped the video pen drives across Hassan's bus stops, parks, shops etc before it voted, with obvious

political motivations, don't care how many women they will be hurting how much. Neither do all those who take pleasure in watching the videos and circulating them via WhatsApp, Bluetooth etc. But what about the state? What has it done to protect the women's identities? So far, not much.

Don't ignore the laws | These acts of circulation are actionable under Sections 66E and 67A of the IT Act. The judiciary, which has issued 80+ gag orders for Revanna, should strongly direct authorities on strict action to protect the women too. SIT's new helpline must also come through for the victims. Finally, it is time to pull political parties within the POSH and Vishakha rekhas. The view that they are exempt because they do not have employer-employee relationships is no longer tenable. Remember, the idea of the workplace was meaningfully expanded by the Bhanwari Devi case. Then note that the Revanna videos reportedly include party workers.

Why U'khand Burns

The Himalayan state has emerged as India's most ecologically fragile. We're to blame

Last five years have seen a dangerous rise in forest fires across Uttarakhand's central Himalayas, from Nov to June. Northeast states, once most prone to long-ranging forest fires, pale in comparison to the inferno Uttarakhand finds itself in with increasing intensity and longer duration. Even winter fires have increased manifold in both frequency and intensity. In fact, Uttarakhand inaugurated its New Year with a fire raging in the forest behind Nainital, thick smoke billowing on the horizon, haze over Naini Lake.

Missing the trees | There is heightened global concern over the sharp uptick in forest fires in this Himalayan region, stretching across Uttarakhand and Nepal. The impact is evident – loss of life, belching carbon emissions, shrinking forest area, loss of habitat and entire microbial ecosystems and biodiversity burnt to cinders. The smoke that travels impacts the health of people over a very large area. Tourism takes a body-blow, and the crippling impact on the state economy and its resources. Dry extreme warming, heatwaves that are the new normal, and human activity – the *what* and *how* of forest fires are well documented.

Fanning the flames | The core question is *why* Uttarakhand, where forest fires were never a hazard, reached this point. Forests were once over 50% of Uttarakhand's land cover. Swaths of forest area have been sacrificed at the altar of development, much of which has not been judiciously planned or designed. It is long established that deforestation contributes to increased risk of fire, fragmented forest cover is also a fire risk. Reducing tree cover and ground vegetation dries out forests. In turn, fire-damaged forests are weakened, and deforestation often follows. Post-mortems of forest fires by authorities can only douse the flames but cannot put out the real fire – callous human activity despite the evidence of severe warming and extreme weather events. That's what Uttarakhand govt must acknowledge.

Heartbreak & hot songs

Taylor Swift is cashing in, so can you!

Shinie Antony

Heartbreak means uncombed hair, insomnia, chain-smoking, getting drunk, growing stubble and humming sad songs. Serious art, it is said, requires a breakup – the bitter parting, the more award-winning the work. Many wannabe poets have tried this formula: saying *katti* to a GF just so they can go record their *ishq-wala* love, each sob a sonnet. Mad lover overnight turns into a gifted lyricist and composer. For song-writers, getting dumped is a good business model.

In many a Hindi film jilted heroes openly address melancholic ballads to the bride, with neither groom nor guests wondering why a total stranger is bawling about unrequited love at a wedding reception. A shawl-wrapped Guru Dutt envying those *'jinke pyar ko pyar mila'*, a brooding Amitabh Bachchan ruining *'tu gair hai magar yuheen'*, and a chatty Rajesh Khanna suddenly feeling mortal when *'kahin door jab din dhal jaye'* – being *ghamgeen* was all the rage. One minute Elvis Presley was all shook up, the next checking into Heartbreak Hotel. KL Saigal saw no point in living *'jab dil hi toot gaya'*. If you see her, say hello, Bob Dylan begged us, while Amy Winehouse went back to black. The aching breaky heart knew its audience.

Which brings us to Swifties. Critics are still not sure if Taylor Swift was mocking herself or the traditional image of poets when she titled her latest album, *The Tortured Poets Department*. However, no poet is ready to take offence – not the tortured ones, not the ones who torture. Her autobiographical pop scores laying bare the state of her heart after each ex exists has people dub any guy in a pic with her as a future song. TTPD goes all dry and droll on us. 'You're not Dylan Thomas, I'm not Patti Smith,' she sings, 'This ain't the Chelsea Hotel, we're modern idiots.' As usual, someone had been talking rings and talking cradles to her.

The tragic poet is eternal. Lovelorn bards have been monetising their emotions too long now, not for them climate issues or topical couplets based on headlines. A Romeo who can rhyme and a Juliet who wails in free verse! Tortured poets are sensitive souls, saved only by a confessional catharsis. As Tay says, 'Once we have spoken our saddest story, we can be free of it.' Boo-hoo is big bucks. Every Majnu is a millionaire – if he can set his moping to music.

IT'S V FOR VARIETY

So far, LS polls are less about a national mood than state-level and caste-community issues. BJP firmly remains the frontrunner. But opposition is looking more competitive

Asim Ali

If the 2024 Lok Sabha elections were a marathon of three laps, the first one is over. Ballots have been cast on 189 seats, dotted across 19 states. What can be reasonably gauged of the national picture so far? We see evidence of two macro-trends.

- An empirically verifiable trend is decline of voter turnout, a significant slump compared to last election. In most states, declines have ranged between 5% and 10%.
- A second trend is a palpable lack of voter enthusiasm, at least compared to the last two elections. Campaign din seems less raucous and street-level mobilisation less visible.

The CSDS-Lokniti pre-poll survey had painted a somewhat contradictory picture. NDA was seen to be maintaining its commanding vote share from last elections. Yet, there was a significant drop (compared to 2019 survey) among those who favoured a return of the govt.

That element of uncertainty becomes a little more charged when coupled with low turnout figures. Of course, it is hardly possible to base any reasonable national predictions merely on turnout figures. Indeed, without granular booth-level data, one can't even make a proper forecast for any particular seat.

Yet, we can certainly provide a provisional assessment. The election appears, so far, to constitute a wave-less election. We do not yet see any pronounced polarisation and consolidation of the electorate along a national axis. Or any manifest hum of voter consensus cutting across horizontal (region/state) and vertical (caste/community) lines, around a towering personality.

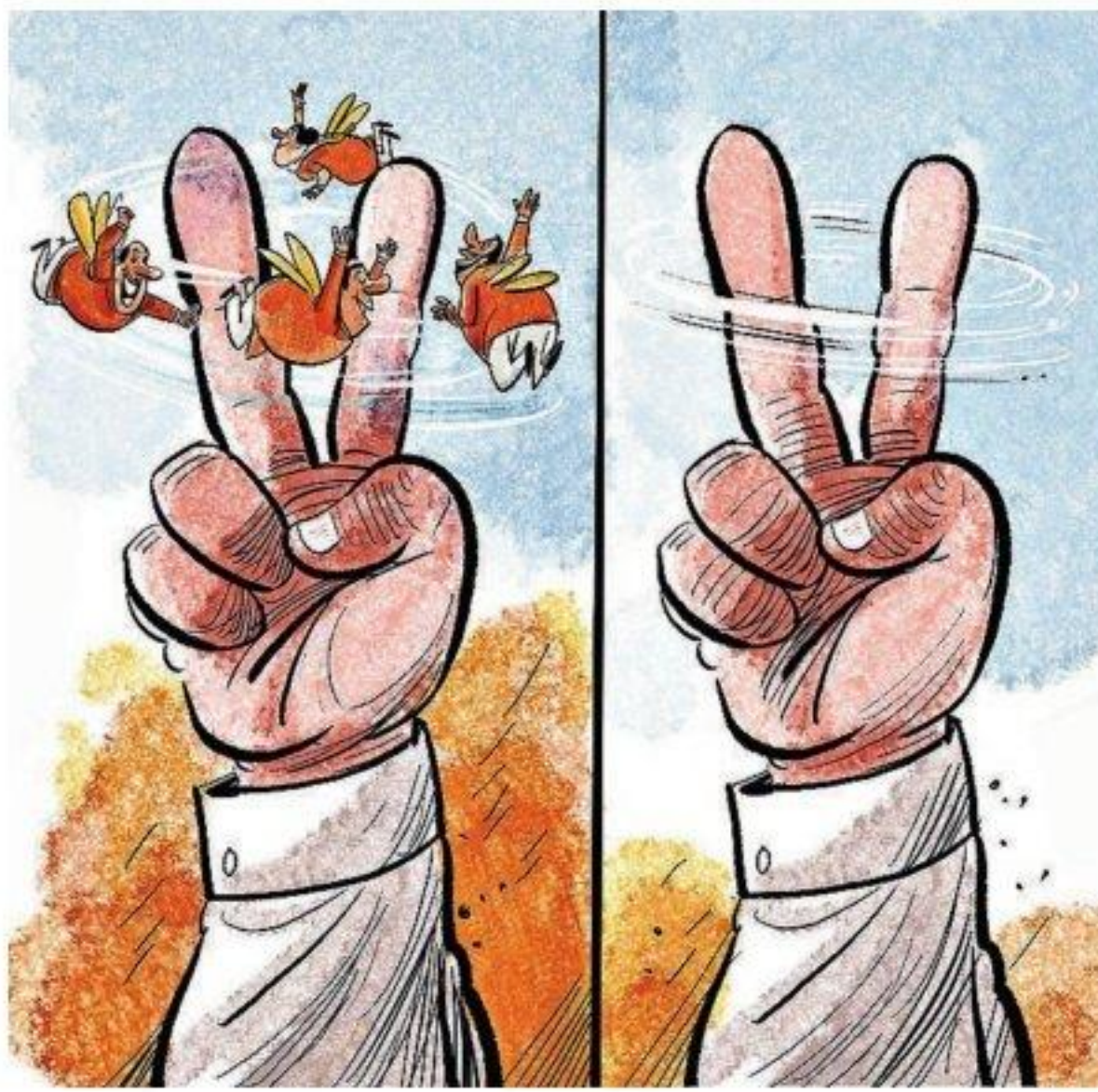
On balance, that is a concerning assessment for BJP-led NDA's prospects of comfortably crossing the majority mark.

- Firstly, BJP's majority prospects hinge on the campaign assuming a referendum character, where national leadership is seamlessly conjoined to an overpowering theme. Modi's presidential campaign in the last two general elections ('Modi wave' elections) powered the BJP juggernaut. In 2019, per CSDS-Lokniti survey, among the sections who based their vote on the choice of the PM candidate, two-thirds voted for the Modi-led NDA coalition.

Presently, also, the preference gap between Modi and (next challenger) Rahul for PM office remains high: 48% to 27%, according to the latest CSDS-Lokniti survey.

However, BJP's campaign over the last month has struggled to fuse this leadership advantage to a singular and irresistible theme (like 'acche din' in 2014

and 'Balakot/national pride' in 2019). It has switched back and forth between Ram Temple (religious pride), rising Bharat (national rejuvenation) and Modi's guarantees (welfare provisioning). All these tropes have gained considerable traction, but more in the sense of forming individual planks aimed at different constituencies, rather than an overarching theme. This might explain BJP's disproportionate focus on responding to the agenda set by Congress's manifesto. As a consequence, the course of electoral competition,



across states, remains relatively detached from any national mood. The electoral pitch is defined more by criss-crossing state-level tides, caste-community concerns and constituency-level negotiations.

Caveat: This does not, however, mean that the election is necessarily being fought on the issues raised by opposition parties (such as unemployment, price rise etc). Much depends on state-level dynamics and their caste-community configurations. For instance, state-level issues might help lift up either the opposition (as farmer distress and Maratha quota stir buoy opposition MVA in Marathwada) or BJP (as law-and-order appeal blunts SP's social justice plank in western UP). NDA's campaign (particularly around '400 paar') has encountered choppy waters among Dalits in the Hindi belt, while generating enthusiasm among upper castes and certain backward castes. NDA's alliance-making/social-engineering

POLLITICS

Special Series on Elections

'Modi Way: Dignity, Connectivity, Prosperity'

GOI's minister for housing & petroleum argues govt's DBT approach has reduced extreme poverty in the last decade, but this hasn't come at the cost of encouraging free enterprise

Hardeep S Puri

Be it reservations, caste-based divisions, or personal attacks on political leaders, the level of misleading propaganda and outright misinformation in the current general elections is alarming.

One issue in particular is how the poor citizens have fared in the last 10 years in India. Many spurious claims have been made, despite the overwhelming evidence that the last 10 years have witnessed a significant rise in consumption per capita; a drastic reduction in poverty; and decline in inequality. Nearly 25 crore people exited multidimensional poverty in the nine-year period between 2013-14 (29.17%) and 2022-23 (11.28%), according to Niti Aayog.

Data on poverty | The World Poverty Lab, which provides real-time poverty estimates based on official data, reported a few months ago that extreme poverty (less than PPP \$2.15) was brought down to less than 3% in India. Bhalla and Bhasin have argued that "high growth and large decline in inequality have combined to eliminate poverty for the PPP \$1.9 poverty line...[which] closely corresponds to the official India Tendulkar poverty line."

They have also suggested that there has been "an unprecedented decline in both urban and rural inequality. The urban Gini declined from 36.7 to 31.9; the rural Gini declined from 28.7 to 27.0." Other studies and analyses verify these claims.

'Garib Kalyan' or welfareism – from 'Antyodaya se Sarvodaya' – has driven this wave of empowerment. Large-scale programmes designed with precision and implemented with speed, minimal leakages, using technology, have been the bulwark behind the

'saturation of public services' provided to the poor.

Missions to provide universal access to toilets, electricity, cooking fuel, piped water, and roads have increased consumption, improved health outcomes, and generated jobs.

- Before 2014, 45% of people did not have access to clean cooking in rural areas. Of the 10.29cr gas connections added to achieve saturation, 8cr were in rural areas.
- Before the Jal Jeevan Mission began, access to piped water supply in rural areas was a meagre 16%, but now stands at 76%.
- Nearly 12cr toilets constructed across India have almost completely eliminated open defecation.
- The Ayushman Bharat mission has heralded a qualitative change – no longer do families have to submerge themselves in debt to pay for a medical emergency. More than 6.5cr hospital admissions have been undertaken under the mission.

JAM effect | Despite many challenges thrown at the Modi govt, which included the twin balance sheet problem; high informality of the economy; weak global recovery after the global financial crisis; and the pandemic, we have only increased public spending in our tenure. The JAM (Jandhan, Aadhaar & Mobile) trinity has allowed the govt to distribute benefits to the poor directly through linked bank accounts,

which themselves have increased in coverage – from around 48% of households in 2014 to 99% now. During the pandemic, we expanded our food support plans through the PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana to provide dry rations to 80cr people at zero cost.

In urban areas, the PM SVANidhi Yojana has sanctioned 88.57L loans worth more than ₹11,300cr to more than 63L street vendors and self-employed individuals. These vendors, who were earlier subject to rent seeking, now have allocated vending zones, thus giving them an identity, dignity, access to digital capital, and opportunities to become micro-entrepreneurs.

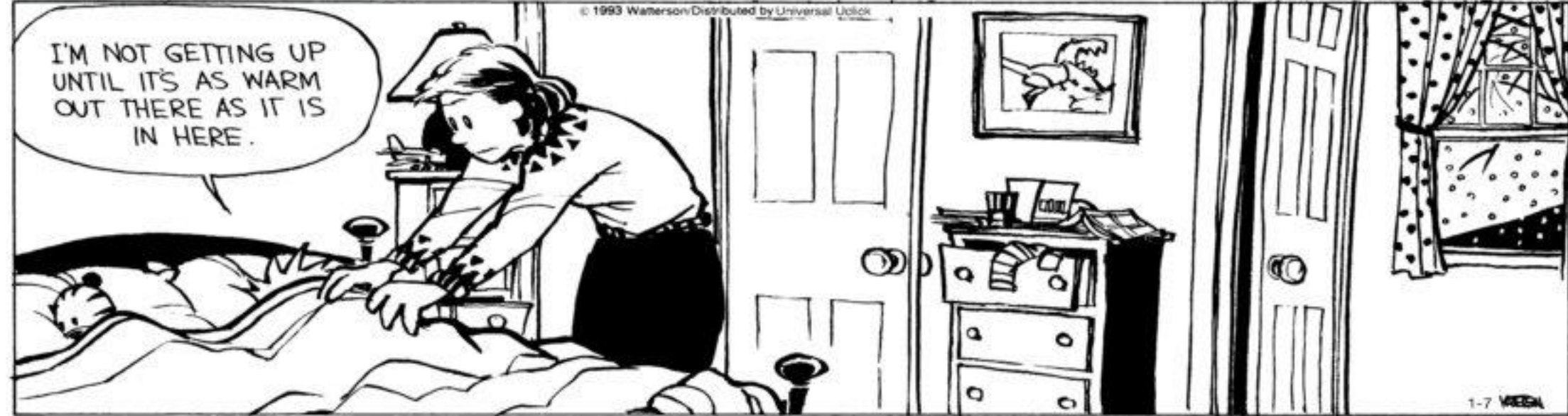
These achievements paint a vivid picture of transformation. The economically weaker sections of our society now have claim to the trifecta of dignity, connectivity, and prosperity.

Welfare plus growth | Our model of combining welfareism with free enterprise, and with emphasis on capital expenditure on digital and physical infrastructure, has ensured India is in a structurally sound position, poised to leapfrog other economies in the coming years.

In comparison, the opposition has made grand promises like giving ₹1L to one woman of each household, which would cost ₹32L cr annually, almost equal to the entire revenue expenditure of GOI.

On the flip side, countries which have had sustained rates of growth have all thought long-term. PM Modi is perhaps the only global leader who is planning for his nation's welfare for the next 25 years.

Calvin & Hobbes



Zen And The Art Of Motorcycle Braking

Mona Mehta

Learning to drive? It is really a one-lesson affair, as a new biker discovered on buying his first motorcycle, an uber-cool BMW, as expensive as a high-end car. With his luxury motorbike came special armour – helmet, goggles, jacket, shoes – to guard against winds as you drive at a three-digit speed. The BMW motorbike also came with a free masterclass on driving. All excited, when the novice biker went to this special class, he found that he was being taught just one thing – how to apply brakes. That's it. No class on how to take off or accelerate. Only braking. Is all else a given?

There are similarities between the human mind and a cutting-edge BMW S1000RR motorbike. The mind, too, knows how to race at high speed. It can move from one point to another, all

charged; switch gears, from past regrets to future anxieties and back, in seconds.

If you want to drive through unpredictable traffic, heavy at times and thin at others, slow-moving or fast, and, like a stunt biker, do some wheelies, stoppies, or burnouts at will – that is, all types of balancing acts – you need constant practice. The same is needed for the mind if you want it to work for you and not against you – constant sadhana.

Most scriptures and spiritual practices are geared towards training the mind to pause, be balanced and centred so that we are always equanimous. One can see the moon's reflection only in still waters at night. Similarly, we can find answers to sail through life's ups and downs effortlessly only when our mind is calm and centred.

For this to happen spontaneously, as in the case of driving on a busy road, we need to focus on four eternal principles – satya, prem, karm, and prakash. Satya comes from Sat Yug; it means being truthful and same on all three planes – of thought, words, and deeds – no hypocrisy, no lying. Apply that to driving; it means following traffic rules truthfully and driving mindfully.

Prem, love, comes from Treta Yug, the era of Ram. It asks us to be 'lovely' and respectful towards all co-travellers, living and non-living beings. Driving carefully, neither hurting anyone nor mistreating our vehicles. Holding grudges and being angry on the road diverts our attention and depletes energy.

Karm is derived from Dwapar Yug when Krishn lived. It means doing work


at hand to the best of our abilities, as an offering to the Divine. Can you make an offering of wrong-side driving, traffic rules violations, and road rage to the Divine?

Prakash, light, the essential principle for Kali Yug, asks us to be egoless, dispel darkness of ignorance, and not be party to that which is not righteous, no matter how many people are doing it. In terms of driving, it would mean dropping all ego and pride in possessing expensive vehicles and following driving rules and inspiring others to do the same.

Whether driving a BMW motorbike or performing any mental activity, sadhana on satya, prem, karm, and prakash can train our minds to spontaneously take right decisions and move through unpredictable and chaotic traffic in life with ease, peace, and grace.

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Sacredspace



Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity.

I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds, and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity...

Rabindranath Tagore

Holding up the mirror

The roots of Khalistani extremism in Canada run deep; S Jaishankar just made it public

In a recent critique of the Trudeau administration, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar accused Canada of granting visas to individuals linked to organised crime, despite warnings from New Delhi, while also legitimising extremism, separatism, and advocates of violence under the guise of free speech. Regarding the escalation of pro-Khalistani activities in Canada and the recent arrest of three individuals in connection with the killing of India-designated terrorist Hardeep Singh Nijjar, Jaishankar remarked that certain individuals have organized politically, influencing politicians to believe they hold sway over community support, thus carving out a space for themselves in the politics of democratic nations. This has been the Indian answer to Canadian charges of killing a Canadian Sikh on its soil. S Jaishankar has effectively retorted to the Canadian charges by saying that the Canada government gives visas to dubious people from India despite the Indian government's warnings. The roots of Khalistani separatism gained significant traction in the 1980s culminating in violence and the tragic events of Operation Blue Star and the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. The wounds inflicted during this period continue to fester, providing fertile ground for extremist ideologies to thrive, particularly among Sikh diaspora communities. Canada, with its sizable Sikh population, became a hub for Khalistani activists and sympathisers, offering refuge to those fleeing persecution in India while inadvertently providing a platform for the propagation of separatist ideologies.



The liberal immigration policies and multicultural ethos of Canada provided a conducive environment for the Khalistani movement to gain momentum, with several prominent figures finding sanctuary and support within its borders. However, the issue transcends mere ideological sympathies and delves into the realm of organised crime and terrorism. Over the years, there have been numerous instances of Khalistani elements in Canada being implicated in activities ranging from fundraising for militant outfits to carrying out targeted attacks against perceived enemies of the movement. India has repeatedly raised concerns about Canada's perceived leniency towards individuals with ties to Khalistani extremism. Minister for External Affairs, S Jaishankar's criticism reflects India's growing unease over the role of certain segments within the Canadian establishment in enabling and even legitimizing Khalistani activities. He has done the right thing in showing the mirror to the Canadian government which had accused India of a Sikh Canadian on its soil. Canada, on its part, has taken some steps to address these concerns but the fact is Canada's Govt has been largely sympathetic to such elements. Only a couple of days back Khalistani slogans were raised in the presence of Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau. Canada must strike a delicate balance between upholding its commitment to freedom of speech and association while preventing its territory from being used as a staging ground for violence and terrorism.



Polling officials travel via a boat to reach their respective polling booths, a day before the voting, in Kamrup

Climate startups: Innovative climate crisis warriors

Startups, pivotal in the shift to a net-zero future, can revitalise economies and communities while providing innovative solutions

Deux ex machina is a technique often deployed by writers to solve a seemingly hopeless situation by external, magical and often unimaginable intervention. It is debatable if Deux ex machina exists in real life, nonetheless, Startups being creatures with innovation, disruption and problem-solving in their DNA can offer faster, creative and localised solutions, for the increasingly hopeless real-world crisis of Climate Change. Be it a startup supplying an animal feed supplement that can cut down bovine emissions significantly, another one using Biotech and robotics technologies for developing GMO seeds and seaweeds that act as powerful carbon sinks, a climate tech company developing agro-forestry at a global scale or simpler everyday solutions that aim to greenify consumer finance or track individual efforts to reduce emissions, they can consolidate as a powerful force against climate change. World Economic Forum estimates that startups create value, nearly on par with the GDP of a G7 economy and the



OECD suggests that young firms create almost half of the new jobs, suggesting their burgeoning economic power and potential to create impact at scale. The race to net zero is propelled by energy and technology transition which on one hand is an opportunity for startups and a threat to local economies and livelihoods on the other. Take the case of coal being phased out; this might result in the currently bustling mining centres turning into silent junkyards. The modern world's triumphs in Silicon Valley or a Shanghai SEZ may guide the establishment of new climate innovation hubs. Brain port Eindhoven in the Netherlands is one such example showcasing the transition from conventional industries to futuristic setups. The questions on the proliferation of such a model 'Can' be addressed by a few suggestions of 'How': Blended Finance for Climate Innovation Hubs Practical experience suggests that 'Impact Capital' often expects social impact plus commercial returns. For startups social impact then becomes an additional responsibility and not an opportunity to improve margins or a business avenue to seriously pursue climate-positive opportunities over the long term. Blended finance can incentivise climate startups to agglomerate within the Climate Innovation Hubs. Monetising Sustainability — Startups should have opportunities to monetise their efforts on reducing emissions, either in the form of reduced taxes and lower cost of capital or claim premiums for climate-positive brand value. Reputation Capital — Unless climate-positive efforts are rewarded by markets in the form of valuations or additional capital or brand value, climate-positive behaviour will continue to be talk and no walk. Research &

Development (R&D) Support — While large corporations have reserves that can be deployed for R & D, startups have only access to highly demanding capital that usually funds sales for growth and rarely for investments for innovations (unless the startup is incubated in a technical university). While the existing carbon economy still grapples with the issues of just transition, the political economy of climate change signals shifts in geo-political equilibrium and technological leapfrogging in climate solutions is yet to emerge, startups as business organisations are only going to achieve greater proportions of power, prosperity and influence in the world. With focused support from policymakers, development finance institutions and international researchers, the global startup ecosystem can be geared up to take on threats of climate change head-on. Who knows we may have a Deux ex machina in the real world of climate change. The writer is a Chevening Scholar and an International Development expert; views are personal

Dynamic contours of electoral politics

In a nation where election season seems perennial, the traditional distinction between campaign fervour and governance blurs into a continuous political landscape

The election season is here. The reaction to the statement could well be that election season is now almost there around the year. There are some elections in some parts of the country going on constantly. In short, almost every season has become an election season. It would be tempting to ask oneself if this is a good thing or a bad thing. It's normal to be judgmental in matters which appear to be significant. However, it would not matter which way the judgment goes because the judgment would not affect the actual run of the situation.

That may be another matter. However, the present election fever is unique in its type because it affects every part of the country and is not confined to a small region or another. The concern of the day is national rather than regional, as it often is. This makes the issues of national significance to figure out a choice in the fray. National issues could come up in many areas, such as defence, taxation, education and interstate movements. The special entry provisions that govern certain regions of the country, or indeed the kind of inter-regional transportation structure, including waterways, as it affects human movement, trade, or commerce. The list enumerated itself is loud and can be added to. However, it makes a basic point. The issues in this election are issues that cut across states, have pan-India bearings, or affect the identity of citizens in the country. All this adds to the exclusivity of the election. Conceptually, what has been set in the preceding few lines is correct. But operationally, there are many other shades and colours. A dominant theme affecting these elections seems to be religion, whereas worship is always a private thing. In India, methods of worship have often served as a method of aggregation of identity. This is a particularly unique gift of the way independence was achieved in this country. No country in the world in the post-colonial era was ever partitioned based on religion, as India was, as a prerequisite for independence. How this helped anyone or any



cause is not quite clear. If the basis of partition was religion, there was something strange about one country proclaiming its identity to be one religion and another country emphatically proposing that it would not have any religious identity. That, however, was the choice of August, 14 and 15, 1947, by the two countries that brought into existence freedom, or more technically, the withdrawal of colonial rule. The British were particular in pointing out that they were giving back power from where they had taken it when they started the rule of then-unified India. The rest has to say is history. But post August 15, 1947, saw an experience throughout the subcontinent that was unique and has been termed by some historians as the 'unification of India'. There was a British India and a princely India. The British India territories would have elected government, yet the princely India would have their choice of secession to India or Pakistan. The rest, as they say, is history. Barring Multan, North West Frontier territory, Jammu and Kashmir, Junagarh and Hyderabad, the merger issues were largely smooth and without too much contention. Even the territories named above had a choice exercised sooner than what seemed most like-

“THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN ELECTORAL PROMISES, THE ISSUES THAT WIN VOTES AND HOW THE ELECTED PARTY ACTUALLY GOVERNS AND IMPLEMENTS THEIR AGENDA ONCE IN POWER LEADS TO MANY UNEXPECTED AND PERPLEXING OUTCOMES

ly possible. The result was the emergence of a unified India and a unified Pakistan. Jammu and Kashmir remained the only state in which a deliberate contention was kept alive. Indeed, there was no contentious issue if the terms of the Freedom Act were followed, but in one way or another, the matter continues to evoke emotions, in a unique way, in several people. It is not just religion at play, there are several factors, including geopolitical ones. It is also possible not to recognize how the matter has been made increasingly complex by an unnecessary play of force, some of whom have no locus standee at all in the case. One would have thought that elections held at a national level, so often, so regularly and so fairly across the length and breadth of the country, would have rendered the whole issue of controversy in Jammu and Kashmir needless. Alas, that is not the case. Elections have a certain pattern in this country: give and take a few arguments here and there. However, choices have to be exercised and the numerical outcome of those choices determines how the country is governed. So the question arises as to what the net findings of the propositions thrown up as electoral issues are. In many states, local

issues seem to be inclined to determine the balloting that would take place for national representation. This appears to be the case, especially in Karnataka, Bihar, Manipur and some other states. The essence of the matter is that choices have to be exercised and the arguments of the choices need only to be communicable in terms of the strength that the community appears to endorse in the legislature. It is worth remembering that, at the end of the day, once the election results are announced, there is no accountability for the correlation between how choices made on issues during elections will be exercised when the party concerned, which wins the election, administers the issue. It may well be said that elections as a process still await better mellowing and maturing to make them an internally consistent one. At the moment, it is satisfying to note that by and large, the process of exercising choices, its panning out in the legislature and its administrative implementation are increasingly becoming worthwhile efforts and, a coherent method of administering, sensibly, a large country, such as India. (The writer is a well-known management consultant of international repute. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SAFFRON: A BLOSSOMING OPPORTUNITY
Madam — Apropos the news article, "Saffron cultivation: Replicate Poonch's success story," published on May 4, this is my response. The story of saffron cultivation in Poonch, Jammu and Kashmir, is not just about agriculture; it's a narrative of resilience and transformation. Ajaz Ahmad's journey exemplifies a shift from traditional farming to embracing the potential of saffron. His vision of Poonch becoming a saffron hub reflects the region's evolving agricultural landscape. However, challenges loom large. Environmental shifts, like erratic rainfall and untimely snowfall, threaten saffron production in Kashmir. Such concerns emphasise the need for sustainable farming practices and governmental support, not just in terms of subsidies but also in ensuring security and mitigating wildlife threats. Yet, amidst these challenges, saffron's allure persists. Its medicinal properties and premium market value make it a lucrative venture for farmers. With initiatives like the National Saffron Mission, there's hope for revitalising saffron cultivation and uplifting Kashmir's socio-economic fabric. As saffron blooms in Poonch, it signifies not just a crop but a promise of prosperity for the region. Virat Chatterjee | Pune

PROGRESS, CHALLENGES AND HOPE
Madam — Apropos the news article, "Narendra Modi introduces India to its Ashtalakshmis," published on May 4, this is my response. Reading about the political landscape and developmental challenges across India, especially in the neglected North East, evokes a mix of emotions. From the perpetual promises of politicians during election seasons to the persistent issues of floods, droughts and insurgencies, it's a reminder of the complex tapestry of our nation's journey. The failure to address fundamental issues like water scarcity and regional development highlights systemic shortcomings that transcend party lines. However, amidst these challenges, there's



Call for transparency
Apropos the news article, "Covishield's Shield in Question," published on May 5, this is my response. The unfolding saga surrounding the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine underscores a pressing need for transparency and accountability in vaccine distribution and oversight. Alex Mitchell's harrowing experience, alongside numerous others, sheds light on the gravity of potential side effects and the imperative of informed consent. As legal battles loom against pharmaceutical giants, questions mount regarding regulatory diligence and corporate responsibility. The admission of rare but severe side effects prompts reflection on the balance between vaccine benefits and risks. The petition, led by advocate Vishal Tiwari, encapsulates the public's demand for rigorous scrutiny and redress mechanisms. Calls for expert medical panels and a vaccine damage payment system underscore a quest for justice and safeguarding public health. Amidst the cacophony of voices, from grieving parents to sceptical netizens, one message resonates: transparency breeds trust. As the global vaccination campaign continues, robust surveillance, thorough investigation and proactive communication remain indispensable in navigating the complexities of vaccine safety. Arnab Reddy | Hyderabad

aging NCERT textbooks emerges as a strategic move. These textbooks, integral to classrooms nationwide, offer more than just academic aid. They serve as a robust foundation, aligning seamlessly with CUET syllabi and offering structured content presentations. From basic principles to advanced concepts, NCERT textbooks provide a roadmap. Their clarity, supplemented by visuals and practice exercises, enhances comprehension and problem-solving skills. Moreover, their standardised content ensures equitable access to quality education, levelling the playing field for CUET aspirants. To optimise CUET preparation, students should adopt a subject-wise study approach, leverage visual aids, prioritise practice and revision and supplement with additional resources. By harnessing the potential of NCERT textbooks, students can bolster their confidence and maximise success in the CUET 2024 Exam. Sanya Khanna | Chandigarh

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RETHINKING ECONOMIC GROWTH

Excessive consumerism contradicts our spiritual values ingrained in our heritage



RAJYOGI BRAHMAKUMAR NIKUNJ JI

The US economy is very often seen as the engine of the world economy, and that is why any sign of slowdown in the US raises serious concerns about harmful spillovers to the other economies. Any keen student of current economics would know well that the economic policies of America, especially during the last few years, have not worked well. In fact, the defeat of the most powerful leaders in the presidential elections that were held in the past few decades is attributed mainly to the failure of their economic policies which created many problems for the country. However, most people do not realise that the economic problems faced there, emanate not merely from wrong policies, adopted recently. Their roots are hidden in some wrong economic, political and cultural concepts and the models built on them over a period of time. For example, the mounting unemployment and the huge foreign debts are not the phenomena that have sprung up overnight and the phenomenon of estimated 11.5% Americans, living in poverty, also has not arisen in the short period of only one or two years. The roots of their sad economic state go at least to as far a period as the end of the World War-II when they adopted a very lavish life-style and an utterly consumeristic attitude and built their economy on militarism, giant industries, transactional and multi-national business corporations, import of raw materials at cheaper rates from the undeveloped countries and export of their goods to such nations and economic capture of foreign markets through their multinational corporations. In short, they thrived on the basis of this economic system as long as other industrial nations did not come up strongly to stand up to them or the weaker nations did not stand up against



their economic exploitation or injustice. Nevertheless, their economic system was not, based on some morally sound and enduring economic principles. As mentioned earlier, it was based on commercialism, competition, consumerism and exploitation of weaker nations and on hot or cold war with an adversary nation, or on considering their nation as the strong military- man of the world, ready for hot or cold war. Now, when some other industrial nations have grown stronger, they cannot compete with them and have, therefore, to close down or to retrench workers as was done recently by many industrial giants. Also, now when there is no war— hot or cold—they are forced by economic reasons to sell their military hardware as they recently sold fighter jets to many Asian countries in order to keep the workers in employment. Their country has had either the ills of recession, or inflation, or heavy taxation, or it had to resort to deficit budgets, foreign debts, protectionist policies, etc. to keep the economy going. It would have, therefore, been appropriate if developing nations like India had learnt some lessons from the failures of the so-called developed models of economy and had, instead, kept in mind their own national ethos and ancient heritage which suggests that a right system of economy is one which is based on social justice, and on economising rather than borrowing and deficit-financing. We should also keep in mind our own national situation which necessitates national and regional self-sufficiency and affords opportunities of full employment to its citizens and promotes balance between rural and urban economy, equitable distribution of income and wealth and prevention of the growth of very wide disparities in income and wealth. We must remember that unbridled consumerism and commercialism and also large-scale borrowing are against the value-system which is embedded in our spiritual heritage and will, sooner or later, lead us to grave economic crisis. So, let us all learn to lead a life of simplicity and frugality and be honest and just to all.

(Writer is a spiritual educator & popular columnist; views are personal)

Vision for India: A State-led roadmap for effective governance

Amid India’s socio-economic shift, Karthik Muralidharan’s new book shines as a guide for the nation’s trajectory



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

despite India being one of the largest manufacturers of tractors of all kinds. The mention of the word farmer brings to mind the images of loin-clothed men beating their bollocks to force them to plough the fields. You go to Madurai in Tamil Nadu, which the DMK touts as a role model of Dravidian development. What welcomes you to the small towns and villages are thoroughfares and

ring roads being used as public comfort stations by the residents. Dravidian leaders do not like the idea of Swachh Bharat and insist that their followers use roads, rivers and beaches as public toilets. It is in these contexts that a book for the economic and social development of India has hit the shelves. Karthik Muralidharan, renowned economist and Tata Chancellor’s Professor of Economics at the University of California, San Diego, has authored a book “Accelerating India’s Development - A State-led Roadmap for Effective Governance”, a blueprint for the Comprehensive Development of India. Productivity, competitiveness, the number of jobs created and the skill of the labour force are

some of the most important ingredients of the economic growth of a country. It is for the Central and State Governments to generate enabling conditions for speedy economic and social development, according to Muralidharan. The author says that land, labour, capital, policies on taxation, bankruptcy, environmental regulation and promoting competition are the enabling services that ensure speedy economic and social development. Muralidharan, who has no love lost for the Modi Government at the Centre, says the present Central Government is always ahead in resolving issues that retard economic progress. “India’s public discourse on growth

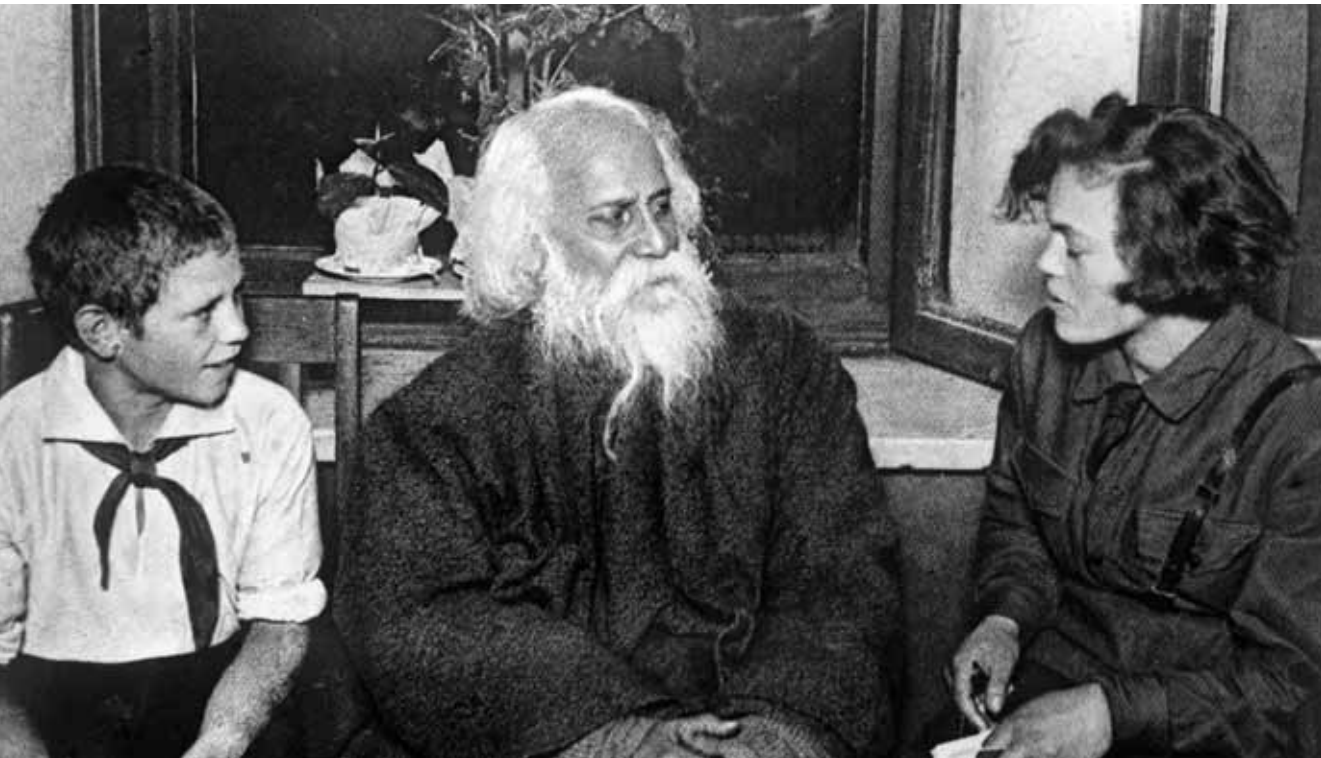
mainly focusses on Central Government actions to promote it, though many of the key issues above are in the domain of State Governments. It is critical to analyze and improve the effectiveness of State level actions for boosting productivity and job quality. State-led initiative and innovations followed by rapid replication of successful ones can play a key role in accelerating both growth and development in India,” writes Muralidharan in the chapter “Jobs, Productivity and Economic Growth”. What makes the book interesting is Muralidharan’s call for improving job quality rather than job quantity. It is not the number of jobs created but the quality of jobs that determines the welfare of the people, says

Reimagining Tagore’s educational philosophy

Rabindranath Tagore, the polymathic Nobel Laureate from Bengal, is celebrated not only for his literary brilliance but also for his visionary ideas on education

Rabindranath Tagore (May 7, 1861 to August 7, 1941), the polymathic Nobel Laureate from Bengal, is renowned not only for his literary brilliance but also for his progressive ideas on education. His philosophy of education, rooted in the principles of creativity, freedom, and humanism, continues to resonate with contemporary educational discourse. In today’s rapidly changing world, where traditional educational paradigms are being challenged and redefined, Tagore’s insights offer valuable perspectives for reimagining education in a manner that fosters holistic development and meaningful engagement with the world. At the heart of Tagore’s educational philosophy is the belief in the innate creativity and potential of every individual. He envisioned education as a process of nurturing this inherent creativity rather than imposing predetermined knowledge. In his seminal work, “Siksha: Herok Ek Jibon” (Education: A Continuum of Life), Tagore emphasized the importance of cultivating curiosity, imagination, and critical thinking skills in learners. He advocated for an education system that encourages students to explore, question, and construct their understanding of the world, rather than passively receiving information.

Further, central to Tagore’s philosophy of education is the concept of “Shantiniketan,” or the abode of peace - and later Sriniketan - which he established as an experimental educational institution in rural Bengal. Shantiniketan epitomized Tagore’s holistic educational philosophy, integrating intellectual, artistic, and spiritual facets of human life. Education transcended traditional confines, embracing nature, arts, and community involvement. Tagore emphasized fostering reverence for nature, aesthetic sensibility, and interconnectedness with all life. He advocated for intellectual development through imagination, free thought, and perpetual curiosity. This personalized approach prioritized holistic growth, including physical development through exercises, yoga, and sports, echoing Tagore’s belief: “The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence.” According to Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, “A teacher can never truly teach, unless he is still learning himself. A lamp can never light another lamp, unless it continues to burn its own flame”. In his essay ‘Ashramer Shiksha’ (Ashram’s Teaching), Tagore extolled the virtues of patience in teaching, advocating that only those imbued with affection for their students deserve the mantle of a teacher. He rejected authoritarian teaching methods, viewing them as indicative of governance inadequacy. K M O’Connell (University of Toronto, Canada) had written that Rabindranath Tagore stands with the pioneering educators, like, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori, and Dewey Malcolm Knowles, who have striven to create non-authoritarian learning systems appropriate to the surroundings. Furthermore, Tagore’s educational philosophy emphasizes fostering a love for humanity and advancing universal brotherhood through recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings and promoting empathy across cultures. Central to his approach is establishing harmony



HIS NOTION OF FREEDOM IN EDUCATION EMPHASISES LINKING NATURE, SOCIETY, AND LEARNERS’ EXPERIENCES. HE ADVOCATES FOR LEARNING IN NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS TO NOURISH BODY AND SOUL, PRIORITISE CREATIVITY, AND ENGAGE CRITICALLY WITH TRADITIONAL VALUES AND BELIEFS

between individuals, nature, and the divine. Tagore advocates for freedom in education to unlock individuals’ inherent potential and stresses the significance of moral and spiritual development alongside academic learning. His vision aims at cultivating well-rounded individuals capable of selfless service and social integration, ultimately contributing to a conscientious and harmonious society. In today’s context, characterized by rapid technological advancements, globalization, and environmental challenges, Tagore’s emphasis on holistic education is more relevant than ever. The prevailing thought on standardized testing and rote memorization (read learning) often stifles creativity and critical thinking, leaving students ill-prepared for the complexities of the modern world. Tagore’s philosophy, instead, calls for a shift towards a more student-centered, inquiry-based approach to learning that empowers learners to navigate uncertainty, think critically, and adapt to change. Tagore’s educational philosophy, as elucidated in his essay “The Centre of Indian Culture,” emphasizes the imperative for education to reflect and engage with the socio-cultural milieu in which it operates, asserting that genuine education must be attuned to its contextual realities to foster healthy growth. This sentiment resonates in Sunil Banga’s (Lancaster University Management School) analysis - in his paper “The global relevance of Tagore’s cosmopolitan educational philosophy for social justice in a post-Westphalian world” published in Journal of Philosophy of Education (August 2023, Oxford) - which underscores Tagore’s cosmopolitan approach to education as a potent instrument for social justice and equity in today’s

world. Banga highlights Tagore’s commitment to societal transformation through education, evident in his advocacy for women’s empowerment, condemnation of oppression, and advocacy for India’s independence (read freedom). Despite emerging from the colonial era, Tagore’s philosophy remains pertinent, particularly his emphasis on education as a catalyst for moral and social development, aiming towards societal harmony and integration to address contemporary global challenges. Moreover, Tagore’s emphasis on the integration of arts, music, and literature into the curriculum offers a counterbalance to the narrow focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education prevalent in many educational systems today. Arts play a crucial role in fostering creativity, empathy, and emotional intelligence, which are essential for navigating the complexities of human relationships and societal challenges. Sunil Banga underscores Tagore’s educational paradigm as an early advocate of global interconnectedness. Tagore posited that education’s primary objective was the attainment of self-realization, which he termed ‘Atma Shakti,’ wherein individuals harmonize with nature and society. Drawing from Hindu literature, Tagore envisions a ‘universal man’ embodying faith in universalism and humanity. He further advocates for personality development through arts and music, leading to a transcendent understanding of human nature. He contends that humans, upon achieving self-realization, unite with ‘God’ or ‘Manav Brahma,’ thereby becoming the ‘complete man’ and ‘soul.’ Rabindranath Tagore’s educational philosophy underscores the integral role of education in fos-

tering connections between individuals and humanity while promoting holistic development. In essence, at the heart of Tagore’s vision of cosmopolitan education is the idea of freedom - freedom to engage critically with traditional values and beliefs; and freedom to imagine citizenship in a globalized world, that enables an exploration and negotiation of multiple allegiances in sympathy with others. His notion of freedom in education emphasizes linking nature, society, and learners’ experiences. He advocates for learning in natural environments to nourish body and soul, prioritize creativity, and engage critically with traditional values and beliefs. Rabindranath Tagore’s philosophy of education provides a compelling framework for reimagining education in the 21st century. His emphasis on creativity, freedom, holistic development, and social engagement offers valuable insights for addressing the multifaceted challenges of today’s world. By embracing Tagore’s vision, educators can create learning environments that empower students to become compassionate, critical thinkers capable of shaping a more just, sustainable, and humane society and boosting student’s morale. On the occasion of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore’s 163rd Birth Anniversary, we may well reflect on his philosophy advocating for an education that transcends mere impartation of knowledge, rather instills a profound harmony with all existence. Revisiting Tagore’s principles may serve as a guiding light for Indian educational institutions in this globalised age.

(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)



RAJDEEP PATHAK

(The writer is special correspondent with The Pioneer; views are personal)

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

LAC standoff

India, China need to reduce trust deficit

A resolution of the India-China border row remains elusive, even as the two countries have been locked in a military standoff along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh for the past four years. During this period, there have been 21 rounds of military commander-level talks and 29 meetings of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs. The two sides have done well to complete the disengagement process at several friction points, but the deadlock over the Depsang plateau persists.

In an interview last week, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said the talks were progressing well. He expressed optimism that there would be a positive outcome. However, recent meetings have not witnessed any breakthrough; both countries have only reiterated their commitment to maintaining peace and tranquillity on the ground and keeping the lines of communication open.

Beijing's troop buildup and infrastructure development along the LAC have not helped matters. This has left India with no option but to augment its military presence in the border areas and develop infrastructure at a rapid pace in order to catch up with the Chinese. Even as the situation has remained stable but sensitive, as described by Army Chief Gen Manoj Pande, the shadow of the Galwan clash of June 2020 continues to loom large, keeping Indian and Chinese troops on their toes. Progress on the diplomatic front has been stymied by the inadequacy of the interaction between PM Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping in recent years. Modi last visited China in 2018, while Xi has not travelled to India since the Mamallapuram summit of October 2019. The Chinese President also chose to skip the G20 summit hosted by New Delhi last year. The political leadership of the two nations needs to proactively engage with each other to reduce the trust deficit. This holds the key to resolving the border dispute and ending the prolonged standoff.

Criminal trials

SC decries ineffective cross-examination

THE Supreme Court has flagged the public's perception that criminal trials are neither free nor fair, while expressing concern over ineffective cross-examination of hostile witnesses by public prosecutors. This indictment of the judicial process underscores a key principle of jurisprudence: the pursuit of truth and justice. Yet, this pursuit cannot rest solely on prosecution and defence; it must be championed by the judiciary itself.

While upholding the conviction of a man in a murder case despite the witness having turned hostile, the SC Bench said judges must actively engage in trial proceedings, extracting pertinent information and guarding against lapses by prosecutors. Similarly, the SC's decision last October to cancel the bail of a man accused of his wife's murder after the witnesses retracted their statements against him, highlights the dire consequences of witness-tampering. The court's emphasis on ensuring witness safety and ordering fresh cross-examination in a secure environment can facilitate a fair trial.

The apex court has stated that the relations between the public prosecutor and the judiciary are the cornerstone of the criminal justice system. The SC has urged courts not to act as 'mere tape recorders'. Such shortcomings affect criminal jurisprudence, compromising its foundational principles. The absence of a fair trial undermines public trust in the legal system. Thus, the independence of public prosecutors from political influence or external pressure is paramount. To this end, the court has rightly emphasised the need for a stringent criterion to appoint public prosecutors, prioritising merit and impeccable credentials. The present state of affairs calls for systemic reforms, placing the delivery of justice at the forefront of legal proceedings so as to uphold the sanctity of the due process.

ON THIS DAY...50 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

CHANDIGARH, TUESDAY, MAY 7, 1974

Not by halves

THE present economic situation in the country, Finance Minister YB Chavan told the Lok Sabha on Saturday, was "difficult and very serious". He could not shut his eyes to the harsh realities, but was unwilling to join those who sang the song of a "deep economic crisis". To the man in the street, the distinction between a serious economic situation and a deep crisis would seem pointless. The situation is bad enough and permits of no quibbling. To allow it to become worse would be dangerous and indulgence in the nuances of danger would be a greater folly. Chavan could also save himself the trouble of stressing "principles" against "tactical adjustments and concessions because of new developments". He claims that the Government has stuck to its principles even in regard to the wheat trade, though the policy reversal is there for all to see. Evidently, admission of error is regarded as unworthy of a great party like the Congress. Chavan has admitted that there is inflation, but he says it is a global phenomenon and no country except the socialist bloc is free from it. Piloo Mody has pointed out that it is only 4 per cent in India. The inflation mounts despite the Government's measures and millions of people are learning to live with it. But Chavan now says inflation "is not something which has come to stay permanently". Curbing this phenomenon is certainly possible, given a determined drive shorn of diversionary tactics. But it just cannot be ordered back, King Canute style. Total elimination is, however, next to impossible. As Chavan has himself conceded, there is the impact of world phenomena and of a multiplicity of factors on the Indian economy.

An overreaction to student protests

Prestigious American universities have floundered in dealing with the situation



MANOJ JOSHI

DISTINGUISHED FELLOW, OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION, NEW DELHI

THE growing intensity of pro-Palestine protests by students in the US has led to an aggressive crackdown by administrators and the police in the form of arrests, suspensions and class cancellations.

The demonstrators, who set up encampments in over 120 universities and colleges across the US, have been galvanised by the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and have called on their institutions to divest from Israeli firms. However, some Jewish students have called the protesters anti-Semitic and expressed concern about their safety. In the election year, politicians have stepped in to term the protests 'anti-Semitic' and demanded a crackdown.

The protests are against the policies of the Israeli government, but somehow it is made out that they are against the Jewish community. In India, it is easy to understand the difference, but in the West, with its terrible history of murderous anti-Semitism, public opinion is often manipulated on the issue by the powerful Jewish lobby in the US.

The protests reflect that young Americans are more likely to oppose Israel's actions than the older ones. A Gallup survey in March found that 55 per cent of the Americans disapproved of the Israeli military action in Gaza, with 63 per cent of them in the age group of 18-34.

Student protests can be sometimes immature, are always impassioned and often over the top. Indeed, students and protests often go hand in hand and are a hallmark of a flourishing democracy. But American



FURORE: The crackdown on protesters at Columbia University has triggered an international outrage. REUTERS

adults, from the President downwards, seem to be failing their country. President Biden, under pressure from the left wing of the Democrats, has backed the students' right to protest, "but not the right to cause chaos".

American students have a six-decade-old tradition of protest. They were at the forefront of the anti-segregation movement in the 1950s and 1960s; they protested Free Speech limitations in Berkeley in 1964, thereafter the Vietnam War, apartheid in South Africa and so on.

The scale of destruction unleashed on Gaza as retribution for the Hamas terrorist attack of October 7 has been wildly disproportionate. There has been little evidence that Israel has sought to apply discriminate force in its battle with the Hamas. Even its mentor, the US, has raised the issue of its humanitarian conduct with Israel.

The International Criminal Court has been conducting hearings on the Israeli actions in Gaza. Separately, the International Court of Justice is hearing a case filed by South Africa, alleging Israel's violation of the international law by committing and failing to prevent genocidal acts.

President Biden has backed the students' right to protest, but not the right to cause chaos.

The US has a certain vanity about its traditions of free speech and expression, but when push comes to shove, there is a tendency to overreact. And this is what seems to have happened on many campuses. College and university administrators have not handled the issues very competently. The University of Southern California, for example, cancelled a valedictory speech by a top student who happened to be a Muslim girl, leading to an uprising

that prompted the university president to call the police. The University of California, Los Angeles, had adopted a liberal approach and allowed an encampment, but summons by a Republican-led congressional committee probably panicked it into calling the police, who came in along with a group of non-student counter-protesters, triggering violence.

Prestigious universities like Harvard, Columbia and Indiana have floundered in dealing with the protests and have hastily called in the police to tackle the situation. Some non-student provocateurs from the right and the left have promoted violence, but even the New York Police Department acknowledged that the protests had been non-violent. In many instances, the students have been joined by faculty members, who have criticised their administrators for mishandling the protests.

While US colleges and universities like Brown University, Northwestern University and the University of Minnesota have brokered deals with the students, others like University of California (Berkeley) and Wesleyan College have allowed

protest encampments.

The allegation of anti-Semitism in colleges has been taken up by the right wing in Congress. Acrimonious hearings by a House Committee have put college administrators on the back foot and forced some of them to resign. Two weeks ago, the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Mike Johnson, himself descended on Columbia University and met Jewish students. At a press conference there, he called on the president of the university, Minouche Shafik, to resign and suggested that the National Guard be summoned to deal with the demonstrations.

More than two dozen Republican senators signed a letter calling on Biden to restore order to the campuses by using federal laws against "the outbreak of anti-Semitic, pro-terrorist mobs". Such labelling of protesters, most of whom have been motivated by the humanitarian concerns arising out of the deaths of around 35,000 Palestinians, more than half of them children, indicates the moral vacuum in the hearts of many contemporary American politicians.

Johnson has probably forgotten history in suggesting a militarised response to deal with peaceful protests. In 1970, the Ohio National Guard fired at and killed four unarmed students and wounded nine who were protesting against the Vietnam War at Kent State University. There is, of course, the irony of someone like Johnson calling for a 'law and order' crackdown, considering his support to the January 6, 2021, insurrection which attempted to violently overturn the results of the 2020 American elections.

In a recent column, Edward Luce, US commentator for *Financial Times*, noted that while student protests could be "foolishness—or worse", it was American adults "who are making the biggest dunces of themselves". They are, he lamented, displaying "traits of hysteria and dogmatism they deplore in the young".

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.—Elie Wiesel

Topographical disorientation

CV SUKUMARAN

THE establishment where I worked had an office boy named Murali. His sense of direction was commendable. He could find his way around easily even in a new place. Given a big city's complex and myriad alleyways, retracing one's steps back to the place from where one started is quite a feat. He moved around delivering letters and financial documents to several offices and banks in the city and suburbs. Those were the days when courier service was little-known.

A close relative of mine, whose name, coincidentally, is Murali, also has this admirable skill. In contrast to this amazing duo, my sense of direction is abysmally poor, so much so that I often find myself lost whenever I go to a new place. Maybe I am suffering from what is called topographical disorientation in clinical parlance. I have to keep asking people for directions. While doing so, I make sure that the person whom I have asked doesn't see me enquiring from others.

A year before the advent of the Covid pandemic, which one recalls with a shudder, our group of eight persons—including me and my wife—undertook a tour of Schengen countries. During the last leg of the trip, we found ourselves at the Paris airport one morning. Owing to the rescheduling of our flight, we had much time on our hands before check-in.

All of us wanted to freshen up. I volunteered to wait to keep an eye on our baggage while the others walked towards the washrooms. I asked the security guard, whom I had heard talking to someone in English, a moment ago, whether there was any bookshop nearby. He said: 'Yes, there are two, both not far from each other, a little away from the washrooms.' I asked him if English books were available there or only French, which was Greek to me. He said with a grin: 'Of course, yes.' Gladdened, I walked in the direction of the bookshops, as instructed by the guard. My responsibility of staying put beside the baggage till my fellow travellers returned had inexcusably slipped my mind.

While returning from the bookstalls, I walked circuitously with a view to exercising my legs. Inevitably, I lost my way. All kinds of negative thoughts stormed my mind. Suppose someone made good of our bags, I feared. I had heard that some European cities were notorious for thefts. Was Paris one of them? Could be just a myth, I tried to reassure myself.

At last, I found my companions. I wished that humans, too, had the powerful olfactory ability which nature had bestowed liberally on his best friend.

Thank goodness, my wife, who was in a jewellery shop with her sisters-in-law, did not miss me at all!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India a welcoming country

With reference to the editorial 'Raking up xenophobia', India is far from being a racist country. In fact, it is one of the most welcoming nations in the world. And it can be said without a doubt that India is on the cusp of major transformation. The day is not far when it will become the third largest economy in the world. US President Joe Biden's remarks calling countries like India and Japan 'xenophobic' are uncalled for. Since the US presidential election is around the corner, it seems like Biden is trying to appeal to his vote bank. Or perhaps he is not happy to see India grow.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Biden's remarks ill-timed

Refer to 'Raking up xenophobia'; President Joe Biden's observation about the 'faltering economies' of the countries that he has accused of being 'xenophobic' is misconceived and ill-timed. India is a fast-growing economy, and it has always been welcoming of immigrants. Biden's remark may be a political move to boost the chances of his re-election in November. However, such statements have the potential to hit America's ties with its allies and undermine the Quad alliance. The American leadership should refrain from using anti-India rhetoric or tarnishing the image of its allies.

DS KANG, HOSHIARPUR

Ensure proper disposal of waste

Apropos of the editorial 'Toxic waste disposal', the situation in towns and villages along the Haryana-Rajasthan border is distressing. Despite all the talk of saving the environment, such incidents bring to the fore the grim ground reality. Instead of getting into spats, both states should focus on fixing the issue and ensuring proper disposal of the hazardous chemicals so as to prevent any further harm to the ecology and human health. Concerted efforts by the Centre, the states and the National Green Tribunal are a must to tackle the menace. Ensuring strict enforcement of the regulations for the safe disposal of toxic matter is advisable. Sustainable waste management is necessary to alleviate the suffering of the local residents.

PRIYANKA, BY MAIL

Don't stifle dissent on campus

Refer to the article 'Taking on mighty Jewish lobby in US'; the crackdown on students by US universities for voicing their solidarity with Palestine is an assault on free speech and academic freedom. The students' demand that the universities withdraw investments from companies involved with Israel is legitimate. It shows that they are concerned about human rights violations. The authorities must not justify their heavy-handedness by accusing the protesters of spreading hatred against Jews. Instead of suppressing dissent on campus, the US must stop Israel from inflicting harm on the innocent people of Gaza.

CHANCHAL S. MANN, UNA

No respite for middle class

The article 'Middle class facing a massive squeeze' is on point. The middle class, the bedrock of our economy, faces an unprecedented squeeze. Progress made over decades has stalled, leaving aspirations unfulfilled. The stark reality is that the living standards of this vital demographic have either stagnated or worsened, while the cost of living has been soaring. Meanwhile, white-collar job vacancies have been dwindling. The middle class, our society's backbone, is being hollowed out. The contribution of this segment remains undervalued, and its significance is often overlooked. There is a need to address this imbalance and restore the dignity of the middle class. The future of our nation depends on it.

SARGUNPREET KAUR, MOHALI

Govt must address vax side effects

Soon after British firm AstraZeneca admitted that its Covid-19 vaccine, known as Covishield in India, causes thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome in some cases, a plea was filed in the Supreme Court seeking a study of the side effects of the jab. It shows that the public has lost faith in the government. It is high time that the authorities concerned took steps to address the concerns of the vaccine recipients. The Centre used to boast about the massive coverage of the immunisation drive in India. But inaction on the part of the government is showing. A judicial intervention must not be required in the matter. The government should act on its own.

JAGDISH CHANDER, BY MAIL

Multipronged strategy a must to curb data poisoning



ATANU BISWAS
PROFESSOR, INDIAN STATISTICAL
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DATA is a powerful weapon. It is a treasure trove of information. While data has been a driving force for civilisation in the 21st century, there has been an ever-growing trend of data reliance. In fact, data is the lifeblood of a marvel of the contemporary world — artificial intelligence (AI). However, the training data of the AI models has become the Achilles' heel of this wonderful transformative technology. Tay, Microsoft's Twitter chatbot, is an early example of this. Tay's introduction on Twitter in 2016 was intended to aid in the development of her conversational abilities through human interactions. Tay was created to mimic a teenage girl but was removed from the platform within 24 hours for expressing racist, misogynistic and Nazi-loving ideas that she had picked up from other Twitter users. Tay is an early illustration of the potential dangers associated with training data issues. It is possible that a model's training data gets contaminated.

A covert saboteur with significant ramifications has surfaced in the recent past: data poisoning. Adversaries can introduce biases, errors or unique vulnerabilities into the training dataset of an AI tool by adding, removing or altering certain data points. These vulnerabilities get manifested when the compromised model makes predictions or choices. An AI tool's output may thus become erroneous, discriminating or unsuitable if its dataset has been changed or distorted in any manner. In the realm of AI innovation, data can play the role of a Trojan horse. Consider, for instance, that an AI model has been taught to identify suspicious emails or unusual behaviour on a corporate network. Successful data poisoning may make it possible for ransomware or phishing attempts to evade detection and get past spam and email filters. Similarly, accidents may arise from AI system errors in self-driving cars. Financial models distorted by biased data, medical algorithms misinterpreting distorted test results and facial recognition systems powered by biased datasets that greatly enhance the likelihood of falsely accusing members of a certain racial group of crimes are all at risk. These examples show how data poisoning can penetrate and skew the fundamentals of AI systems, leading to severe financial losses, reputational harm and moral ambiguities that undermine faith in technology.



RISK: In the realm of AI innovation, data can play the role of a Trojan horse. ISTOCK

Scholars are debating the nature of various types of data poisoning and potential countermeasures. According to Google research from July last year on various types of threats to AI systems, an attacker only needs to control 0.01 per cent of a dataset to poison a model. And because the datasets being used usually contain millions of samples, it is difficult to identify this kind of attack. Data poisoning as a defensive strategy is also garnering a lot of attention. Users are downloading Nightshade and Glaze, two freeware software programmes from the University of Chicago. While Glaze is a defensive tool that individual artists can use to defend themselves against style-mimicking attacks, Nightshade is an offensive tool that can be used to disrupt AI models that scrape

Successful data poisoning may make it possible for ransomware or phishing attempts to evade detection and get past spam and email filters.

their images as part of training data without permission. The University of Chicago's press department refers to Nightshade as the 'poison pill' because it modifies an image's pixels in a way that causes mayhem for computer vision while leaving the image intact for human eyes. By contaminating the practice data and by making some of the outputs of image-generating AI models useless — dogs turning into cats, cars turning into houses, and so on — Nightshade could harm subsequent generations of these models, including DALL-E, Midjourney and Stable Diffusion. However, though creative, this method is unlikely to be effective for very long. It won't be long until large language models are trained to recognise these defence

strategies. How about passing regulations? Content creators and AI model developers may engage in a protracted tug-of-war. The Artificial Intelligence Act was adopted by the European Parliament on March 13 this year. It is regarded as the first all-inclusive horizontal legal framework for AI in history. It attempts to establish standards for data quality, accountability, transparency and human monitoring across the EU. "Cyberattacks against AI systems can leverage AI-specific assets, such as training datasets (eg data poisoning)," it acknowledges. According to Article 15 of the Act, "The technical solutions to address AI-specific vulnerabilities shall include, where appropriate, measures to prevent, detect, respond to, resolve and control for attacks trying to manipulate the training dataset (data poisoning), or pre-trained components used in training (model poisoning), inputs designed to cause the AI model to make a mistake (adversarial examples or model evasion), confidentiality attacks or model flaws." But, with the ever-evolving technological advancement, understandably, it's never easy to find an exhaustive list of such 'measures'. Generally speaking, data-poisoning attacks fall into four major categories. An 'availability attack' taints the model as a whole. A 'targeted attack' solely impacts a portion. For the majority of samples, the model will still function adequately, making it difficult to identify targeted attacks. A 'subpopulation attack' doesn't impact the entire model. Rather, it affects subsets with comparable characteristics. Furthermore, a 'backdoor attack' occurs when an adversary inserts a backdoor into training samples, such as a collection of pixels in an image's corner. This causes the model to classify items incorrectly. Data anomalies can be found by using statistical models, and shifts in accuracy can be detected by using programmes like Microsoft Azure Monitor and Amazon SageMaker. Data poisoning must be prevented via a multifaceted strategy. Ensuring the integrity of the training dataset is simpler for systems that don't require large amounts of data. The analysis grows more challenging, if not impossible, as datasets get larger. A machine learning (ML) model can be made to perceive itself as a target and fight against attacks like model poisoning by teaching it to detect efforts to alter its training data. Overall, data poisoning highlights how AI security paradigms are changing. The attack vectors for AI and ML systems are becoming more varied, and combating these modern dangers calls for a combination of traditional cybersecurity expertise, an understanding of ML principles and ongoing innovation. It is, after all, a cat-and-mouse game, just like any security system.

Trouble-torn Manipur needs an out-of-the-box solution



JAIDEEP SAINIA
SECURITY & TERRORISM ANALYST

THE security situation in Manipur has become even worse a year after violence broke out. The only way out is for the principal stakeholders to come together and thrash out a way for immediate course correction. One must put into perspective three recent incidents in the state. Miscreants triggered an IED blast on a bridge on National Highway-2 in Kangpokpi district on April 24. The bridge connects Imphal with Nagaland's Dimapur. The highway is a major lifeline of the state and its severance has led to the stranding of over 100 trucks carrying essential supplies for the people of Manipur. Two CRPF personnel were killed in an attack at Naranseina in Bishnupur district on April 27. A camp of the India Reserve Battalion (IRB) was located about 200 metres from the area where the CRPF men were billeted. The IRB personnel were primarily from the Meitei

community. The CRPF personnel were reportedly in the process of vacating the camp and only a platoon had been left behind. It is possible that the attackers wanted to target the Meitei members of the IRB; as the attack was carried out in the dead of night, they mistook the CRPF camp for the IRB one. However, the target could actually have been the CRPF — a throwback to the United Liberation Front of Asom's (ULFA) modus operandi during the mid-1990s, when the insurgent group went on a spree of killing Hindi-speaking people of Assam. The ULFA was keen to attract the attention of New Delhi, which it was successful in doing. A slew of MPs from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar had descended on Assam to provide succour to their Hindi-speaking brethren. There was (and continues to be) a section of people among the Assamese population who are against outsiders setting up shop in that state. With regard to the Naranseina incident, lawlessness in Manipur has gone so deep that there are elements which are beginning to feel that New Delhi needs to be taught a lesson. It is important to note that Central paramilitary forces such as the CRPF and the BSF had not been



THE WAY FORWARD: An Assam-like Unified Command Structure must be formed for Manipur, Nagaland and south Arunachal Pradesh. REUTERS

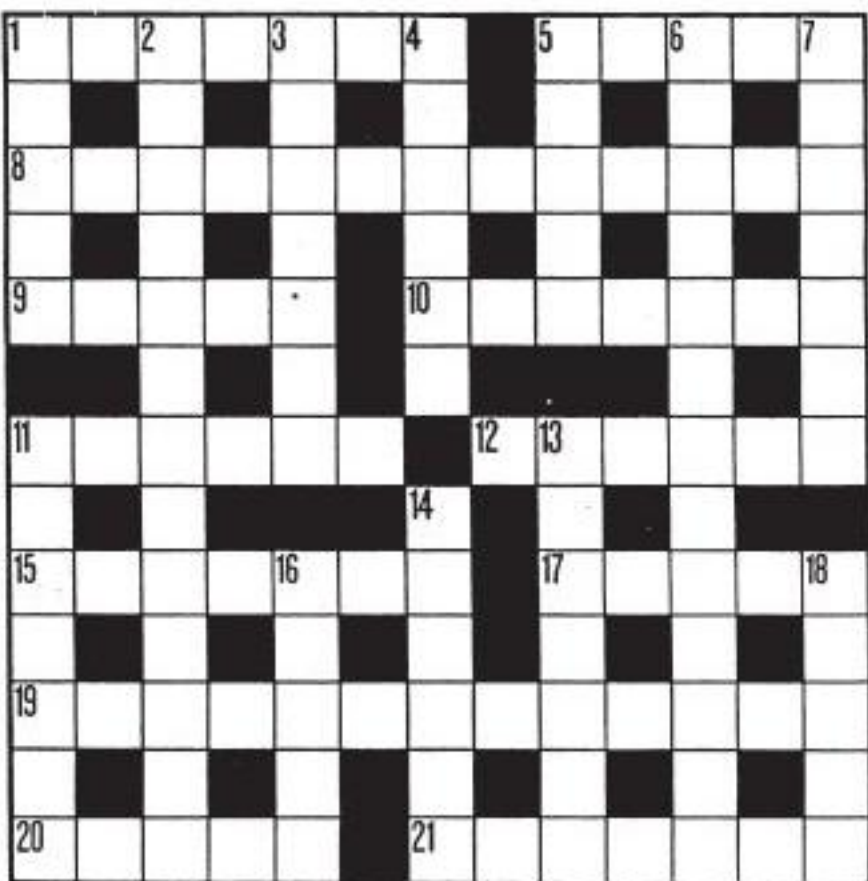
targeted in the past. The finger of suspicion for the IED explosion on the bridge and the attack on the CRPF camp was mainly pointed at Kuki militants. However, it could well have been anybody. In a state that has been careening out of control since May 3, 2023, almost every group has become militarised. The third incident pertains to anarchy continuing under political patronage. Meira Paibis waylaid an Army Casspir vehicle after the column had apprehended cadres of the Arambai

The only step that the Centre needs to take at this critical juncture is to empower its forces. Manipur would be irrevocably lost if the imbroglio is allowed to continue.

Tenggol with illegal weapons. Hundreds of Meira Paibis surrounded the Casspir and were berating the soldiers. If the Army men had lost their composure, there could have been a bloodbath. Assam has ushered in an era of peace as a result of well-honed teamwork. It is recommended that a Unified Command Structure (UCS) — as was the case in Assam — must be immediately formed for Manipur, Nagaland and south Arunachal Pradesh. It should be under the overall

command of the General Officer Commanding of the Rangapahar-based 3 Corps. There must be one clear voice (naturally after due consultations) that should focus on strategy and ways and means for peace and normalcy to return. Manipur is a house divided. The state police force is almost dysfunctional. It has abdicated its responsibility to a radical militia organisation which brooks no opposition. A DSP was picked up by the Arambai Tenggol, forcing some cops to lay down their arms. At this juncture, the police need leadership. Unfortunately, it is not going to emerge from within the force. The power over it has to be vested in a firm leader with strong organisational backing, such as the General Officer Commanding of 3 Corps. The Assam Rifles is doing a tremendous job, but it is being accused unjustly of being partisan. Residents of the Manipur valley had asked for its removal. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act has been removed from many areas in Manipur, and one has witnessed the acts that non-state actors are perpetrating in the state. The Assam Rifles is already under the operational command of 3 Corps. But making it a part of the UCS would not only permit it to calibrate its operational moves with the Army, the Manipur Police and the Central paramilitary forces, but allow it greater manoeuvrability by way of robust intelligence gathering in consonance with other end users in the UCS. It is due to the overlapping issues that Manipur, Nagaland and south Arunachal are being clubbed. For instance, one cannot divorce the problem of valley-based insurgent groups' entry into Manipur with the help of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) from the manner in which the game will play out after the carving out of separate administrative zones. Similarly, the subterfuges in Tirap, Changlang and Longding districts of south Arunachal have to be seen in light of the support that the NSCN(IM) is receiving from the Eastern Naga National Government. The Indian state and its Army are powerful entities. They can face any challenge. The only step that New Delhi needs to take at this critical juncture is to empower its forces. The Army is capable of achieving the impossible. Manipur would be irrevocably lost if the present imbroglio is allowed to continue.

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS
- 1 Impassive in adversity (7)
 - 5 Insipid (5)
 - 8 Seek to provoke a fight (5,4,4)
 - 9 Alternative of two (5)
 - 10 A business (7)
 - 11 Israeli unit of currency (6)
 - 12 For each one (6)
 - 15 Visual (7)
 - 17 Brusque (5)
 - 19 Exact likeness (8,5)
 - 20 Unbending (5)
 - 21 Short-handled axe (7)

- DOWN
- 1 Apply oneself vigorously (3,2)
 - 2 With minimum resources (2,1,10)
 - 3 Unit of energy given by food (7)
 - 4 Insanity (6)
 - 5 Bowl (5)
 - 6 Impeccable (5,8)
 - 7 Easing of strained relations (7)
 - 11 Stand surety for (7)
 - 13 Person devoted to native country (7)
 - 14 Settle conclusively (6)
 - 16 Gave as example (5)
 - 18 Wield (5)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 As yet, 8 Stand out, 9 Handy, 10 Sit tight, 11 Stark, 12 New, 16 Grieve, 17 Amazon, 18 Try, 23 Giddy, 24 Ruthless, 25 Kapok, 26 Sycamore, 27 Heady.
Down: 2 Star turn, 3 Endorsed, 4 Strife, 5 Unite, 6 Forge, 7 State, 12 Net, 13 Way, 14 Badinage, 15 Hold good, 19 Resort, 20 Brush, 21 Stack, 22 Blimp.

SU DO KU

6	2		3		1		7
			9			1	4
	4			8	5		3
9		5	7		8		1
		1		6		8	
8			2		9	3	5
7		2				4	
5			4		3		2

V.EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

1	6	3	7	8	4	9	5	2
2	9	7	6	1	5	4	8	3
8	4	5	9	3	2	7	1	6
7	2	6	4	5	1	8	3	9
4	1	8	2	9	3	6	7	5
5	3	9	8	6	7	2	4	1
3	7	4	1	2	6	5	9	8
9	5	2	3	7	8	1	6	4
6	8	1	5	4	9	3	2	7

CALENDAR

MAY 7TH 2024, TUESDAY	
■ Shaka Samvat	1946
■ Vaishakh Shaka	17
■ Vaishakh Purnimite	25
■ Hijari	1445
■ Krishna Paksha Tithi 14, up to 11.41 am	
■ Ayushman Yoga up to 8.59 pm	
■ Ashwin Nakshatra up to 3.32 pm	
■ Moon in Aries sign	
■ Gandmoola up to 3.32 pm	

FORECAST

SUNSET:	TUESDAY	19:04 HRS
SUNRISE:	WEDNESDAY	05:34 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	39	24
New Delhi	42	25
Amritsar	40	23
Bathinda	41	22
Jalandhar	39	21
Ludhiana	40	20
Bhiwani	40	27
Hisar	42	24
Sirsa	42	27
Dharamsala	32	20
Manali	24	08
Shimla	25	16
Srinagar	25	10
Jammu	37	21
Kargil	18	07
Leh	18	02
Dehradun	38	20
Mussoorie	26	16

TEMPERATURE IN °C