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-PAPER WITH PASSION-

In a quandary

The BJP's rivals hunt in packs but are still unable to throw up a strong challenge in terms of candidates

the political landscape of Uttar Pradesh, which sends the highest number of MPs to the Lok Sabha, is undergoing an intense upheaval in the run-up to the general elections, which has taken the centre stage as usual. What is depressing, though comical at the same time, is the frenetic activity in the Samajwadi Party and the inertia in the Congress regarding the naming of their poll nominees — but both to the same end. While the SP substitutes its candidates by the hour, the Congress is fighting shy of naming its fighters even in traditional strongholds such as Amethi and Rae Bareli. The Akhilesh Yadav-led SP is making headlines with its unconventional strategy of repeatedly changing candidates on the seats allotted to it by the Opposition INDIA bloc, reflecting perhaps a calculated move to optimise electoral prospects. On the one hand, this swift candidate shuffle underscores the party's agility and adaptability in responding to local dynamics; on the other, it is being seen as a sign of indecision. Prime Minister



Modi was quick to take a jibe at the SP over its lastminute distribution of tickets. Akhilesh must be knowing the importance of Uttar Pradesh in deciding the fate of the nation as well as his own party. In 2019, the NDA had emerged as the leading coalition with a notable vote share of 51.19 per cent. The BJP garnered 49.98 per cent of the votes on its own and won 62 seats. With NDA ally Apna Dal (Sonelal)'s two seats, the tally was an impressive 64 seats. Mayawati's BSP won 10 seats and the SP, with 17.96 per cent vote share, won five, with one seat going to the Congress. This time round, the pressure is on the BJP to maintain its last performance. The SP now has a tie-up

with Congress, but the BSP — going it alone — is likely to dent their vote share. The SP's candidate selection process reflects a nuanced understanding of caste equations, regional sentiments and grassroots dynamics, factors that often play a decisive role in UP's electoral outcome. However, amidst the SP's dynamic manoeuvres, the Congress finds itself struggling to even find suitable candidates. Modi's recent remarks on the Congress' electoral predicament highlight the party's organisational deficiencies and its failure to mount a formidable challenge in the key State. The absence of a coherent strategy, coupled with internal dissent and leadership crises, has exacerbated the grand old party's electoral woes. The contrasting trajectories of the SP and the Congress underscore the complexity of Uttar Pradesh's electoral dynamics and the divergent strategies adopted by the Opposition parties to counter the BJP's dominance. While the SP emphasises agility, coalition-building and grassroots mobilisation, the Congress grapples with internal strife, organisational weaknesses and a lack of viable candidates. The battle for UP's 80 seats is not a contest merely between these political groups but a reflection of the larger socio-political fault lines, caste dynamics and economic aspirations that define the State's complex fabric.



Participants during a half marathon themed on 'Run for cleaner tomorrow', in Guwahati

High on rhetoric, low on originality



The Indian National Congress unveils a manifesto that appears grandiose yet lacks innovative solutions, drawing criticism for its reactive stance towards current policies

ndian National Congress has come out with a manifesto that looks pompous and well-intentioned but less original and more reactive to the present policies. The party is cautious even as it says it may replace NEP but is subdued on proposed novel path to deal with the sliding economy, eloquently silent on PSUs and unnecessary 4-year-BA degree modelled on the highly expensive US model. It notes overall dissatisfaction

over NEP but limits it to "will revisit and amend the New Education Policy (NEP) after consulting with the state governments". Does it mean the 4-year degree course to continue? Its scrapping could have highlighted deep concerns to instil confidence in the youth, each of who would spend at least Rs 3 lakh a year extra and be delayed for job market. Overall, from unheard of four-year nursery — to new fouryear-degree — a child loses four years during education. Congress could have highlighted the unnecessary fourth year at the degree level to cost two crore aspirants' additional expenditure of Rs 6 lakh crore a year?

It avoids a word on PSUs. The Nav Sankalp Economic Policy resets the button with "3-W"s – work, wealth and welfare for reviewing GST — hope of most small traders, promote manufacturing and make jobs the cornerstone, rejecting jobless growth. A new welfare orientation since 1991. Its definition of work is the same as in the present — selfemployment and starting busi-

It highlights that RBI finds 60 percent of central projects stalled causing a cost escalation of Rs 5 lakh crore. It could have said these would be scrapped. On labour laws too the party is evasive on undoing the amendments denying them the rights.

On corruption, it says, "will probe demonetisation, Rafale deal, Pegasus spyware, the Electoral Bonds scheme and bring to law those who made illeains through these measures . Rahul Gandhi at launch said electoral bonds showed that political funding to the BJP was through "extortion and putting improvement in employment

Indian National Congress



pressure" on the corporates. Welcome move. It has also promised reversal of Agnipath army recruitment. In most such opposition promises, it was observed that once in government, the issues are shelved and some may even say these were "jumlas" as manifestos have turned out. The 1971 Congress manifesto is remembered to the day for its classic "Garibi Hatao" slogan. The slogan five "Nyaya", may be a good idea but are not inspiring. It calls for five pillars of justice — Justice for Youth, Justice for Women, Justice for Farmers, Justice for Workers, and Justice for Shareholders. What is so great about it, if it has to counter mumkin hai! convenor Chidambaram has been criticising government performances in his newspaper columns and even challenged the new statistics. It does not reflect in his document. It even does not question the figures of 3-trillion economy which has a high repayment of Rs 10 lakh crore and reduces Rs 47 lakh crore 2024-25 bud-

being questioned by World Bank. The communication could have been sharper. It could have highlighted the weaker consumer sentiments than five years back as RBI's Consumer Confidence Survey denotes. In 2024, fewer people report

get to Rs 37 lakh crore. The 7

percent growth figures are

THE 1971

CONGRESS

MANIFESTO IS REMEMBERED TO THE DAY FOR ITS **CLASSIC** 'GARIBI HATAO' SLOGAN. THE SLOGAN 'FIVE NYAYA' MAY BE A GOOD IDEA BUT IS NOT INSPIRING

of income situation. The middle class is promised stable income-tax. It does not promise that it would be at the level of 22 percent corporate

To combat unemployment, Congress has guaranteed a one-year apprenticeship with a private or a public sector company to every diploma holder or college graduate below the age of 25 years. The wages of workers under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act will also be increased to Rs 400 per day — the minimum national wages it announces. It seems to have forgotten that apprenticeship scheme was introduced by Indira Gandhi in 1970s. It was a cropper as the private sector never liked it and PSUs were lukewarm. All metros in the country except Kolkata are running in losses.

Manifesto could have harped on it and suggested pocket and eco-friendly solutions. Castebased census could help it politically to an extent but that cannot be road map for creating jobs. It has got into the trap of caste politics.

It has spoken of high petrol prices, questioned "cess" raj but is silent on atrociously high petrol road cess toll of Rs 32.9 per litre introduced promising to abolish toll gates. The country needs freedom from extor-tionist toll collections of over Rs 10 lakh crore through cess and toll gates causing high

car/tractor junking and high education fees. These cause enormous wealth loss to farmers and average families. With a bit of empathy it could have touched millions of hearts. It has done well to promise that job applications would not have any fee. The call for opening more Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya Vidyalayas are reassuring. The move to introduce free education up to class ten is appropriate. Would it be so also in private public schools? It has a model in UP. In 1960s, the

inflation. Similarly, it is silent

on scrapping illicit law for

Congress government introduced the system of paying teachers' salaries even for private schools ushering in required changes in the education scenario. That brings the fundamental difference. It has decided to review the Telecommunications Act, 2023 and remove the provisions that restrict freedom of speech and expression that violate the right to privacy. It ignores the more draconian Bharat Samhita or other amendments to the Indian Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code. The powers to misuse ED, CBI and other bodies emanate from it. Still the promise to have a fearless society may raise hopes. The nation aspires

(The author is a senior journalist; views are personal)

that with these new moves the

political discourse would turn

Harnessing the power of IT for nation building



India's journey towards becoming an IT-empowered nation is a testament to the transformative potential of IT in inclusive growth

n the contemporary land-scape of the Indian econ-Lomy, the infusion of disruptive technologies has ignited a digital revolution, propelling the nation into a global IT powerhouse. India is currently witnessing an unprecedented ubiquity of technology, with entrepreneurs leveraging cutting-edge technologies like AI, blockchain, Internet of Things (IoT), machine learning, and data analytics to tackle multifaceted challenges. Today, India possesses all the necessary ingredients to become a modern IT-empowered nation: a wealth of educated workforce, technological expertise, supportive government policies, and a collaborative digital ecosystem are driving the nation forward. The recent G20 Summit showcased India's prowess in emerging technologies and digital transformation. India successfully demonstrated that its IT sector is a force multiplier and a bulwark of innovation, continuing to empower cutting-edge digital solutions. According to the RBI survey, the revenue from Indian IT service exports

rose to USD 185 billion dur-



ing FY2022-23. This monumental contribution by India's IT industry on the world stage underscores the sector's pivotal role in weaving the

nation's economic fabric. With the proliferation of lowcost data and increased system transparency, India's revolutionary digital initiatives like BHIM-UPI and e-RUPI have gained international recognition as pioneering steps towards digital transformation. The rise of digital payment systems and the push towards a cashless economy have improved accessibility to financial services, enhanced commercial inclusion in tier-2 and tier-3 cities. Together with conducive government initiatives like the JAM trinity (Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, and Mobile), India has catalyzed the rise of a dynamic startup ecosystem, propelling the nation to the

forefront of global technolog-

approach aligns with the government's vision of creating a holistic environment conducive to growth, exemplified by initiatives such as Make in Índia, Digital India, and Skill India to support schemes for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).

Currently, India boasts the world's third-largest IT startup ecosystem, a testament to the nation's prowess in leveraging technology for innovation and economic advancement. As India looks ahead to 2024 and beyond, several trends and milestones indicate a bright future for the country's digital economy. India's digital economy is set to account for over 20 per cent of its GDP by 2026, showcasing the sector's robust growth. From 4.5 per cent in 2014 to 11% today, the digital economy's contribution is on a steep upward trajectory.

The focus is shifting from established players to opensource systems and disruptive startups, broadening the scope of digitization. Digital public infrastructure, security, and digital skilling are becoming pivotal areas of focus. The demographic divical innovation. This strategic idend of a young, educated

workforce, combined with a deep pool of tech-savvy talent, has created a fertile ground for innovation and collabora-

The ecosystem's vibrancy is further accentuated by the government's supportive policies, encouraging indigenous entrepreneurship and estab-lishing a level playing field for startups. Today, India's tech startups are not merely addressing age-old systemic challenges; they are also sowing the seeds for a brighter and more sustainable India. With the world looking to leverage the power of AI, India has emerged as a trailblazer in harnessing the latent potential of AI.

With a robust foundation laid by government initiatives, a dynamic private sector, and an adaptive population, India is poised to emerge as a global digital powerhouse. The year 2024 promises to be a turning point, with a focus on inclusivity and innovation reaffirming India's status as a leader in the global digital

(The writer is Director General, Software Technology Parks of India; views are personal)

CORRUPTION IN HIGH PLACES

Madam — Apropos the news article "Modi knocks hard on Mamata's door in Bengal" published on April 5, this is my response. If India has indeed seen the horror of Sandeshkhali revolving around atrocities upon women folk; surely it must be asked whether the country had acted "blind" revolving around spine-chilling gangrapes/murder/naked parade of women folks in Uttar Pradesh Gujarat Kathua or Manipur to cite a few! Persons pointing accusing fingers towards one and only TMC dispensation of West Bengal must also deliver their verdict upon "exemplary" pro-women environment in saffron states around the country also! After all among the 25 Opposition leaders, who have chosen to cross over to the BJP at various points in time, as many as 23 have managed to earn a reprieve with cases against them either closed or put in the "cold storage"! It proves that BJP is nothing but a "saffron-coloured washing machine" which can turn even the "blackest" leader to absolutely "pristine white"! So naturally, the BJP acts as the "social detergent" helping public life get rid of all stains of corruption! So let the sleeping dogs lie as far as the Vyapam scam (Madhya Pradesh), Ventilator scam (Gujarat), Electoral bond or public Fund opened during the onset of the pandem-

Kajal Chatterjee | Kolkata

CONGRESS PRESENTS ITS MANIFESTO

ic are concerned!

Madam — Apropos the editorial "At Crossroads" published on April 6, this is my response. Switching sides during elections is a common feature in Indian politics and it is not surprising to see so many deserting Congress ships in the last few days. But what is worrying is when one of vour former CM, sitting MP leaves you, then it sends a signal that Congress leadership and Gandhis are not able to manage and hold their leaders into their fold. We have seen how tall leaders like Himanta Biswa Sarma, and Jyotiraditya Scindia left

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR **Cinema rediscovers Savarkar**

propos the news article "Cinema Rediscovers Savarkar" published on April 5, this is my response. Veer Savarkar, a revered figure in India's struggle for independence, epitomised unwavering dedication and commitment to the nation's cause. His visionary leadership and courageous activism were instrumental in shaping the course of India's fight for freedom. A prolific writer, poet, and revolutionary thinker, Savarkar's literary works, notably "The First War of Indian Independence,"

Gandhis are unable to digest the fact that they are no longer the glue around which party revolved once upon a time, they have lost that Midas touch.

As far as the election manifesto is concerned, leaders and grassroots workers need to be there to share the promise with voters right at the booth level, but with a flurry of desertions in the grand old party, it will not be a surprise if most of the voters would not even have a clue of what Congress has promised in its manifesto. With these desertions, the gulf between the grassroots level and the top leadership of Gandhis has further increased.

Bal Govind | Noida

REALITIES IN NCERT TEXTBOOKS

Madam — The recent update exercise undertaken by the NCERT to revise references in textbooks has sparked discussions about the portrayal of historical events and political narratives in educational materials. NCERT clarified that these Congress and are now well-settled in BJP. updates are not a syllabus revision but

stirred a sense of nationalism among countless Indians. Despite enduring years of incarceration and facing formidable challenges, Savarkar remained resolute in his quest for liberty for his beloved motherland. Savarkar's contributions to the freedom movement were profound and far-reaching.

for the better.

Randeep Hooda's recent directorial debut, Swatantra Veer Savarkar, delves into the life of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a pivotal figure in India's fight for independence. Hooda's portrayal of Savarkar is lauded for its historical accuracy and his remarkable physical transformation. The film sheds light on Savarkar's ideology and incarceration in the Kaala Paani jail, sparking meaningful discussions about his legacy — a must-watch for those intrigued by this significant period in Indian history.

Amarjeet Kumar | Hazaribagh

rather an effort to reflect contemporary realities and correct factual errors in textbooks. One notable change involves the references to the demolition of the disputed structure at Ayodhya. NCERT adjusted the language to align with the latest developments in politics, highlighting the importance of presenting accurate and updated information to students.

NCERT emphasized the need to acknowledge the complexity of such events, ensuring that all communities affected are represented accurately. Overall, efforts to update educational textbooks reflect a commitment to providing students with accurate, relevant, and inclusive learning materials. As education continues to evolve, it is essential to adapt educational materials to reflect the changing socio-political landscape and promote a deeper understanding of history, politics, and society. Shruti Saggar | Ludhiana

> Send your feedback to: letterstopioneér@gmail.com

NEW DELHI | MONDAY, 8 APRIL 2024

The last mile

Climate issues can complicate monetary policy

he outcome of the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) first Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting of the financial year did not surprise anyone. Nevertheless, the tone of the RBI governor's statement, the monetary policy resolution, and the post-policy media interaction by RBI officials suggested that the MPC was determined to achieve the legally mandated target of 4 per cent inflation rate on a durable basis, which must be welcomed. As a result, the MPC left the policy repo rate unchanged at 6.5 per cent for the seventh consecutive time. Given that the MPC expects the Indian economy to grow 7 per cent this financial year, marking the fourth consecutive year of at least 7 per cent growth, it provides significant policy space to the central bank to focus on inflation and allow the disinflation process to be completed.

While both growth and inflation outcomes have become relatively favourable, and the significance of attaining the 4 per cent inflation target on a durable basis is well understood by market participants, it is worth assessing when the target is likely to be achieved. The MPC expects the inflation rate to average 4.5 per cent this financial year, but that will still be above target. It has been argued, including in the MPC, that the real policy rate of 2 per cent can undermine growth outcomes. But the other view in the committee is that the real policy rate should be seen with the inflation rate, which is projected to remain above target in 2024-25. So, for how long will the MPC maintain the policy repo rate at 6.5 per cent? The Monetary Policy Report (MPR), also released last week, had some interesting indications. It noted that assuming a normal monsoon and no policy shocks, the structural model indicates that the inflation rate will average 4.1 per cent in 2025-26. Projections by professional forecasters polled by the RBI suggest that the policy rate would be reduced by 50 basis points in the current financial year.

Given the comfort on the growth side, it is likely that the MPC will want to be fully convinced that inflation will remain close to the target on a durable basis before contemplating monetary easing. Last-mile disinflation may be testing for both the RBI and financial markets. Notably, the last-mile difficulty in attaining the inflation target is primarily emanating from volatility in food prices. In February, for instance, the food inflation rate was 7.8 per cent, and it contributed about 70 per cent to the headline rate. The core inflation rate, on the other hand, at 3.4 per cent, marked the lowest level in the current series. Food price volatility is always hard to predict, particularly in the context of increasing extreme weather events. In fact, handling food price volatility could become more difficult in the future.

Research featured in the MPR notes that both inflation and its volatility could increase over time. Frequent weather shocks might demand tighter monetary policy. Further, inflation expectations may get de-anchored, undermining the credibility of the central bank. Predictably, this would warrant a higher policy interest rate to contain inflation, which will affect output. How the climate issue and food economy are managed, therefore, can have a significant impact on monetary policy in the medium to long run. For now, the focus will be on rabi output and monsoon prospects.

Poll promises

Congress could have offered a more progressive agenda

lection manifestos of political parties tend to offer a vision of governance that is often impractical. The Congress's manifesto for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections fits this template. The manifesto suggests that the time for a radical change in the style of governance has come and that the elections present an opportunity for such change. But it is hard to spot the signs of radical thinking in this document. Rather than outlining a programme based on a coherent ideology, its proposals are either reactive, reversing initiatives by the ruling National Democratic Alliance, or problematic in terms of implementation. Termed "Nyay Patra" (Document of Justice), it offers five pledges for justice — for the youth, women, farmers, and workers, and for equity — and 25 guarantees, a riff on the Bharativa Janata Party's (BJP's) slogan of "Modi ki Guarantee".

To be sure, there are some good ideas in the manifesto. Chief among them is the proposal to enact a law on bail that would incorporate the principle that "bail is the rule, jail is the exception" in all criminal laws. This is an interesting promise. since it was the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance that made the bail terms under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act so stringent as to be non-workable for the accused. Some of its suggestions for tax and economic reform are also welcome. Among them are the proposals to do away with the "angel tax" for unlisted companies that gain funding from angel investors and a law to limit Union cess and surcharges, which have increased substantially in recent years, to 5 per cent of gross tax revenues. More attractive for industry would be the promise of a "GST 2.0", a single moderate rate with a few exceptions, doing away with the confusion multiplicity that has been the bane of goods and services tax. The party has also wisely desisted from mentioning a return to the old pension scheme. It has underlined its woke credentials by pledging to introduce a law recognising civil unions between couples belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community.

Against these progressive ideas must be weighed a raft of fiscally and socially imprudent proposals. Among the former are guarantees of a legal minimum support price (MSP), the issue that is the cause of the current fractured relations between farmers and the Union government, and is widely considered by economists to impose a heavy annual burden on the exchequer. A cash dole of ₹1 lakh a year to women of poor families is similarly ill-advised. Though the party reckoned that the proposal achieved some traction in the recent Assembly polls, an open-ended payout such as this could impose a heavy pressure on government finances. It is also a pity that the party, having promised a new electoral dynamic, is falling back on old divisive caste-based politics. Promising a caste census and pledging to raise the 50 per cent cap on reservations for Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes is likely to roil existing social resentments at a time when formal job creation remains one of India's key economic challenges as will the pledge to implement a 50 per cent women's quota in central government jobs. In as much as voters take an election manifesto seriously, the Congress appears to have missed a chance to offer something more than a BJP-minus agenda.

ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY



Exciting world of data science

AJIT BALAKRISHNAN

...and say bye to the humanities-science divide

ust the other day a prominent state university's professors invited me to join their discussion on how to modernise their curriculum. When

my turn to speak came, I said the most important first step in this modernisation effort was to start a course on digital humanities, initially at bachelor's level and allow students from arts or science backgrounds from schools to join. As I was speaking, I noticed the quizzical look on the faces of practically all of the dozen or so professors in the room. Then, one of them stood up and said: "I can guarantee you that not one of the students from an arts/humanities background will join the course: The word 'digital' will frighten them." Once he said that,

the rest of the professors in the room said: "We agree!" "Do you know that the National Education Policy 2020 has a feature that data science will be taught in all schools in India from this year?" I asked. That question of mine was met with bewildered looks. I then pointed out this was a key suggestion of the 11member expert group, in which I was, which created the NEP 2020, and I was thrilled when all the other members immediately accepted it and made it a key recommendation. Even the implementation is under way now and I could see an initial textbook already ready (you can see it by searching for "DATA SCIENCE

GRADE VIII Teacher Handbook" on the internet).

The CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) school folks have also shown their enthusiasm for data science by making the following public

announcement: "The objective of this curriculum is to lay the foundation for Data Science, understanding how data is collected, analysed and how it can be used in solving problems and making decisions. It will also cover ethical issues with data including data governance and builds foundation for AI-based applications of data science. Therefore, (the) CBSE is introducing 'Data Science' as a skill module of 12 hours' duration in class VIII and as a skill subject in classes IX-XII."

In other words in three years, we will be able to see a stream of college aspirants in India, excited by data science and eager to know more. The exact wording for this goal in the NEP 2020 document is this: "multi-disciplinarity and a holistic education across the sciences, social sciences, arts, humanities, and sports for a multidisciplinary world in order to ensure the unity and integrity of all knowledge.'

One of the professors with me that day then raised his hand and asked: "Do you mean to say that all our children must learn computer programming and become computer programmers?'

No, I said, it's something like this: If you have to teach your young daughter how to ride a bicycle, you

don't start by lecturing her about the physics of motion, then move on to lecture her about how rubber is made into tyres and metal is converted into bicycle parts. You seat her on a bicycle, hold the cycle in place, get her to learn how to balance, tell her how to get her feet to the ground and balance herself, and so on. Over time she will experiment and figure things out by herself.

Similarly, if a child must learn data science, he does not necessarily need to learn computer programming. He can learn to look at, for example, the batting score from 10 matches for three cricketers and calculate which of them scored the most runs, the average score of each cricketer, and the standard deviation of the score of each cricketer... so we can judge who is most consistent in batting. With such real-life examples, which all children are aware of, the key features of data science can be taught.

As I was saying all this, I could see a sense of relaxation among the professors, but also a sense of the challenges that lie ahead. If executed correctly, citizens at all levels may jump into the upcoming digital world. For example, as I stroll through my neighbourhood in Bombay, I can see small roadside fruit vendors and fish sellers display a QR code near their coir baskets and ready to accept digital payments. The Aadhaar now is carried by 1.2 billion Indians. Nearly 300 million Indians now do online shopping. And they all seem to have made this transition to the digital world enthusiastically and happily.

However, I couldn't but make some cautionary remarks: The spread of any new technological wave can also create a societal upheaval. I still remember the 100-odd prosperous cotton textile mills in the Parel area of Bombay when I started working there after graduating from IIM Calcutta in 1971 and how that world collapsed into strikes and violence with the arrival of far cheaper synthetic fibres like nylon and mixes like terry-cotton and the collapse of all 100-plus mills over the next eight-ten years.

The digital era, which data science is part of, will have its threatening aspects with a few elements like privacy, fake news, and digital fraud already starting to create anxiety. To rationally deal with these threats and benefit from the opportunities, it is critically important that data science knowledge spread across all humans (lawyers, doctors, accountants...) and not just nerds, so that we as humans make the right choices.

The writer (ajitb@rediffmail.com) is an internet entrepreneur

That tricky issue of job creation

n the last week of March, Chief Economic Advisor V Anantha Nageswaran said the government could not solve all social and economic problems. such as unemployment. He wondered what the government could do on the employment front "short of hiring more itself". "In the normal world, it is the commercial sector that needs to do the hiring," he claimed. India's gross domestic product (GDP) grew 8 per cent in the December quarter — while the unemployment rate among graduates is over 40 per cent. But jobless growth is not a new syndrome. It has plagued every regime for the past 25 years, including the two Congress-led regimes as well. I remember former chief economic advisor Shankar Acharya pointed out in his columns in this very space even the strong growth in the mid-2000s did not lead to a commensurate rise in employment. The United

Progressive Alliance was led by a dream team of ministers and bureaucrats. The finest brains in the government and outside had formulated numerous schemes, including job guarantee schemes. But to no avail Unemployment remained high. The Modi government has brought in an equally large number of policies and yet joblessness has remained sticky.

When Narendra Modi was campaigning for power in 2013-14, in his election rallies, he often asked the vouth: "Aapko naukri chahive ki nahi *chahiye.*" In one of the earliest election speeches in Agra in November 2013,

he had promised 10 million jobs a year to the youth if voted to power. When Zee TV asked him about this promise in January 2018, Mr Modi instead pointed out street food vendors selling pakodas should also be included in employment statistics; and so, unemployment in the country is much lower. His creative logic drew a few laughs, giving birth to "pakodanomics" while his supporters passionately argued that it reflected his right emphasis on entrepreneurship.

Why is it so hard for government action to create jobs — so much so that even high economic growth under different regimes is not good enough to change the basic picture of unemployment? One, as Mr

Nageswaran correctly pointed out, "it is the commercial sector (which) needs to do the hiring". But then, shouldn't he ask himself — or ask the commercial sector — why is it not creating more jobs? Businesses don't hire for the sake of it. They hire when they think they need more hands. Unfortunately, for netas, babus, and job-seekers, they also weigh the advantages of hiring humans versus acquiring machines. Many aspects of manufacturing and construction are now mechanised, which is preferable for businesses. Humans need skilling, careful management, and replacing when they quit. It is challenging but necessary for labour-intensive sectors like textiles, and the services sector. Indeed, there is a shortage of skilled employees in all services like travel, transport, hospitality, health care, software development, maintenance and repair functions, design, finance, and mar-

keting. Anyone with skills in these areas is not jobless.

So can't government policies nudge businessmen to hire more? Of course, they can. That leads us to the second reason for jobless growth: While Mr Modi promised jobs before the 2014 election, for six years he did nothing to help create them. Between 2014 and 2020, his initiatives were mainly social: Swachh Bharat, Jan Dhan, Digital India, Beti Bachao Beti Padao, Suraksha Bima, Jeevan Jvoti Bima, Atal Pension, Soil Health Card, etc. The "economic" schemes of this period like Make in India, Skills India,

MUDRA loans, and Startup India were a lot of sloganeering, with very little impact on job creation. The coup de grace was the Tughlaki scheme demonetisation, which destroyed small businesses and jobs. No wonder India's GDP growth dipped to 5 per cent before Covid-19 (even after making a 1.5-2 per cent upward adjustment by changing the method of GDP calculation). The economy sank into a morass. The government in panic drastically cut corporate tax rates on September 20, 2019, to make businesses invest and hire. This gamble failed. Businesses refused to step up, given poor demand growth.

However, in the post-Covid period, GDP growth

picked up and revenues to the exchequer boomed. allowing the government to launch a set of ambitious policies. This time it was all hands-on development projects and simultaneous initiatives in multiple directions — something never seen before. The government announced Production-linked Incentives during Covid-19 itself. Then came the defence production and exports policy and railway modernisation. In the 2023-24 Budget, the government allocated an unprecedented ₹10 trillion for infrastructure. Implementation is visible on the ground in the railways, defence production, road transport, urban infrastructure such as metro projects (some of it wasteful), water, power, etc. It has even made destructive changes to the Indian Forest Act to remove hindrances in the path of "development". I am certain this will lead to some job growth. Does the government need to do more?

If the "commercial sector needs to do the hiring", the real and frictional cost of doing business needs to be slashed and Chinese dumping at below cost has to stop. Writing on the issue of job creation seven years ago. I had said that successive governments had contributed to making the lives of business persons tougher. The Prime Minister's Office can have a team whose only job is to listen to business persons' mann ki baat about the reasons for the high cost and delays involved in doing business. Common and recurring problems could be clubbed and eliminated; this would require working with the states (at least the Bharativa Janata Party-ruled ones). The team could also monitor a few labour-intensive projects to understand the bottlenecks they face, right up to the implementation stage, and recommend systemic changes. Maybe we will see this happening in Mr Modi's third term as Prime Minister. After all, he has come a long way from the wasteful publicity of social schemes to the central funding of development projects. Freeing job creators from a corrupt and destructive web of policies and practices from the Centre down to the talukas is the third and final step required. Jobs would follow, to the extent possible. Beyond that, we wade into the much more difficult terrain of education and skilling.

The writer is editor of www.moneylife.in and a trustee of the Moneylife Foundation: @Moneylifers

The quickest path to WWIII



SCOTT ANDERSON

very few months when Donald J

 ✓ Trump was president, Iran

 made a show of its ballistic missiles and set off a small panic in Washington. The tests went like this: A missile flew up from one part of Iran, travelled through the country's airspace and, ideally, blew up harmlessly in another part of Iran, hundreds of miles away.

The former White House political adviser John Kelly remembers that, on one such occasion. Trump said he wanted to shoot the weapon down. "Well, sir, that's an act of war," Kelly recalls telling him. "You really need to go over to Congress and get at least an authorization."

"They'll never go along with it," Trump apparently replied. "Well, I know," Kelly said. "But

that's our system."

This anecdote and many other alarming scenes appear in Jim Sciutto's The Return of Great Powers, an absorbing account of 21st-century brinkmanship. Sciutto has interviewed several of Trump's former advisers, including Kelly, who explains that he managed to talk his old boss out of some of his worst ideas only by suggesting they would hurt his standing in public opinion.

That such political figures would speak so candidly can be partly credited to Sciutto's standing as CNN's chief national security analyst and his earlier stint with the State Department under Barack Obama. He's the kind of well-connected reporter who, as we learn in this book, gets a call at 3 am, in February 2022, from an unnamed Congress member to warn him that a war in Ukraine is imminent.

The Return of Great Powers argues that we are living through a Cold War redux. The battle is being waged on every imaginable front, from undersea communication cables to satellites in outer space and the growing frontiers

of artificial intelligence. One great difference between this cold war and the last. Sciutto contends. is that the guardrails erected to prevent superpower rivalries from sliding into catastrophe have been steadily dismantled. Over the past quartercentury, both the United States and Russia have abandoned one arms control treaty after another and lines of communication between all three powers have been purposely reduced. As one unnamed

State Department official tells Sciutto, when a mysterious Chinese balloon drifted across North America last fall, the Chinese military "refused to pick up the phone."

THE RETURN GREAT POWERS Add to this precarity those

proxy mischiefmakers - North Korea, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, to name a few - that might see advantage in provoking a superpower showdown. It's enough to send those with a front-row view into the old basement bomb shelter.

Having identified the peril, Sciutto's panelists also agree on the solutions:

Unwavering commitment to the defence of Ukraine; greater integration of NATO forces; much closer cooperation between the European and Asian blocs of democratic nations. Ironically, many of these recommendations are now being enacted thanks to the Russian invasion and Chinese encroachments - longneutral Sweden and Finland have ioined NATO, and East Asian nations

IRRATIONAL CHOICE

DEBASHIS BASU

defence pacts. But that doesn't mean there isn't

cause for concern. Trump, once again

his party's presumptive presidential

nominee, has fought against US

military aid to Ukraine and urged

Russia "to do whatever the hell" it

meet their financial obligations.

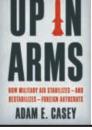
wants to NATO members who fail to

The ideal way forward for a great

have strengthened their mutual

THE RETURN OF GREAT POWERS: Russia. China, and the Next World War **Author:** Jim Sciutto **Publisher:** Dutton **Pages:** 353

Price: \$30



UP IN ARMS: How Military Aid Stabilizes – and Destabilizes – **Foreign Autocrats** Author: Adam E Casey Publisher: Basic

Pages: 323 **Price:** \$32

statistics that are initially eye-catching. According to his examination of hundreds of Cold War authoritarian regimes, Soviet-supported rulers survived, on average, twice as long as Americansupported ones. Most startling, in any given year, US-backed dictators were

power like the United States has always

mistakes and successes of the Cold War

Casey, a former academic who is

now a national security analyst for a

curiously unspecified branch of the

US government, sets out to reexamine the accepted wisdom that US

been fraught, and looking back at the

is often instructive, but not always,

Adam E Casey's *Up in Arms* is well

written and clearly the product of

prodigious research; it also shows

how Cold War comparisons can

than their Soviet counterparts.

sometimes go too far.

regimes served to maintain and prolong those dictatorships during the latter half of the 20th century. In rebutting this thesis, he sets out some

totalitarian

about seven times more likely to fall

Casey gamely suggests his findings might have currency as the planet enters another period of superpower jockeying, but it is hard to see precisely

how this military-proxy dynamic of

yore replicates itself. China has never

shown much interest in extending its

Asia, and Russian military tutelage is

martial reach to countries beyond

surely trading at a deep discount after its dismal Ukrainian outing. As for the United States, while displaying little reservation about cosying up to despots when convenient - witness some of the grotesqueries it has climbed into bed with for the so-called "war on terror" it's hard to imagine any eagerness to go back to the days of army-building in the wake of America's Iraq and

Afghanistan war hangovers. That being said, in 10 or 20 years, the hangovers could fade. Giving up on democracy is all the rage these days. The leaders of the great powers could start eveing Cold War-inspired playbooks like Casey's, with dire results for everyone caught in between.

The reviewer's most recent book is The Quiet Americans: Four CIA Spies at the Dawn of the Cold War - A Tragedy in Three Acts ©2024 The New York Times News Service

The Edit Page

Indian High Earners Of the World, Unite!

Eco effects of diaspora need a non-GDP index

The median annual household income in the US, according to the latest available census figures for 2022, was \$74,580. The figure was \$152,341 for households of people of Indian descent. The Indian diaspora in the US is that country's highest-paid ethnic group, which sends close to a quarter of the remittances India receives from around the world. The share of income ethnic Indians in the US send back to their folks in India is less than 15%. If this broad indicator is applied worldwide, the Indian diaspora, which remitted \$125 bn last year, would be producing economic output approaching the GDP of Switzerland, or about 0.8% of world output. However, Indians all over are not as well off as they are in the US. So, this rough estimation can, at best, be regarded as the outer limit of the diaspora's contribution to the world economy. A safer guess would be India's diaspora produces more than the economies of Pakistan and Bangladesh combined.



Pitted against India's 3.4% contribution to world GDP, though, the economic agency of its migrant and emigrant populations is considerably underreported. GDP by design captures the income of ethnic Indians in their host countries. Gross national

income (GNI), another indicator that accommodates economic activity of migrant workers, does not add to clarity on account of the longer-term work contracts of India's migrant labour. The 32 mn 'overseas Indians' retain strong cultural links with their country of origin that helps explain the stronger-than-usual transfer of wealth.

Official statistics like GDP do even less in explaining the behavioural effects of having Indians heading the likes of Google, Microsoft, and Britain. This feeds the supply of India's best talent in search of more productive economic opportunity. It also creates more space for the stay-at-home workforce. India will remain the biggest exporter of labour for a while, and the greater agency its migrants acquire abroad will add to the economy's heft. To begin with, India needs to measure the economic effects of its diaspora.

Shut Down 21st-C. Black Holes of India

India is spending a vast amount of money on building new infrastructure and upgrading existing ones. However, when it comes to maintaining existing infra, even the most basic ones, the government machinery often falters, sometimes with disastrous consequences. Last week, a 2-year-old boy died after he slipped into a 50-ft deep manhole in Gurgaon. Similar incidents of people falling into open manholes, drains and uncovered borewells happen at regular intervals across 21st-century India. Even as 'unfortunate anomalies', it is shameful.

Such fatalities and injuries due to such 'black holes of India' are not mere 'accidents' but result from poor governance, administrative negligence, irresponsibility on the part of local



officers and citizens' failure to engage with authorities on civic problems. Rescue operations in such 'accidents' are not easy, as they depend on many factors such as soil type, diameter and depth of the borewells/manholes. There is no standard rescue equipment.

Yet, there is a simple, necessary way to avoid such incidents - close manholes and borewells after work is done. Track down illegal and abandoned borewells and cover them up. National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) data suggests that a lack of warning signs and flimsy covering of borewells make for human traps. A Supreme Court ruling in 2009, revised in 2010, also gave basic guidelines: signboards, barbed wire fencing, steel plate covers fixed with bolts, and filling up borewells from bottom to ground levels. But as incidents show, these have remained on paper. To ensure compliance, officers must be responsible. Ordering a probe to find which officer was responsible after a mishap, as has been done after the latest manhole death, serves little purpose.



Informed risk with money is a radical gesture – and replicable elsewhere

A Short Philosophy of (Real) Money-Making

As we all know, creating wealth — real worth — requires risk-taking. While that seems to be obvious to most of you, what seems to be less known is that risk-taking is going against the grain, being counter-cultural, and, dare we say, engage in grown-up gender-neutral 'bad boy' behaviour. The very notion of buying when everyone's selling, and selling when everyone's buying should, by itself, tell you that to shake one's moneymaker, one needs to get in touch with one's 'Jhunjhunwala' side. Money-making, in one fundamental respect, has been immune to docile, obedient behaviour seen in most other aspects of social engagement in our culture—startingfrom the automatic (but complicated) respect towards elders, to a full-throated, sashtang pranaam reserved for our political figures whom, many of us, treat as divinity. But the good thing about objective activities like money-making is that they not only encourage counterintuitive business but actively encourage them.

So, while it's safe and secure to play it, well, safe and secure, the real movers and shakers engage in — what millennials have made old-timers call - disruption. But as canny oldtimers and new-timers know, disruption is as old as geological tectonic plates. Up the stakes and you up the rewards as long as you smartly keep that trapeze safety net below.

It's incredulous Tatas didn't anticipate Vistara's response, providing fodder for conspiracy theory

Isn't This Brand Fratricide?



Shivaji Dasgupta

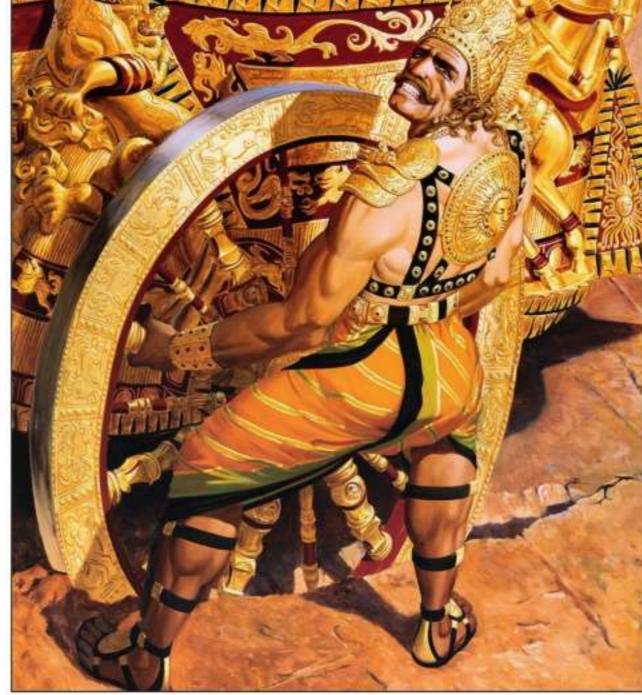
n so many ways, the Vistara pilot fiasco is too bad to be true. When guaranteed pay was cut to 40 flying hours from the erstwhile 70, a dramatic backlash — cancellations and delays - was surely predictable. Especially since pilot unions follow a global SOP, with self-declared sickness being the most popular mode of dharna.

From a curbside perspective, this episode smacks of brand fratricide. A rare, yet significant, practice orchestrated by boardrooms, usually in M&A scenarios. When the favoured sibling, by dint of reason or emotion, assumes the destructive liberties of James Bond, on or off the record.

An iconic Indian scenario is Thums Up, acquired by The Coca-Cola Company in the 1990s. Mysteriously, the hugely popular brand disappeared from retail shelves, seemingly part of the Atlanta global dominance strategy - only to make a thunderous comeback, when customers refused to part with their loyalties. Quite possibly, the supari contract was withdrawn as a frenetic afterthought. Thums Up today is a serious leader in the carbonated drinks sector, contributing generously to the cola master's coffers.

When UB Group, owners of Kingfisher beer, performed an encore in their acquisition spree, this time around coffins were well and truly sealed. Kalyani Black Label, for instance, the beer brand from eastern India, was systematically gobbled up by the UB juggernaut and practically disappeared. Similar fates were in store for London Pilsner and Sandpiper—their high potential trajectories nipped chillingly and effectively by Big Beer. As ever, the customer was the ultimate loser, with successful regional brand satraps overwhelmed by the mighty potentate.

There are sufficient reasons to suspect that Vistara's travails are sequential to the above episodes. Air India aspires to be a genuinely premium en-



its glory days. Vistara, on a smaller scale, built a culture of lovable luxury that aptly succeeded and exceeded the able, though profligate, indulgences of Jet and Kingfisher.

Comparisons between the two would be inevitable. Frankly, Big Brother Air India will take years to come close, however successful the rehab, to the sprightly presence of the sleek youngster, Vistara. So, what better, perhaps, than a series of blackout moments, sufficiently anecdotal on LinkedIn, to reset the equilibrium? Where the IndiGoloathing upper-end flyers are compelled to regard Air India as the full-service saviour, giving the carrier valuable time to establish its desired experience?

A high-voltage rebranding exercise is functionally unwill still be in incumbent li- profligate, indulgences of Jet and Kingfisher

haul will, naturally, take time to be optimally operational. Making stylish safety videos can earn aesthetic plaudits. But they have little connection to

pilot response, thereby providing ammunition for a conspiracy theory nud ge. As karmic justice, the empathy de-

derwhelming, when the vast Vistara built a culture of lovable luxury that majority of Air India's fleet aptly succeeded and exceeded the able, though

Vistara cutbacks will ensure that cutbacks are not the prevailing pattern, considering that Indian aviation will indefinitely be a two-carrier race. The recent Air India Express ads provide further impetus to this fratricidal hypothesis, as, quite suddenly, a patently LCC entity is flaunting a faux business class, more top-end seats for HNI flyers.

Modern customers revel in choice. And, thus, brands across categories are shifting goalposts from absolute loyalty to active consideration set occupation. In aviation, online aggregation culture of ticket acquisition means that folks seek best contextual value, whether luxury or mass.

Perhaps the Tatas did miss a trick by not navigating the airline business from a portfolio perspective, with Vistara being a key ally. As opposed to an overwhelming obsession for restoring the Maharaja's kingdom, driven by persuasive doses of emotion, instead of modern brand logic.

Securing the life of a brother today would have possibly led to a better-hedged tomorrow, quite like Coca-Cola and Thums Up. And unlike Kingfisher, which could have leveraged regional equities to build modern-day niches, like Black Label craft beer. Airlines, like French boutique airline La Compagnie, are experimenting with all business class formats, which could be one way to make the most of Vistara's own boutique equity.

Laughing merrily in the backdrop is the deeply industrious IndiGo, selling overpriced sandwiches with assembly-line doggedness. Their staggering market share and prolific connectivity are already modifying dietary patterns of domestic flyers, discarding subjective trappings of luxury for liberating flexibility. Air India's new-found values may remain relevant only for international travel, that too until the next disruption appears.

Whether diabolical or inadvertent, Vistara's reputation has been damaged significantly, and the suitably affronted affluents may not wish to return. It's a tragedy from a brand and customer perspective. More importantly, Air India's business resurrection could have been amply aided by Vistara, if only they flew hand in hand.

Karma à la Karna tity, seeking a sustainable flashback to very. And the in-flight experience over-

monetisable customer delight. It does seem incredulous that the Tatas, maestros at bloodless mergers and layoffs, would not have anticipated the

monstrated by the larger pilot community towards the

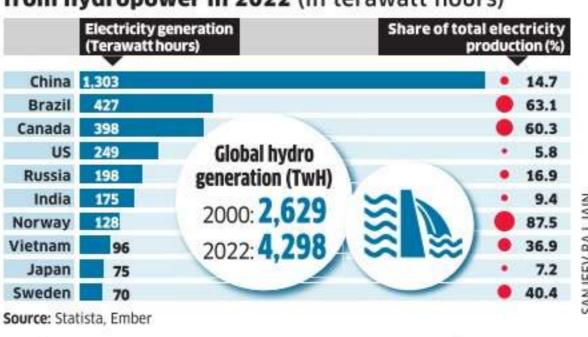
The writer is an autonomous brand consultant

ChatGPT SH**AI**RI OF THE DAY In the realm of political strife, Manifestoes provoke quite the knife. Each party's grand schemes, Make the others scream, But it's all just a comical rife!

Hydro Powers

China is the world's biggest hydro power producer, having generated an estimated 1,303 terawatt hours of hydropower in 2022, according to data published by Ember, a UK-based energy think tank. This is roughly 31% of global hydropower output that year. India was the sixth biggest generator, with hydro contributing 9.4% of the country's total electricity production...

Countries with the highest electricity generation from hydropower in 2022 (in terawatt hours)



Bell Curves

...Dush-karma marga is the service lane of Karma marga, one of the three margas to reach God!

Killing a Market, Softly



Sugata Ghosh

There are times when RBI is forced to talk Sitting on a high perch, it usually believes that not replying is also a reply. That changed briefly last week when journos quizzed Shaktikanta Das about an RBI communiqué that could bring down the curtain on India's thriving exchangetraded currency derivatives (ETCD) market where individuals and companies bet on how the rupee would move against the dollar, pound sterling or yen.

This market was born in 2008, a year after a miffed New Delhi sensed that a Dubai bourse had gently ignored RBI to launch rupee-dollar futures contracts. Prodded by advocates of financial libera lisation, two Indian exchanges were permitted to launch ETCDs. The rationale was, if India can't stop listing of rupeelinked ETCDs in Dubai (and later in Singapore), why not allow them here?

Over 15 years, the market deepened, drawing punters and proprietary traders, companies either hedging forex flows or speculating, and offshore funds arbitraging between Dubai, Singapore and India. The average daily turnover on the largest exchange surged to almost ₹30,000 cr in FY24, having touched ₹41,000 cr in FY23. That party may soon end with RBI spelling out a rule it claims always existed, but the market ignored at its peril.

What changed? Nothing whatsoever, say RBI officials. All that the central bank has done, they insist, is reiterate the original regulatory intent that ETCDs are only meant for hedging. So, all trades must have underliers—actual forex outflows (like dollar loan servicing or import payment) or inflows (like anticipated export earning). The market was rattled. No market anywhere survives with

only hedgers. Many ETCD traders are

plain speculators with no underlying exposure. But it's they who make the market liquid. Without them, the market won't have the depth for hedgers to hedge their risks. Pushing out speculators may wreck the ETCD market, which aims to bring in transparency and arm smaller companies, often fleeced by banks, to cut better deals.

As the market toppled and brokers panicked, RBI narrated a sequence of events since 2008, while maintaining that the 'regulatory framework' has remained consistent. But the prosaic message masked a regulatory frailty. The law that allowed ETCDs was

Foreign Exchange Management Act

(Fema), which gave RBI the power to frame regulations. The statute doesn't prohibit speculation in ETCDs, but the regulations, which RBI makes, can. And RBI has, from time to time, tweaked the language of the rules, opening doors for a different interpretation. While the original regulation said that such contracts are meant for hedging, in 2014, RBI allowed long or short positions up to \$10 mn per exchange 'without having to establish the existence of any underlying exposure'. The limit was raised to \$100 mn subsequently.

Back in 2008 — when forex reserves were half of today's—RBI allowed ETCD positions to 'hedge an exposure to foreign exchange risk or otherwise'. Here, 'or otherwise' was understandably interpreted to mean that besides hedgers, there was room for speculators. Turnovers rose post-2014 as speculators and arbitrageurs freely took positions up to SHUTDOWN \$100 mn.

The words 'or JUST AHEAD otherwise' are missing in the January 2024 circular that specifically directs exchanges to ensure that trades have valid underlying exposure. So, every trade must be a hedge, not a punt. It was always meant to be, avers RBI. In a laboured play of words to back its position, RBI's

January circular says while a trader need not 'establish the existence of underlying exposure', it 'should be in a position to establish the same'. In 2000, RBI had, indeed, said that underlying details must be shared if 'called upon to do so'. But that was long before ETCDs were launched and the \$100 mn limit was permitted.

What's driving RBI? Rising ETCD volumes were probably impacting the \$/₹rate as banks and speculators traded between the regular inter-bank overthe-counter (OTC) forex market and ETCD bourses to make money from price differences. Instances like the volatility in ETCD after the OTC trading platform faced outage on Nov 10 may have further raised regulatory hackles.

But these are challenges regulators must endure as markets open up. Nowhere in the world do ETCDs have mandatory underlying. A regulator has an armoury of tools. It could have reduced the \$100 mn limit, raised trading margins or intervened actively in the ETCD market. But it stuck to the notion that trading without an underlying exposure was a 'misuse of regulation'

tions to internationalise the rupee, can 'speculation' remain a bad word? Brokers, a tribe RBI abhors since the Harshad Mehta days, have no voice. Sebi, which regulates brokers, will not say a word on Fema. And, New Delhi, preoccupied with other things, would be fine if banning ETCD speculators

At a time when India harbours ambi-

A market takes years to develop, and may never regain liquidity once investors flee. RBI may be covering up after unwittingly unleashing a hurriedly

helps to keep the rupee stable.

drafted circular to consolidate ETCD and OTC market rules without sensing the outcome. Or, Mint Street may have simply chosen to kill a market to make its life easier. Either way, it was avoidable.

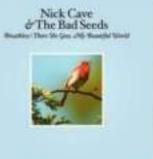
All the signs are there sugata.ghosh@timesgroup.com

MELODY FOR MONDAY

Breathless Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds

The very opening notes of

birdsong making way to flute in Nick Cave's haunting song, 'Breathless', envelopes you with the peacefulness of daybreak. Released as part of his 1997 album, The Boatman's Call, 'Breathless' stands out as a poignant exploration of love, loss and longing. The song unfolds with Cave's distinctive baritone voice, drawing listeners into a world of melancholic beauty. His poetic lyrics paint a



alove affair -with nature, with fellow sentient beingsmarked by both passion and

vivid pic-

ture of

vulnerability. And the redbreasted robin beats his wings/His throat it trembles when he sings/ For he is helpless before you.' Cave and his band, The Bad Seeds, lay out the intoxicating thrill of being consumed by love while also acknowledging its transitory nature. It is also a song celebrating pantheism—the belief that reality, the universe and nature are identical to divinity - without uttering anything beyond wonder and awe.

The singer's emotive delivery imbues the lyrics with a sense of urgency, as each word hangs on to the weight of the world. Listen to the song at the start of day, and nothing can hurt you.



Message of An Eclipse

VIVEK JAIN

Of the eight planets in our solar system, barring two, Mercury and Venus, all have their own moons. Mars has two, Phobos and Deimos, and Jupiter and Saturn, a massive 80-plus, of which Titan of Saturn and Ganymede of Jupiter are well-known.

With such an arrangement, there are bound to be plenty of times when a moon comes between the Sun and its parent planet. In case of the Earth and Moon, the distance, size and angles are such that the Moon just about perfectly covers the Sun leaving the outer zone, the Corona, visible during an eclipse, with a spectacular occurrence of the diamond ring, the Sun's light escaping between the mountains on the Moon.

Technically, what we call a lunar eclipse, too, is a solar eclipse for the Moon, as the Sun is eclipsed because of the advent of the Earth between the Moon and itself. Even the International Space Station has its own solar eclipse events. This time, in fact, it will have it three times during its three passes. The eclipse for us on the Earth is for a limited time.

Eclipses must be occurring on all planets with their respective moons. They may have different formats and frequencies, but their message is the same: numerous obstacles will eclipse our quest for the truth. However, the truth remains bright and shining behind all the impediments. We only need patience and unwavering faith for the obstacles to move away and illume the one and only reality.

Areas in Mexico, US and Canada will witness a solar eclipse today

Chat Room

RBI, Get Goingon **Governance Too**

Apropos the news report, 'Food Inflation on Mind, RBI Holds Interest Rates Steady' (Apr 6), a semblance of monetary policy stability across major central banks together with a short break in domestic pressures because of the election fever allowed RBI to play it cool at the April 2024 MPC meeting. The result is visible in the views on growth and inflation expressed in the monetary policy announcement on April 5. Still, analysts have read between the lines and speculation about a rate-cut season beginning October 2024 is going around. It is comforting to find that RBI's focus continues to be on governance and regulation aspects of the banking sector. The coming weeks will likely see RBI acting with vigour to make recalcitrant financial institutions in the cooperative and NBFC category that continue to play 'hide and seek' fall in line.

M G WARRIER Mumbai

The RBI has expectedly but justifiably kept the reporate unchanged for many quarters now, what with the inflation numbers still not within its tolerable limits. But, interestingly, growth continues to accelerate, various glo-



bal headwinds notwithstanding. This probably indicates the resilience of India's growth story. As in many Western

ecially the US, RBI should mainly focus on inflation control, while economic growth is the joint responsibility of GoI, for the supply side, with RBI already focusing on the demand side.

GK MURTHY Mumbai

Carrot-and-Stick Approach Best

Apropos 'Jailhouse Jesus' by Narayani Ganesh (Speaking Tree), and the Edit, 'Don't Make Bail A Coin Toss' (Apr 4), the fact remains that the number of crimes committed while on bail are highly disturbing. The practice introduced in New York of making released convicts compulsorily report to police stations periodically led to substantial reduction in repeat crimes. Combining these visits with mindsets evolved with Vipassna and Yog introduced by Prisons IG Kiran Bedi would help considerably in easing the risks involved in granting bail.

BUDDHA BAGAI

New Delhi Letters to the editor may be addressed to

editet@timesgroup.com



MONDAY, APRIL 8, 2024



GOOGLE'S AI VISION

Alphabet Inc.'s CEO Sundar Pichai

I think in AI, there are a lot of tools you can think about how do you let users—at scale give more input into these models and how do you reflect it to the extent where there are multiple viewpoints

Bumps on the road

New BoT terms for highway construction may throw pvt investors into risk-aversion mode

HEN IT COMES to rekindling the interest of private risk capital in greenfield infrastructure ventures, no amount of effort by the government seems to suffice. The latest set of tweaks to the concession terms for the long-moribund build-operate-transfer (BoT) highway projects allow the government to pitch in, with half of equity finance, and up to 40% of the entire project cost. That means balance sheet monies to be put in by the private investor could be as low as 15% of the project cost, given the typical 7:3 debt-equity ratio for long-gestation highway projects. Non-banking finance companies can now be lead lenders to such BoT projects, and private developers will be party to negotiations for any debt refinancing required during the cost recovery period. If these weren't enough for the private investors to shed their inhibition, the revised model concession agreement (MCA) also offers them the comfort of "compensation," for revenue shortfall from traffic undershooting projections. That leaves almost nothing for the investors to desire for, but the question is, could such BoT concessions be called "pureplay" public private partnerships any longer?

The modified MCA comes at a time when over half of the projects under implementation or being awarded by the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) fall under the hybrid annuity model (HAM) devised in 2016. The HAM model was an offshoot of the "twin balance sheet" problem that scared away private investors from large greenfield infrastructure projects. The government contributes 40% of the capital costs of HAM projects upfront, and the balance 60% is paid by it as annuities over the life of the project. The remaining projects being implemented are conventional EPC contracts that are funded entirely by the government. Under both these models, the ultimate liability lies with the taxpayer.

In January this year, the NHAI came up with a plan to award 53 hightraffic density corridors of 5,214 km length worth ₹2.1 trillion under the BoT model and bids for projects worth around ₹35,000 crore were invited. Response to these projects has been lukewarm. To be sure, of the projects awarded under Phase 1 of Bharatmala, BoT share is barely 1.5%. Apparently, the government felt impelled to redesign the model to the extent of undermining its basic trait, because it saw no signs of risk capital flowing into the sector. The government must guard against its infrastructure financing policies becoming ad hoc. There is a definite risk of the current set of policies unwittingly dampening the risk appetite among potential investors. The issue of over-dependence on HAM cannot be addressed by bringing in another version of it.

Private investments are robust in a host of infrastructure sectors like telecom, seaport services, airports, and renewable energy. The situation is not satisfactory in thermal power sector because large corporate groups and fund houses are constrained by ESG (environmental, social, and corporate governance) norms. In sectors like highways and railways, absence (lack of feasibility) of market-determined pricing of the services is a dampener. But a certain mandate could still be accorded to the private investors even in these sectors, by earmarking certain remunerative areas and short-gestation projects to them. Monetisation of brownfield assets is a way to harness private funds and risk-averse patient capital. The NHAI has made some headway on this front by raising ₹1 trillion so far (including over ₹40,000 crore in FY24), helping unlock Budget funds for priority projects.

Will AI create more fake news than it exposes?

THE BEST LARGE-language models can already write like humans, especially if prompted properly. Photos and images can be faked at low cost. Yet-to-be-released technology can create convincing voice simulations. There are signs that some academic papers contain traces of GPT-4. If even professors are faking it, then surely the dam has burst.

In other words: As the AI revolution spreads, so will the AI-enabled fakes. This is an inevitability, but it can be managed — so long as consumers and producers make significant adjustments in the way they use the internet.

The post-AI internet will have a lot of free, advertising-supported content full of AI fakes, designed to appeal to the lowest common denominator. The first question is whether anyone will even notice. After all, there are plenty of low-quality and unreliable outlets out there already, mostly not driven by AI.

Technology to detect AI fakery will evolve and improve, and there will be an arms race. So long as the detection works, the free, ad-supported internet will continue. Readers, listeners and viewers will be able to use their own AIs to find content they like — and a percentage of them may prefer the fakes. After all, the Weekly World News still has an audience.

Still, even assuming the fake detectors work, mainstream news sites will face additional competition. Alternative sites will spoof their content, adding twists sometimes partisan, sometimes sensational, sometimes sponsored by foreign governments. Some of the most effective competitors might be 98% legitimate,

> but a 2% fake rate along some critical dimensions, such as coverage of foreign wars or salacious personal scandals, could be significant.

> Of course institutions will evolve to limit the scope of these problems. The best and most authentic material will probably end up in highly curated sites, available only on a subscription basis. Perhaps those sites will occasionally make mistakes and post fake material, but their authen-

> These sites will work hard to create the kinds of content that AI cannot easily spoof. For instance, columnists with well-known personalities will become more important, relative to more generic but still first-rate writers. Even if an AI can copy the style of Paul Krugman, for example, it cannot

be Paul Krugman, and many of Krugman's readers care what he thinks about an issue. They don't want the AI cloned version, no matter how high its quality. So media outlets will do more to promote the personal brands of their authors.

COWEN

Bloomberg

ticity will be their major selling point.

These sites will also make their content smarter and more complex. That will make it harder for free, AI-driven sites to produce derivative versions. To give a simple example, Sora, a service from OpenAI, can make a good twominute video, but making much longer videos may not be cost-effective. So some media outlets might start publishing longer videos.

Or how about podcasts with lots of rapid back-and-forth on complex issues? Again, it's hard to imagine current versions of AIs engaging in that kind of debate. There will be an arms race here too, with subscription-funded media always trying to stay ahead of the AIs.

The bad news is that journalists will have to work harder. The good news is that subscribers will end up smarter and better-informed. This part of the arms race will point in the direction of ever-higher quality. Media outlets can also be expected to move further into the business of live events. Holograms aside, it is hard to imagine the AIs doing anything comparable, not for a long while at least.

Over time, as the AIs continue to improve, hybrid subscription sites might emerge, with both human- and AI-produced content. They will delineate who (or what?) was producing which content, rather than trying to obscure it. Articles authored by

humans might even have an attached AI bot that could offer further detail. People are right to worry about AI fakes. I share their concern. But I also have faith that the media will be innovative enough to adjust to these new realities.

ASIAN PEERS

INDIA AND SOUTH KOREA ARE STRENGTHENING TIES AS GEOPOLITICAL INSECURITY GROWS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Friends in need

Resolution, New Delhi

As China's economy

slows down, South

Korean companies hope

to move manufacturing

to other countries. India

could be one of them.

and secure investments

in manufacturing

AMSUNG, HYUNDAI, AND LG — all South Korean companies—are household names in India. They came to mind when external affairs minister S Jaishankar visited Seoul from March 5-7 and met Cho Tae-yul, minister of foreign affairs of the Republic of Korea. The visit followed President Yoon Suk Yeol's trip to Delhi to attend the G20 Summit in New Delhi last September.

The visits signified the economic and strategic importance of South Korea in India's "Act East" policy. Additionally, China's economic-cumstrategic threats in the Indo-Pacific, which has become the primary arena for US-China strategic competition, are major reasons why Seoul and Delhi wish to strengthen their ties to deal with emerging security challenges.

India is keen to expand into new areas, such as critical and emerging technologies, semiconductors, green hydrogen, human resource mobility, nuclear cooperation, and supply chain resilience with South Korea, Asia's second economic tiger, after Japan.

South Korea has lessons to offer India and other developing countries. Its GDP per capita — \$32,422.6 — is higher than India's \$2,410.9 and China's \$12,720.2. India's economic and trade ties with

South Korea follow the pattern of its weak economic relationships with other Indo-Pacific countries. Economic ties between India and South Korea are far from achieving their full potential. While trade between the two countries has increased over the last decade, a mere 2.9 % of South Korea's exports come to India, while 24% go to China. 1.3 % imports of South Korea's imports come from India, and 1.7 % of Indian exports go to South Korea.

South Korea and India have troubled political neighbourhoods because of their complex histories. Both are challenged strategically by a rising China.

Indian diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific must contend with the presence of major powers around the Korean peninsula—China, Japan, Russia, and the US which have created Seoul's greatest security challenges. South Korea confronts the geostrategic realities of being close to China—both physically and economically — with the help of China's

integral role in managing relations with

ANITA INDER SINGH

Founding professor, Centre for Peace and Conflict

Such considerations explain why South Korea is building partnerships in Asia by strengthening economic ties with India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations under its New Southern Policy (NSP) of 2017.

North Korea.

The policy stresses political and strategic cooperation,

nomic cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges. South Korea has striven to expand trade in the Indo-Pacific. It has also prioritised development cooperation, and has increased funding for projects in Southeast Asian countries to counter China's widespread economic

Additionally, as China's economy slows down, South Korean companies hope to move manufacturing to other countries. India could be one of them, and secure investments in manufacturing. But it faces stiff competition from Vietnam, whose position on global supply chains is second only to that of China.

South Korea is not a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, but in March 2020 it attended the Quad Plus meetings, which included non-Quad countries, to discuss responses to the Covid-19 pandemic.

South Korea's approach to the Quad and the concept of a free and open Indo-

> Quad partners while avoiding endorsement of any regional strategies that could spark a direct confrontation with China.

Pacific is to work with

Like non-aligned India, South Korea is wary of China's hostile reaction to the Quad. The group's continued focus on issues such as pandemic manage-

ment, infrastructure development, climate change, and emerging technologies dovetail with South Korea's NSP priorities.

Simultaneously, as US-China frictions intensify, South Korea is worried about becoming entangled in their competition. This has been obvious since 2017, when China mounted a campaign of economic coercion in retaliation for Seoul's decision to allow the deployment of a US missile defence system in South Korea. China thus weaponised economic ties to shape its strategic decisions. There are lessons for India to learn from

Beijing's handling of its Pacific neighbours, even richer ones like South Korea and Japan.

Seoul's NSP is highly complementary to American interests in the Indo-Pacific. Since 2021, the US and South Korea have stressed shared goals to expand regional coordination on cybersecurity, public health, law enforcement and promoting a green (pandemic) recovery.

In 2023, South Korea and the US began annual military drills to bolster their readiness against North Korean nuclear threats, after the latter raised animosities with a series of missile tests. The threat of conflict with the North remains a harsh reality for South Korea.

That is a major reason why South Korea has developed a capability for arms production. Its ambitious goal is to become the world's fourth-largest weapons exporter by 2027. It has ramped up arms exports to become a world supplier. India has bought the K9 howitzer. Since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Poland has bought South Korean howitzers, tanks, jets, and multiple rocket launchers, at a time of "rapid changes in the security situation".

Like Japan, South Korea offers lessons to India for making progress through education. India's ambition to develop prestigious projects, such as chip manufacturing, will only be achieved if it imparts high levels of education to all citizens. Since 2011, South Korea has fostered the strategic and global talents of its citizens by incorporating STEAM, which aims to connect the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields, with arts, in all elementary and middle schools.

Economics and security are intertwined. India can learn much about good economics and education from South Korea's experiences with the aim of promoting the well-being of its citizens and countering China in Asia.

Essentials for an effective AI mould for India

India's ambition to

become a digital

economy leader

necessitates a robust

foundation in Al

technologies. It's crucial

to not just celebrate the

milestones but also lav

down the tracks



SP KOCHHAR

Director-general, COAI (Cellular Operators Association of

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, OR AI, is dominating discussions today in both tech and non-tech forums alike. The customer-facing application, generative AI (GenAI), has especially become a buzzword, drawing attention and leading to policy discussions and regulatory actions across the world. While these are progressive developments and definitely required to propel India's aspirations for leadership in yet another technology vertical, there are other integral parts to this AI ecosystem which seem to be missing in conversations but need to be focused upon.

While GenAI seems to be the area of focus for all today, its efficacy is contingent upon the entirety of the ecosystem that facilitates its operations. The crux of GenAI lies in its ability to parse through data, organised in specific templates within data bins, to generate meaningful outputs. The collection of data based on criteria and sorting them into specific bins is what I mean by a 'templated' approach in this regard. Without such a structured input process, these data repositories risk becoming mere data dumps, significantly diminishing the quality of AI-generated responses. This underscores the critical role of embedded AI systems in preprocessing data to ensure its utility.

Understanding an AI system's workings elucidates the importance of templated data management. Data, in its raw form, is akin to unmined gold — valuable

but not immediately useful. The various sectors/sources produce large data sets, which essentially is 'raw data'. The embedded AI systems take the requirements from the GenAI system at one end and sift through raw data to make templatised trend-based data sets, which are then used as inputs for GenAI to produce the required results. This is akin to producing intelligible information or 'knowledge' by embedded AI systems. Thereafter, the

GenAI system absorbs this data, analysing it to read the trends and inferring from these trends to produce results, or what can be termed as 'wisdom', which cater to the requirements of the users.

The template is a critical part of this process, and needs to be formulated by the government to ensure uniformity of the data

being collected. It would also help provide a semblance of sanity and sanitation checks on the diverse data being collected from across multiple sectors and from multiple sources. Unless a specified template is implemented for the purpose, owing to the diversity of sources, the data collected may be fragmented or cluttered, which would constrain the production of

fruitful outcomes from the eventual GenAI application used. It is equally important to understand

The 'knowledge' of embedded artificial

intelligence and GenAI's 'wisdom' need to work

efficiently together to produce fruitful results

that the analysis and subsequent outcomes produced by the GenAI depend fundamentally on the nature of the data present in the system. Relying on data sets tailored to the nuances of the Indian environment is crucial for AI systems to generate accurate and relevant outcomes. The diversity of India's geography, languages,

consumer behaviour and industrial landscape demands a localised approach to data compilation. This necessitates governmental oversight to ensure the representation of India's unique attributes in AI anonymised data sets, a cornerstone in leveraging AI technology for national advancement by making these data

sets available for experiment and utilisation without impinging on privacy and data security.

For example, consider the scenario of implementing a national digital education initiative designed to cater to the diverse needs of India's student population, aiming to address various educational requirements across regions, accounting for local languages, varying

initiative to be effective, it is crucial to gather and organise detailed information about these variables and feed them into an embedded AI system. The system then analyses the data, identifies patterns, and passes them on to GenAI, thus allowing the latter to tailor educational content and delivery methods to meet the specific needs of different student groups. If the system were to rely solely on global education models/data, it might not fully capture the unique educational landscapes of India's regions, potentially leading to less effective or irrelevant content. Localised data ensures the AI system can generate more accurate and impactful solutions, showcasing the importance of tailored AI applications in national development projects.

curricula and access to resources. For the

India's ambition to become a digital economy leader necessitates a robust foundation in AI technologies. As we race forward on the digital highway, it's crucial to not just celebrate the milestones but also lay down the tracks — by focusing on the underlying AI ecosystem's components. Ensuring the comprehensive development of AI technologies, backed by localised, structured data sets, is paramount for India's journey towards technological pre-eminence. This strategic focus will not only fortify our position in the global tech arena but also ensure the sustainable and inclusive growth of our nation in the digital age.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

On labour reforms

The much-awaited four codes of labour reform are all set to be implemented by as early as after the national election. With the rollout of the four codes, the Indian economy is likely to see further uptick in economic development by creating a salubrious working atmosphere, fostering skill development, enhancing safety and security of workforce, among others. The

incumbent government indeed accomplished a superb job by unifying and harmonising a plethora of central labour laws and placing them under the four codes on wages, social security, occupational safety, health and working conditions, and industrial relations. Nevertheless, quick notification of these codes passed by the parliament between August 2019 and September 2020 will go a long way in realising the desired

objectives of the labour reform. —Ashok Kumar Sahoo, Guwahati

Status quo on rates

Apropos of 'Playing it safe', it is not just India but other nations too which are waiting for America's lead in cutting interest rates. Until the Fed does it, it is very difficult to see the same happening in India. The US is the leading driver of world economy, whether we like it or not. Meanwhile the curbs on

New Delhi

strengthen the confidence in the rupee. The government is trying to push for rupee trade. When measures are taken to protect the rupee, nobody is likely to place much confidence in it. The government needs to decide for itself on the route it wants for the rupee and act accordingly. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

dollar outflows will do nothing to

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{ OUR TAKE }

Manifesto that banks on State

Congress's welfare promises are a departure from the consensus on reforms, fiscal prudence

ndia is perhaps the only country in the Global South that has had no serious economic crisis. The Congress, as the party which has ruled India for the longest period, deserves some credit for this. Its ability to first pursue State-led industrialisation and then unleash economic reforms (albeit, when under the gun), with Jawaharlal Nehru rejecting Gandhiji's gram swaraj vision in the former case, and PV Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh manoeuvring out of the Nehruvian socialism dogma in the later years, highlight decisions taken despite differences of opinion within the leadership.

The Congress's challenges today are very different from what they were when it managed these historic recalibrations. It has suffered humiliating losses in the 2014 and 2019 elections and has seen a massive erosion of the political power it used to wield. The agent of this weakening of the Congress has been the BJP, which under Narendra Modi, has perfected a political cocktail of nationalism, welfare, development and Hindutva. Can the Congress stage a comeback in 2024? What's the best way to achieve this?

The manifesto of the Congress, which was released last week, suggests that it is making yet another recalibration to revive its political fortunes. This seems to include a very large increase in the allocation of fiscal resources towards welfare. While the relationship between welfare and the Congress is not new in this country, what makes the 2024 manifesto unique in a way is that it seems to have given a complete go-by to concerns of fiscal sustainability while making these promises. In doing so, the Congress, clearly, seems to be decoupling itself from the bipartisan consensus it has helped evolve on matters such as fiscal prudence and reforms at large in the post-1991 period.

Will this decoupling help the Congress party or political discourse in the country? True, they throw light on the fact that the Indian economy is mired in deep-rooted and widespread inequalities. But India's pre-1991 experience shows that the State was not very successful in managing economic aspirations and growth either. An even more important question is whether such promises will have credibility. The person who drafted the manifesto has been one of the most outspoken advocates of the post-reform consensus the Congress is now asking to be discarded. This makes it very likely that the party is promising these things in a half-hearted manner rather than as a reflection of an organic debate on economic reforms.

Neither will help the Congress in improving things

for itself.

A textbook case of politics writing history

eriodic curriculum updates are necessary, including in the humanities, but there has to be epistemological and scientific certitude backing them, especially with regard to the methods of arriving at the insertions or deletions. The controversy that the recent revision of school textbooks by the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) has dredged up indicates that the latest updates may not fully pass this test.

For instance, the revisions remove references to the Aryan Migration Theory (AMT) from history textbooks, asserting that the analysis of ancient DNA recovered from excavation sites establishes that there was continuity between the Harappan people and the Vedic era communities, in line with the claim of Hindu nationalists. The other side argues that the findings resist any such interpretation, especially when it comes to the absence of the Central Asian "steppe" gene in many samples — the so-called Aryan gene that is almost ubiquitous in parts of South Asia today.

This is not surprising since history is a contested terrain and its uses for politics would mean there will always be attempts to manipulate its writing. However, we need to fireproof textbooks from power politics. In the Harappan story, where science has been enriching and updating our understanding of early Indians, migrations into India, and the shaping up of a complex and varied population that speaks of multiple genetic sources, it is best to make available the multiple narratives to students rather than impose any politically driven claim on them.

It would preserve scientific temper in education if polemics were kept out of school textbooks. While, of course, keeping the distinction between science, mythology, beliefs and opinions.

STRAIGHTFORWARD Shashi Shekhar



Season of appearances and political deceptions

The gravest issue with Indian politics is that it operates in a murky realm of half-truths

un Tzu, a general, war strategist, and philosopher of ancient China, has said: "Appearances are everything in politics, and deceptions are built on it." Politics in India, one of the oldest democracies in the world, as it heads for elections, offers a live demonstration of the general's words of wisdom in action.

Look at the goings on in the courtrooms and politics of New Delhi. Enforcement Directorate (ED) personnel are working hard to prove the alleged liquor scam in court. They detained Delhi chief minister (CM) Arvind Kejriwal, deputy CM Manish Sisodia, Rajya Sabha member Sanjay Singh, and many others in connection with the case. Of these, Singh has been granted bail. His lawyer argued before court that the ED had imprisoned his client needlessly. He said the directorate had been examining the case for two years and was yet to find any "money trail". He also pointed out that Dinesh Arora, a witness in the case, had not mentioned Singh in the first nine statements he gave and referred to him only in his 10th testimony. The court noted the point and requested a response from the ED's lawyer. But instead of responding, the ED decided not to dispute the bail plea.

Singh, now out of prison, has alleged that the ED began its effort to frame Kejriwal with action against YSR Congress Party Lok Sabha Member of Parliament (MP) Magunta Sreenivasulu Reddy - an accused in the alleged Delhi liquor scam case on September 16, 2022. "He was pressured into giving a false statement against Kejriwal, but when he refused, his son Raghav was arrested. After continuous questioning, Raghav changed his statement against Kejriwal and became part of a larger conspiracy. A big conspiracy has taken place to put the Delhi CM behind bars," Singh said.

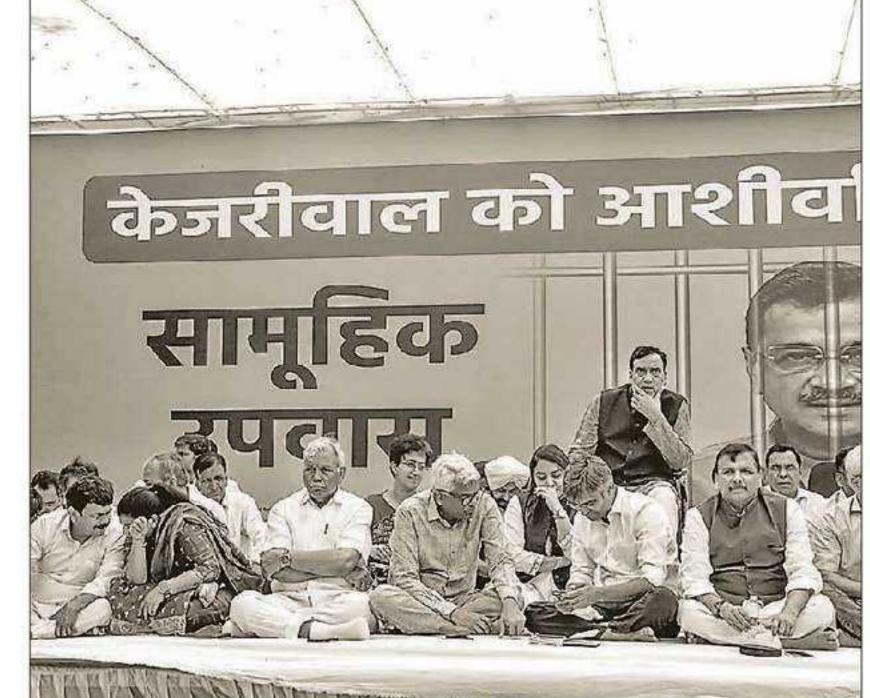
It is clear that the Aam Aadmi Party intends to reap electoral dividends from Kejriwal's detention. Fresh posters are already out depicting him behind bars. The Bharatiya Janata Party, not to be left behind, is saying it is inappropriate to celebrate the bail so much because the investigation is still on and the case is still pending in the courts. It is clear that

the parties are trying to influence public opinion through these arguments. How can a typical voter, preoccupied with his day-to-day challenges, make a choice on such complex issues? How much longer can our democracy sustain itself relying on these limiting constraints?

This is not the first time that such incidents have occurred in Indian politics. Remember the Bofors case, which caused Rajiv Gandhi to step down from power. The four prime ministers who came to power after him had been his opponents. The first was Vishwanath Pratap Singh, who stated at a public rally in Patna that the names of the Bofors deal middlemen were in the pocket of his sherwani. Though he rose to power on this issue, he was unable to do anything. It is natural to wonder whether the claims levelled against those accused today will be proven.

The gravest issue with Indian politics is that it operates in a murky realm of half-truths.

Kejriwal himself rose to power by opposing established leaders, political parties, industrialists, journalists, and thinkers. He spoke of an alternative politics, but when his party was unable to form a government on its own the first time it got majority seats, he sought the support of the



AAP leaders at a day-long fast held to protest against the arrest of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal in the alleged excise policy case AMIT SHARMA (ANI)

same Congress that he had opposed. He is fighting this general election, too, with the Congress, which is still led by the same Nehru-Gandhi family that he once said should be put behind bars. In his initial days, Kejriwal's colleagues and he himself accused every established leader of corruption and demanded their resignation. Today, he is in Tihar jail number two on corruption charges, but refuses to resign.

Earlier this week, 56 out of 62 party MLAs gathered at his official residence and begged Kejriwal's wife Sunita to communicate to the CM that he should not resign since they were all behind him. Following this, questions have been raised over whether Sunita will take charge if Kejriwal is forced to resign. This possibility cannot be ruled out because all the firebrand leaders of the party are under ED scrutiny. Atishi, who manages more than 10 portfolios, even stated at a news conference that she was next. She also listed Raghav Chadha and Saurabh Bhardwaj as potential ED targets. If these apprehensions turn out to be true, Sunita might become the next CM of Delhi. She, like Rabri Devi, has no previous experience of running a political party or government. If this occurs, won't Kejriwal and Lalu Yadav be

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

Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

Kumar Gandharva at 100 sounds new and modern

Sopan

Joshi

ore than three decades after his death, Kumar Gandharva's music is still popular. His voice is heard ▲ **V** ▲ in mobile phone ringtones in unlikely places-railway stations, airports, public meetings. In caller tunes downloaded by people who weren't even born when he died on January 12, 1992. Programmes held across the country over the past year to celebrate his birth centenary have been well-attended, as well.

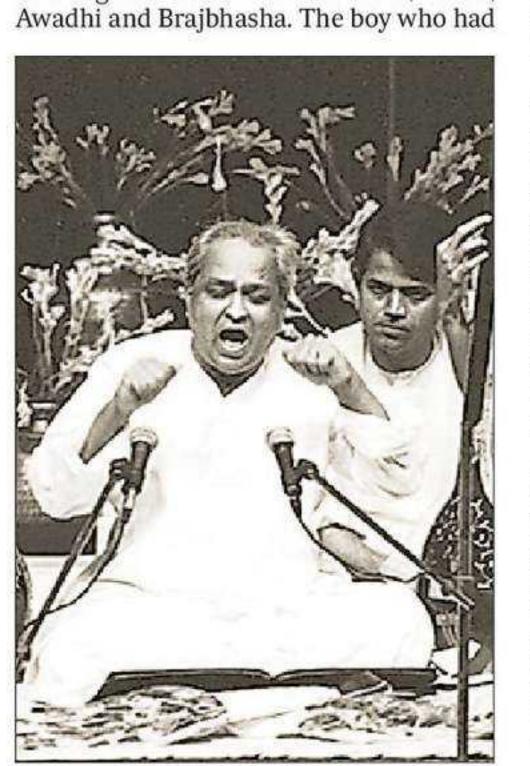
His popularity across generations and geographies emerged in the face of impossible odds. This child prodigy's body was underdeveloped due to his family's misfortunes and poverty. His childhood was stifled by the life of a travelling performer; at the age of nine he was his family's sole breadwinner. By the age of 11, he had left his family and his hometown in northern Karnataka for good, moving to Mumbai to learn classical music. By 23 years of age, he was being hailed as the next sensation in Hindustani classical music. Yet he was deeply dissatisfied, falling out with his guru, the

versatile musicologist BR Deodhar. Just as he began to make a name for himself as a classical singer, falling in love and getting married to a fellow musician, he contracted tuberculosis in his left lung. On the advice of his doctor, he moved away from Mumbai's humidity. In 1948, the young couple moved to the dry climate of Dewas, Madhya Pradesh.

For nearly five years, he was forced to keep lying down to rest his body. Practising singing was out of the question; it was difficult for him to speak. His wife worked in a school to make ends meet. New antibiotics gradually helped him recover, although three-fourths of his left lung had collapsed due to TB and the effect of its medicines.

It was obvious he was not going to fulfil the promise of his prodigal talent. Even as he faced death and despair, he began to rethink music and its cultural roots. While he lay recovering, he heard ordinary village folk, especially women, singing in bullock-carts that passed by their rented house. His wife and he began to research folk music in 1952.

Having grown up speaking only in Kannada, he had learned Marathi in Mumbai; he now began to train himself in Hindi, Malwi,



Kumar Gandharva's art broke barriers of language, region and culture. SANJAY SHARMA

quit school after four days had now become a scholar researching poets and writers of northern India.

His outstanding bravery in the face of a life-threatening disease, his easy manner, his sense of humour, his powers to observe the beautiful in the ordinary, his capacity to research and assimilate these combined to make him a leader of all manner of artists. He cultivated deep friendships with a wide range of talented artists and litterateurs. There were poets, novelists, journalists, painters and, of course, musicians. He became a beacon of cultural excellence in

Dewas, Indore and the Malwa region. It was during his recovery that he noticed the mendicant singers, especially *jogis* of the Nath sect, who sang verses composed by the great poets of the Bhakti traditions. His estrangement with his guru had not taken away the diversity of influences. Deodhar was a disciple of Vishnu Digambar Paluskar, who had opened new paths for Indian classical music, making it popular and establish-

ing its presence outside of temples and princely courts. But Deodhar was the only disciple of Paluskar who had also completed a formal education, going on to train himself in western classical music. He was open to all the gharanas that other-

wise could not stand each other. Kumar Gandharva had absorbed this openness, going on to lend it new dimensions. Deodhar had once

taken the young man with him to the temple of the Vallabh sect in Mumbai; this was to prepare a special thematic programme for the spring festival. This was Kumar Gandharva's introduction to the poetry and music of the classical traditions of the Bhakti movement. This exposure came in handy when he noticed the poetry and music in the singing of folk mendicants. In particular, he was moved by a sadhu singing "Sunta

hai guru gyani" and "Raghubar ki sudh aayi". When he began to sing again in 1954, his music had changed. The way he imagined music itself had changed. As he got back to singing in public concerts, he also began to put together new ideas of presenting folk and Bhakti music. For the first time in his life, he became financially secure, finding the joys of family life. It did not last, however. His wife and partner in music died in child-

He had to start from scratch. Again. Just that he now had the added responsibility of two children. He remarried and got to music with a renewed dedication and a new partner. He began devising thematic programmes of the kind nobody had imagined earlier. Programmes around seasonal festivals; around Malwa's folk music; even around the great Bhakti poets. This gave him connections with groups outside of the Hindustani classical music circuit. It also saved him from becoming a tragic victim of varied misfortunes.

Kumar Gandharva's immense popularity is a reflection of the kind of deep connections he made among worlds that were seemingly unconnected. He used his classical training to take music to its roots in folk culture. He became a cultural bridge, an extension of our freedom struggle. His art broke barriers of language, region, culture and much more. That's worth remembering today, because he was born a century ago, on April 8, 1924.

Sopan Joshi is the author of An Improbable Life, an illustrated biography of Kumar Gandharva. The views expressed are personal

KAMALA HARRIS } VICE-PRESIDENT, THE US

There is great power in publicprivate partnerships, which demonstrate how much we can accomplish with private sector expertise and the capacity

of the government



Predictive precision medicine is the future

Naresh

Trehan

Te face an invisible adversary that undermines public health: Noncommunicable Diseases (NCDs) which claim 41 million lives each year, accounting for 74% of all deaths worldwide. The impact is particularly severe in lowand middle-income countries where 77% of NCD deaths occur, underscoring the need for an urgent response to this growing crisis.

Cardiovascular diseases, which account for most NCD deaths globally, cause 25-27% fatalities in India. A notable number of these deaths occur in individuals under 50. This represents not only a significant loss of life but also a substantial economic and emotional burden on families and communities. These numbers are a clarion call for pre-emptive action against a threat that spares no one, highlighting the critical role of preventive medicine.

Predictive precision medicine goes beyond reacting to diseases as they appear, and anticipates and prevents them. It helps tailor health care to each individual's genetic makeup, lifes-

tyle, and risk factors, representing a shift towards a system that is not only effective but deeply empathetic. It recognises the individuality of each person's health journey.

Predictive precision rests on the principle of the "five rights" — the right patient receiving the right treatment at the right time, in the right dose, and via the right route. This concept is a radical departure from

traditional one-size-fits-all medicine. It hinges on understanding each person's unique health blueprint, incorporating their genetic data, lifestyle choices, and even their living environment into their care plan.

A defining element of precision medicine is its reliance on -omics - such as genomics, proteomics, metabolomics and others — that offer a window into the complex machinery of the human body at a molecular level. This not only helps understand what's wrong, but also why, leading to highly specific and effective steps for treatment, should the need arise. The traditional preventative measures for heart disease monitoring blood pressure, blood glucose, cholesterol or advocating for a healthy lifestyle

— often don't resonate until it's too late. Historically, risk assessment for heart disease has been a broad stroke, categorising individuals into "high" or "low" risk. This method, while helpful, is imprecise. Sample this. Out of 100 people deemed "high risk", 20 might face a heart event; in the "low risk" group also, five may suffer a heart attack. All are advised preventive medicine, but few heed it with the consequence of disease onset in majority. But, for those at high risk, poor compliance may become fatal. Predictive precision medicine refines this approach. By harnessing detailed

analytics, it identifies within high-risk groups, individuals who truly stand at the precipice.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning are at the heart of this revolution. These technologies delve into health data, discerning risk patterns with a precision unattainable by traditional methods. AI's capability to analyse complex data — from ECG abnormalities to environmental factors - and compare them against large data sets enables a highly personalised risk assessment and projection of disease progression, helping doctors select the most efficient medical intervention.

Though a decade old, the story of Hollywood actress Angelina Jolie vividly illustrates this. By identifying a genomic variant in the BRCAl gene, her doctors could estimate her heightened risk for breast and ovarian cancer. This critical insight led Jolie to opt for preventive surgery, dramatically reducing her risk to that of the average woman her age. Her proactive decision highlights predictive precision medicine's potential to empower individuals with life-saving information.

Predictive precision medicine extends beyond heart disease and cancer to other illnesses including neurological conditions, mental health disorders, and even infectious diseases.

Precision medicine is playing a pivotal role in reshaping public health on a global scale. In a rapidly ageing world, facing the vagaries of

the climate crisis, the demand for a health care system that can dynamically meet new needs is undeniable. This need is further accentuated by a looming deficit of health care professionals, anticipated to reach 18 million by 2030.

Predictive precision medicine, leveraging advanced data analytics, technology, and AI, can help create a formidable strategy to meet these challenges. It can pinpoint populations at heightened risk for specific conditions, enabling large-scale interventions across communities. Furthermore, this approach minimises the inherent risks of medical treatments ranging from adverse reactions to surgical complications and economic burdens — by shifting the point of intervention from disease onset to its nascent stages. This approach also reduces out-of-pocket spending, contributing to the sustainability of health systems globally.

Predictive precision embodies the promise of a health care system where disease prevention, personalised management, and efficiency are at the forefront. It advocates for a future where every individual has the right and means to tailor their health strategy, resonating with the ethos of "My Health, My Right".

> Naresh Trehan is CMD, Medanta. The views expressed are personal

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The Indian EXPRESS

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BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

GOAL WORTH SETTING

World No 3 sounds good. But what matters is not aggregate size of economy as much as population's general standard of living

N 2013-14, the year before the Narendra Modi government came to power, India was the world's 10th largest economy. At the end of its second term, the country's ranking has improved to fifth, behind the US, China, Japan and Germany. The Prime Minister has "guaranteed" it would further go up to third, should he get a third term. A closer scrutiny, however, shows that the progress from No 10 to No 5 came on the back of an average annual GDP growth of 5.9 per cent between 2014-15 and 2023-24, below even the 6.8 per cent during the 10 years of the previous Congress-led dispensation. Given India's present GDP of about \$3.5 trillion (as against Germany's \$4.4 trillion and Japan's \$4.2 trillion), it needs to grow by hardly 6 per cent annually (and the latter two at their current sub-2 per cent rates) for emerging as the world's No 3 by 2028.

Becoming the world's No 3 sounds good; it adds to the country's geopolitical heft and ability to exert influence at a global scale. But from a developmental perspective, what matters really is not the aggregate size of the economy as much as its population's general standard of living. That, in turn, is reflected by the per capita GDP. At just over \$2,500, it's way below China's \$13,000. Considering that, in 1990, India's per capita GDP of \$369 was actually higher than China's \$348, it only shows how much distance the latter has traveled over the last three decades. If the current and the coming two decades are to be India's decades, the least it must do is target a quadrupling of the per capita GDP to \$10,000 in today's prices. This is consistent with the Modi government's own vision of a Viksit Bharat or "developed India" by 2047. Going by the World Bank's definition, India is now a "lower-middle income" and China an "upper-middle income" country, with the threshold for "high income" — roughly corresponding to "developed" — at \$13,845. China is, in fact, almost there.

Quadrupling an average Indian's income in real terms by 2047 is an aspirational target most would more easily relate to, than a \$30-trillion GDP. When Prime Minister Modi, in February 2016, gave a call for "doubling farmers' income by 2022", it led to more focused policy-making from all concerned departments towards achieving the stated goal. A similar target, to raise the standard of living of ordinary Indians, would be worth aiming for more so when evidence points to headline poverty rates under successive governments coming down significantly. Per capita GDP targets, both near and far term, would be good gauges for policymakers seeking to move beyond eliminating poverty.

NARROWING THE VIEW

NCERT's textbook revisions pose question mark against its mandate to enable critical thinking

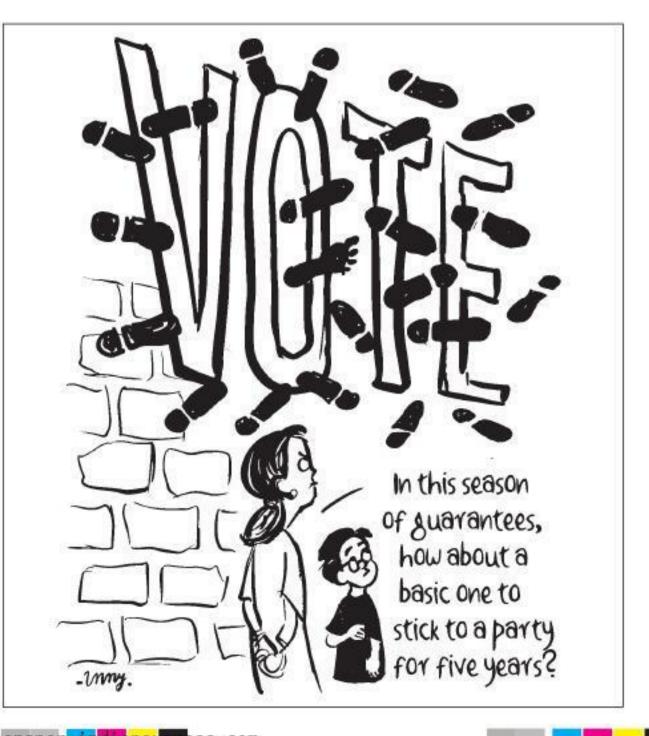
NITS FOURTH round of revisions, the NCERT has announced significant changes in the history, sociology and political science textbooks of classes VI to XII. Revision of learning material should be par for the course in a robust education system. But school curricula in India — especially social science textbooks — have not always kept pace with the latest research. History textbooks, for instance, haven't done adequate justice to the archaeological findings that have changed understandings of the Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC). Recent historiography on understudied areas, such as the country's Northeast, is yet to find a way into the school curriculum. Political science textbooks have very little on the new forms of mobilisation enabled by social media. It's also time that the student is apprised of climate change politics. The NCERT's latest revisions do not address such knowledge-related imperatives either. Instead, they appear burdened by the ruling dispensation's anxiety to paper over fraught political moments in the country's recent history — the demolition of the Babri Masjid, for instance. They underplay social faultlines such as those related to caste. Even the changes that take note of new research on the IVC, seem of a piece with the deeply contested and politically loaded narrative that harps on continuity between the Harappan and Rig Vedic epochs.

Last year, an investigation by this newspaper on NCERT textbooks had shone a light on the deletion of key passages on Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, the Emergency, Gujarat 2002 and protest movements. Of course, social sciences have always been an arena of ideological and political contestation and textbook committees have a long history of being fettered by government interventions. However, the recent revisions belie the hopes raised by the NEP — they go against the policy's ideologically agnostic approach to education reform. Some of the changes described as "minor editing" — the deletion of the reference on the poverty and powerlessness of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities in the Class XII Sociology textbook, for instance — seem to tie in with a political agenda of playing up the notion of a cohesive Hindu society. Similarly, the removal of a sentence linking big dam projects to the destitution of tribal groups — also in the Class XII Sociology textbook — betrays an unease with argumentative engagements with developmental processes.

Young minds today are exposed to a glut of information on culture, history and politics from a variety of sources, including social media. Veracity is often a casualty. Classrooms must, therefore, provide a grounding in objectivity while alerting students to social complexities, with all their diversities, conflicts and inequities. The country's foremost textbook framing body should be an enabler of this process, not a hurdle in it.

Freeze Frame

E P Unny



Security and transparency



Investigation into alleged army atrocities at Rajouri comes at a critical juncture

AMONG THE MANY types of operations that the Indian Army has conducted in Jammu and Kashmir over the years, the most difficult are rarely those at the LoC and the LAC. There, the context is clear and the rules of engagement do not pose many restrictions on Indian soldiers or place them at a disadvantage. Military craft, a high degree of physicality, passion, energy, leadership and, of course, sometimes, negotiation skills, make the difference. Not so much in the case of hinterland operations which are of a hybrid nature and internal security and proxy war conditions place severe restrictions on troops and their manner of conduct. Restrictions also stem from political, social and demographic considerations. The context here is the incident of December 21,

2023, on Mughal Road near Bafliaz town in

Poonch district.

In this area, a number of encounters between the Army and terrorist groups have taken place in the past 18 months or so. The troops have suffered numerous casualties without sufficient compensatory gains. The last incident allegedly became a trigger for some officers and other soldiers to interrogate a few local villagers whom they suspected of giving support to terrorists. Three civilians from Top Pir village in nearby Rajouri district died, allegedly due to torture, while several others suffered injuries. The Raksha Mantri visited the area and told the troops, "You are the country's protectors. But I want to request that besides ensuring the country's security, you also have the responsibility to win the hearts of the people. There should be no mistake that hurts an Indian," he said. It was a fine statement and timed appropriately. He also asked the Army to inquire into the matter transparently. That inquiry has concluded with reports of serious lapses by seven to eight personnel, including some officers.

Several cases continue to be invoked for the purposes of propaganda by indiscreet elements, even though these cases have long been solved. Yet, nothing can be above the law. Investigation and prosecution must follow all due processes. The findings in the Rajouri case, the welltimed visit of the Raksha Mantri and his appropriate statements clearly indicate that the current establishment — like its predecessors — will uphold the processes of justice

because the people remain

the centre of gravity.

The inquiry will no doubt go through all the due processes.

The public must be aware of three things: First, countering proxy war operations demands a high sense of balance on the part of security forces at every stage. There will be several successes to celebrate but there will also be setbacks involving casualties and other losses. The operating environment demands a very high level of decentralisation, going down to tactical and sub-tactical levels because quick decisions are required on actionable intelligence. At the operational level, all the support is provided — technology, higher intelligence analyses, information warfare, programmes to win hearts and minds.

But the sub-tactical level is the cutting edge of operations. There may be hundreds of operations going on at a time, especially when the strength of terrorists is high. For instance, as a senior operations staff officer 25 years ago, I had to coordinate 11-12 operations a day simultaneously in just South Kashmir. Soldiers will make genuine mistakes from time to time — only a thorough investigation will establish or negate culpability. An act of indiscretion amounting to a wilful breach of orders laid down for the conduct of operations will always invite the strongest response from the Army. The Indian Army is extremely careful of its reputation for fair play and human rights.

The second thing for public knowledge is the fact that the Army will always be vulnerable to its reputation being targeted this is done to undermine its ability to keep the people of the region on its side. People are the "centre of gravity" in such operations. Terrorists and separatists would always try to tarnish the image of the Army and compromise its relationship with the people. Their intent is to reduce intelligence flow and garner public backing and logistics for the terrorists.

The third imperative in this environment is that allegations against the Army's probity must be correctly judged at the highest levels. Investigating every allegation levelled by vested interests will demoralise soldiers. However, those considered serious enough must be probed within an appropriate time-frame and the process of justice taken to its logical conclusion in a fair manner. Several cases continue to be invoked for the purposes of propaganda by indiscreet elements, even though these cases have long been solved. Yet, nothing can be above the law. Investigation and

prosecution must follow all due processes. The findings in the Rajouri case, the well-timed visit of the Raksha Mantri and his appropriate statements clearly indicate that the current establishment — like its predecessors — will uphold the processes of justice because the people remain the centre of gravity.

The investigation of the Rajouri case is taking place at a very critical juncture. There are indications of a possible removal of AF-SPA from all or some segments of J&K. It's early to speculate on such an important issue. One of the major provisions of AFSPA is the protection it affords to Army personnel from prosecution without the Centre's sanction, for an act committed on duty. However, when the Army and the establishment continue to demonstrate a high level of transparency in investigation and prosecution of all cases, the need for AFSPA-like protection will itself be diluted. That is how we need to view due processes in such cases of alleged misdemeanour while countering terror operations in a

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challenging environment.

ROAD TO PEACE IN MYANMAR

For reconciliation between warring groups, neighbours must mediate, including India

RAJIV BHATIA

MYANMAR HAS BEEN at war with itself for the past three years. The military coup in February 2021 unleashed a chain of violent conflicts in many parts of the country, resulting in its de facto division into a section where the military government called the State Administration Council (SAC) still rules and another where the Resistance is in charge. The latter projects that the tide is now turning in its favour. What is the ground reality? On a recent visit to Bangkok, this writer interacted with a group of regional experts

The starting point is the assessment by **UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres** who, on March 18, expressed deep concern about "the deteriorating situation and escalation of conflict" that has put civilians at serious risk. He highlighted two alarming trends. First, the expansion of conflict in the Rakhine State known for its "pre-existing vulnerabilities and discrimination" creates the danger of further incitement of communal tensions. Second, the forcible recruitment of youth into the military under the new conscription law in various regions and states is bound to aggravate the crisis.

Another reality check was provided by Tom Andrews, UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar. He spoke of a fivefold increase in air strikes by the military on its people in the past five months. He estimated that 2.7 million people stand displaced, with another 1 million likely to enter this category by the end of 2024 and asserted that 18.6 million people, including six million children, need humanitarian assistance. As against these vast needs, the flow of aid is minimal, with aid donors facing logistical challenges in a na-

The SAC and the Resistance are much too locked into a hostile frame to agree on a modus operandi to relieve people's suffering. They need external help which can only come from Myanmar's ASEAN partners and willing neighbours such as China, India, and possibly Bangladesh. The internal and external players, therefore, need to create a mechanism for crafting a programme that helps alleviate people's hardship.

tion ravaged by conflict.

Experts agree that given the prevailing animosities, Myanmar's stakeholders are incapable of finding ways through which deescalation of violence and delivery and distribution of humanitarian assistance may take place smoothly. The SAC and the Resistance are much too locked into a hostile frame to agree on a modus operandi to relieve people's suffering. They need external help which can only come from Myanmar's ASEAN partners and willing neighbours such as China, India, and possibly Bangladesh. The internal and external players, therefore, need to create a mechanism for crafting a programme that helps alleviate people's hardship. One neighbour, Thailand under the new government, is ready to take concrete measures such as the creation of a "humanitarian corridor" inside Myanmar as a pilot project.

Going beyond the imperative need for an early cessation of the fighting, Myanmar's friends should also suggest a pathway to the nation's return to normalcy. For this purpose, they need to discover a via media between two contrasting positions — the SAC's insistence on retaining the 2008 constitution and restoration of limited democracy after "controlled" elections, and the Resistance's vision of a fully federal democratic union with an apolitical military under a new constitution. Even before a peace formula is conceived, a pressing need exists to create an innovative mechanism for dialogue among all relevant players. ASEAN's Five Point Consensus (FPC), agreed in April 2021, has failed to deliver, despite its best endeavours.

Some experts have argued that Myanmar presents "a regional problem." Indeed, it does so, but only in terms of its

consequences, not causes which are essentially internal. The SAC, the initiator of conflict, is now in decline and faces "an existential threat", claim some observers. Others assert that despite its failures and setbacks, it remains a tenacious entity. The Resistance reveals a triumphant spirit, although internal divergences and lack of cohesion are viewed as its Achilles heel. An outright victory of one party against the other seems unlikely. Perhaps neither side can prevail over the other with the help of guns, planes and drones. Both need to internalise that they are part of a single nation, and it is their combined duty to work for reconciliation.

Ironically enough, Aung San Suu Kyi, serving a 33-year long imprisonment, and the National League for Democracy, which secured a landslide victory in the last elections (November 2020), hardly figure in the current discourse. Yet, in many ways, she holds the key to a possible political solution.

As a major, interested, and affected neighbour, India can and should certainly help. India's Myanmar experts need to develop a set of practical and pragmatic proposals, infused with an accurate reading of power dynamics, geopolitical play and the country's history. They have a role in advising policymakers in New Delhi as well as shaping the regional approach to resolving the crisis in Myanmar. Its aggravation will inevitably threaten regional peace and progress. India's eastern neighbourhood can ill afford that calamity.

The writer is Distinguished Fellow, Gateway House and a former ambassador to *Myanmar and the author of* India-Myanmar **Relations: Changing Contours**

APRIL 8, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

PPP POLL BOYCOTT

THE PAKISTAN PEOPLE'S Party (PPP) has decided on a total boycott of elections which the country's military ruler, Gen Ziaul Haq has promised to hold before March next year. In a major policy statement being drafted for release, the PPP will declare that Gen Zia has lost mandate to hold elections since his regime was illegal and unconstitutional. Gen Zia is accused by the party of destroying, de facto, the 1973 constitution of Pakistan which had the approval of the people.

PM on Iran-Iraq war PRIME MINISTER INDIRA Gandhi made an im-

passioned plea to Iran and Iraq to end their escalating war. She warned Israel to withdraw its troops from Lebanon immediately too. Mrs Gandhi regretted that the "tragic conflict between Iran and Iraq has defied our best efforts at finding a solution", and the Palestine problem remained unresolved.

THE PUNJAB PROBLEM

NOW THAT THE Government has offered to study Article 25 as demanded by the Akalis and the Akalis have withdrawn their proposed agitation on the issue, efforts are afoot to find a solution to the Punjab problem and end the present stalemate. The secret contact which the government had established with the

Akali leadership is being maintained. The government appears to be keen on an early solution to the Punjab problem.

15 DEAD IN NAGALAND FIFTEEN ACTIVISTS OF the pro-Beijing: National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and five Burmese army men were killed in an encounter at a place between Shiplouu and Punuw in northern Burma recently, according to a report from across the border. When a group of armed NSCN men was advancing towards Shiplouu village to settle an old score, some villagers immediately alerted the nearby Burmese army post, the report said. Upon being challenged, the NSCN opened fire.



THE IDEAS PAGE

would require both the centre and the provinces, as well as the civilian and military arms of the state, to work in tandem in the fight against terrorism." - DAWN, PAKISTAN

"What is needed is the total commitment of the state to get the job done. This

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

Getting around a boycott

An 'India Out' campaign in Bangladesh jeopardises joint projects. People-to-people connections, liberalised visa regime, can help show a way out



BANGLADESH'S LOCATION AND India's role in its independence have established the "India factor" as a powerful discourse in its domestic politics. The emergence of an "India Out" campaign on social media that advocates the boycott of Indian products with hashtags such as #IndiaOut, #BoycottIndia comes as a reaction to that.

From Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani to the present-day opposition alliance led by Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), there have been instances of anti-India stands throughout Bangladesh's history. Bhashani was pro-China and believed in a model of Islamic socialism. He criticised Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for making Bangladesh a satellite of India and tried to forge a coalition of the right and left extremists against the Awami League (AL). The BNP, which represents the right-ofcentre forces, has an orthodox social constituency inspired by Bhashani. The party is remotely controlled by its acting chairperson Tarique Rahman, Khaleda Zia's son, from London where he is in exile.

The BNP's stance can be seen as an attempt to gain political momentum given its steady decline since 2006. Boycotting the elections of 2014 and 2024 has contributed to a loss of BNP's political influence and organisational strength in the country. It might be one of the reasons why some of its leadership, including Ruhul Rizvi and Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, seems to be supporting the Boycott India movement, even though the party itself has not come out with an official statement. Rizvi publicly threw away his Kashmiri shawl and called for the boycott of Indian products in front of the party's central office in Dhaka's Nayapaltan.

On the other hand, Sheikh Hasina's track record has been strong when it comes to the economic performance of the country over the last decade. Bangladesh is expected to become a middle-income country by 2041 while it is on track to graduate from the Least Developed Countries list in 2026. Bangladesh finds itself above average on the parameters of the Human Development Index compared to other South Asian countries.

According to the World Bank, Indian exports to Bangladesh were valued around \$324 million in 1991. This, interestingly, increased to \$868 million in 1996 during the first tenure of the BNP. Similarly, during its second tenure, in 2001, the export from India was around \$1.06 billion, which increased to \$1.66 billion in 2006.

A close economic partnership between India and Bangladesh has been one of the factors behind Bangladesh's prosperity. India's proximity to Bangladesh translates into a natural trade advantage. Shared land borders and well-established transportation links facilitate the movement of goods,



C R Sasikumar

often at lower costs compared to imports from more distant locations like China. India is Bangladesh's second-largest import source, with a staggering \$13.69 billion worth of goods entering the Bangladeshi market in 2021-22.

A dominant theme in India's exports to Bangladesh is the supply chain for the textile industry. Bangladesh's garment manufacturing sector, a key driver of its economic growth, relies heavily on raw materials and intermediate goods from India. In 2022, non-retail pure cotton yarn and raw cotton (20.1 per cent of total import) were among India's top imports. These materials are transformed into yarn and fabric in Bangladeshi factories before being used to manufacture garments for domestic consumption as well as for exports.

While textiles reign supreme, India also supplies Bangladesh refined petroleum which is crucial for powering industries and transportation. Other significant imports include pharmaceuticals, chemicals, and machinery, highlighting the multifaceted nature of this trade relationship. Recently, India exported 50,000 tonnes of onion to Bangladesh ahead of Ramzan, an exception to the export ban on the crop in December 2023. This is apart from essential commodities such as garlic, coconut oil and spices. There have also been instances of informal trade between the two countries, crucial in stabilising inflation in Bangladesh.

India is a major supplier of construction materials to Bangladesh for infrastructure development. The supply of diesel locomotives, double and single-decker buses, steel coaches, highway duty trucks under Indian Government's Line of Credit had improved transportation, work efficiency and office capacity in Bangladesh. The loss-incurring **Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation** (BRTC) is turning profit-making with the supply of new tracks from India.

An intensification of the India Out campaign stands to derail all of these as well as the on-going negotiations on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between India and Bangladesh. AL leaders, including Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, have argued that if the boycott campaign is steadfast, even "garam masala, onions, garlic, ginger and all spices that come from India should not be seen in their (BNP leaders') homes".

The educated and moderate younger generation of Bangladeshis consider development as the core of political and diplomatic actions. This cohort is keen to be a partner in the process of economic growth and development and is not sceptical of an alliance with India. This generation has given a massive mandate to the AL-led alliance since 2008, giving hope that in the age of globalisation and commercialisation, boycotting of products is an obsolete idea.

However, the two governments must also actively work to inspire trust and confidence among citizens. This can be done by promoting people-to-people contact, sensitising the media in both countries and liberalising the visa regime. All of these will come in handy to maintain the India-Bangladesh development partnership.

> The writer is professor, School of International Studies, JNU

Artificial intelligence and art

There is a challenge at hand. Artistes would do well not to be complacent about the superiority of their creativity



Tanuj Solanki

SEVERAL AI COMMENTATORS, including Gary Marcus, professor emeritus of Psychology and Neural Sciences at the New York University, have recently remarked on the fact that Dall-E, OpenAI's image generation technology, finds it easier to generate an image of an astronaut riding a horse than it does a horse riding an astronaut. In either case, the prompt is asking the AI to do something outlandish. But the second is somehow more bizarre for the algorithm that is Dall-E — it is, we might as well say, easily misunderstood. If you demand an image of a horse riding an astronaut, you will likely get an image of an astronaut riding a horse.

Is this Dall-E being human-like, defaulting into that which is arguably more imaginable from the spectrum of the bizarre; or is it just simply making a mistake that it is likely to? There aren't many images of a horse riding a human — let alone an astronaut — in the training data most likely. So, presumably, Dall-E does what it can do.

One can, perhaps, venture from this to opine on the difference, as it stands today, between the machine and the human mind. I find it useful to speculate on what happens in the human mind (the abstraction as we know it, as against the biological brain and its electricities) when it is given the same prompt, that is when it is asked to imagine a horse riding an astronaut. What are the minutest steps in our mental processes, steps that we can identify as abstractions and thus name using the most common language?

There is that slight scratch of dissonance, I think, an acknowledgement that the prompt is bizarre, and then, along with a flash of understanding the mind at once constructs an image (usually hazy, grey, possibly fluid, with several undetailed archipelagos). Three identifiable stages, then, all traversed in the briefest time possible: Primary parsing; understanding; and imagination.

Subsequent production, the transfer of the mental image to a medium – paper or software — is slow; its quality is dependent on the imaginer's talent with the medium; and its correspondence with the mental image is unknowable, or knowable only through the articulations or anguish of the subject, that is, to an unreliable limit.

Of these, which ones does Dall-E lack in the context of the prompt?

On an abstract level, at which we understand anything, Dall-E merges the first two – parsing is understanding – and the last two — production is imagination — and it merges them to a mechanic utilitarian

degree, one that makes us wonder if it has any understanding or any imagination. Its horses do not ride astronauts.

Generative AIs' lack of understanding and imagination, as evidenced in their failure to tackle the truly bizarre, or their failure to produce original works of beauty (ChatGPT is awful at poetry), or their failure to appreciate the laws of physics in the images or videos they produce, is of some solace to artistes. In interviews, when asked the mandatory question of the threat AI poses to them, writers tend to emphasise GenAI's lack of "lived experience" and "imagination", its definitive unoriginality, and, occasionally, the fact that art is not so much in the artefact as it is in the conceptualisation and development of the artefact.

Though there is nothing wrong in these remarks, they contain, to my mind, a misreading of the threat. GenAI attacks not art at its apogee but the economies of the artefact. Writers are not facing the possibility of ChatGPT producing an extraordinary and original story, but the prospect of it producing an infinity of bad, unoriginal, plagiarised or near-plagiarised stories. It may not have experience and understanding and imagination, and it may not have a window into what it feels like to write a story, but its ability to produce artefacts at the click of a button is an upending of things as they exist. In literature and cinema, we already see a winner-takes-all economy, where a few select works, whether of high quality or mass appeal, whether by accident or by design, gather a lion's share of the revenues generated. As the reproducible is reproduced at the click of a button, as the price of production nears the asymptote of zero, and as the zone of human originality is challenged further and further (surely GenAI will also get better at aesthetics and originality), all human-created literature and cinema become luxury items. The upshot: Winnertakes-all intensifies exponentially, a lesser and lesser number of people get to live the experience of making art, the figure of the bold amateur vanishes from the scene.

The year 2024 is crucial for OpenAI because of the lawsuits it is facing across geographies. The organisation sometimes sounds rattled. It has called outright plagiarism a "bug" and has suggested that strict enforcement of copyright laws will be an existential threat to it. Artistes of any kind — even those who today use GenAI to aid their work — must read between the lines here. The algorithm intends to swallow everything you have made — for it cannot function without it — and it intends to swallow everything for no consideration to you. You'd do well right now not to bask in the nuanced superiority of your humanity, of your ability to imagine a horse riding an astronaut. Things are heating up. Think of what verdict might help sustain your one glorious and artistic life. Ask loudly for it wherever you can.

> Solanki is a writer, most recently, of Manjhi's Mayhem



What women voters want

with India.

An intensification of the

derail the on-going

negotiations on the

India Out campaign stands to

Comprehensive Economic

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Partnership Agreement

and moderate younger

core of political and

diplomatic actions. This

Next government must bring in far-sighted policy changes for gender equity

Angellica Aribam

tant stakeholders for political parties. In the 2019 general elections, the female voter turnout surpassed male participation. The Election Commission of India estimates that around 47 crore women will vote in the forthcoming elections. The notion that women vote as per the directions of the male head of the household is losing ground. Studies have shown that women are now making conscious choices when voting. Naturally, political parties are aware of the need to consolidate support amongst women. Promises are being made to fulfil the growing aspirations of women voters. But it is yet to be steeped in ground realities.

As India heads towards the general elections, I spent the last few weeks speaking to women and LGBTQ+ persons to encapsulate their expectations from the next government in a gender manifesto. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2023, India currently ranks 127th out of 146 countries on gender parity. Strides, some small and some massive, have been made. However, it is not enough. The Preamble to the Constitution commits to justice, liberty, and equality for all citizens. More than half of India's population, especially from marginalised communities, still struggles to access these basic guarantees. Throughout the consultative process for the gender manifesto, it became clear that the women of India demand nothing short of equity and a dignified life.

Studies show that the majority of the population from the historically criminalised Nomadic and Denotified Tribes (NT-DNT),

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identification papers. Similarly, trans persons go through insurmountable challenges to update paperwork that still carry their "dead names" (birth names that are no longer in use after gender transition). Their right to an identity has been denied for a long time. In 2024, the right to exist must not be a struggle for any person. It behoves our political parties to adopt a gender agenda that recognises the hopes and ambitions of women and LGBTQ+ persons from all walks of life. Here are some recommendations for this agenda:

While the Constitution guarantees equality, personal rights fall short when viewed from a gendered lens. Last year, the Supreme Court ruled that citizens do not have the fundamental right to marry. We cannot claim equality if LGBTQ+ persons are denied the right to choose their partners. Parliament must legislate as soon as possible.

Everyday, women face grave safety challenges, some of which begin at home. It is unconscionable that marital rape exists as an exception in the penal code. The next government must do away with the law and adopt a zero-tolerance policy towards genderbased violence. Several women have spoken to me about their fear of deep fakes and online abuse. The current law and order machinery is ill-equipped to deal with the growing menace and must be reformed to ensure women feel secure both online and offline.

To create social inclusion, it is important to unlearn gender norms. Children adopt patriarchal practices due to gender socialisation in their surroundings. There is an urgent

to remove gender stereotypes. Additionally, gender sensitisation workshops from an intersectional lens should be integrated into school curricula. Next, we must recognise that childcare is a shared responsibility between parents and paid paternity leave should be made mandatory in all formal organisations. To set a precedent, creches should also be set up in all government offices to enable more working parents, irrespective of gender, to participate in childcare. Post-Covid, there has been a greater em-

phasis on the right to health. Studies have found that women do not prioritise their health. Right to health should be considered crucial and policies drafted from a gendered lens. In the last Union budget, the government announced a vaccination programme to prevent cervical cancer. It must provide free screening for breast and cervical cancer. Further, the financial support to pregnant women and lactating mothers under the National Food Security Act 2013 must be increased to account for inflation.

A significant challenge for the next government is to enable women's economic prosperity. It must earmark specific funds to be allocated to women-led start-ups. Nonrecognition of women farmers and low female labour force participation are two major pain points for women. The next government must enact the Women Farmers' Entitlements Bill, 2011. It must also implement economic policies, especially in the manufacturing sector, that promote women's participation in the labour force.

WOMEN VOTERS HAVE emerged as impor-especially women, do not have government need to review and reframe school textbooks. One way could be granting tax rebates to organisations that employ more than 20 per cent women in their workforce. Since the government is one of the biggest employers, it must fill all the vacant positions, estimated at 30 lakhs, at the earliest and women's reservation must be extended to these jobs.

> Last year was momentous for women's political rights in India. After more than three decades of activism, the Women's Reservation Bill was passed. It signifies that historic push towards gender equity can be made if there is a serious will of the government. However, that the law is not in application leaves us all disappointed. The next government must ensure that women's reservation is implemented as soon as possible. It cannot be subject to completion of a Census. Additionally, representation is an ideal that must be reflected in both the Upper and Lower Houses. Parliament must legislate on provisions for reservations for underrepresented communities in the Rajya Sabha and Legislative Councils.

> India will take more than a century to achieve gender parity. Past feminist movements have taught us to celebrate the minor victories while continuing to persevere in our pursuit of major goals. The aforementioned recommendations are crucial, farsighted and, most importantly, attainable for the next government within its tenure. All we need is the unequivocal will to break new ground to shape a gender-equal world.

The writer is founder, Femme First Foundation

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A CURIOUS SILENCE

and speech' (IE, April 6). The grand old party in its poll manifesto, "Nyay Patra", has maintained selective silence on a burning issue — the restoration of the Old Pension Scheme (OPS) for central and state government employees. This is despite the implementation of the OPS in the Congress-ruled states of Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan.

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Manifesto

Azhar A Khan, Kotwalan

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Manifesto and speech' (IE, April 6). The Congress party's manifesto, "Nyay Patra" has promised to relook at the law that hinders free speech and review the provisions for granting bail by the court. But RSS cadres have become the bridge between politicians and the people. The Congress manifesto lacks vision. There is no plan for jobs generation and poverty alleviation. The manifesto would have been more attractive to the voters had there been discussion of alternative vision of governance and politics.

Atul Thakre, Nagpur

FOR PEACE AT LAC

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Calling China's bluff' (IE, April 6). China is using the Arunachal Pradesh dispute as a pawn to pressure India into not joining the America camp. India need not overreact but it must ensure that it does not allow China to alter the status quo on the ground. Both the nations must use their wisdom to settle all disputes.

Shubhada H, via email

GOOD CALL BY MPC

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Holding the rate' (IE, April 6). The MPC made the right decision holding key interest rates for the seventh consecutive time. It has maintained its hawkish stance. The CPIbased inflation came in at 5.09 per cent in February, and has been above the MPC's 4 percent target for 53 months in a row. Headline retail inflation has been consistently below the upper tolerance limit of 6 percent in recent months. The MPC has done well at a time when the government would want more focus on growth ahead of the general elections. SS Paul, Chakdaha

LESSONS FROM DHONI

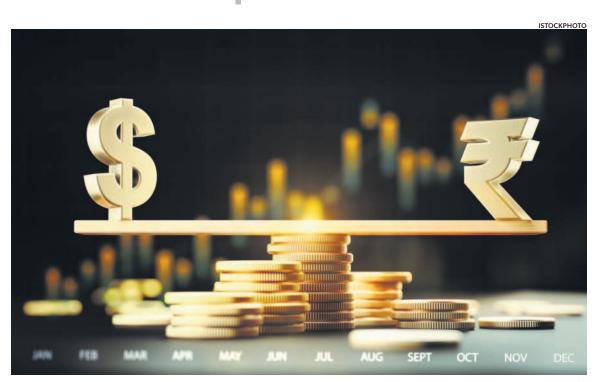
THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The unpleasant soundtrack of the boo' (IE, April 7). Fans are agitated because Hardik Pandya changed his loyalty from the Gujarat Titans to Mumbai Indians for an obscene amount of money However, given the flippant nature of many cricket fans who idolise players based on the number of fours, sixes and centuries they score or wickets they take, a good batting performance or win will probably silence them. But some are dismayed by the crude manner in which the MI management dealt with Rohit Sharma. The announcement about the role change was made a month ahead of the IPL. This was in direct contrast to how CSK Chennai captain, MS Dhoni, gracefully handed over the task to Rituraj Gaiwadin the first match.

Y G Chouksey, Pune





OUR VIEW



RBI has a better handle on rupee management

RBI's restriction of rupee derivative trading to those who must hedge their forex risk looks like part of an external stability effort. This year's challenge is the rupee's internal firmness

fter declaring a crackdown on rupee derivatives traded on exchanges without underlying exposure to foreign-exchange risk, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) extended its deadline for compliance. Circulated in January and slated to take effect from 5 April, RBI's requirement for market position holders to affirm their need to hedge risk (and submit back-up proof above a point) has been pushed to 3 May. Transactions had crashed as brokers asked clients to comply, though the basic rule remains the same. Rupee options and futures are meant for globalized businesses to shield their finances from the blows of exchange-rate flux. So such positions can be held only by those with genuine forex exposure, a condition laid down all along by India's Foreign Exchange Management Act. Deputy governor Michael Patra has elaborated that RBI had in 2014 permitted participants to take positions of up to a level without providing evidence of exposure. That relaxation, however, was misinterpreted to conclude there's no need for underlying risk, "which is not the case," he said, calling it "a violation of the law."

Given signs of market turmoil in response to RBI's move to enforce that rule, we could expect a significant scale-back in trading. The shake-up so far suggests a large chunk of these derivatives were being used by punters as a way to place bets in search of profits. That some of these trades are done on margin money—as opposed to those for which full contract sums are paid upfront—could have acted as a lure. While wider participation in a market is usually an assurer of superior price discovery, this logic can get upended if an upsurge in trades is led by a mix of clever traders and rookies who know

little of what makes a key price move but are attracted by the market's casino-like appeal. The irony then would be of risk naiveté in a market meant for risk mitigation. A peculiarity of how the rupee's external value is determined also lends it a unique form of complexity. As RBI operates a managed float to ensure "orderly appreciation and depreciation of the rupee" against the US dollar, it intervenes in the forex market against sharp swings, but not to peg it at any level. Such a 'mixed economy' policy could tempt more price speculation than is healthy.

The last fiscal year was one of relative rupee stability. It dipped less than a percentage point against the dollar—less than its peer currencies, i.e., and also its long trend of a 3%-plus average annual decline. This was cited on Friday by RBI as a sign of macro stability. After the volatility of 2022-23, last year saw our capital inflows recover, trade gap stabilize and forex reserves (a war-chest used in the rupee's defence) reach a new peak (of above \$645 billion). Barring an oil or other such shock, trends in 2024-25 may favour rupee strength. Foreign funds will flow into Indian bonds enrolled by global indices; business borrowings from abroad could rise too, should US rates of interest soften, which may also send more investment dollars our way (unless RBI eases rates to neutralize such a Fed-action effect). Given RBI's avowed focus on inflation, however, the liquidity released by bulky dollar purchases may need to be sterilized via bond sales, which would pressure yields up and tighten money. Even so, an abundance of dollars is better for our economy than capital outflows. It also grants RBI a firmer grip on the currency's external value. The bank's challenge for 2024-25, though, will be the balance struck with the rupee's internal stability.

MY VIEW | THE INTERSECTION

India cannot solve its water crisis without pricing it appropriately

Only pricing will provide the incentives necessary for efficient and sustainable use of this resource



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Takshashila Institution, an independent
centre for research and education in public
policy.

few years ago, the mayor of a Karnataka town asked me how she could prevent people from wastefully washing their yards, walls and vehicles with water from the municipal water supply. She told me she had organized awareness campaigns, promoted conservation efforts and even personally remonstrated with citizens, but to little avail. When I asked her how much they paid for the water, she replied that the monthly charge was a few tens of rupees per connection, but this was not strictly enforced. She was taken aback when I told her that was why her conservation efforts had been unsuccessful.

An underpriced resource is over-consumed. That is what is happening across the country, where underpriced water and electricity are causing people to consume more than the optimum. It is not a surprise that we are going from water scarcity to water crisis. The current approach of underpricing water is no longer tenable, for water crises will only get worse in the coming years. Water can only be conserved when it is priced at marginal cost, at the most expensive litre of water produced to satisfy a given demand.

In Bengaluru, residential piped water costs between ₹7 and ₹45 per 1,000 litres. Houses that do not have access to municipal water supply purchase water from tankers at around ₹150 during

normal times and up to ₹250 during shortages. Thus the marginal cost of water is 20 to 35 times what the fortunate people with access to municipal supply pay. If prices go up, people will adopt flow controllers, bucket showers, rainwater harvesting and other conservation measures with greater urgency.

So pricing water is a solution to the scarcity and sustainability problem. The question is how do we get there.

There is no doubt that water is a necessity of life and everyone should have access to a basic quantity of it for drinking and washing. The United Nations General Assembly has decreed that every human has a right to 50 to 100 litres of water per day from a source less than 1km and 30 minutes from home. In a country with many poor and low-income households, this water should be available regardless of one's ability to pay. There is a case to make available this basic quantity of water free of cost to poor households.

With the availability of a robust social welfare infrastructure in the form of the Jan Dhan, Aadhaar and Mobile (JAM) trinity, it is already possible to ensure water is properly priced and the poor are provided the money to purchase it. Indian cities must raise water prices over a period of a few years until they are close to its marginal cost, and entitle poor households to water vouchers. Vouchers can be financed through the state government's budget until municipal water corporations are able to cross-subsidize them from their own surpluses.

Today, municipal water supply is synonymous with piped water. There is no reason why this must be so. Indeed, municipal water companies should be mandated to provide at least 100 litres per person per day regardless of the means of delivery. It should be up to them to use pipes, bore wells, tankers or bottles, as long as they achieve the outcome.

Pricing can solve upstream problems as well. One reason the Kaveri water dis-

pute has persisted for decades is that there is no reason for the claimants to moderate their claims. The more they ask, the more the tribunal is likely to eventually assign them.

My colleagues at Takshashila have shown that a more efficient and less contentious allocation system is indeed possible. States that claim more than a low basic quota must pay for the excess into a Kaveri Water Fund. States that take below their quota can receive money instead. This would allow state governments the flexibility to choose a wider set of policies, and give them the financial resources to compensate farmers and others who have to change their water-use patterns. Pricing will create incentives to economise on the use of water and lead to a more efficient allocation.

The policy design is not tremendously difficult and the projects can be made financially viable. The biggest hurdle is a political system that is addicted to populism. Indian politicians know how to make paid things free. They are unfamiliar with the idea of making free things chargeable. Yet, there are examples—national highways, for instance—where pricing has created a bigger and better road network.

Water should be priced not because it will bring new sources of revenue to governments, but because it creates incentives for conservation. Tackling scarcity requires action on multiple fronts: increasing efficiency of use, promoting reuse, governing groundwater, harvesting rainwater, rehabilitating water bodies, building new infrastructure and so on. It is hard to implement these at the scale required because there are few incentives to do so. No government has the capacity to cajole or coerce everyone into action. Pricing provides a strong incentive for people to do the right things. There is no alternative.

Disclosure: The author is on the board of Jal Seva Charitable Foundation. These are the author's personal views.

10 PEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Although two-thirds of our planet is water, we face an acute water shortage.

The water crisis is the most pervasive, most severe, and most invisible dimension of the ecological devastation of the earth.

VANDANA SHIVA

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

No, neuroscientists do not know much about the mind

MANU JOSEPH



creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoupled'

f you have 'neuro' in your bio, you can say just about anything about the mind, as though you know what it is. If you are situated in the West, and identify as male, you will be taken even more seriously. Andrew Huberman is one of several beneficiaries. He is also from Stanford, so conditions were perfect for him to begin a podcast about that thing people hyphenate with confidence: 'mind-body.' He used expressions like "peer reviewed" and it appeared to many that he spoke scientific truths. He attracted millions of listeners. He is so popular that even though you may not have heard his podcast or read him at all, a lot of advice that has come down to you from reformative types emerged from him. If you know people who have suddenly become morning antennas to "catch" sunlight or started buying products like ashwagandha, you indirectly know Huberman, His fame would suggest a world deeply interested in physical and mental fitness. You wouldn't be able to guess that by looking around.

Huberman says a lot of commonsensical things and uses the sacred theology of science to persuade people—sleep well (somehow); eat fruits, vegetables, proteins and healthy fats; remember to drink water; stress is bad; physical exercise is good; as much as possible, stay away from computer screens. Which sane person can disagree with any of this? But he also says a lot of abstract things, like, for instance, that practising gratitude "activates neural circuits." He offers some kind of "scientific" evidence, but some of us intuitively know, or "neurally" know, that you cannot say anything definite yet about a whole lot of human behaviour just because somethings lit up on electrogencephalogram

somethings lit up on electroencephalogram. Generally, Huberman says that decent behaviour leads to physical and mental health. A reason why he is now the subject of a controversy. Not because some scientist found contradictory evidence on an EEG screen, but because, according to an article in *New York* magazine, Huberman cheated on some women. By modern standards of male disgrace, this is almost funny. But the magazine's reasoning is that if Huberman is morally shady, he should not be taken so seriously as a 'wellness' guru.

What I find amusing is that what eventually diminished his aura somewhat was not

the discovery that he was no more qualified than the rest of humanity to speak of the mind, but that some of his ex-girlfriends did not consider him an ideal human being (like their other ex-boyfriends perhaps).

From what I have seen, people who are likely to have excessive faith in Huberman

On mental

'wellness,' there

isn't much of

a difference

between

science and

and other neuro-gurus are not famous for their cold logic. They are usually life-long seekers of advice on how to be, and how to be happy. Inside them was a reasonless sorrow, to which they attached reasons and villains, but the sorrow itself never went. Most of their lives, they were consumers of the wellness industry. Once it only meant reading J. Krishnamurthy. Then came the "right way" to

only meant reading J. Krishnamurthy. Then came the "right way" to breathe and the rediscovery of some stretching exercises with names hinting of deep spiritual stuff. Every five years or so, there would a dramatic breakthrough in the global pursuit of 'wellness,' which would arrive through a fascinating person who was, oddly, always a male. Like Huberman.

And another famous neuro-something, Sam Harris, who speaks about the nature of consciousness. Not that he should not; just that I do not see how he could know more about the mind than anyone else. The science of consciousness is not even in its infancy. Yet, people give Harris et al the first right to define the nature

right to define the nature of being and the meaning of "meditation."

Huberman says that we must be "mindful," which is to live in the present (as we did during covid—how was it?). And we must introspect and learn a lot, and, of course, be grateful. And build muscles. What he seems to be saying is, 'Be like me, why can't you be like me.' That is what many gurus often say.

When a man sets out to say 'be like me,' he usually knows what to say and how to say it. It is somehow useful for some wellness gurus to be narcissists. And, in my observation, there is frequently a bit of that in their ardent seekers too. They are so preoccupied with themselves, how they are feeling. A "wellness" session can look like

alpha narcissists talking to beta narcissists.

Many people have defended Huberman saying that it is silly to humiliate him using the comments of anonymous ex-lovers. British actor Russell Brand said that Huberman is being targeted by some women because he is a very manly man who appears to enjoy

But some scholars have used Huberman's disgrace to remind people that they always found his 'science,' too, dubious. Andrea Love, a biologist, argued on *Slate.com* that Huberman used scientific lingo to impress gullible people: "Huberman fills his podcast with confident displays of pseudoscience, topped with the appeal to authority he gar-

being a manly man.

credentials to gain your trust."

But then, when it comes to "wellness," especially the part that involves the mind, there is not much of a difference between science and pseudoscience.

ners by regularly repeating his academic

Once, only monks were taken seriously when they spoke of abstract matters, and only those monks who wore special robes or signalled in some other way that they were different from other humans, even as they said stuff like "I am you, you are me." Today, 'neuro' is the new robe of the modern monk.



THEIR VIEW

RBI shows the dull but venerable art of batting with a straight bat

Its MPC had all the reason not to rock the boat, with growth faring well, inflation cooling and national elections looming



MYTHILI BHUSNURMATH is a senior journalist and a former central

f ever there was a case for the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) to present a straight bat, and not attempt any theatrics, Friday, 5 April 2024, was the day. With the economy doing well, inflation down, if not out, and general elections looming ahead, it made no sense to rock the boat. Not after the central bank had come in for lavish praise from both Prime Minister Narendra Modi ("RBI, with its success in managing inflation and growth, despite the pandemic and two wars, can be a role model for other central banks") and finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman ("RBI stands tall among its peers on several counts") at the celebrations held on l April to mark the 90th anniversary of RBI's commencement of operations

So, in the last MPC meeting before the elections and the first in this fiscal year, the rate-setting committee did exactly what was expected—it kept rates on hold (for the seventh consecutive time) and said it remained focused (as before) on the withdrawal of liquidity. It cannot be faulted for inconsistency. If it felt growth was doing quite well and the inflation-growth dynamics did not warrant any change in policy rates at its meeting in February 2024, when National Statistical Office (NSO) estimates placed 2023-24 gross domestic product (GDP) growth at 7.3%, there was even less of a case for any rate action to support growth now that the economy is doing better (the latest official estimates place GDP growth higher at 7.6%).

Clearly, the MPC, like the US Federal Reserve, has a problem on its hands. Its 'higher for longer' policy doesn't seem to have impacted growth adversely. On the contrary, not only is growth, according to governor Shaktikanta Das's own admission, likely to touch 8% in 2023-24 but is likely to remain robust in 2024-25

Prima facie, it might seem as if nothing has changed and the latest MPC resolution is merely a 'cut and paste' of its earlier one. Except that monetary policy statements are not only about what is stated in black and white, but also about what is left unsaid. And so it is with the latest one.

The biggest omission is the absence of any explanation of how or why the MPC and RBI misjudged the strength of the economic recovery in the year gone by. Remember, RBI had not raised its growth estimate in February, the governor contenting himself with saying the NSO estimate for growth in 2023-24 is 7.3% (RBI's own estimate then was 7%).

However, Friday's statement was completely silent on the slip-up, preferring instead to dwell on growth in the current fiscal (7%). Considering that the NSO's latest estimate for 2023-24 is 7.6%, considerably higher than RBI's estimate of 7%, one would have expected some explanation, if not a



VIEWS

mea culpa. But no. For whatever reason, neither the MPC nor RBI seems to have thought it necessary to offer any explanation.

Yet, their reading about the underlying strength of the economy is crucial to the future course of policy. Can we assume that what worked in the past will work in the future as well. Economics 101 would say that a scenario where growth is looking up but inflation is not yet beaten is tailor-made for a rate hike.

Remember, monetary policy acts with a long lag. As Governor Das admitted, "The last mile of disinflation is turning out to be challenging," adding that monetary policy transmission is "still a work in progress," a full 23 months after the first rate hike in May 2022. Logically, the slow pace of monetary transmission in India combined with a stronger-than-expected growth should have warranted some change—a more hawkish tone perhaps, if not the symmetric policy response of a (contrarian) rate hike.

Remember also that what started in April 2023 as a "tactical pause" in the words of Governor Das and not "a pivot or a change in policy direction," has continued now for a full 12 months. But condi-

tions in April 2023 were vastly different from today. Back then, real GDP growth was estimated at only 6.5%, and though inflation had "softened from its elevated levels a year ago," it "still remained above the upper tolerance band."

In contrast, today, growth seems to be robust. And while inflation, according to RBI's estimates, is expected to be just 4.5% in 2024-25 (and lower still at 3.8% in the July- September quarter, traditionally a bad quarter, given the tendency for prices to rise in the summer months), the upside risks to inflation—higher commodity prices, geopolitical conflict, strong foreign exchange inflows—seem higher than the downside risks to growth. In such a scenario, one can perhaps be pardoned for wondering if the monetary policy is "actively disinflationary," as the statement claims.

Sure, "balancing the economic see-saw," as Mervyn King, former governor, Bank of England, put it, is always a challenge. "Our ambition at the Bank of England is to be boring," he had famously added. Well, on Friday, RBI, which entered its 90th year on 1 April 2024, possibly took a leaf out of the book of its counterpart with a 240-year advantage. It tried to be boring!

MINT CURATOR

Biden ought to tell Netanyahu that enough is enough in Gaza

The US should stop arming Israel in honour of the UN's resolution



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geopolitics.

he White House described the recent phone call between US President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as "tense and challenging." And what else could it have been? For the first time since Hamas attacked Israel on 7 October and Israel began retaliating massively against the whole Gaza Strip, Biden demanded an immediate ceasefire. He apparently added an or-else: "If there are no changes in their policy," said a spokesperson, "there will have to be changes in ours."

That still seems too little too late to lots of people, even and especially in Biden's own government. While Biden was on the phone with Netanyahu, I was talking to Annelle Sheline, who last week resigned very publicly from her mid-level job in the State Department in protest over what she regards as American failures to observe international and US laws in supplying Israel with weapons even as it commits humanitarian crimes in Gaza.

Take the ceasefire Biden has demanded. Wasn't that already the gist of a resolution by the United Nations Security Council? The US had let it pass by abstaining rather than exercising its veto. But then the White House went out of its way to emphasize that the resolution was "non-binding." Why, wonders Sheline, who has a PhD on political Islam and helped write humanrights reports on the Middle East before resigning. Security Council resolutions are meant to be binding; that's the whole point.

At the exact same time, moreover, the Biden administration was also readying previously agreed shipments to Israel of huge bombs—the kind that have been flattening much of the Gaza Strip—and even preparing future sales of fighter jets, missiles and other weapons. By mixing his sig-

nals, Biden is sending no signal at all.

To Sheline, these US arms sales are illegal. She points to two laws. One prohibits the US from arming foreign military units which "credible information" implicates in human-rights violations. The other bars support for governments that restrict humanitarian aid. By now, evidence of Israeli violations on both counts seems overwhelming—from blanket rather than precision bombing to blocking aid and causing starvation. Just this week, Israel struck well-marked trucks in an interna-

tional aid convoy, killing seven.

Sheline represents a larger shift in US public opinion. Whereas about half of Americans still approved of Israel's Gazan campaign in November, when the shock of 7 October was fresh and the worst of



US foreign policy could get warped by its stance on the Gaza War REUTERS

Israel's bombing yet to come, a majority now disapproves. Opinions are polarized, of course, with many older people and Republicans backing the Israeli government to the hilt while younger and left-leaning demographics turn against Israel. Among the electorate, as in Congress, the mood is in flux, and not in Israel's favour.

That turn is even further along within the government. Sheline is the third diplomat to resign over the Israel-Gaza conflict, and one of many who have signed onto cables in the internal dissent channel. Since she quit, many colleagues have shown support. Resistance is also building in other departments, and apparently even inside the White House: First Lady Jill Biden is said to be horrified by the suffering in Gaza and to have urged her husband to "stop it, stop it now."

Another tragedy, Sheline told me, is that Biden was supposed to be the good guy, and the US a good country. A Biden America, unlike the alternative version peddled by Donald Trump, was meant to stand up for democracy, law and human rights at home as abroad. That claim is looking more hollow by the day, and the US less credible and more hypocritical abroad to many people. The conflict in the Middle East is threatening to take hostage Biden's entire foreign policy.

Whenever the world calms down to think clearly, it must apportion blame for the immense misery of the past six months. Hamas deserves the most, but Netanyahu and his right-wing coalition partners are due their share, as are other parties in the Middle East. By contrast, Biden, I believe, genuinely tried to empathize with all sides and to find a balance between justified Israeli self-defence and humanitarian restraint. But in that attempt he has failed, as Netanyahu repeatedly and brazenly snubbed and ignored him.

UN resolutions and tense phone calls to Netanyahu are no longer enough. One of Biden's predecessors, Bill Clinton, allegedly emerged from a meeting with Netanyahu in 1996, venting in frustration: "Who's the... superpower here?"

If Netanyahu nowignores Biden and the Security Council and fails to cease fire, the US must vote to condemn Israel at the UN and immediately halt all shipments of arms to the country.

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THEIR VIEW

RBI won't waver in its focus on taming retail inflation

RAJANI SINHA



is chief economist at CareEdge.

he decision of the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) to leave the policy rate unchanged in the last meeting was on expected lines. RBI also maintained its stance of 'withdrawal of accommodation,' as it is committed to bringing down consumer price index (CPI)-based inflation to its 4% target on a durable basis. RBI governor Shaktikanta Das highlighted that healthy economic growth has given RBI room to unwaveringly focus on price stability.

While CPI inflation has moderated to 5.1% in the last two months, it remains above RBI's 4% goal. Core inflation (excluding food and fuel) has slipped below 4%, with continued disinflation in the services sector. The main concern for the central bank is persistently high food inflation—7.4% in February. Specifically, very high inflation in items of daily consumption like vegetables (30%) and pulses (19%) could result in upward pressure on household inflationary expectations. As per the latest RBI survey, the household per-

ception of current inflation moderated to 8.1% in January 2024 from 8.9% in July 2023. But one-year-ahead inflation expectations remain high at 10%. With a normal monsoon expected this year, we can expect further moderation in food inflation. However, caution is warranted, given that in the last few years, we have seen increased climate risks, with an adverse impact of that on domestic and global food prices. India's Meteorological Department has warned of more heat waves than usual this year. This increases upside risks for food inflation, specifically for vegetables and fruits. Low water reservoir levels are another concern. Hence, a normal monsoon with good spatial distribution will be very critical for a moderation in food inflation. RBI has maintained its average CPI-based inflation projection of 4.5% for 2024-25, as against an estimated 5.4% in 2023-24.

Apart from food inflation, concerns stem from geopolitical rifts and the ensuing risks of supply-side bottlenecks. While overall global commodity prices are likely to remain benign due to weak global demand, one cannot ignore supply-side risks. We have seen global trade disrupted by the Red Sea crisis and Brent crude oil prices rise by a sharp 18% in the year so far.

On the global front, another risk that the governor aptly highlighted is rising levels of public debt. For advanced economies, public debt-to-gross domestic product (GDP) has risen sharply to 112% and for emerging economies to 67% in 2023, according to the International Monetary Fund. The backdrop

of high public debt, high interest rates and low growth is making debt sustainability a challenge. Advanced economies that have enjoyed low interest rates in the past are now facing a situation of higher for longer interest rates. This will have severe implications on their interest payment burden. For instance, for the US government, net interest payments are projected to cross 20% of revenue by

2032 from 9.7% in 2022, as per the US Congressional Budget Office. Similarly, for the UK, the government's interest expenses have already doubled from 5.4% of revenue in 2020 to 11% in 2022. Das has highlighted that the worsening debt situation in advanced economies can pose risks for

emerging economies by way of swings in capital flows and financial market volatility.

Even with a global slowdown, India's external situation remains comfortable. Merchandise exports, which had been hit by the global slowdown, are already showing improvement. Supported by healthy service

Signs of price

stability, in food

especially, may

lead to shallow

rate cuts from

the second half

of 2024-25

exports and strong remittances, we are expecting India's current account deficit at a benign 0.7% of GDP in 2023-24 and around 1% in 2024-25. There have been strong foreign institutional investor inflows in the last fiscal year and the trend is likely to continue this year, with the inclusion of Indian government bonds in global indices. India's foreign exchange reserves are at a comfortable \$645 billion.

As far as domestic growth is concerned, RBI remains optimistic, with a GDP growth projection of 7% for 2024-25. High frequency economic indicators like the purchasing managers' index, GST collection, auto sales and bank credit growth indicate a healthy growth momentum. However, a

broad-based pick-up in consumption demand remains critical. Rural demand has been feeble but is showing signs of improvement, going by fast-moving consumer goods and two-wheeler sales data. Based on the assumption of normal monsoon rainfall, we can expect consumption growth to improve.

The other critical goal is a meaningful pick-up in private investment. It has increased in sectors like steel, cement, petrochemicals, automobiles, aluminium and renewable energy. The order books of capital goods companies have also grown sharply in the last fiscal year. Moreover, data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy on project investment has been showing the private sector's growing intent to invest. Hence, we can expect the private capital expenditure cycle to accelerate.

This brings us to the question of whether RBI will cut policy interest rates this fiscal year. If CPI inflation continues to moderate and there is respite on food inflation, specifically, we can see rates being cut by a shallow 50 basis points in two tranches starting from the third quarter of 2024-25. RBI will be watching the actions of the US Federal Reserve. Given India's comfortable external position, however, the critical factor influencing its decision will be domestic inflation.