



EDITORIAL

A lethal irony

The current situation in Gaza is a stark manifestation of an extreme geopolitical irony — the conflict-torn region is witnessing condemnable bloodbath, unfolding just parallel to the talks of ceasefire in Cairo. What is on display in the region is a blunt disregard of human life and dignity, and humanitarian principles. The fact that the world is witnessing, almost helplessly, the ‘massacre’ in the region, speaks volumes about the profound vulnerabilities that remain hidden beneath the superficial safety valve of international order.

Hamas, which triggered the conflict seven months ago by killing around 1,200 Israelis and abducting 250 hostages, now stands crushed at the hands of the extremely aggressive Israeli military. The ‘movement’ has given its approval of the “proposal regarding a ceasefire agreement” — prepared under the mediation of Qatar and Egypt. On the other hand, Israel, which is spearheading a highly lethal onslaught on the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, has not approved the truce agreed upon by Hamas. On the contrary, it has stepped up its offensive by now targeting the long-threatened Rafah — a city housing 1.4 million people that has thus far served as a refuge for Palestinians evacuated from other parts of Gaza. In a strictly limited evacuation period, the Israeli military has told around 100,000 people to evacuate Rafah, and move to the “expanded humanitarian area” at Al-Mawasi on the coast. However, news reports suggest that the Al-Mawasi region is already overburdened with an influx of a large number of refugees from other regions and lacks vital services. No wonder then that the UN human rights chief, Volker Turk, terming the evacuation order to be “inhumane”, called it “contrary to the basic principles of international humanitarian and human rights laws”. Apart from inflicting casualties and destruction in Rafah, Israel’s seizure of the city is also likely to obstruct the flow of humanitarian assistance.

The war has to come to an end. Both the parties — Israel and Hamas — recognise this fact. However, Israel, owing to its dominant position, appears hell bent to secure the truce in its favour. In fact, Israel has made its intent very clear by stating that it will “exert military pressure on Hamas” to advance its war aims, which include: “the release of our hostages, destroy Hamas’s military and governing capabilities and ensure that Gaza does not pose a threat to Israel in the future”. In the process, what Israel has decided to completely overlook is the massive loss of life and property. Gaza Strip is decimated to rubble, more than 34,000 people have been killed (the count is still on), and for an entire generation of residents who remain, trauma may never fade away completely. Their life will never be the same.

The extreme hostilities to which the children and women in the Gaza Strip have been subjected, with the entire world watching helplessly the pride and might of Israel’s ruling class outweighing the lives of the ordinary citizens of Gaza, should not have been acceptable in the rules-based order of 21st century. It must be hard for the Gazans to forgive Hamas as well, which, after instigating the powerful Israel, left Gazans to defend for themselves. For the last seven months, not only the lives and dignity of Gazans, but also the façade of international order for peace, have been toyed with as per the fancy of a few. This condemnable game of humiliating humanity must end at the earliest. Obstructions to ceasefire will have to be removed rapidly.



SANDIP BANERJEE

The timeless values inherent in Tagore’s internationalism find resonance in today’s globalised world

Rabindranath Tagore’s complex relationship with the West and his transcendental philosophy, outlined by both nationalism and internationalism, placed him as a bridge between cultures

In one of his very famous poems, ‘Where The Mind is Without Fear’, Rabindranath Tagore writes: “Where the world has not/ Been broken up into fragments/By narrow domestic walls...” These lines point towards a mind longing to break barriers and embrace the world. While discussing Tagore, a lot of critics raise the point about Tagore’s nationalism. However, Tagore’s nationalism was embedded in his internationalism. This internationalism is, in turn, a product of humanism. As a poet and philosopher, Tagore has demonstrated pluralism and inclusiveness in his ideology. He was much ahead of his generation in thinking that a parochial attitude towards social and cultural issues would actually weaken the broader base of humanity. Today we talk about holistic development and mutual understanding in international affairs. Tagore could decipher the meaning of these even a hundred years ago. Like many thinkers of his generation, Tagore did not isolate himself from international events. He believed that national events are a reflection of the greater world. Moreover, the basic tenets of humanity are primordial and are common to all sections and communities across the globe. Hence, to him, the religion of man is about common welfare.

Rabindranath Tagore’s internationalism can be traced back to Raja Rammohun Roy, whom Tagore regarded as the first exponent of internationalism in our country. Both of them valued internationalism as an expression of love for all life in all parts of the world. This is most vital in modern times, particularly when modern man has cocooned himself within the shell of hedonism and self-love. When we are torn apart by communal issues across the globe, Tagore’s works enunciate the idea of love for mankind as a religious feeling. This sense of interna-



Tagore’s nationalism was embedded in his internationalism

nationalism extends feelings to all and sundry and avoids conflict and contradiction. When we talk about world peace and understanding, we ought to remember that no understanding is practically implemented without appreciating each other. This holds true for bilateral relations between countries. Tagore emphasised this bilateral understanding. Tagore realised that sooner or later the world would have to unite for common interest. The concept of his Visva Bharati University promotes his sense of internationalism. The very motto of the university — ‘Viswam eka nidam’ — “where the world meets in one nest” rests on the belief that the world can be one family. This is nothing different from the essence of globalisation about which we are so keen today.

To Tagore, internationalism and nationalism are not absolutely separate entities. He integrated the two in his approach to world affairs. At times, his faith in internationalism made him suspicious of nationalism, particularly European nationalism. We may add that even in his own country he could not always side with the nationalists. He even had his differences of opinion with none other than Gandhiji. It was not that Tagore was unpatriotic, as some would wrongfully explain. His anti-war, pacifist attitude evoked considerable displeasure in the West. He condemned the imperialistic propensity of Japan, for to him, it was nothing less than persecution of peace and harmony.

Again, about the Munich Pact of 1938, the poet wrote to the Czech scholar Lesny: “My words have no power to stay the onslaught of the maniacs. I feel so humiliated, so helpless”. Tagore, the global citizen, bleeds within himself at the instance of inhuman justice. In one of the most famous observations, C.P. Scott of Oxford said, “... our chief ground for gratitude to Rabindranath is that he has bridged the gulf that divides East and West”. In fact, Tagore emerged to be one of the voices that broke down the frontiers between the East and the West. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Tagore declared that when eventually he was accepted by the West, the heart of the West opened before him without delay. In his Nobel Prize-winning work, ‘Gitanjali’, Tagore spread the splendour of Indian Philosophy in the West, thereby bridging the two different strains of culture. This is also one dimension of Tagore’s internationalism, where the assimilation of Indian culture engenders the cult of humanity. Today when we are torn apart by local issues, we need to imbibe Tagore and his broader outlook. Incidentally, when we notice the bubbling areas of conflict in modern civilisation, we realise how Tagore was prophetically correct. His Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in itself, is in the true sense a cultural dialogue between the East and West. More than anything else, it teaches values of tolerance, endurance, and growth through the mutual exercise of ideas and opinions. Are not all these true components of an international mind?

It is highly significant that while dissecting the features of Tagore’s internationalism, we should take into account our philosophical tradition. Tagore thought about the entire humanity; it is not just a kind of Non-proliferation Treaty or awarding the Nobel Peace Prize. It is not about the fight against war; it is a fight for peace and benevolence. As an individual, highly conscious of international developments, Tagore realised the importance of the victory of the Allied Powers in the Second World War. In his famous letter written in 1940, addressed to the President of the United States, Franklin Roosevelt, Tagore wrote, “All our individual problems merged into one supreme world politics, which, I believe, is seeking the help of the United States of America as the last refuge of the spiritual man”. Rabindranath Tagore’s relationship with the West was complex. At times he was revered, at times enveloped in international intrigue. It is believed that the U.S. Government also maintained records on Tagore. Tagore’s frequent visits to the West and his observations on international events, along with his anecdotes on various countries like his famous ‘Letters From Russia’, made him one of the rare cosmopolitan personalities in contemporary India. Very few people during those days travelled as extensively as Tagore did, and that unfolded his mind to international issues. Rabindranath Tagore’s political philosophy was between Nationalism and Internationalism. He was truly a product of the Renaissance, who craved for the boundless stretch of imaginative mind. Hence, he never found himself confined to geographical dimensions. In this way, he influenced thinkers like Gandhi and Nehru. It is the demand of the time that Tagore should be more appreciated in the global context. The multiculturalism embodied in Tagore’s work is the result of his vast exposure to the Western world. On the other hand, the universality of the Upanishads taught Tagore how to be one with the world. Here, nationalism transcends to internationalism. It is not just protesting against the oppression of the British masters on Indian people; it is opposing the despotism of the strong over the weak, happening in any corner of the globe. That is how Tagore formed his disposition towards political crisis.

Tagore’s idea of internationalism is not about global governance or dismantling of nations. Neither is it about surrendering national sovereignty before powerful authorities. His philosophy of internationalism gathers around cooperation, understanding, and pursuit for the unity of mankind. All these make Tagore so relevant in modern life. Even while promoting his ideas on education and rural reconstruction, he was never reluctant to learn Western methodology. This propensity to accept and innovate was a manifestation of his internationalism. Inevitably, he emerged as a link between Orientalism and Occidentalism. No wonder, Bertrand Russell spoke about Tagore, “He has contributed as much as any living man to the most important work of our time, namely, the promotion of understanding between different races”.

The writer is an educator from Kolkata. Views expressed are personal

Tryst with (un)trust

While a decline in voters’ trust in democratic institutions and governance should have led to a sense of disenchantment, paradoxically, there has been an increase in electoral participation

Indian democracy is at a crossroads. People are more invested in elections even as they become more sceptical about politicians and public representatives. Increasingly, people seem to be voting more to remove a particular party from power rather than proactively choosing an alternative. Voters feel that keeping a party in power for long does not yield results. Change is their way of creating pressure on elected governments to deliver. There is also, however, a curious incumbency trend in some Indian states.

While there is an overall disenchantment with democratic outcomes, there still exists greater investment in the electoral processes.

India is thus among the few countries in the world witnessing a constant rise in voter turnout. In 2023, there was a six-fold jump in voter turnout compared to the first general election of 1951. On an average, the voter turn-out is 67 per cent in the general election and close to 70 per cent in many of the recent state assembly elections.

In spite of male electors being greater in number, it is the women voters who are turning out to vote in larger numbers. Women voters have not only managed to have more women-oriented welfare policies implemented — such as free passes for women in public buses — but even managed to create positive pressure to implement a long standing demand for the implementation of 33 per cent reservation for women in Parliament. Does all of this mean there is greater voter trust in the Indian state and its governance? It does not seem so.

There is a steep rise in what is



Greater aspirational mobilisation reinforces greater trust in and consent for a more centralised and authoritarian form of governance

often referred to as anti-incumbency by psephologists, where political parties are often voted out to bring in a new party. At the heart of this crisis of trust in democratic processes in India seems to be the “neoliberal consensus”. Such a consensus disallows parties to formulate radically different policies. Most political parties today promise transactional welfarism and electoral promises which are increasingly similar. In order to overcome this kind of “trust deficit” and a sense of crisis of legitimacy, political parties develop innovative strategies to circumvent voter anger, without changing the direction of their policy outcomes. The BJP, for example, has constantly changed its candidates and state-level leadership. In the recently concluded assembly elections, the BJP changed the chief ministerial candidates in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Even in course of the ongoing run up to the general elections,

the BJP has dropped many sitting MPs. It was widely believed that Congress in Rajasthan and BRS in Telangana would have fared much better had they not used again the same set of legislators. To overcome voter fatigue with the same old political faces, the BJP has also introduced a presidential form of election campaign. It contests elections centred on the image of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and urges voters even in state elections to vote for Modi and not for the local candidates. The argument is that it is Modi who will finally deliver on the election promises. The current campaign for general elections is not only spearheaded by Modi but centres around the slogan of “Modi’s Guarantee”.

In an era of faceless globalisation, complex tiers of governance and increasing informalisation of the economy, having a face and a name to rally around is meant to encourage the voters to repose greater trust in the leader and his governance. This shift to a “direct democracy” form of electioneering underlines the trust deficit in governance, which is compensated by increased electoral participation. It is a paradoxical see-saw between trust and legitimacy crisis. Modi, therefore, is accountable directly to the electorate. Constitutional norms, the separation of powers and Rule of Law become dispensable. The discourse of efficiency has made the narrative of aspirational mobility and faster growth look more palpable and tangible. Yet again, greater aspirational mobilisation — Atma Nirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) — reinforces greater trust in and consent for a more centralised and authoritarian form of governance. This could be called libertarian paternalism — a model of governance in which trust in institutions is actively undermined as against the trust in a leader.

Greater electoral participation, therefore, is a trust and investment in the electoral process without respect for democratic norms that can turn into a majoritarian ethic. In this model, democracy and authoritarianism become somewhat strange bedfellows. The debate on Indian democracy today is thus eerily polarised. The urban, educated sections of progressive social activists, academics, journalists and the opposition parties are worried about the growing crisis of democracy. They see the crisis reflected in the way institutions are weakened and norms are flouted, state governments are destabilised through defections and horse trading, the role of money power in politics goes up building huge entry barriers and hero-worship of the leader makes public discourse toxic. They see these as signs of a growing democracy deficit. However, most of these issues do not seem to concern the voters when they go out to cast their vote. For the voters, democracy seems to be about policy outcomes, welfare benefits and greater economic opportunities. Neoliberal development creates a model of jobless growth and economic inequalities. This is what the voter responds to but finds that there are no alternatives. All parties speak the same language. How then does the voter influence the parties to breach the neoliberal wall? It is this lingering question in a voter’s mind that will probably decide the changing contours of her trust in Indian democracy. DTE The writer is Associate Professor at Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Views expressed are personal

DearEditor

UNDUE INTERFERENCE

This is in reference to the news report "Guv asks Raj Bhavan staff to refrain from giving statements to police". I would like to ask the pertinent question that while incorporating Article 361(2) of the Constitution of India, was the intention of the legislature to protect a governor who indulged in all criminal activities not linked to his official job? The answer cannot be affirmative. The law shall, therefore, take its own course and the governor cannot have immunity by any stretch of imagination to uphold the Rule of Law. Needless to add, the outrage of modesty of a woman is not the prerogative of the governor; let alone to be considered as part of his job. Be that as it may, how can he expect Constitutional immunity and is allegedly causing interference in the administration of justice?

— ARUN GUPTA, KOLKATA via email

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TWEET OF THE DAY

Profoundly sad to know that 9 persons died due to thunderstorms and lightning last night (5 in Purba Bardwan, 2 each in Paschim Medinipur and Purulia), while 2 more persons died due to wall collapses in Nadia and 1 more due to tree collapse in South 24 Parganas. Our district administrations everywhere have been working on disaster management mode round the clock and are taking actions to provide relief and ex gratia as per guidelines. My sincere condolences to the bereaved families of the 12 fellow citizens of Bengal.

MAMATA BANERJEE
@MamataOfficial

Rural Distress

In the heart of India’s hinterlands, a quiet crisis is unfolding, one that speaks volumes about the economic challenges gripping rural communities across the nation. The latest data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) reveals a stark reality: shrinking real wages coupled with soaring inflation are pushing rural India into an abyss of financial distress. This distress is a tale of tangible hardship felt by millions of hard-working individuals striving to make ends meet. The numbers paint a grim picture, with rural wages contracting in as many as 25 of the past 27 months, reaching a staggering 3.1 per cent decline in February alone. This erosion of purchasing power is exacerbated by a relentless inflationary spiral, where essential commodities become increasingly out of reach for rural households. From tur dal to onions, the rising prices of necessities are squeezing already tight budgets, leaving families grappling with impossible choices. But the repercussions extend far beyond the realm of household economics. The sluggish consumption trends, exemplified by stagnant tractor sales and dwindling purchases of two-wheelers, serve as a harbinger of deeper systemic issues. These trends not only reflect the economic woes of rural India but also signal a broader malaise in the country’s rural economy. As tractors gather dust and motorcycles remain parked, the wheels of progress in rural communities grind to a halt, thwarting aspirations, and stifling growth.

Furthermore, the disparity between rural and urban inflation rates underscores the unequal burden borne by rural populations. While urban areas may weather inflationary pressures with relative ease, rural communities find themselves disproportionately impacted, with limited resources to buffer against rising costs. This disparity is not merely a matter of economic statistics but a reflection of systemic inequities that perpetuate rural impoverishment. In this context, the observations of development economist Venkatesh Athreya ring particularly poignant. Indirect taxes, he contends, play a significant role in fuelling inflation, exacerbating the plight of rural populations already struggling to make ends meet. It is a reminder that economic policies, though crafted with the best of intentions, can have unintended consequences that deepen rather than alleviate rural distress. Beyond the realm of data and statistics lies the human toll of this crisis. A recent survey lays bare the palpable anxiety pervading rural communities, with a staggering 71 per cent of respondents citing price rise as a top concern. For those living on the margins, already grappling with unemployment and economic uncertainty, inflation represents yet another obstacle on the path to a better life. In the face of such adversity, it is imperative that policymakers adopt a holistic approach to address the multifaceted challenges confronting rural India. This entails not only targeted interventions to alleviate immediate hardship, but also long-term strategies aimed at fostering sustainable economic growth and reducing systemic inequalities. Only then can rural India emerge from the shadows of economic distress and realise its full potential as the backbone of the nation’s prosperity.

AI Warfare

In the scorching heat of a Californian afternoon, history was quietly made at Edwards Air Force Base. An experimental F-16, its sleek frame adorned in bold orange and white hues, pierced the sky with a thunderous roar. Yet, what followed was not a conventional aerial duel, but a spectacle of technological prowess ~ an AI-controlled fighter jet, piloted not by a human, but by artificial intelligence. This milestone in military aviation represents a seismic shift in warfare, akin to the advent of stealth technology in the 1990s. The US Air Force’s embrace of AI heralds a future where unmanned warplanes, guided by sophisticated algorithms, dominate the skies. The vision of a fleet comprising over 1,000 AI-enabled aircraft by 2028 underscores the service’s commitment to harnessing cutting-edge technology for national security. However, as with any leap into the unknown, this transition is not without its share of apprehensions and ethical dilemmas. The spectre of autonomous weapons looms large, raising concerns among arms control experts and humanitarian groups alike. The prospect of AI making life-and-death decisions, including the deployment of lethal force, without human intervention is deeply unsettling. The International Committee of the Red Cross has sounded a clarion call for urgent international action to regulate the use of such technology. Yet, proponents argue that human oversight remains paramount in ensuring responsible AI deployment. The assertion by US Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall that there will always be human involvement in critical decision-making processes offers some reassurance. Nevertheless, striking the delicate balance between leveraging AI’s capabilities and preserving ethical standards demands meticulous scrutiny and robust safeguards. The strategic imperative driving this paradigm shift is clear ~ to maintain air superiority in an increasingly contested and complex global landscape. As geopolitical rivals like China invest heavily in bolstering their air capabilities, the United States faces the imperative to adapt and innovate. The emergence of AI-controlled aircraft promises to mitigate risks to pilots while enhancing operational effectiveness. At the heart of this transformation lies the convergence of security, cost, and strategic considerations. The staggering cost overruns and production delays plaguing traditional manned fighter programmes, exemplified by the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, underscore the urgency for alternative solutions. AI-controlled unmanned jets offer a compelling proposition ~ smaller, cheaper, and potentially more agile than their manned counterparts. The US Air Force’s pioneering efforts in AI development, exemplified by the ground-breaking achievements at Edwards Air Force Base, underscore its commitment to staying ahead of the curve in military technology. Yet, as we venture into uncharted territory, we must remain vigilant, ensuring that technological innovation is guided by ethical principles and human values. The journey towards an AI-enabled future in military aviation is fraught with challenges and uncertainties. Yet, it is a journey that must be undertaken with resolve, mindful of the profound implications for security, ethics, and the very nature of warfare itself.

Massing of education

Thus, a concertedly touted idea of acute necessity for rapid expansion of Higher Education became a new mantra for achieving heavily popularised bliss called ‘economic growth’ across the whole world. Indeed, since the early 1970s a mission of mass or universal HE as a matter of human right came to be mooted formally and popularized explicitly with enormous patronage of corporate funding bodies as well as multilateral agencies initially in Western countries followed sooner or later by the entire developing world



While the terms ‘mass or universal elementary education’ and ‘higher education’ have been in global vogue for about the preceding three centuries, ‘mass higher education’ is new and certainly a post-WWII idea. To illustrate: global Gross-Tertiary-Enrolment Ratio was 10.1 per cent in 1972 and now it is much above 40 and increasing by one per cent per year ~ popularly described as its ‘massification’.

Apparently, this phenomenon appears pretty welcome, and few bother about its origins, evolution or wider ramifications. But it is high time that these latter questions are systematically investigated and evaluated at least in view of the contemporary phenomenon of declining global standards and quality of higher education/learning.

During WWII itself, the UK’s (coalition) government planned for an ambitious programme of post-war ‘social reconstruction’ in which education would play an important part by achieving social equality through a ‘better system of education’ available equally to all, irrespective of means. This marked an innately contradictory emphasis in favour of wider participation in higher education (HE) for achieving ‘social equality’, albeit within a fiercely capitalist framework/ system which inherently breeds economic inequality.

During this period, the USA too embarked on a rapid expansion of HE with the aim of augmenting the production of scientific knowledge, skills and personnel, albeit with a strong synergy with private industry/capitalists. Thus, even during WWII there was a ‘call’ in the capitalist bloc for breaking away from what they sarcastically called the ‘elitist’ structure of traditional HE/university.

And in its immediate aftermath a rapid public-funded expansion of colleges, universities and other research institutes had taken place in these two influential countries purportedly for augmenting the pool of scientific talent as well as social equality within academically

‘able’ youth of all sections of population, ability being judged in terms of secondary school scores obtained.

After the invention of the notion of ‘human capital’ in the early 1960s, a newly evolved academic branch named ‘Economics of Education’ flourished briskly in terms of theoretical and empirical research funded lavishly by massive benefaction of giant corporate funding organisations as well as major multilateral agencies including UNESCO, World Bank and OECD. This research with its seductive elegance redefines HE as a private commodity mainly in the form of skills, information, and know-how that could be manufactured by both private and public investments in building up educational institutions which thereby constitute a fiercely growing competitive industry.

And it also posits with impeccable precision of exposition that rapid expansion of HE in the contemporary context of vigorous technological innovations not only drives economic prosperity, both at macro and micro levels, but it is absolutely necessary for keeping up national and international competitiveness.

Thus, a concertedly touted idea of acute necessity for rapid expansion of HE became a new mantra for achieving heavily popularised bliss called ‘economic growth’ across the whole world. Indeed, since the early 1970s a mission of mass or universal HE as a matter of human right came to be mooted formally and popularized explicitly with enormous patronage of corporate funding bodies as well as multilateral agencies initially in Western countries followed sooner or later by the entire developing world.

In feeding into this popularly cherished expansion and privatisation of HE reinforced by rights-based campaigns and af-

firmative actions, society cannot escape paying a heavy price in the form of steady erosion of eligibility criteria for admission to academic programmes along with drastic dilution of academic curriculum/content in diverse forms and guises, so that naturally-ordained larger mass of lower-ability/motivation students are increasingly accommodated towards making an institution/university both commercially viable/profitable and democratically sensitive to the masses’ right to HE.

For example, overall acceptance of applicants for admission



ARUP MAHARATNA

The writer is former Rajiv Gandhi Chair Professor, Central University of Allahabad, Prayagraj. This article draws on his recent monograph titled Higher Education and Intellectual Retrogression: The Neoliberal Reign (London/New York: Routledge, 2023)

to UK’s HE institutions in 1996-2001, as per a major study, is found almost exponentially surpassing the respective estimated/expected levels calculated by applying the initial rate of acceptance in 1996. This clearly signifies a rapidly falling standard of entry requirements at UK universities, and thereby a lowering of overall quality/ standard/ talent of learning. Another significant American study

reveals that despite devoting much less effort to activities directly related to learning than their counterparts of the 1960s, the students of the 1990s happen to have scored higher grades than those garnered by the older students, pointing clearly to both ‘grade inflation’ and increasing readiness on the part of academics for compromises with standard/ quality of higher learning.

These worrisome trends are found to be valid across all institutional types ~ private or public. With UNESCO’s initiatives, an International Commission for Development of Education was established in 1970, which in its 1972 report entitled Learning to Be: The world of education today and tomorrow for the first time introduced a never-thought-of-before educational paradigm called ‘Lifelong Learning’. By the end of the 1970s there had been piles of official

reports in many countries with a single common theme, namely ‘planning for education throughout a citizen’s life’. While the world has been witnessing technological progress over at least two and half preceding centuries, the need for mass higher education has never been invoked prior to the post-war ascendancy of pro-capitalist neoliberal thinking, which ruthlessly defied the long history and tradition of educational thinking/ philosophy and rushed to radically redefine aims/goals of HE as being, in one scholar’s words, “acquisition of spurious and fictitious ‘skills’ (such as telephone skills, communication skills, information skills and even, I believe, life skills)”.

No matter the elegance/ precision of new theoretical arguments, ideas and evidence carefully harnessed in defence of mass or universal HE worldwide since WWII, business dimensions, capitalistic pecuniary interests and private corporate underpinnings of an ever-expansory market for HE degrees and diplomas evidently appear to have been inextricably linked.

All this has however eventually brought in a crisis of HE globally, especially in the form of low standard/quality of higher learning resulting thereby in mounting complaints of employers in trying to find truly ‘employable’ persons amid plenty of degree-holders.

As these post-war ‘new’ or ‘novel’ ideas advocating an ever-widening access to HE/university for avowed economic growth, coupled with drastic dilution of academic content and curriculum contingent upon the necessity of accommodating academically lower ability students, spur inevitably a process wherein higher learning/education tends to become more vocationally-oriented than academic and scholarly, there emerges both a declining trend in overall standard/quality of HE generally and an acute dearth of people who do, or can do, or wish to do, basic original, inventive and independent research in particular to bring in new breakthroughs and higher intellectual heights ~ the hallmarks of modern civilizational progression.

ASIAN VOICES

Revving up the e-vehicle industry

The development of the country’s fledgling electric vehicle industry is expected to go up a gear after President Marcos declared last week that he wants e-vehicles to account for at least half of the vehicles on the road by 2040.

A bold and ambitious goal for sure as e-vehicles today number just 7,000, or a minuscule .001 percent, of the 14.3 million registered vehicles at the end of 2023. But Mr. Marcos has been at the very least consistent in the policy direction toward widespread adoption of e-vehicles, and most recently directed the Department of Energy and other concerned government agencies to put their heads together and speed up the implementation of action plans as well as craft effective strategies to make electric vehicles a more visible component of the public and private transportation sectors.

Specifically, he wants his lieutenants to focus especially on integrating e-vehicles into public transportation, given that the sector is the largest source of air pollution and energy-related greenhouse gas emissions that warm up the world’s atmosphere and disrupt weather patterns with often devastating consequences such as more frequent and more severe droughts and typhoons.

Indeed, according to DOE data, transport GHG emissions contributed to 34 percent of total GHG emissions in the country, with road transport accounting for 80 percent of those



emissions. “President Marcos has instructed the concerned agencies to work together to study the integration of the EV industry so we can strengthen the local manufacturing of electric vehicles and supporting battery charging mechanisms in order to encourage the electrification of the public transport sector,” Palace briefer Daphne Oseña-Paez said. “If we aim to fulfill our pledge to the Paris Agreement, we need to boost the share of electric vehicles in the total projected vehicle fleet nationwide,” Mr. Marcos said earlier.

The government does have the legislative arsenal to make Mr. Marcos’ EV goals happen, with the passage of the Electric Vehicle Industry Development Act and the crafting of the Comprehensive Roadmap for Electric Vehicle Industry that provide the enabling environment for the EV targets to be met. But as what always happens with these laws, the problem lies in the commitment and the allocation of resources needed to bring these provisions on paper into reality.

For example, the Department of Trade and Industry already talked last year about providing incentives such as subsidies and tax breaks to encourage the local manufacturing of as many as four million EV units ~ from two-wheelers to e-trikes and e-public utility vehicles and e-buses ~ in the next 10 years. It has also announced plans to provide consumers and PUV operators with rebates and discounts to encourage them to buy an EV over a fossil-fired one. So why the delay? These have to be in place and operational if the cost gap between e-vehicles and traditional cars using fossil fuels is to be narrowed, making it easier for consumers to choose an EV.

E-vehicles that are used as PUVs are said to lead to P2.4 million in savings over 15 years of operations. But then buyers today have to bear a 20-50 percent higher upfront cost compared to diesel or gas-fueled vehicles, thus the crucial role that subsidies and affordable financing schemes will play in making more people switch to e-vehicles.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Options for Sudan

SIR, This refers to the editorial “Sudan Famine” published in The Statesman on 5 May. Sudan is infamous for its recurrent civil strife engineered by squabbling warlords from time to time.

Its hapless bear the economic burden of lawlessness prevailing in that country. The primary task of the administration that is in place is to ask for international aid and assistance in a famine-like crisis.

Although your editorial expressed concerns on likely aid sources for the Sudanese people facing starvation, options are available for initiating necessary actions.

The UN Central Emergency Response Fund managed by OCHA is already available for release of immediate assistance. Another structured mechanism under UNO for extending assistance to a famine-hit country like Sudan was formed in the COP-27

Climate Conference held in Egypt in November 2022.

Developed countries agreed to contribute generously to form a Climate Loss and Damage Fund to aid climatically vulnerable countries at times of natural distress.

Yours, etc., Kunal Kanti Konar, Kolkata, 6 May.

PHILIPPINES

SIR, This refers to the editorial titled ‘Philippine Dynasts’ published on 1 May. How dynastic feuds and politics between the Marcos and Duterte clans could harm the interests of common people and the greater good of the nation has been nicely articulated.

The US-China geopolitical situation centred around the South-China Sea might get a new dimension as an impact of the dynastic rift in Philippines. The US stance of sitting president Marcos acts against the China-

friendly foreign policy of Duterte.

While President Marcos congratulated Lai Ching-te on his election as the President of Taiwan, China reacted strongly reminding Marcos about the one-China policy, adopted by his father. This led Manila to clarify that Philippines still maintained its one-China policy.

Your editorial has highlighted some beacons of hope for a brighter future of the Filipino citizens, who are showing formidable resilience while advocating for education reforms and anti-corruption efforts.

Yours, etc.,

Sukhendu Bhattacharjee, Hooghly, 3 May.

UNJUSTIFIED

SIR, This refers to the news report, “BJP MP candidate Tapas Ray and leader Tamoghna Ghosh given Central security”, published in today’s edition of The Statesman. One MP candidate and one leader of the BJP have been provided with Central security cover after a couple of localised incidents that

MEDIA HAS FAILED

SIR, For many years the media in our state of West Bengal, both print and electronic, are seriously engaged in a binary creation in respect of apportioning political space exclusively between TMC and BJP at the cost of others and these efforts get accentuated during election time. This year is no exception. Day in and day out, unfailingly we find pictures of Mamata Banerjee and PM Modi and Abhishek Banerjee occupying first pages and other prime space with elaborate description of their speeches, although they are mostly poor in content and full of venom and malice. Private TV channels are seen doing the same thing with massive gusto. The mission is clear. There wibe two parties in West Bengal viz. TMC and BJP. The Left and Congress, integral parts of the INDIA block are being clearly seen to be left out by the media. Media have given us to realise that they are neither neutral nor objective. Obviously, they have had their own political agenda in the matter of curtailing INDIA block partners and propping up TMC and BJP. People nowadays normally do not take the media very seriously, really a sad commentary on its lackadaisical performance. Media have an obligation to use their resources to deal with people’s issues objectively.

Yours, etc., S Sarkar, Berhampore, 5 May.

had taken place recently. Is Central security cover for two leaders who do not even represent the electorate justified? The responsibility of their security lies with themselves and the political outfit

that they represent. How can the Central government be responsible for the security of local leaders of a political party?

Yours, etc., Anupam Neogi, Kolkata, 6 May.



About Western pots and Indian kettles

BHARAT DOGRA

Experienced diplomats and intelligence officials know that when several powerful countries target a developing country by making allegations one after the other, they are often merely trying to weaken the resistance of the country trying to act in independent ways in international affairs. Some allegations are made directly, and some through media leaks.

India has been at the receiving end of such experiences in recent times. So many charges have been made against Indian diplomats in quick succession by countries whose intelligence agencies are known to work in close collusion with each other that all signs of a coordinated effort to create problems for India and Indian diplomacy are evident. These allegations coming from Canada, the USA, the UK and Australia suggest a concerted effort to push back Indian diplomacy at a time when India has been asserting its independent foreign policy boldly.

While rightly emphasizing India's many-sided strong relationship with the western world, India has kept open its options on important issues to pursue its national interests, and this has not gone down well with those Western leaders who wanted a more compliant role from India. Hence there have been attempts in recent times by Western powers to try to put Indian diplomacy on the back foot by making allegations of an assassination today, an assassination attempt yesterday, stealing secrets the day before that, and of interference in their internal affairs earlier.

India has denied these allegations, although at varying levels. In the context of one such allegation, India's external affairs minister S. Jaishankar responded with a Hindi idiom 'ulta chor kotwal ko daante' (the thief rebuking the police official).

Experienced diplomats and intelligence officials of all countries know that clandestine work is sometimes taken up in hostile countries. The ethical mark is set not by avoiding such



work, but by ensuring that this does not harm public welfare in any significant way.

In fact, this may be a good time to ask leading Western powers to look inwards at their own record as in their case allegations of killing prominent leaders of other countries and subverting democratic functioning are well documented. To give just one example, the first Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Patrice Lumumba was killed by a conspiracy hatched by Belgium and the USA, and there has been a public apology by the government of Belgium for this. Lumumba was a leader committed to justice and unity, someone who would have prevented the plunder of vast mineral wealth of his country by Western powers and their collaborators. So, he had to be removed.

Together with killing the most popular leader from whom his people had high hopes, secessionist forces and processes were also encouraged by his killers in a country which had just attained freedom, around 1960, after highly exploitative colonial rule. This led to a new cycle of violence, resulting in many deaths, also paving the way for the very long dictatorship of Mobutu who plundered his own country and allowed Western powers to do so, setting new records of human rights abuses and cruelty.

In the 1980s, the Sandinista government in Nicaragua was attracting wide attention by achieving significant improvements in health, education, and small peasant-based farm-

ing cooperatives. Some of the development achievements it recorded could not be achieved by the Somoza dictatorship, a US client, in the previous four decades.

While the people of Nicaragua were happy and hopeful about the achievements of the new government, US agencies launched a huge campaign to harm not just the Sandinista government but also the symbols of its success such as health centres, hospitals, schools, and cooperatives. For this purpose, various right-wing groups called contras (counter revolutionaries) were mobilized, armed and trained in an operation costing several million dollars. In addition, explosions at ports, refineries and pipelines were arranged.

America Watch, which subsequently became part of Human Rights Watch, accused the contras of targeting health care clinics and assassination of health workers, attacking and killing civilians, torturing them, raping women, and burning civilian homes.

Human Rights Watch stated in a report (1989), "The Contras were major and systematic violators of the most basic standards of the laws of armed conflict, including by launching indiscriminate attacks on civilians, selectively murdering non-combatants and mistreating prisoners."

In September 1973, the CIA planned to oust another socialist government committed to the welfare of people - the Popular Unity government led by President Salvador Allende in Chile, a popular leader who has just won the elections. Following Allende's election, the CIA director had a meeting with President Nixon and a note from this meeting, later declassified, stated - "\$10 million available, more if necessary, full time job, best men we have, game plan make the economy scream, 48 hours for plan of action".

However, before Allende could be removed, it was found necessary to get rid of General Rene Schneider who was committed to the constitution of the country and was a man of great integrity. Big money and weapons to

get rid of him were provided by the CIA. Attempts to kidnap him were made and he was eventually killed. Then came the CIA-assisted attack against Allende during which the presidential palace was bombed and Allende died. This led to the Pinochet dictatorship for several decades - characterized by huge corruption, corporate plunder, and inequalities on the one hand and the most terrible torture, executions, and disappearances on the other hand, inflicted on tens of thousands of opponents including women. The Pinochet regime got full support from the USA and the Chilean model was held up for emulation by a leading group of US economists - the Chicago boys.

In 1964, USA assisted efforts led to a coup to bring down the democratic government of Brazil led by President Joao Goulart. This led to a dictatorship characterized by death squads, torture, and human rights violations.

Mohammad Mossadeh was a popular leader and Prime Minister of Iran, elected democratically in elections, keen to get more resources for helping his people by curbing the profits of oil multinationals. This led to a coup by the combined agents of the USA and Britain in 1953, so that the unpopular Shah of Iran could be brought in again for monarchical rule, suppressing the democratic aspirations of the people. While Mossadeh was jailed and many of his supporters were jailed or executed, a secret police force called SAVAK was set up and became notorious for its gruesome torture and repressive activities.

In Guatemala, around the same time, a CIA-assisted coup led to the ouster of the democratically elected government of President Jacobo Arbenz that was known to be devoted to the welfare of people. This was followed by nearly four decades of military rule with its death squads, disappearances, torture, and mass executions, claiming over 150,000 victims.

The Church Committee of the US Senate had investigated the allegations relating to the assassination and attempted assassination of almost a

dozen foreign leaders by US intelligence agencies like the CIA. Books on this subject have mentioned close to 40 prominent foreign leaders who are likely to have been targeted with assassination or grave harm. In the case of Fidel Castro, the most popular leader and former President of Cuba, dozens of assassination attempts were made but he survived them all. In addition, there have been several other terrorist aggressions aimed at Cuba causing immense harm.

The US War on Terror in this century has resulted, according to Brown University estimates of a peace award winning US project, in 900,000 deaths directly, and in a total of 4.5 million deaths indirectly. At the same time terrorism has become worse in several regions and several new terror groups have been formed. In fact, some of the deadliest new terrorist groups based on sectarian and fundamentalist ideologies were created because of the hostile actions of the USA and its allies in Iraq and Syria. Earlier the USA had mobilized sectarian, fanatic militants from many Islamic countries and armed them heavily with the help of Pakistan to fight the Soviet army and the communist regime in Afghanistan. Over 15,000 of these armed militants later spread violent conflict in many other countries as well, while also attacking several US and western targets.

In Libya in 2011, the USA, Britain and France armed and used such militants for regime change in very violent ways, supported by thousands of air bombing raids. These militants again later troubled and destabilized several neighboring countries.

Hence it is evident that the most powerful Western countries have time and again intervened in other countries to disrupt democracies and to cause enormous human distress in other ways. It is such behavior by them that needs to be corrected. In addition, of course, ethical norms must be satisfied by all countries.

(The writer is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent books include Planet in Peril, A Day in 2071 and Protecting Earth for Children.)

100 YEARS AGO

OCCASIONAL NOTE

MR. MONTAGU'S reforms have admittedly blighted more than one promising career in the Indian Civil Service, and many of its members have been forced to resign through inability to conform to the new policy. The question "What to do with our ex-Civilians?" is being answered in a variety of ways, and of these not the least remarkable has been chosen by Sir John Maffey, who recently vacated the Chief Commissionership of the North West Frontier Province. At the age of 47 Sir John Maffey is about to carve out a career for himself in the City of London, having recently been admitted a partner in the firm of Messrs. Buckmaster and Moore, stock and share brokers. At first sight it might appear that the methods of the Indian Civil Service, especially in the Frontier Commission, were not the best suited to train up a young stock-broker in the way he should go. But the man who, with the all-important aid of Mrs. Starr, succeeded in forcing the border ruffians to yield up Miss Molly Ellis, may safely be trusted to confront the bulls and bears who are said to infest the purlieus of Throgmorton Street. Sir John Hewett is another ex-Civilian who has gone into business in London, and he has prospered in partnership with Sir David Yule.

NEWS ITEMS

"WARNING TO ALLIES"

BERLIN PRESS VIEWS ON ELECTION

("TIMES" SPECIAL SERVICE.)

THE Berlin Press as a whole derives cold comfort from the result of the elections. Some of the Nationalist newspapers are inclined, however, to read the result as a warning to the Allies, especially France, that Germany, backed by strong Nationalist representation, is in no mood to be trifled with.

The Borsen Zeitung and the Deutsch Allgemeine Zeitung both think that the election has facilitated the formation of a strong bourgeois Government and that Germany will in future be represented with greater dignity in her dealings with foreigners.

"This," it is added, "is something which France must note as it means that Germany will no longer tolerate further attempts to interfere with her internal policy."

The Kreuz Zeitung, representing the Nationalists foresees the possibility of an early dissolution and a new election, and this is also the view of the Borsen Courier which declares: "How the necessary two-thirds majority for the acceptance of the material requirements of the Experts' reports is to be obtained remains a puzzle."

Newspapers voicing the opinion of the Government parties shirk the question. Although the few outstanding results can have no appreciable effect on the position, they declare their inability to discuss the matter till the returns are complete.

MRS BESSANT ON INDIA

TO THE EDITOR OF THE STATESMAN."

Sir, I have read the leader about Mrs. Bessant in your issue of Friday last with regret not unmixed with surprise. Coming to your reading of Indian history, one may be permitted to doubt your dictum that Indian history, one may be permitted to doubt your dictum that India's interest was preeminently spiritual and philosophical. If you will care to investigate India's past from original Sanskrit and Pali sources, as some Indian writers have been doing recently, you will, I have little doubt, be satisfied that Indian civilisation was not the partial thing you make it out to be, with its head in the clouds, but was an all-round many-sided affair, and was firmly planted on what you call the political and the practical. One great characteristic of that civilisation was its wonderful power of assimilation. India has never stood for the formula which you attribute to her, that "alien contribution to her development has been unnecessary and iniquitous." On the contrary she gave welcome and asylum to Greek, Persian, Scythian, Pathan and Mongolian cultures, and was time after time enriched by them, but never suffered herself to be engulfed or overwhelmed-a phenomenon attributable to this power of assimilation. The same thing is true of European impact, and specially her contact with English civilisation and culture. Mrs. Bessant will be the last person to suggest that "all would have been well in India had not the English interfered." On the contrary, she, both in her speeches and her published writings, has said that the bringing of the English to India's soil was a dispensation of Providence, so as to build a bridge for the meeting of the East and the West, to lead in the fulness of time to that not very far off divine event to which things are moving-I mean the establishment of an Indo-British Commonwealth of free and federated States, with India as an equal partner with England. This is the one thing that really matters for the future of humanity; and the whole of Mrs. Bessant's political activities are directed towards that end.

Wildfires expose human incapacity

ACHYUT WAGLE

Nepal faced the rage of 32,645 large wildfires during the last decade. The data of the Forest Fire Detection and Monitoring System in Nepal shows that in the first five months of 2024, the incidence of wildfires crossed the 5,000 mark, way above the past yearly average. The economic, social, and environmental costs in the form of losses of human and domesticated animal lives, flora and fauna, disruption to the ecosystem and air pollution, among others, from both wild and other types of fires are colossal.

The global scenario is not much different: The annual average number of wildfires is about a million; in 2024 alone, more than a quarter of a million large-scale fire incidents have occurred across six continents. Repeated wildfires in uncontrollable scale and ferocity like in California, Australia, Amazonian forests and Indonesia in recent years have only exposed the absolute incapacity of human ingenuity and so-called scientific advancement to contain and control these disasters. About a million hectares of forest cover per week are destroyed and 604 million tons of carbon dioxide are released globally due to wildfires. The crisis is threatening human civilisation as personified in the proverbial "spreading like wildfire", uncontained.

Increased number of forest and other fire incidents, in overused gen-

erality, are attributed to climate change and its ensuing global warming. However, regarding specifics, scientists and researchers have miserably failed to predict the correlated possibility of fire incidents with rising earth surface and atmosphere temperatures. They seem so far more preoccupied with guesswork on glacial melt, sea level rise, desertification of land, etc. Recent actual occurrences of wildfire incidents and their intensity have exceeded far beyond any prediction by the entire scientific community.

Even rich and developed countries that boast of institutionalised and efficient disaster preparedness mechanism appear equally vulnerable in the face of wildfire. Other forms of after-effects of climate change, like unseasonal weather variation, impact on crops and sea level rise, may occur gradually. But wildfires are instantly making the earth uninhabitable, with increased density of carbon dioxide and smoke in the air, raising cities and settlements to the ground and destroying oxygen-generating vegetation.

To take a rather cynical view, the failure of rich and influential countries to prevent, control and manage fire-related disasters might compel them to walk the talk on preventing the adverse impacts of climate change. Otherwise, instead of initiating meaningful action, the First World has only lectured developing nations on their responsibility and the importance of containing carbon emissions and

global warming. The largest polluting countries have no plans to compromise their luxuries of travelling by personal cars, consuming fossil-fuel-generated electricity, switching off their air conditioners and refrigerators, reducing air travel and curtailing the ship-cargo-supported international trade. Replacement of energy sources for these fossil fuel intensive livelihood trends is not yet on the horizon. There is no sincere willingness to change the behaviour of the governments and citizens that end.

Despite the convenient stories played out by optimists about scientific progress, industrialisation, infrastructure development and economic growth, the past two centuries have proven to be the most destructive threat to the earth's existence. From 1950 to 2022, an estimated 1.5 trillion barrels of oil have been extracted from the earth. The coal and mineral extraction have been equally substantial. At present, globally, the daily average oil extraction is 103 million barrels, according to estimates by the US Energy Information Administration. It is growing at 4 per cent annually.

The euphemism of clean, green, or renewable energy is only tokenism or a sugar-coated saga. On the one hand, there has not been serious consideration and planning to completely replace petroleum-fuelled electricity generation. Not a single moderate-sized economy is contemplating that end, let alone the large ones. The scien-

tific community has not even piloted research to operate long-haul aircraft and ships with renewable energy. Large crafts and shipbuilders have already accepted large commercial delivery orders for the next two decades.

On the other, the scope of hydro-electricity is limited and more prone to uncertainty in the face of rapidly depleting sources like snow. The overhyped scope of clean energy from alternative sources like solar, wind, geothermal, etc., would certainly reduce direct emission of carbon dioxide, but components they use can only be produced by over-extraction of different metals and minerals. Their smelting and processing are beyond imagination without using fossil fuels in direct or indirect forms. The same applies to producing components and batteries needed for "renewable" energy and electric cars. The possible pollution, for example, from the used/disposed batteries, will perhaps be more hazardous as unrecyclable chemical and radioactive waste compared to fossil fuel-induced pollution. A monolithic energy transformation narrative is, therefore, only for political consumption.

Not only in fuel consumption, transportation, and production technologies, but all so-called disruptive scientific discoveries have proven more destructive than supportive to humanity and mother earth. The culmination of nuclear technology is impending nuclear warfare among the global superpowers. The aviation

industry produces more war planes than passenger aircraft. Weapon and ammunition manufacturing has used more technology than the vaccine and life-saving drug industry. Information technology has created an additive social media anarchy with a huge psychological toll on the young and future generations. Whether artificial intelligence would prove a better tool to enhance humanity or otherwise is yet to be seen.

An answer to the question of whether the invention of robots, drones or digital human replicas supported the poor, marginalised and deprived lot of humanity in any form is yet hardly affirmative. Equally intriguing is whether the insatiable quest for economic growth of countries and the prosperity of individuals were possible without harming the earth's sustainability.

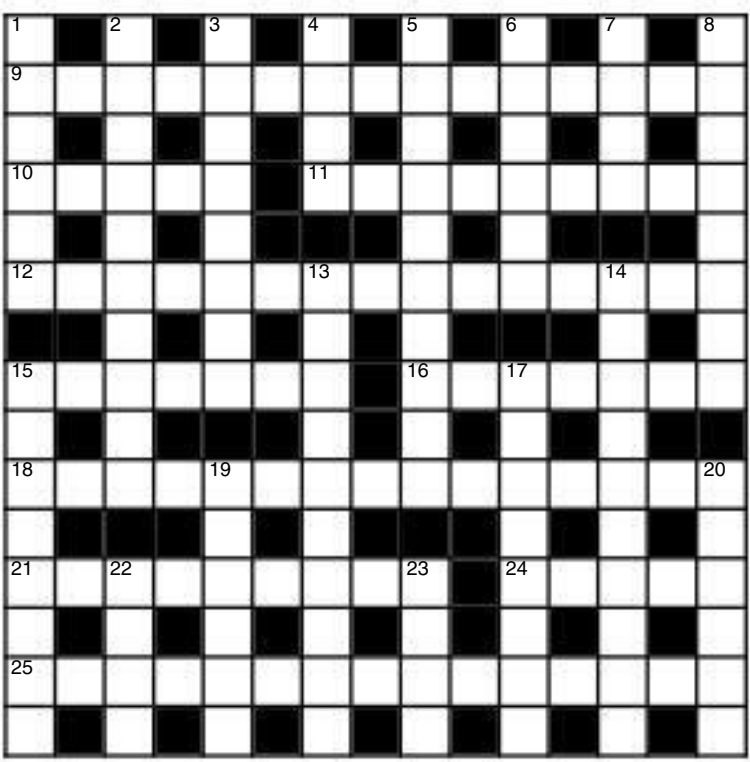
Even before the crises related to carbon emission, water scarcity and biodiversity loss, wildfires on the overheated earth's surface may soon make the planet uninhabitable to entire species of plants and animals. The helplessness in dealing with it is already evident in the utter shame of scientific and technological advancements.

If human sensitivity and empathy are not restored, science alone is unlikely to reverse this destructive consumerism, which is costing life on planet Earth itself.

The Kathmandu Post/ANN.

CROSSWORD

NO-292773



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

O E S N T D R
H O L D S W A Y U N I T E S
R G E M X P B
I N D Y D E P R E S S I O N
E E H D O O
S T E P O N E N O R M I T Y
T R T E A
B O R O U G H T S U N A M I
P U M T A
A D H E S I V E B E A U T Y
E R D N A I
O F F T H E M A R K B O N K
E I D C I A E
C A R I U S O E N N O B L E D
T S G S G A S

ACROSS

- 9 Cut some lessons, holding out for usual score (3,3,3,6)
10 Cancel, getting OK to be replaced by university show (5)
11 Realistic photo capturing two bits of fabric (9)
12 Agitated Britten finally added a solo aria with no life at all (4,2,1,8)
15 Tense women with exotic diets getting misrepresented (7)
16 Newspaper produced by retired journalists? (7)

DOWN

- 1 Well, Communist should be allowed to live (6)
2 Insignificant stuff - I bottle it in test (10)
3 Desire to include grandma in agreement (8)
4 Condescend to remove an old feature of organ (4)
5 Gave nothing to men at sea? Hurry up! (3,1,4,2)
6 Creator? Not now (6)
7 Persistence beginning to rankle in annoying character (4)
8 Line in what actress responds to indicates heroic figure (8)
13 Financial officer has some hesitation about one location of speech (10)

- 14 Weather device: article chaps set up before remote storms (10)
15 Redrafted one post about a source of stir (8)
17 Item to be kept secret? Mostly dull fool slipping up (8)
19 Hard to understand ordinary old man quite without attraction (6)
20 Elevated benefit in my song? (6)
22 Some stoner dude? (4)
23 Kind to support military's first exploit (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)



FIRST COLUMN

OVERCOMING BONDAGE OF THINKING

God's grace frees us from anguish, guides us on the right path



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

This is a cruel fact. We are hopelessly tied down by our thinking, especially negative. What do you see on roads? Older folks are engrossed in thoughts. What happened? They realized that they were not so great after all. But the obstinate ego would not allow them to seek help where it is available. If a solution to a problem is to be found, it must be; this is their thinking. Sure, but how long would you meditate on it? There should be a time limit. No, that is why obsession is a very common problem. Other ages are no better. The younger ones are guilty of lusty thoughts. With the advent of cell phones and the internet, age is no longer a bar. What a shame when one is supposed to be in the 'brahmacharya' (celibacy) stage. As one gets older, thoughts of earning the maximum amount of money capture the imagination. There is nothing wrong with it except our expectations should be based on reality. Otherwise, there will be a lot of pain. What is common to all ages is fear of different kinds. This is a real problem, which causes all kinds of mental diseases. This particular problem requires help at the highest level, that is from God, but will we turn to Him? Also common to all ages are hate, anger, enmity, etc. There is hardly any chance of relief when we think that we are the centre of the universe, even though there are eight billion of us. If that were true, there would be eight billion centres of the universe. See, how silly such thinking is. This is what is the basis of our thought process. The frog mentality of thinking one's limited knowledge is everything leads many to dismiss spiritual practices as simplistic, when in fact they are meant to be easily accessible to all.



Let us get to the bottom of this all-pervasive problem. What is this mind? It is a faculty given to us for thinking, willing and feeling. It is subtle, i.e. far more strong than the gross body. The mind affects the body, as we all have experienced. When we are disturbed, our bodies get affected; their working is disturbed. Why has God given us a faculty, which can hurt us so much? He had to to give us free will, which can bring bliss, as indicated by Lord Krishna, 'A person, having consciousness, unattached to external sense objects, enjoys that happiness within, which is extraordinary. He who, with consciousness united to Brahman, finds eternal joy. God's kindness lies in our return to Him, part of the Cosmic Design, where independence is limited, and control rests with God. So we must turn to God to control our uncontrolled and negative thinking. Lord Krishna States, "Undoubtedly the mind is very difficult to control due to its fickle nature, but it can be brought under control by practice and by detachment from inappropriate sense objects." (6.35) This practice has to be with help from God. Otherwise, there will be partial success only. As we age, our focus shifts towards God, as our physical pleasures diminish, highlighting the purpose of the "Ashram" system for spiritual growth in later years. Therefore, God has made provisions for unlimited mental enjoyment. But we have to seek shelter from God for that. We should not be turning to drinks, etc. for compensation to get over our woes, because they send us deeper into more suffering. Fear is a defence mechanism but only in the limited sense. It should alert us to take curative action. But if it overtakes our thinking, fear becomes a serious problem, as all mental diseases point to. The conclusion is: that we must turn to God with determination sooner than later. Then God will not only free us from the bondage of painful thinking but will also help us in all matters with His guidance and help. This is the way the System has been designed.

(The writer is a spiritual guide; views are personal)

Elected leaders need to rethink

It is time that elected representatives live up to the expectations of their electors as responsible, honest and devoted community leaders



These are election times and each one of us is a part of the process. These are also times of model code of conduct in the shape of guidelines for political parties and candidates. There are restrictions imposed by the election commission on the maximum expenditure a candidate could incur. Everyone knows what happens to it! In general, people are no more worried about spiralling high expenses that the spread of elections imposes on the candidate and State exchequer. The spread of elections leads to avoidable wastage of manpower and other resources required to conduct and complete the process. The worst sufferers are the schoolchildren, as teachers are the most easily available manpower for elections at every stage! Once elected, no one is willing to pave the way for the generation next! Election times also reveal the behavioural decline amongst those who had tasted the fruits of power earlier but were dethroned by the people. Their frustrations even bring forth utterances that may be blatantly unsocial, personal and not acceptable in a civil society. The elders have created conditions that demand innovative action by the young 'millennials' who must realize how their elders have decimated the basic principles of democracy by taking recourse to caste combinations, igniting regional and linguistic sentiments, and creating communal antagonism at the cost of deteriorating social cohesion! Independent India began its new journey at around 18% of literacy, today its boosts to nearly 80% of it despite the population increase of over 100 crores. We are a learning society. Our international standing is at its best after independence. One wonders why the language used by politicians against each other should become so coarse and uncivil. It could put to shame any decent educated person. Respect for the learned, committed and experienced is one of the most liked of the treasures of our heritage which unfortunately stands torn to tatters. India shall never be in a position to ignore the



ARTICULATING THE NORMAL EXPECTATIONS FROM THE ELECTED REPRESENTATIVE, APJ ABDUL KALAM WAS GIVING VOICE TO EVERY SANE INDIAN: "IT HAS BECOME CRUCIAL FOR US TO BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT WE CAN RIGHTLY EXPECT FROM OUR LEADERS, FROM PANCHAYAT MEMBERS TO MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT"

presence of great luminaries of contemporary times like Gandhi, Patel, Subhash Bose, Nehru, Rajendra Prasad and others. How could anyone who wishes to understand India do so without getting familiar with Swami Vivekananda, Ramkrishna Paramhans, Tagore or Sri Aurobindo? Hope lies only in those who were in schools a couple of years ago, and were mesmerized by a saint-scientist; the indomitable APJ Abdul Kalam. I had personally witnessed on numerous occasions how children of India fell in love with him. It was not because of his position or the Pokhran II, it was because of the love his persona emanated for every child, every Indian! India stands blessed with numerous such luminaries who could make a change in the area around their place. One wishes political aspirants learn from APJ, and other luminaries how to deal with people! APJ Abdul Kalam was one of the most admired and loved celebrities during the millennial transition to the 21st century. He was a professional leader who led by example, through heart-to-heart connections with one and all. His dedication and devotion to the national cause were of the highest order. He inspired, he motivated and he achieved his target with gusto. He could win over every Indian irrespective of their socio-economic station in life, his profession or his ideological leanings. APJ endeared himself particularly to the children of India in whom he could see the emerging India, the future India! He ignited the curiosity and creativity of millions of children. He gave them 'wings of fire'. He entered the Rashtartapati Bhavan with two bags and left with the same after five years. India needs people with such

personalities right from the panchayat level to the Parliament with whom every individual could feel connected, who may be acknowledged as 'approachable'. All this, and much more; reverberates in one's mind as various inputs concerning the general elections float before everyone. Each one of us who has voted over a dozen times in general elections would love to talk about the drastic change that has occurred in the quality of leadership on a larger scale, the deterioration in mutual respect and regard amongst those in public life, in power or opposition. We are witness to the usage of a language for the opponents that would have shamed everyone some five decades ago. Today, no one seems to be worried about it. The only encouraging sign is that all this is being noted by the voters, and they are despising it. In the long run, one could say with confidence that it would not work in favour of the truants. Sadly enough, the defects of elections about whom Gandhi had written as early as 1922, have reached every stage of elections, including even those of panchayat Raj bodies. One must not give up hope. And there is always hope for the better after having reached the bottom. Articulating the normal expectations from the elected representatives, APJ Abdul Kalam was giving voice to every sane Indian: "It has become crucial for us to be clear about what we can rightly expect from our leaders, from panchayat members to local councillors of a municipal corporation to members of parliament." In other words, there has to be ownership. Whether it is the panchayat member, development officer, councillor, MLA MP or minister, they have to at least try to be

the best of their ability to do what they are elected to do. We need a Parliament with a vision, one that has the larger picture in mind and can rise above petty party politics. How would such a parliament perform? What are how it can play a far more constructive role than it has in the last Lok Sabha? I would also expect that the Hon'ble members of the next Lok Sabha shall firmly and sincerely resolve not to present before the nation any spectacles that disturb the functioning of the August House, and present a poor example before the young of India. What was happening till now, was a matter of serious concern for the last couple of decades. It was precisely articulated with great concern by the veteran politician C. Subramaniam: "The indiscipline that marks the proceedings of parliament and legislatures is a matter of great concern. Not only pandemonium is created obstructing the proceedings of the legislatures but also acts of violence among the members inside the legislatures are becoming common and an almost everyday occurrence. Nobody is prepared to observe the rules of the game. Then how can we expect the masses of the people to observe discipline and respect the laws and regulations?" It is time that future MPs and other elected representatives live up to the expectations of their electors as responsible, honest and devoted community leaders. They have to be a source of inspiration to generations ahead. Let them resolve not to let even a minute of parliament's time be wasted! It would be a great gift to the nation! (The author works in education, social cohesion and religious amity, views are personal)

Benevolent hearts: Dynamics of begging and household donations

Despite legal prohibitions in many States, begging persists with beggars being one of the highest recipients of household donations

Begging is a ubiquitous phenomenon in India and is hidden in plain sight. Perceptions of 'persons engaged in Beggary' may vary but it is also evident that many households donate to them. 'Persons engaged in Beggary' are largely missing from the discussions on public policy in the country. A recent study by the Centre of Social Impact and Philanthropy (CSIP) at Ashoka University showed that 'persons engaged in Beggary' are one of the highest recipients of household donations, ranking only after 'religious organisations'. This leads us to question, what are the motivations that lead households in such a large proportion to donate to 'persons engaged in Beggary'. Who are the biggest donation-makers to



SHAIVYA VERMA

'beggars' with respect to gender, geography and age? And in what 'form' donations are received by the 'persons engaged in Beggary'? Even though begging is not a crime it is legally prohibited in more than twenty States and Union Territories and can invite punishment for one year to 10 years and even beyond under special circumstances. The pros and cons of the existing laws are another

debate. The study by CSIP showed a 14% increase in total 'cash' donations by Indian households from INR 23.7 thousand crores in 2020-21 to INR 27 thousand crores in 2021-22 of which 'persons engaged in Beggary' are one of the preferred recipients of household giving among 'religious organisations', 'non-religious organisations', 'family and friends', 'household staff', and 'supporting a cause or signing a petition'. They are the second highest recipient of household donations both in terms of overall market size and the proportion of households who made donations to them among other recipient groups in the study. The report further notes that the market size and the average cash payments to

the 'persons engaged in Beggary' have increased from 2020-21 to 2021-22. While 'persons engaged in Beggary' are one of the preferred recipients, households do not trust them with their money but with materials. Despite a high proportion of households who donated to 'persons engaged in beggary' they received the lowest value of 'cash' donations from households (under INR 100). While 'persons engaged in Beggary' were least preferred for 'cash' donations as compared to other recipient groups in the study, a clear preference to donate 'in-kind' was noted for this recipient group. More than half of those donating to 'persons engaged in Beggary' donated 'in-kind' which is starkly different from 'in-kind'

donations received by other recipient groups. Households are mostly driven by their intrinsic motivations when giving to the 'persons engaged in Beggary'. 'Religious beliefs' are one of the top motivators. It guided 55% of households that gave to the 'persons engaged in Beggary'. Religious beliefs can be understood as 'helping others is a way to serve God', and 'good karma/ Almighty rewards good deeds'. Furthermore, 'family traditions' play an important role in motivating households to give to the 'persons engaged in Beggary'. They are also affected by the visible hardship due to poverty and are driven to donate in order to support someone in financial distress. Rendering 'seva' or service

also emerged as a significant motivation for giving to 'persons engaged in Beggary'. Households also find it easier to give in smaller amounts in 'cash', which leads many households to offer some money to 'persons engaged in Beggary'. About 60% proportion of households responded to have donated to them. The study also found that donations made to 'persons engaged in Beggary' were in the range of smaller amounts 'under INR 100'. It was intriguing to find that the givers who are more empathetic to the 'persons engaged in Beggary' are the people who have a 'vulnerable' position in society and are mainly dependent on others for social and economic security. Older women and households from

rural areas and from lower socio-economic categories are primary givers to 'persons engaged in Beggary'. More households from rural India donate to 'persons engaged in Beggary' than households from large towns. In fact, the proportion of households making offerings to 'persons engaged in Beggary' in rural India was higher than the national average of the proportion of households who gave to 'persons engaged in Beggary'. Similarly, 'giving' by lower socioeconomic category (SEC D/E) to 'persons engaged in Beggary' was higher than the national average. While about 53% of households from higher and middle socio-economic categories (SEC A, SEC B and SEC C) contributed, more

than 65% of households contributed towards 'persons engaged in Beggary' from the lower socioeconomic groups (SEC D/E). In terms of gender and age, older women between the ages of 46 to 60 years are the biggest and primary donation-makers to the 'persons engaged in Beggary'. Beggary in many forms has been in existence for ages. Due to the hardships faced, persons engaged in Beggary usually suffer from negativity, hopelessness, low self-esteem and stigma. In India, 'people engaged in Beggary' are often seen outside religious places. The writer is Senior Research Manager at the Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy (CSIP), Ashoka University. Views expressed are personal



OPINION

The
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{ OUR TAKE }

Israel has lost the plot on Gaza

The war is no more about Tel Aviv’s right to self-defence but increasingly driven by domestic political compulsions

Israel has opted to launch a fresh incursion in the Gaza Strip even after Hamas accepted a ceasefire proposal put forward by Egypt and Qatar and the United States and the European Union (EU) warned against going ahead with such an assault, reflecting how Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has spurned mounting international concerns about the conflict. While Israel’s anger after the brazen October 7 terror attacks was understandable, its war has now reached a stage where it is being waged for the sake of waging one. Netanyahu’s goal of ridding Gaza of Hamas now has genocidal implications, since Israeli forces are showing no signs of distinguishing between terrorist fighters and helpless citizens and even international aid workers. In vast swathes of the Gaza Strip, ground to dust by the advanced weaponry provided to the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) by the US and other western partners, such distinctions have disappeared.

With Israeli forces taking control of the crucial Rafah crossing on the frontier with Egypt and Israeli jets continuing to bombard other parts of one of the world’s most densely populated enclaves, western officials have warned that there is no longer any safe zone in all of Gaza and that up to 600,000 children could now be in danger.

Already, the unfettered Israeli onslaught on Gaza has resulted in nearly 35,000 deaths, many of them women and children. It would appear the Netanyahu government’s real aim is to both prolong its grip on power and obliterate any possibility of a two-State solution. The US and other European allies of Israel have lost all moral claims to a rules-based order by letting Israel continue this war, which is no more about its right to self-defence.

The war may suit Netanyahu’s domestic political needs, but the liberal world is the loser for it. The unrest on American campuses, public protests in European countries and growing unease on the streets of Arab nations are an indication of which way public opinion is turning. Some say Israel’s behaviour may even cost US President Joe Biden his re-election. India too will find it difficult to defend Israel’s actions, given its need to balance relations with the Arab world. Peace needs to be pursued at all costs in Gaza since this has long ceased to be a localised conflict. It is only luck, and a lot of diplomacy, that have thus far ensured it has not turned into a regional war.

Strengthen laws to deter drink driving

The high prevalence of drink driving on the national Capital’s roads points to the failure of punitive provisions. Official data shows a sharp spike in drink driving fines this year up to March 31, compared with the corresponding period last year. The scale of this problem is evident from a recent survey which found that 81% of the respondents reported driving while drunk during August-December last year. The costs of this are significant. As per a 2023 report by IIT-Delhi researchers, official data pegs driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs as the cause of just 3% of road accident deaths, but independent studies, also referred to in the research, say alcohol/drugs could be a contributing factor for 20-30% of fatal crashes.

One reason for this is inadequate deterrence. Indian law provides for both fines and imprisonment — fines, of course, are the de facto punishment. However, at Rs 10,000 for the first offence and Rs 15,000 for the second (within three years of the first), these have had only limited effect in curbing drink driving. India needs to draw lessons in deterrence from countries that have managed to deal with this situation better. For instance, a 2022 research indicates that strengthening laws against drinking and driving, especially a zero-tolerance policy for new drivers, helped Germany bring down alcohol-related crashes by 50% between 2000 and 2018. Tying fines to the disposable income of the driver — with a high enough floor — as Germany does is something Indian policymakers could consider. The German law also provides for licence revocation in certain circumstances, following which the offender can apply for a licence only after the expiry of a certain period. Another means to deter drink driving is to bring down the permissible limit of blood alcohol content. At 0.03%, India’s is lower than the permissible limit in many western nations but higher than that in many other countries where incidence of drink driving accidents is low.

In West Bengal, caste links with Hindutva

The political growth of the BJP in Bengal is driven by the successful mobilisation of several lower caste groups, but the logic behind this draws heavily from the conventional ideological template of Hindutva

From a state known for the class politics of the Left, West Bengal now seems to have emerged as a new laboratory of identity politics. Political analysts are currently concentrating on what, on the surface, appears as signs of caste-based political assertion by several lower caste groups. However, a closer analysis divulges a curious reality. What West Bengal is currently witnessing is not conventional caste politics, but an extraordinary marriage between the politics of Hindutva and the politics of caste, where the former informs the logic underlying the latter.

It is widely believed that the general castes constitute the main support base of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), but the current political dynamics in West Bengal present a picture contrary to this conventional wisdom. The BJP has been struggling to win elections in the upper caste-dominated Greater Kolkata and its surrounding areas in South Bengal. In the ongoing Lok Sabha elections too, the party is not expected to do well in

this region. But it has made impressive political inroads in several pockets dominated by the subaltern population. Some of these areas are the Matua belt in South Bengal, North Bengal districts populated by the Rajbanshis, Midnapore that is home to Mahishyas, and Janglemahal with its large tribal presence.

The support that the BJP currently enjoys among the lower caste Namasudras, who mostly belong to the anti-Brahmanical Matua sect is quite formidable. The citizenship status of many among the Namasudras remains uncertain. The Namasudras, originally hailing from East Pakistan/Bangladesh, were forced to migrate at different intervals in the decades following Partition in 1947 on account of religious persecution. The BJP’s outreach to the Matua-Namasudra community is based on the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 (CAA), which promises to eliminate their citizenship-related woes.

However, given the anti-Brahmanical character of the Matua sect, the BJP’s growing traction among the Matua-Namasudra community raises an important question: Is their political allegiance to the BJP merely a tactical stance influenced by citizenship-related demands or is it also an expression of ideological commitment? Undoubtedly, the Namasudras transferred their political allegiance to the BJP due to the enactment of the CAA. But the CAA is not merely a piece of legislation; it is an entire political discourse, which has reopened the repressed wounds of Partition and politicised the collective memory of

religious persecution suffered by the Namasudra refugees. It has enabled the BJP to politically organise the Namasudras not as a lower caste group but as a religiously exploited group of Hindu refugees. This has created among the Namasudras a strong impetus for the development of ideological sympathies for the politics of Hindutva. The recent notification of the Citizenship Amendment Rules, 2024 (CAR) is also aimed at consolidating the Namasudra support in favour of the BJP. However, the application process and documentation requirements as mandated by CAR have created a great deal of anxiety and resentment. Still, it is unlikely that the majority of BJP supporters will turn away from the party. This is due to the powerful ideological pull of Hindutva. For many, CAA is not only about legally acquiring citizenship but also about discouraging the migration of Bangladeshi Muslims.

Elsewhere in the state, one of the main reasons behind the BJP’s spectacular political rise in North Bengal is its success in winning the support of the Rajbanshi community. Historically, the Rajbanshis, who claim to be the original inhabitants of North Bengal, have remained at the forefront of a movement demanding the creation of a separate state within the Indian Union, comprising parts of North Bengal. The influx of outsiders, mainly immigrant Bengalis, locally known as Bhatias, is seen by the Rajbanshis as a threat to their livelihood and culture. Apparently, the BJP’s tacit support for the demand for a separate state has contributed to its



The support that the BJP currently enjoys among the lower caste Namasudras is quite formidable

growing appeal among the Rajbanshis. The party’s recent move in sending Ananta Maharaj to the Rajya Sabha from West Bengal was seen as a manifestation of such support. Ananta Maharaj heads an influential faction of the Greater Cooch Behar People’s Association, a group that has been demanding the formation of a separate Cooch Behar state or Union Territory constitutive of portions of North Bengal. This demand for territorial and cultural autonomy has also made many among the Rajbanshis quite sympathetic to the BJP’s idea of a National Registry of Citizens (NRC). An NRC-like exercise is increasingly considered necessary by them for the expulsion of illegal Bangladeshis from North Bengal.

The BJP has also spiritedly advocated granting of Other Backward Class (OBC) status to Hindu intermediate castes such as the Mahishyas. Significantly, the BJP’s argument for the inclusion of Mahishyas into the OBC category is connected to the conventional Hindutva narrative of Muslim appeasement. Highlighting the disproportionate inclusion of a large number of Muslim groups into the OBC list by the Trinamool Congress government, the BJP has accused the TMC of deliberately depriving deserv-

ing Hindu intermediate castes to unduly favour the Muslims.

The political growth of the BJP in West Bengal is driven considerably by the successful mobilisation of several lower caste groups — but the logic of this mobilisation draws heavily from the conventional ideological template of Hindutva. Such a scenario problematises the widely held proposition that the politics of caste and politics of Hindu nationalism are inherently antithetical and that the political articulation of Dalit or lower caste identity is necessarily an effective antidote to the Hindutva agenda of Hindu consolidation. Contemporary Bengal politics demonstrates that the politics of caste and politics of religion, far from being mutually incompatible, can seamlessly blend and integrate. It draws our attention to the need for a new analytical framework for comprehending the emerging nexus between the politics of caste and the politics of Hindutva.

Ayan Guha is a British Academy International Fellow, School of Global Studies, University of Sussex. He is the author of the book *The Curious Trajectory of Caste in West Bengal Politics: Chronically Continuity and Change* (Brill, 2022). The views expressed are personal

{ SIMPLY ECONOMICS }

Pramit Bhattacharya



Extraordinary legacy of a grounded economist

Next Monday (May 13) will mark the 100th birth anniversary of one of India’s most accomplished economists. Kakkadan Nandanath Rajan, popularly known as KN Raj joined the Reserve Bank of India in 1947 soon after finishing his PhD from the London School of Economics, and prepared independent India’s first balance of payment estimates.

Raj then moved on to the newly created Planning Commission, helping draft India’s first five-year plan. Raj’s forecast of India’s savings trajectory turned out to be quite prescient, and he was called upon to firm up India’s official savings and investments data decades later.

Raj’s student, KP Kannan, credits Raj with shaping three important economic institutions of the post-Independence era: The Delhi School of Economics (DSE), the Thiruvananthapuram-based Centre for Development Studies (CDS), and the social science journal *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW). DSE was founded by another economic giant, VKRV Rao. It reached its peak during Raj’s long stint as its director. Raj left Delhi in 1971, at the height of his career, and set up CDS in Kerala. Raj’s presence helped attract global scholars to the new institution. Raj was also closely involved in setting up the Mumbai-based *Economic Weekly* (which later became the *EPW*) founded by Sachin Chaudhuri. He was a founder-trustee of the Sameeksha Trust, which publishes *EPW* and remained on its board till his death in 2010.

A doyen of Left-Keynesian economists, Raj found admirers even among economists who leaned Right. The free trade champion Jagdish Bhagwati who disagreed with Raj on many policy issues still found much to learn from him. “You are India’s most valuable resource, and you should consider it a social obligation to take good care of yourself,” Bhagwati wrote to Raj after the latter had fallen ill in 1986.

There are many lessons for economists and policy practitioners in Raj’s life and work. But three of Raj’s traits deserve special mention: His granular understanding of the economy, deep empiricism, and unwavering integrity.

Raj’s global fame owed a great deal to his intensive and incisive research on his home state. He was the first to highlight the distinctive patterns of Kerala’s development path, much before it came to be seen as a “model”. Despite its low per capita income, Kerala had raced ahead of the country in educational and health outcomes, Raj noted in a landmark 1975 study on the state’s development trajectory. He attributed that success to the historic welfare interventions by the

princely rulers during the pre-Independence era and pro-poor policies of successive state governments in the post-Independence period. At the same time, he also highlighted the need for industrialisation to tackle the state’s twin problems of unemployment and under-employment.

An empiricist par excellence, Raj refused to engage in “endless and mindless” regression models. He subjected all databases to relentless scrutiny and cross-checks before relying on them. And often enough, he was able to draw powerful insights using basic descriptive statistics. In his 1975 study on Kerala, Raj used data on agri-production, nutrition (including primary survey data) and health to poke holes in the National Sample Survey (NSS) consumer expenditure reports. The NSS reports omitted coconut kernels from the food consumption tables while underestimating the consumption of tapioca and bananas (important food items in Kerala). Raj provided alternative estimates of food consumption and argued that his estimates reflected the state’s reality better.

Raj had the ear of several Prime Ministers (PMs) from Jawaharlal Nehru to Manmohan Singh and several chief ministers (from EMS Namboodiripad to C Achutha Menon). Yet, he didn’t shy away from taking a stand against them when the need arose. When a part of Raj’s interview to the All India Radio was censored in 1974, Raj complained to the then information and broadcasting minister, IK Gujral and the then PM, Indira Gandhi. Gujral justified the censorship while Gandhi claimed she was completely against censorship, “even mild forms of it”. Raj pointed out the contradiction between the two in a letter to Gujral. After failing to receive a satisfactory response, he publicly aired his concerns.

Later, Raj would share the entire set of correspondence on this issue with the Shah Commission that examined the excesses of the Emergency years (1975-77). Raj argued that the authoritarian abuses did not start during the Emergency but had been growing over time. “The middle and upper classes of our country had been generally acquiescing in such abuses as long as they were not directly affected very much... and similar things could happen again unless we viewed such abuses of power not merely as the aberrations of particular individuals but as part of a larger phenomenon reflecting a deeper malaise,” wrote Raj in his letter to the Shah Commission secretary.

Nonetheless, Gandhi still consulted Raj on economic matters when she returned to office in 1980. Raj also clashed swords with Namboodiripad but the latter continued to engage with him till the end. Raj’s advocacy was motivated by public interest, not the desire for a public post. This earned him respect across the political spectrum.

Pramit Bhattacharya is a Chennai-based journalist. The writer is grateful to KN Raj’s son, Gopal Raj, for allowing him to browse through some of Raj’s correspondence. The views expressed are personal

{ JOSEP BORELL } EU FOREIGN POLICY CHIEF



In spite of warnings, the Rafah offensive has started again. I am afraid that this is going to again cause a lot of civilian casualties. There is no safe zone in Gaza



Prajwal Revanna tapes call for a collective response

It is perhaps India’s saddest secret. I saw it in Tamil movies of yore often with Rajinikanth as the hero. The scene: A feudal landlord is being driven in a horse carriage, bullock cart or car through his lands. He spots a woman working in his fields and fancies her. He sends word through one of his lackeys that the woman needs to appear at his farmhouse that evening. He takes her into his bedroom and rapes her. The scene typically shows the woman pleading with him to leave her alone. The words are different in different Indian tongues — Ayya, Anna, Hukum, Sahib, Mahoday — but they all convey power and a feudal hierarchy where women are viewed as the property of the landowner, much like his cattle or crops. He takes what he wants because he is entitled.

In Hassan, the videos have the women pleading with Prajwal Revanna to leave them alone. “Beda (No) Anna (Big brother). Nanna bitbidi (Please leave me alone),” they plead, calling him their elder brother. There are tales of how Bhavani Revanna, Prajwal’s mother, tells the girl students in the college that she oversees — that she has two sons but all the girl students are her daughters.

When thinking about Prajwal Revanna and how to handle his case, it is good to remember this intricate web of relationships that defines the landscape of Hassan where this sordid tale is playing out.

I haven’t seen the sex tapes that Prajwal made when he was raping these women. I have to admit a prurient curiosity — I want to see them. But I have read descriptions of the tapes and talked to scores of people about how Prajwal filmed the women he was raping even as they pleaded with him.

In Karnataka, there have been accusations thrown between party heavyweights about who revealed the tapes and how. HD Kumaraswamy (Prajwal’s father’s younger brother) has accused deputy chief minister DK Shivakumar of releasing the tapes and said he could have at least blurred the faces of the women in the video — an odd piece of sensitivity in this scandal. In places like Hassan, the story goes, everyone knows everyone’s business.

In incidents of sexual assault and rape, India, and indeed the world, has a tendency to blame the woman — the victim. “She must have been wearing something provocative to instigate him into rape,” is a common one. In this case, however, and thank god for this, it seems obvious to everyone that the women were victims of one family’s power over their lives, not agent provocateurs.

Is there any good that can come out of what has happened to the women of Holenarsipura? In my view, the only way out for these women who have been abused is to unite.

The sad truth is that sexual abuse of women has precedents in India and the world. These women who have been raped by Prajwal need to add their narrative to the Me Too movement. Only by uniting as victims can they get their voice heard. Only by coming together and holding hands as a sisterhood can they change the narrative.

Although I cannot pull out statistics, I would be willing to wager that every single woman in India — and I include myself in this category — has experienced some sort of sexual molestation ranging from groping and pinching to rape and assault. The foremost emotion that you feel is shame and self-blame.

The women of Hassan need help from sensitive and strong lawyers in order to turn the spotlight on the real perpetrators of this crime: Prajwal, his father and his family. Victimhood can be erased by coming together as a community. These women need to come together and stand up for themselves instead of hanging their heads in shame.

The way that the SIT, the courts, the state and the country handle this case could change the trajectory of millions of women who suffer unwanted advances from powerful men all over India. It could help these women realise that they can come together and say, “Enough”. It could even give powerful men — politicians and otherwise — pause before they lay hands on another woman.

Shoba Narayan is a writer and journalist. The views expressed are personal



Challenges to climate policy

As the preparatory talks begin ahead of the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 29), the key questions that need answers are whether the funding commitments made by the rich nations in the past have been honoured and which direction the global efforts in fighting the climate crisis are moving. It is time for a candid reality check as the industrialised world has failed to meet the \$100 billion annual commitment made over a decade ago. Given the scale of the global needs, it is a paltry amount. Even that commitment has not been fulfilled so far. The flow of funds has been erratic and inadequate over the years. The Conference of Parties (COP 29) will be held in November in Baku, the capital city of Azerbaijan, amid two big wars — the Ukraine invasion and the Israel-Gaza conflict — raging in neighbouring regions and worsening geopolitical tensions. But it is hoped that the climate summit, to be attended by representatives from 196 countries, could become an engine for peace, by finding a common ground among countries in the urgent need to tackle global heating. Setting new targets for climate finance topped the agenda at Petersberg Climate Dialogue, held in Berlin as a preparatory exercise ahead of the Baku summit. Low-income countries have long complained of the failed climate finance promises. As negotiators set their eyes on the revised commitment, it is also time to reflect and learn from past experience.

At the 2023 Climate Change Conference held at Dubai — COP28 —, the countries had agreed “to end the age of fossil fuels,” keep the target of limiting the global temperatures to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels within reach, triple renewable energy capacities and double improvements in energy efficiency, and halt deforestation by 2030. There is a need to establish new and innovative sources of finance while linking climate policy planning, project implementation, and public and private financing. While fighting climate change is everyone’s job, the rich and developed countries must bear the bulk of that responsibility, not just because they have caused most of the emissions but also because they have greater resources and capacity to act. As countries prepare to submit the next round of nationally determined contributions (NDCs), there must be a coordinated mechanism to support poorer and vulnerable countries in drafting and implementing their NDCs. There are multiple challenges to the international climate policy. The climate crisis is likely to exacerbate food and water shortages and could increase migration, adding to pressures on states and potentially sparking border issues. For India, the deliberations provide yet another opportunity to voice the concerns of the developing countries. India cites its low per capita emissions to counter any international demand to cap its overall emissions, arguing that it needs to lift its people to similar standards of living as in the developed countries.

It is time for a candid reality check as the industrialised world has failed to meet the funding commitment



VLADIMIR PUTIN
Russian President

“We do not refuse dialogue with Western states. The choice is theirs: do they intend to continue trying to restrain the development of Russia, ... or look for a path to cooperation and peace



MANISH TEWARI
Congress Chandigarh LS candidate

During the last 10 years, people have only seen backbreaking price rise and widespread unemployment. The BJP still does not have anything to offer ... other than deliver ‘jumla after jumla’



MAMATA BANERJEE
West Bengal Chief Minister

EC’s Model Code of Conduct should be rechristened as Modi Code of Conduct. But we will continue to flag every incident of violation of rights of citizens of this country

Echoes of ‘India Shining’?

A hat-trick with issues like anti-incumbency, religious and regional polarisations is going to be a tough task for BJP



Dr MANIKYA MAHESH

Is India once again witnessing the ‘India Shining’ phenomenon of 2004, after exactly 20 years? While Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is confident of winning back the people’s mandate for the third time in a row, many sections of the Indian intelligentsia are doubting the tall claims of the ruling party. It’s reminiscent of one of India’s most popular prime ministers, Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s, election campaign in 2004. Back then, the Prime Minister and his party came up with a powerful two-word election slogan called ‘India Shining,’ believing in India’s growth on many fronts under their rule.

Vajpayee’s Leadership

As an administrator, Vajpayee had garnered positivity among various sections, thanks to the nuclear tests under his leadership, which became an international talking point in geopolitics. Many compared Vajpayee’s leadership to that of Indira Gandhi, who also conducted nuclear tests during her tenure. The nuclear tests elevated India’s status to a nuclear power, igniting patriotic fervour across the nation.

Vajpayee’s welfare schemes and infrastructure boosts, like the Swarna Jayanti National Highway Programme, were considered game-changers for the Indian road mobility sector. Alongside these factors, the BJP leadership believed there was no competition for them, especially from the Congress under the political novice Sonia Gandhi as its president. However, despite the blitzkrieg campaign, the NDA led by Vajpayee’s BJP lost the elections. Post-elections, many BJP leaders, including senior leader LK Advani, ad-



mitted that their campaign slogan ‘India Shining’ overshadowed the harsh realities of a struggling economy, unemployment and poverty.

Case of Déjà Vu?

This background echoes the same confidence and campaign tenets of today’s ruling BJP party. The party has initiated the election campaign with ‘Abki Baar 400 Paar,’ literally meaning they aim for 400-plus Lok Sabha seats in the parliamentary polls. The BJP might have its reasons for such a strong slogan, such as the long-awaited Ram Mandir temple construction in Ayodhya, accolades to India, especially Prime Minister Modi, in international politics, economic reforms, welfare programmes for various sectors and a slow but steady economy.

However, unprecedented unemployment and the Covid-19 crisis, leading to job losses in many informal sectors, along with agitations against the agriculture farm laws, slowing economy

and petrol price rise are likely to affect the BJP’s electoral dividends this time.

Apart from numerous administrative and policy-related shortcomings to the resounding ‘Ab Ki Baar 400 Paar’ slogan, there are significant political challenges hindering BJP-led NDA prospects in the current polls. The major challenge, having peaked in all large States in North India in the last elections, is expected to be the biggest hurdle in repeating the electoral magic. Especially in States like Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh,

When the NDA led by Vajpayee’s BJP lost, many admitted that their ‘India Shining’ slogan cast a shadow on the harsh realities of economy, unemployment, poverty

where BJP scored nearly 100 per cent last time, the party is facing tough challenges from the Congress in Rajasthan and Gujarat and regional parties elsewhere. It also faces challenges in the largest State, Uttar Pradesh, with the Congress and the Samajwadi Party forming an I.N.D.I.A alliance. Even replicating the same success as in 2019 in West Bengal poses another challenge for the BJP.

Distant South

Apart from the challenges in the Hindi belt and North India, the BJP always faces hurdles in the South during parliamentary polls. In the entire 132 seats in South India last time, the saffron party only secured 29 seats, with Karnataka being the major contributor. However, this time, the ruling Congress is aiming for a major share in the current polls in Karnataka. Ground reports from media sources suggest Tamil Nadu is disappointing the BJP despite its high-stake campaign.

But the BJP, as an organisation, has significantly strengthened its support ecosystem over the last decade, unlike during the 2004 elections. Many are pondering over the BJP and its leadership raising highly polarised issues, including direct references to the Muslim community, instead of the much-hyped ‘Modi ki Guarantee’ by the party. While some consider this a sign of weakness and lack of confidence in winning big in elections, others in the party believe that such highly polarised speeches will eventually lead them to big numbers in the final tally.

This heavy polarisation is a double-edged sword, as it may lead to the polarisation of minorities and ultimately benefit regional forces and the Congress. However, it appears that the BJP still has an edge over the scattered opposition block under the India alliance.

Repeat or Reject

Repeating victory for the third time in the Indian general elections only happened once under the leadership of the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru during the 1960s, when there weren’t many opposition parties. But repeating the hat-trick with issues like anti-incumbency, religious and regional polarisations and fast-changing aspirations of voters is going to be a tough task for the BJP, for sure.

If issues like employment and regional aspirations, along with a desire for change, resonate with the people, the déjà vu of ‘India Shining’ in 2004 will definitely be repeated in 2024. The question remains: will the BJP fall flat like in 2004 with the ‘India Shining’ campaign, or will it come back to power? The fate of India, and especially Modi 3.0, lies in the hands of the people. We have to wait until June 4th, the election results day, for answers.

(The author is senior journalist with over 15 years of experience in media and public relations)

Letters to the Editor

Go slow

Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu’s pro-China stance and anti-India rhetoric are here to stay but how long is the question. Muizzu had set May 10 as the deadline for withdrawal of Indian troops from his country. Maldives is a country that thrives on tourism. India was keen to use tourism as a handy tool to beat Maldives. For a giant nation like India, carrying small neighbours together can be a diplomatic victory but that can be done with tact and with New Delhi’s dephenation policy nothing is impossible.

GANAPATHI BHAT, Akola

Worrying factor

It is unfortunate that in the world’s largest democracy, press freedom has been on a constant decline. Many observers describe a decline in the quality of freedom of expression in India ever since the BJP came to power in 2014. Press is called the fourth pillar of democracy, but its state has been a worrying factor in the last few years. Journalists, especially from smaller media outlets, have constantly been facing harassment and threats. But every attack on the fundamental right of freedom of speech and expression only adds to the strength of the Fourth Estate.

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR, Chennai

Artificially ripened mangoes

A study carried out by the scientists of the University of Hyderabad demonstrated that consuming mangoes can be a remedy for many gastrointestinal problems. But mangoes available in the market are artificially ripened using banned substances. Consuming them causes diarrhoea and stomach upset contrary to the findings of the above study. The Food Safety & Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) permits the use of ethylene gas for artificial ripening of fruits. It is not clear who is responsible for ensuring that the FSSAI-permitted method is used to ripen mangoes since the available ones in the market are illegally ripened. Consumers are advised to buy from reliable sources, but none appears to be reliable. Why do the government authorities miserably fail to ensure that people get healthy and tasty mangoes?

DR O PRASADA RAO, Hyderabad

Don’t panic

This refers to the Edit ‘No need for panic’ (May 6). Concerns about the safety of the Covishield vaccine have returned with British pharmaceutical major AstraZeneca, which developed Covishield, admitting that the vaccine has a rare side effect that causes blood clots. This has raised an alarm in India as it is the same vaccine manufactured by Serum Institute and administered to a majority of the country’s population during the pandemic. Reassurance from doctors that there is no need to panic is comforting.

KS RAO, Thane

Every vote is precious

Often, people choose not to vote because they feel their vote does not count. But one vote does count in many ways. Your choice to vote or not will have far-reaching consequences on people. The most common reason people say they do not vote is: one vote does not count. If everyone uses an excuse and does not vote, then what kind of government would we be having?

JUBEL D’CRUZ, Mumbai

India in the hotspot

■ CNN

Why hasn’t this iron pillar in India ever rusted?

Can an iron structure stand tall for 1,600 years without rusting, despite being exposed to the elements? It seems implausible, considering the supposed lack of technology at the time of its construction. Yet, inside UNESCO-listed Qutb Minar complex one mysterious structure stands as a testament to this very enigma.

■ The Straits Times

How Modi’s BJP plans to win a supermajority

As India votes in a six-week general election, Narendra Modi’s image adorns everything from packs of rice handed out to the poor to large posters in cities and towns. His Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is relying on the prime minister’s popularity as it seeks a super-majority in India’s parliament.

■ Al Jazeera

Manipuris can’t go back a year after fleeing violence

Lingneifel Vaiphei collapsed to the ground in agony after she saw the lifeless body of her infant child laid out on a cold steel stretcher in a mortuary in Chennai. Steven’s body was tightly wrapped in a striped woollen shawl, traditionally worn by the Kuki-Zo tribe in the northeastern Manipur state. His face had turned blue.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Sexual abuse case

Vital to ensure that Prajwal Revanna faces the law

THE allegations of sexual harassment against Janata Dal (Secular) MP Prajwal Revanna, grandson of former Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda, have caused a political storm amid the General Election. The alleged sexual exploitation of many women, captured in around 3,000 video clips that are being circulated on social media, has triggered a verbal duel between the ruling Congress in Karnataka and the BJP which is contesting the Lok Sabha polls in the state in alliance with the JD(S). The state government has formed a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe the case, even as Prajwal's father HD Revanna is under arrest on the charges of molestation and abduction. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has asserted that there should be zero tolerance to people like Prajwal, but at the same time, he has accused the Congress government of allowing the MP to leave the country.

The SIT faces the challenge of conducting an independent and impartial investigation despite Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's assurance that his government will not interfere in the probe. It will not be easy to get the victims, identified from the video clips, to come forward to lodge complaints. According to reports, several women who were allegedly subjected to sexual abuse have left their homes in Hassan district — the bastion of the Deve Gowda family — over the past 10 days or so. With their identities revealed, aggrieved women are fleeing apparently due to social stigma and fear. Notably, HD Revanna is accused of abducting a woman in an alleged attempt to prevent her from approaching the SIT.

The state government needs to ensure that the victims muster the courage to give their statements and are not silenced or deterred by threats and coercion. Their protection should be prioritised in the pursuit of justice. The absconding MP against whom a Blue Corner notice has been issued, must be made to face the law.

Farm fires

Worrying spike in stubble burning in Punjab

WITH 877 incidents of farm fires reported across Punjab since April 1, and 83 per cent of them in just the first six days of May, immediate intervention is necessary to mitigate the adverse environmental and public health impacts of stubble burning in the region. A major cause of this annual problem is the altering agricultural landscape, where the traditional practice of using wheat stubble as cattle feed is waning. Instead, farmers are increasingly turning to summer and spring maize, leaving wheat crop residue as a burdensome byproduct. This shift underscores the need for innovative solutions that align agricultural practices with environmental sustainability. Wheat stubble holds intrinsic value as fodder and soil health enhancer. Encouraging farmers to adopt alternative methods of residue management, such as mulching or composting, can reduce air pollution and enhance soil health as well as agricultural productivity in the long term.

Meanwhile, with regard to paddy straw disposal by burning, the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) recently issued directives to Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh to implement revised action plans and aim to eliminate the noxious practice this year. Notably, in view of the efficacy of Haryana's strategies for a reduction in stubble burning last year, the CAQM had recommended their implementation in Punjab. Central to Haryana's success was the provision of financial incentives to farmers, along with the deployment of flying squads by the Central Pollution Control Board for on-ground monitoring of enforcement measures.

While such steps are crucial for ensuring cleaner air the whole year round, their effectiveness hinges on robust implementation and support mechanisms at the grass-roots level. Giving farmers access to affordable machinery for residue management, coupled with incentives for adopting sustainable practices, can spur compliance and foster a culture of environmental stewardship.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, MAY 8, 1924

The Sikhs at Vaikom

THE presence of a few Sikhs at Vaikom (Travancore) and their *langar* to help the Satyagrahis in their campaign against untouchability have raised doubts as to their intentions. More than one Anglo-Indian journal has made comments suspecting ulterior motives and questioning the connection between the supporters of the gurdwara reforms in the north of India and those engaged in the untouchability struggle in the southern-most part of the country. One affects the Sikh community or a very large section of it, which has differences with another section of the same community worshipping in a common place. The other affects a section of the Hindu community that is in conflict with another section of the same community. Both are regarded primarily as religious struggles, though certain political workers have expressed their sympathy with the reformers and lent their active support to some extent. In the case of both movements, certain critics have questioned the propriety of Congressmen interfering with religious problems and are anxious to isolate the religious from political reformers. A leading newspaper writes: "With the social grievance of untouchability in the extreme south of India, the Sikhs have no concern, and their presence can mean only one thing: that the Congress has decided to make the Vaikom agitation one more episode in its laborious work of undermining authority in general all over the country. The Sikhs have been taken to Vaikom to give a revolutionary glamour to the movement and stimulate morbid dreams of heroism in the minds of excitable youths."

India gearing up for a leap in auto exports

Much will depend on the ability of the automobile industry to leverage its advantages



SUSHMA RAMACHANDRAN
SENIOR FINANCIAL JOURNALIST

ELECTRONIC goods, led by mobile phones, became a surprise leader in India's exports last year. The automobile industry is now looking to spring a similar surprise by becoming a rising star in the export basket. It is gearing up to become a global hub of supply to the world. It may not be as dramatic a rise as in the case of mobile phones, but it seems that auto majors are finally viewing India as a viable base for exports. Till recently, investments in projects in this sector have been made largely with a view to tapping the enormous domestic market. This despite strenuous efforts made over the years to spur multinationals to make this country a base for supplying components and finished automobiles to the world.

As per recent reports, leading Japanese manufacturers like Honda, Toyota and Suzuki are keen to supply India-made cars to even their home market. Such a unique development is akin to Indian subsidiaries of Swiss companies sending watches to Switzerland. The move speaks volumes about the improved quality and competitiveness of Indian passenger cars as the standards for imports are reputed to be extremely high in Japan.

Some car models are now being made exclusively here and exported both to Japan and Southeast Asia. These are the same manufacturers who were wary of investing in this country in the 1980s, when Suzuki took the plunge and set up a joint venture with the Indian government. Osamu Suzuki was considered a maverick of the Japanese auto



BIG CONTRIBUTOR: Automobiles account for over 45 per cent of India's manufacturing GDP. REUTERS

ecosystem for having taken this decision in a risky, untried market. Honda and Toyota as well as US and European manufacturers made investments over a decade later. It took them many years to overcome reservations about dealing with bureaucratic complexities and intricate regulations in India.

South Korean manufacturers like Hyundai were quick off the blocks and entered the Indian market in 1996. This is probably why their marketing and distribution systems are able to match those of Suzuki. Both joint venture Maruti Suzuki and Hyundai have been the market leaders for many years now. As far as car exports are concerned, they remain the bigger players as well. Yet, the total passenger car export volumes are still not enough to bring India on the list of the top 10 global exporters.

Even now, it will be a Herculean task for car exports to reach the level of top suppliers like China and Germany. In fact, the entire automobile sector, including commercial vehicles, two-wheelers and three-wheelers, recorded a dip in exports during 2023. The only segment showing an upswing was passenger cars, which rose

The insistence on maintaining global standards is not just essential for consumers' safety, but it also makes products acceptable in world markets.

by about 6 per cent. The rise in this segment is being attributed to improvements in supply chains as well as the easier availability of semiconductors, the key component whose shortage had stalled production over the past few years.

The slowdown in demand in other vehicle categories is largely due to a faltering economic revival in major export destinations. Geopolitical conflicts, including the Ukraine war, have hit emerging economies, which are among the key markets for commercial vehicles and two-wheelers. Consequent foreign exchange constraints have

apparently hit purchasing abilities in these countries, leading to a dip in exports.

Passenger cars, on the other hand, are being shipped to a variety of countries/regions, including Mexico, West Asia and North Africa. South Africa is also emerging as a market, especially for electric vehicles (EVs), while Maruti Suzuki is reported to be sending cars as far away as South America.

What has now given greater heft to the prospect of a leap in car exports is the fact that Indian emission and quality norms are broadly up to international standards. This ensures that cars being produced here can meet the exacting standards of developed economies like Japan. For instance, Toyota is currently exporting e-drives, a critical component in cars with advanced hybrid technology. As much as 70 per cent of the production is reportedly being set aside for exports. Similarly, Maruti Suzuki is planning to send its first lot of EVs to Japan and Europe.

It is in this backdrop that one must recall the efforts of the automobile industry to dilute international safety norms for vehicles made in this country. For instance, airbags, which have been the norm in developed

countries, were not a standard accessory in cars here for a long time. The excuse given by manufacturers was that costs would rise dramatically for consumers. These have now been made mandatory for most models. Emission norms have also been stringent and kept up with international regulations. The lesson here is that the insistence on maintaining global standards is not just essential for consumers' safety but also makes products acceptable in world markets.

As for the future, a study last year by consultancy firm Arthur D Little said India had the potential to become a \$1-trillion auto export powerhouse by 2035. Currently, it is the fourth largest market in the world, valued at \$250 billion. Automobiles account for over 45 per cent of the manufacturing GDP.

Market leaders like Maruti Suzuki have already set targets envisaging a three-fold rise in exports over the next five years. The strategy for smaller domestic players like Renault Nissan is to use Indian plants largely for exports, with 65 per cent of the output already allocated for this purpose.

In order to achieve a big leap in exports, much will depend on the ability of the automobile industry to leverage its current advantages. These include lower manufacturing costs, cheaper labour and availability of skilled manpower, along with a highly developed ecosystem of component suppliers. The latter has evolved over the past few decades and become the backbone of the Indian automobile sector. What needs to be seen now is whether the industry will be able to resist the temptation of meeting the demand of a large and expanding domestic market or take on the challenge of exporting to the world. The new government will need to drive policies to ensure that exports become an attractive option. Both policymaking and good business should meld so that the forecast of India becoming a global auto export hub finally becomes a reality.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

A manufacturer is not through with his customer when a sale is completed. He has then only started with his customer. —Henry Ford

A mix-up at the airport

SONIK BHATIA

WAITING for your luggage at the airport carousel is somewhat like standing at the gates of your kid's school when the classes are over. You strain your eyes and expect your luggage — or kid — to come into view anytime. However, there are occasions when the wait is agonisingly long. In such cases, it is natural to be gripped by anxiety as you wonder whether something has gone wrong. One such incident happened when I landed in Frankfurt, Germany, for a conference. Since this was my first-ever flight, the entire experience was new for me — right from security checks to getting the boarding pass and ultimately settling in my seat. Eventually, I arrived at the baggage carousel and peered at the slow-moving conveyor belt. One suitcase after another kept popping up and I could not afford to take my eyes off the belt, lest I should miss my luggage. Most of the other passengers, who had experience on their side, spotted their suitcases and quickly lifted them off the carousel. There were butterflies in my stomach. I was not sure whether I could carry out this 'operation' with such effortless ease when my turn came.

At long last, I saw a suitcase which looked like mine, but its colour was slightly different. That was the only one left when the belt stopped moving. I had a sinking feeling — my luggage had most probably been misplaced or lost. I went to the help desk and told the staff members about my problem. They accompanied me to the carousel and picked up that suitcase. They found that it belonged to one Stephanie Brown, a British citizen who had also started her journey from New Delhi. It was now obvious to me and the staff that Ms Brown had taken away my luggage by mistake.

The task at hand was to find the woman. I hoped that she would notice the mix-up in time and come back soon to collect her own item. After an hour or so, a staff member came running and told me that the woman had arrived at the counter with my suitcase. Having faced inconvenience due to her fault, I was ready to confront her for being so careless. However, when I met her after completing the formalities, my anger subsided. I was disarmed by her charm and humility. She apologised profusely for the confusion and said she realised her mistake only when she was about to board a taxi. 'Since your suitcase is of the same brand and also has the same soccer sticker, I thought it was mine. It was only out in the sunlight that I detected the difference,' she clarified. I reciprocated with a smile and asked: 'Is soccer your favourite sport too?' She replied in the affirmative. I said in a lighter vein that had the suitcase belonged to a man instead of a woman, I would have preferred to retain it and try out the clothes inside. At these words, we laughed heartily and parted ways — of course, with our respective luggage.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India, China should hold talks

Refer to the editorial 'LAC standoff'; China's policy of expansionism and aggressive conduct in the region has hurt its relations with almost all its neighbours, except for Russia and North Korea. Even the people of Pakistan are not happy with the actions of the Dragon. In his recent visit to China, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken failed to stabilise the bilateral ties. He made it clear that Beijing's aggressive behaviour would not be tolerated. Though India has held several talks with the Chinese, tensions remain high along the LAC. Leaders of both countries should proactively engage in dialogue to amicably resolve the prolonged standoff. Once the border dispute ends, the two nations will progress faster and prosper in a healthy, mutually beneficial economic environment.

SUBHASH VAID, NEW DELHI

Don't allow miscarriage of justice

Apropos of the editorial 'Criminal trials'; the SC has flagged a very valid concern with regard to the integrity of the judicial process. The public does not see the criminal justice delivery system as fair or transparent. It is disconcerting that a lot of times, there is no proper cross-examination of the witnesses who turn hostile. This miscarriage of justice must not be allowed. The role of a public prosecutor in the criminal justice system is indispensable. The criteria for the appointment of public prosecutors must be stringent. And they must have an impeccable record. Further, the court has rightly underscored the significance of an effective cross-examination of hostile witnesses to extract the truth and uncover the inconsistencies in witness testimony.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, LADWA

Clouds of uncertainty over Gaza

Refer to the news report ' Hamas accepts truce offer after Israel evacuates Rafah'; the current state of uncertainty surrounding the Gaza ceasefire is a reflection of the suffering of the innocent civilians stuck there. As Hamas tentatively agrees to a ceasefire proposal, Israel's refusal to accept the terms prolongs the agony of countless

Palestinians, including women and children. The relentless strikes on Rafah, coupled with the displacement of over a million Palestinians, paint a grim picture of human tragedy unfolding before our eyes. While diplomatic efforts push for peace, the harsh reality on the ground speaks of shattered homes, lost lives and an uncertain future. As the world watches, it is imperative to demand swift action to end this cycle of violence.

GURDEV SINGH, BY MAIL

Campus cheerleaders for Hamas

Apropos of the article 'An overreaction to student protests'; the author has failed to understand that the purpose of higher education is education, not activism. The writer has wrongly claimed that public opinion is manipulated by the Jewish lobby in the US. At Yale, a female Jewish student was recently stabbed in the eye with a Palestinian flagpole during an anti-Israel protest. The pro-Palestine students have been chanting, 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free', which effectively means the eradication of the Jewish state and the expulsion or killing of its inhabitants. The protesters have become cheerleaders for the Hamas, a terror group whose operatives raped, tortured, killed and mutilated several Israeli civilians on October 7. Further, the writer's observation that the scale of destruction unleashed on Gaza has been disproportionate is flawed. Any response to a terrorist attack must be crippling.

AJAY TYAGI, MUMBAI

Canadian Khalistanis at it again

With reference to the report 'Canada again, floats target Indian leadership at pro-Khalistan rally'; it is concerning that PM Justin Trudeau is allowing extremism, separatism and violence to flourish on Canadian soil. Khalistani extremists have been raising separatist slogans and delivering inflammatory speeches at rallies. Pro-Khalistan protesters often also target PM Narendra Modi and other Indian leaders. They keep pushing for greater participation in a referendum on the matter. They must understand that Khalistan can be created only in a country whose citizens want it.

UPENDRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

Students lead struggle for reinvention of democracy



SHELLEY WALIA
EX-PROFESSOR, DEPT OF ENGLISH
AND CULTURAL STUDIES, PU

THE police crackdown on university students has again roiled the US. The student protests of 1969 were against the Vietnam War, and this time, they are against the American backing of the Israeli war machinery targeting Palestinians.

Sadly, international agencies for peace and the defence of human rights remain moribund while a serious humanitarian crisis unfolds in Gaza, with more than 14,000 children killed. It is student activism that has drawn attention to the brutality of the war. They have been closely watching the massacre in Gaza and feel deeply frustrated that their country and their university are complicit in the ongoing genocide.

While the presidents of various colleges and universities support the police force for the maintenance of order and discipline, their moral bankruptcy is apparent from their deafening silence at the destruction of schools and universities across Palestine. Their role in bringing the police to the campus and

repealing the age-old tradition of free assembly or disregarding the legitimate and moral aspect of the protest against genocide underscores misgivings about moral progress and mutual understanding.

Dissent and opposition to injustice underpin the student protests and evoke the spirit of democracy in an academic environment that has gradually become subservient to the conservative far-right. Undeniably, politics remains central to education. Education believes in and inculcates public participation in the affairs of the state — the mark of an egalitarian society in which open debate and difference of opinion invite a vigorous presentation of opposing viewpoints, enriching our understanding of the challenges we face or the meaningless wars we fight.

In any civil society, educational institutions are sites where complaints are freely heard, considered and swiftly resolved. Such a democratic environment rekindles a new hope at every step, giving the youth the stamina to take a peaceful position that is neither easy nor expedient. But this is far from the reality the world finds itself in. The decline has been steady over the years. Educational institutions across America, rather than facilitating the procedures of defence of fundamental rights and the promotion of a civil society, have gradually become pawns in the hands of right-wing ideologues. Citing anti-Semitism or invoking the



UP IN ARMS: Dissent and opposition to injustice underpin the student protests. REUTERS

question of law and order are lame excuses used to justify the crackdown on students. The dogmatic strain found in the reasoning resonates with the dominance of the Jewish lobby in the US that ignores the call for the end of the Israeli onslaught on the people of Palestine.

It is a fact of history that when governments fail to safeguard the democratic rights of citizens, it is often the students who become vigilant about the state's inadequacies or transgressions. As we have seen in the last few days, the attempt to stifle dissent and freedom of thought has grown in its ferocity across universities in the US. Nationwide alarm at the use of police force against demonstrators calling

The stand taken by the heads of American universities has been demoralising.

for the end of the war in Palestine and for divesting all links with companies that support Israel reflects an adversarial stand against the administration. A collective defence against the brutality of war and terrorism in West Asia has moral and intellectual legitimacy in a democracy.

We stand at a moment of crisis in world history when the free citizens of the world are livid at the return of McCarthyism, which uses the 'malaise' of communism to smudge critical education, university autonomy and public intervention in the policy decisions of a power-hungry state. Persecution and muzzling of the human spirit through the advocacy of irrevocably established

stubborn thinking and institutionalised hegemonies amounts to the abrogation of social and moral obligations to the principles of a meaningful conversation.

Student activism in the US, as seen since the days of protests against the Vietnam War, apartheid in South Africa or the Iraq War, becomes vital for resistance to political structures that take a stand against the freedom of expression and refuse to recognise basic human rights. The killing of innocent children and women in Gaza underscores the fragility of the notion of justice and respect for human life. Such a regressive milieu deepens the sense of estrangement and distrust between the students and the state with its deceitful politics, its civil aggression, the rampant academic repression or the pervasive acts of war. The student agitations compel us to revisit centres of higher learning where diverse interests and opinions underwrite a robust critical conversation. Let it be clear that institutions of higher education cannot be turned into programming centres where critical thinking and revolutionary pedagogies are scoffed at.

And though there is a lot of rage to go around, we also share hope for a better world and a commitment to bringing it into existence through those who dream, act and think deeply to subvert any kind of state control underpinned by violence and the

manufacturing of fear. The voices of the students have begun to resound and reinforce each other in unison in the emancipatory struggle for the reinvention of democracy and its beleaguered educational institutions. The motivation is to oppose the tyranny of the state and spread the message that education must not be painted as a site of radical ideology out to overthrow social norms, community and national unity. The public must believe in the fact that, though demonstrations and strikes have always been put down, they nevertheless advance the cause of progressive movements. It is the power of the people to act and stand up before the state apparatus.

Understandably, interrogating power is fundamentally unsettling. Administrators across American campuses must understand that if there is a breakdown of communication between them and the students, the blame lies with the establishment's inadequacy in engaging in a discussion across the table on the relevant issues. Bureaucratic high-handedness or intimidation tactics of thought-policing higher education will never work. The stand taken by the heads of American universities has been demoralising, especially because of the botch-up by the establishment to integrate 'student idealism' as well as activism into university policies.

Need to restructure entrance exam for civil services



LT GEN NPS HIRA (RETD)
FORMER CHAIRMAN, PUNJAB
PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

THE results of the annual civil services examinations, conducted by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), were declared recently. For the past few years, the exam methodology, its efficacy to select the best, and the brutal competition among the aspirants have become subjects of debate. The civil services need the best human resources. The UPSC has a system in place to select the best candidates. However, are they really the most suitable? A closer examination of the system reveals that the present system has led to some unintended consequences, especially for those candidates who do not make it.

Many parents in India are keen to see their children enter the civil services. The selection process is extremely tough. This year, only one applicant out of almost 1,300 made the cut. Since some candidates who apply do not appear in the exams, the actual success rate is roughly one

out of 700-800. Despite the heavy odds, aspirants continue to appear in the exams year after year. Unfortunately, a significant number of them end up frustrated.

An important question is: Are we selecting the best? A candidate in the general category is allowed six attempts, backward castes candidates can make nine attempts and for Scheduled Castes, there is no limit on the number of attempts, though there is the age limit of 37 years. It is almost a thumb rule of any competitive examination that if a candidate is allowed to make repeated attempts, his or her performance in the written exam keeps improving with every attempt. The interview is a more complex affair. The performance in the interview normally does not improve as much with successive attempts because it demands greater originality of ideas and expression from the candidate. The weightage for the written test is about 87 per cent. The interview weightage is only around 13 per cent. Those clearing the examination in the fourth to sixth attempts generally make it as they are able to score high in the written test. The British, who started this examination in India, allowed only two attempts. It was a decision based on logic. When we allow more than two attempts, the candidates



HERCULEAN TASK: Many parents are keen to see their children enter the civil services, which have an extremely tough selection process. ISTOCK

keep improving their written exam performance every year for the simple reason that they have been reading the study material under the same syllabus, with only a little variation in current affairs. So, in the end, we may select a very hard-working and perseverant civil servant, but he may not be the brightest or an original thinker. The high number of attempts allowed are partly due to political reasons and partly due to lobbying by the coaching industry, whose turnover runs into thousands of crores of rupees.

The examination has three stages: preliminary, mains and interview. A candidate in the general category who takes six chances does it over a period of

A large number of exam attempts are only benefiting the coaching industry, wasting the resources of the UPSC and also taking a heavy toll on the candidates.

almost eight to 10 years. In the reserved category, it may go up to 15 years. On the face of it, the odds may appear to be something like 800 to 1, but in reality, it is the same candidates appearing again and again. So, for a persistent candidate, the real odds of making it are around one out of 200 candidates. For the top three services (IAS, IPS and IFS), it is about one out of 400-500. On the whole, the rejection rate is still unacceptably high at around 99.5 per cent. Unfortunately, it is not the candidate but the system which we have designed for him that is responsible for getting him sucked into it. The moot point is should the candidates be allowed to

continue appearing for three to five years? The hapless parents, too, realise this only after they have wasted a lot of their hard-earned money on coaching.

Allowing so many attempts, be it in the general or reserved categories, really does not help. Ultimately, the number of candidates getting selected, whatever may be the category, remains the same. A candidate may be very bright, but it is extremely difficult for him to compete in his first attempt with another candidate who has been preparing for up to 8-10 years. So, we are being unfair to the bright and also to the not-so-bright. It stands to reason that the number of attempts be reduced to two or maximum three. The reserved category may be allowed one more attempt.

If the number of attempts are reduced, about 80 per cent of the candidates selected will be the same. About 20 per cent may change and that change would be for the better, both for the system and the candidates. A large number of attempts is only benefiting the coaching industry, wasting the resources of the UPSC and also taking a heavy toll on the candidates. Most of them end up missing other bright career opportunities.

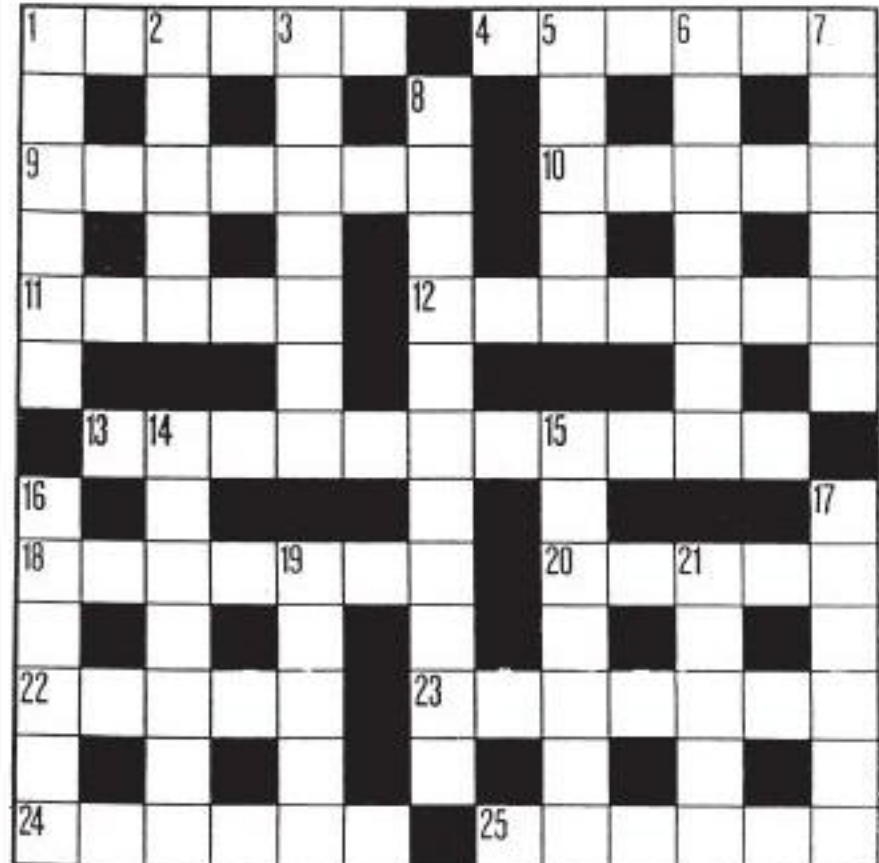
Another issue is whether

the UPSC needs to get a psychologist on its interview panel, like in military interviews. It is a problem to objectively quantify psychology in terms of marks. A psychologist may like to exercise the veto; therefore, it is very difficult to incorporate one in a government selection system due to its legal implications. The present interview panel, which consists of experienced people, has stood the test of time. The real problem is with the number of attempts.

One more knotty issue is the 'optional subjects' allowed in the examination. There are two optional papers with a weightage of as much as 500 marks out of a total of 1,750. The optional subjects have little useful outcome in selection. It is also very tough for any examination body to deal with this complication in its assessment. The Punjab Public Service Commission (PPSC) has done away with the optional subjects. This has helped the PPSC reduce the load on the candidates and also enabled more objective assessment due to a level playing field.

A high number of aspirants for the civil services is a good sign. We need to ensure that they do not get mired down in this process. Let this examination not become an unintended trap for the candidates, messing up their lives.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- Free of charge (6)
- Rough drawing (6)
- Salt lake in Jordan valley (4,3)
- Haggard (5)
- Chock (5)
- Set of documents on subject (7)
- Forefront of progress (7,4)
- Unbeliever (7)
- Bind's resting-place (5)
- Disapproving expression (5)
- In relation to (3-1-3)
- For choice (6)
- Very handsome young man (6)

DOWN

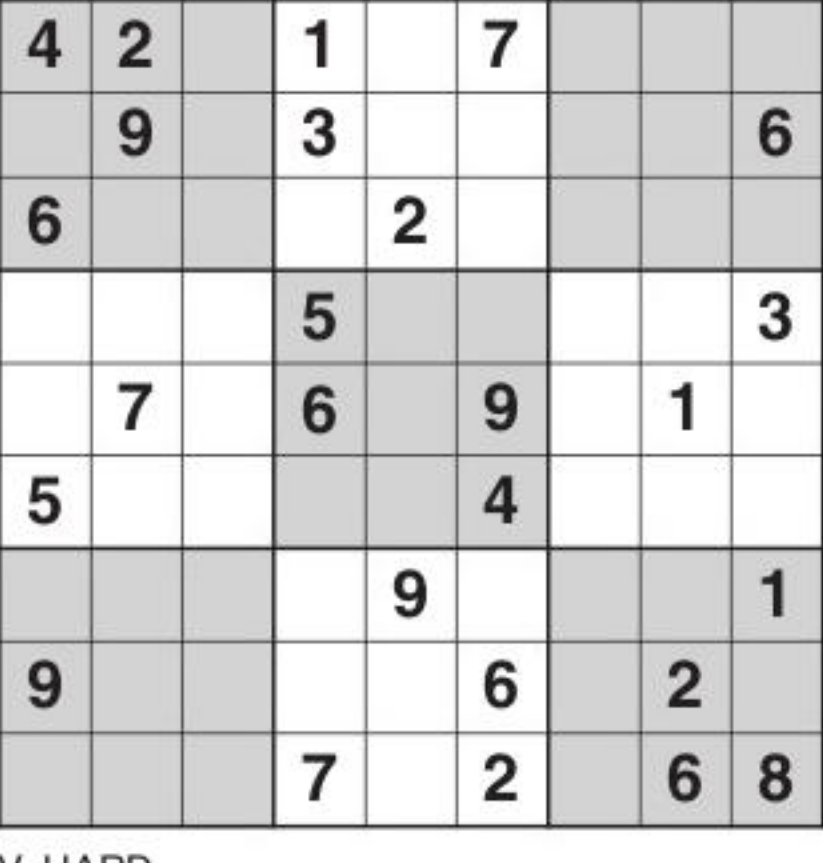
- To sink (2,4)
- Judicial decision (5)
- Examine closely (7)
- Acclaim (5)
- Furious (7)
- Needing food (6)
- In close cooperation (4,2,5)
- Payable in advance (2-5)
- Open to the elements (7)
- Be unlike (6)
- Long scholarly dissertation (6)
- Thickheaded (5)
- Split (5)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Stoical, 5 Bland, 8 Trail one's coat, 9 Other, 10 Concern, 11 Shekel, 12 Apiece, 15 Optical, 17 Terse, 19 Spitting image, 20 Rigid, 21 Hatchet.

Down: 1 Set to, 2 On a shoestring, 3 Calorie, 4 Lunacy, 5 Basin, 6 Above reproach, 7 Detente, 11 Sponsor, 13 Patriot, 14 Clinch, 16 Cited, 18 Exert.

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

MAY 8TH 2024, WEDNESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Vaishakh Shaka 18
- Vaishakh Purnimite 26
- Hijri 1445
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 15, up to 8.52 am
- Saubhagya Yoga up to 5.41 pm
- Bharni Nakshatra up to 1.34 pm
- Moon enters Taurus sign 7.07 pm
- Vaishakh Amavasya

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	39	25
New Delhi	41	24
Amritsar	41	23
Bathinda	41	22
Jalandhar	40	22
Ludhiana	41	24
Bhiani	41	27
Hisar	42	23
Sirsa	44	25
Dharamsala	33	20
Manali	25	08
Shimla	27	16
Srinagar	27	11
Jammu	38	22
Kargil	23	10
Leh	20	05
Dehradun	37	20
Mussoorie	26	15

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Why not a white paper for time-bound end to reservation

AS the country is in midst of Lok Sabha elections, the issue of reservations, who is protector who is destroyer, who should get reservations, who will scrap constitution and who can protect it and Parivarvad politics are some of the major issues on which all leaders are laying emphasis.

Well when the founders of Indian Constitution including Nehru and Dr Ambedkar, (not Mahatma Gandhi) as Rahul Gandhi claims, had debated on the issue of reservations at length, it was felt that the weaker sections including the scheduled castes and tribes in our country should get reservations as a gesture of atonement for the evil done to those who were deprived of education and social equality.

The Constituent assembly perhaps visualised the dangers of political parties using this more for vote bank politics and hence had said that the reservations should be for a period of 10 years but now India is in 'Amrit Ka' and still the political parties are fighting with each other as to who is the saviour and who is the destroyer. There should have been a detailed evaluation of the reforms and the benefits that were accrued from it to the targeted sections of the society. But nothing of that sort had happened.

Every party has five years of tenure in Lok Sabha. Why is it that none of them ever bothered to ask for a progress report on the reservations? Why is it that the opposition instead of using the floor of

the Parliament for such meaningful discussions and debates and putting the government in dock, converts Parliament into a battle ground on trivial issues and wake up only during elections? It is because our Neta's had discovered the power of using caste groups as vote banks. Not much of change at the ground level can be expected even by 2047 if their attitude does not change.

The BJP which is likely to hit a hat trick should take a bold step and should come up with a white paper on the benefits accrued to these weaker sections since the reservations came into effect and present a road map as to how and by when India can become a country where there would be no need

for reservations just as it predicts that India would become 10 trillion economy by 2030.

This will help in presenting a clear social security scenario in the country before the people and would help any government whether at centre or states to come up with practical schemes rather than treat them as vote banks and try to lure them on the eve of elections.

What is clearly evident is there is one section of Indians who had derived maximum benefit from reservations in last 75 years and they are politicians. They have perfected the art of creating vote banks based on caste, creed and tribe and promising them the moon and the stars when elections come around

and divide them for the sake of power politics. This needs to end. Instead of Mandir or muslims, the governments whether state or centre should focus on controlling price rise, employment generation, education and health sector.

Reforms in education sector will never come and education cannot be made affordable to the common man as long as the politicians continue to run educational institutions. There is also need for a clear policy without options being given to the state governments regarding imparting education in regional language till at least high school level.

Will Modi 3.0 government work in this direction is something that needs to be watched.

LETTERS

Reservation the key issue in LS polls

IF the fiery campaign speeches of leaders are anything to go by, we can say for sure that reservation has become the single most important issue in this election. The Congress has made its stance on reservation clear; it favours reservation for the underprivileged, dispossessed and neglected sections of society to get adequate representation in education, employment and leadership and law-making roles. Fearing that it may resonate with the SCs, STs, OBCs and the educationally and socially backward among religious minorities, the BJP peddles the blatant lie that the Congress plans to strip the Dalits, Adivasis and OBCs of reservation and give it to Muslims. Citizens cannot be discriminated against on the ground of religion. The Congress has also made it explicitly clear that it is in favour of raising the cap on reservation from 50%. But the BJP maintains a studied and 'discreet' silence on it to placate the upper castes with whom it sides. The Congress stresses the need for caste census so as to bring to light the socio-economic conditions of the weaker sections of society. But the BJP is opposed to it as it has no real commitment to social justice and human equality. It is widely known that the RSS, BJP's ideological parent, is not against ending reservation and perpetuating upper caste domination. The support of the Dalits for the BJP in this election has significantly dwindled as the party could not convincingly allay their fears that it has plans to change the Constitution and end reservation. They remain sceptical about Modi's guarantee in this regard. True patriotism is expressed and reflected in "sharing" among compatriots.

G.David Milton, Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

Will wonders work in a weak?

THIS is with reference to Hans editorial "Will Modi-Shah assurances change Andhra minds" (May 7). The last line in it "Time is short, task is big" is thought provoking and it speaks volumes. Late and hurried visits of Modi-Shah in Andhra Pradesh cannot suddenly bolster or resurrect the buried opinion on BJP which is still alive in the people's mind. People did not find fault with Chandrababu Naidu in 2018 who went against Narendra Modi in the larger interest of the State. That is past. Now BJP's image is raised due to its political alliance with TDP-JSP only. The angst and skeptical feeling against BJP is to be driven out from the people with determined, solid and genuine guarantees with a specific time line to impress them and gain fulfilled trust. Sharmila of Congress is piercing into public minds attacking YSRCR, BJP and other parties. Votes may split either way. Hung result may also lead to a big human business.

Dr NSR Murthy, Secunderabad

It's Shehzada Vs Shahenshah

RAHUL Gandhi has filed his nomination papers from Rae Bareilly. Though the move was a strategic one, it was a last minute effort by the Congress President Kharge to push Rahul Gandhi to fight from Rae Bareilly, which has remained a Congress Bastion since many decades. The decision to field Rahul Gandhi raises many questions. Is Mr Gandhi not confident of winning from Wayanad? Rahul Gandhi has a big struggle up his sleeve. Will he be able to Polarise the voters of a Safranised U.P. and win the hearts of the Electorate of Rae Bareilly? Going by the statistics, the BJP is having an upper hand in the Hindi heartland. The consecration of Ram Temple at Ayodhya and the development of Kashi Corridor in our PM's Varanasi constituency, along with development work by Yogi Adityanath in UP has certainly put BJP as a clear favourite over the Congress and the SP. So, Rahul Gandhi has his task cut out at Rae Bareilly. He needs to win and win big. Vote bank and appeasement politics may not work for Gandhi in U.P. So, the battlelines are drawn between Shehzada Rahul Gandhi and Shahenshah Modi.

Parimala.G.Tadas, Madinaguda, Hyderabad

Can India claim credit for Sunita's achievements?

THIS refers to news item "Indian-origin astronaut Sunita Williams set for 3rd mission". Her Indian origin is due to her father Dr. Deepak Pandya who after completing medical education in India migrated to USA in 1957 about 67 years ago. Mother of Sunita Williams is of Sloven descent. Sunita was born and completed her education in USA, worked in United States Navy, and made significant contributions to US space missions. Don't know how many times she visited India and whether she is keeping contacts with her father's family. It has become a fashion for India to cover the achievements of "Indian origin foreigners" and take credit for them, because one of their parents was Indian, examples, besides Sunita Williams, are: Rishi Sunak, Prime Minister of UK and Kamala Harris, Vice President of USA. How far it is justified?

Dr O. Prasada Rao, Hyderabad

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Crackdown on crime nets major victories for B'luru cops

BENGALURU: In a resolute effort to uphold law and order, the Bengaluru Police Commissioner announced significant strides in combating crime throughout April. From targeted crackdowns on narcotics trade and illegal gambling to addressing longstanding cases and curbing rowdy activities, law enforcement's proactive measures underscore a commitment to safeguarding the city's residents and maintaining public safety.

The Central Crime Branch (CCB) and various police stations collectively filed 42 cases under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, resulting in the arrest of 51 individuals, including 8 foreign nationals. Seizures during these operations included 131 kg of ganja, 66 gm of charas, 1.25 kg of cocaine, 6.25 kg of MDMA, and a substantial quantity of ecstasy tablets.

Illegal gambling rings, such as matka gambling and cricket betting, were also targeted, leading to the filing of 182 cases and the arrest of 563 individuals involved in these illicit activities. Furthermore, as a preventive measure, 1155 cases were registered under Sections 107, 109, and 110 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC).

In addressing longstanding cases, the authorities prioritised 18 cases in April for immediate action. Some of the cases date back to 2005 which have been longstanding for the past 19 years. Efforts are underway to apprehend 5 suspects under proclamation and scrutinise 28 individuals with Non-Bailable Warrant (NBW) cases.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Lack of education, misconceptions on asthma hindering treatment

NEW DELHI

LACK of education surrounding asthma is giving rise to misconceptions and misinformation, delaying treatment of the debilitating respiratory condition, said doctors on World Asthma Day on Tuesday.

World Asthma Day is observed every year on May 7 to raise awareness of the relentless chronic condition. This year's theme, Asthma Education Empowers, underscores the importance of enhancing awareness and understanding of asthma.

"Adherence to treatment plans is pivotal, yet often hindered by misconceptions and misinformation surrounding asthma management," Dr Indu Khosla, Consultant Pulmonologist, SRCC Children's Hospital, Mumbai, told IANS.

"Despite the availability of advanced treatment and prevention strategies, there remains a notable lack of education surrounding asthma. Many individuals are unaware of how to effectively manage their condition and access appropriate medical assistance. With proper edu-

cation and knowledge about asthma, including recent advancements in modern and biological medicines, it becomes easier to prevent and treat the condition," added Dr. Sachin Kumar, Senior Consultant - Pulmonology & Critical Care Medicine, Sakra World Hospital, Bengaluru.

Asthma prevalence globally ranges from 3-15 per cent, and it is influenced by genetics and environmental triggers like dust, pollution, and viral infections.

Post-Covid, there has been an increase in the number of viral infections causing wheezing in children and this is attributed to reduced immunity due to decreased exposure during the lockdowns.

"Worsening AQI due to construction activities, weather change, etc. has also contributed to a rise in wheezing among children. This phenomenon we are seeing both in normal children without genetic predisposition for asthma and in children with asthma. It is possible that it could be a potential risk leading to future asthma development," Dr Indu said. Asthma remains a



Asthma prevalence globally ranges from 3-15 per cent, and it is influenced by genetics and environmental triggers like dust, pollution, and viral infections. Post-Covid, there has been an increase in the number of viral infections causing wheezing in children and this is attributed to reduced immunity due to decreased exposure during the lockdowns

significant global health concern, affecting an estimated 262 million people worldwide as of 2019 and causing approximately 455,000 deaths annually as per the World Health Organization.

Dr. Pavan Yadav, Lead Consultant - Interventional Pulmonology & Lung Transplantation, Aster RV Hospital told IANS that in India, asthma affects a considerable portion of the population,

with urbanisation and air pollution cited as significant contributors to the rising prevalence.

"The challenge in India, as in many lower-middle-income countries, is the

under-diagnosis and under-treatment of the disease, which exacerbates the health burden on the population," he added.

Asthma is a chronic respiratory disorder where the major symptoms are breathlessness, chest tightness, and cough. While more common in early childhood and adolescence, it can happen at any age. According to Dr. Puneet Khanna HOD And Consultant - Respiratory Medicine Manipal Hospital Dwarka, asthma also spikes comorbidities like allergies.

"The most common is allergic rhinitis or the nasal discharge from the nose or a beacon sneezing. It is estimated that approximately 97 per cent of patients who have asthma also have coexisting allergic rhinitis," he told IANS. In addition, there can be sinusitis post nasal drip, headache, or migraine, gastroesophageal reflux disease, irritable bowel syndrome, and autoimmune diseases like joint pains PCOD, or thyroid disorders.

The doctors called for addressing the myths associated with asthma, particularly misconceptions to help boost treatment outcomes.

Venus is losing water faster than previously thought

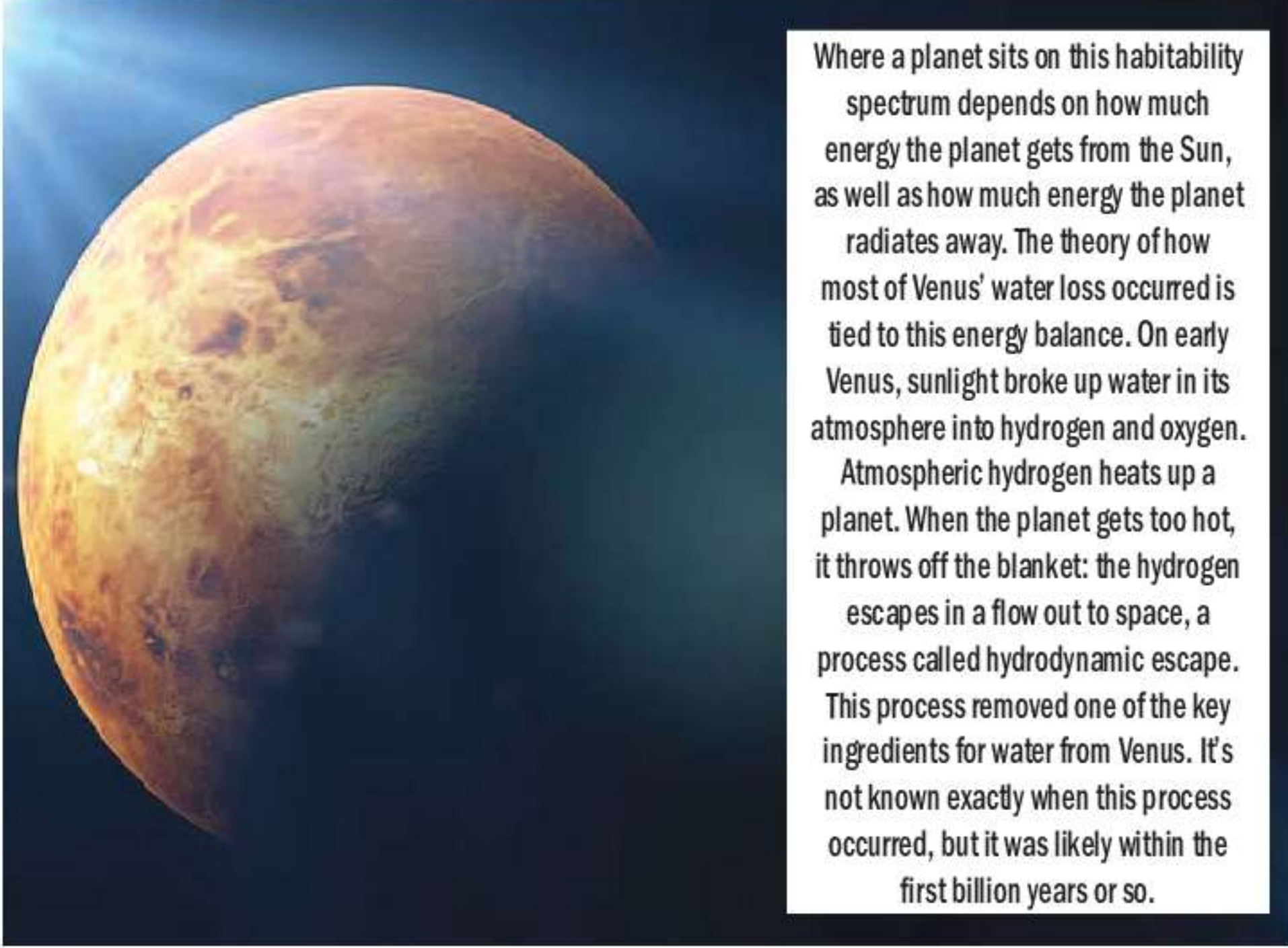
ERYN CANGI
COLORADO

TODAY, the atmosphere of our neighbour planet Venus is as hot as a pizza oven and drier than the driest desert on Earth – but it wasn't always that way. Billions of years ago, Venus had as much water as Earth does today. If that water was ever liquid, Venus may have once been habitable. Over time, that water has nearly all been lost. Figuring out how, when and why Venus lost its water helps planetary scientists like me understand what makes a planet habitable – or what can make a habitable planet transform into an uninhabitable world. Scientists have theories explaining why most of that water disappeared, but more water has disappeared than they predicted. In a May 2024 study, my colleagues and I revealed a new water removal process that has gone unnoticed for decades, but could explain this water loss mystery.

Energy balance and early loss of water: The solar system has a habitable zone – a narrow ring around the Sun in which planets can have liquid water on their surface. Earth is in the middle, Mars is outside on the too-cold side, and Venus is outside on the too-hot side. Where a planet sits on this habitability spectrum depends on how much energy the planet gets from the Sun, as well as how much energy the planet radiates away. The theory of

Venus, sunlight broke up water in its atmosphere into hydrogen and oxygen. Atmospheric hydrogen heats up a planet – like having too many blankets on the bed in summer. When the planet gets too hot, it throws off the blanket: the hydrogen escapes in a flow out to space, a process called hydrodynamic escape. This process removed one of the key ingredients for water from Venus. It's not known exactly when this process occurred, but it was likely within the first billion years or so. Hydrodynamic escape stopped after most hydrogen was removed, but a little bit of hydrogen was left behind. It's like dumping out a water bottle – there will still be a few drops left at the bottom. These leftover drops can't escape in the same way. There must be some other process still at work on Venus that continues to remove hydrogen.

Little reactions can make a big difference: Our new study reveals that an overlooked chemical reaction in Venus' atmosphere can produce enough escaping hydrogen to close the gap between the expected and observed water loss. Here's how it works. In the atmosphere, gaseous HCO+ molecules, which are made up of one atom each of hydrogen, carbon and oxygen and have a positive charge, combine with negatively charged electrons, since opposites attract. But when the HCO+ and the electrons react, the HCO+ breaks up into a neutral carbon monoxide molecule,



Where a planet sits on this habitability spectrum depends on how much energy the planet gets from the Sun, as well as how much energy the planet radiates away. The theory of how most of Venus' water loss occurred is tied to this energy balance. On early Venus, sunlight broke up water in its atmosphere into hydrogen and oxygen. Atmospheric hydrogen heats up a planet. When the planet gets too hot, it throws off the blanket: the hydrogen escapes in a flow out to space, a process called hydrodynamic escape. This process removed one of the key ingredients for water from Venus. It's not known exactly when this process occurred, but it was likely within the first billion years or so.

CO, and a hydrogen atom, H. This process energises the hydrogen atom, which can then exceed the planet's escape velocity and escape to space. The whole reaction is called HCO+ dissociative recombination, but we like to call it DR for short. Water is the original source of hydrogen on Venus, so DR effectively dries out the planet. DR has likely happened throughout the history of Venus, and our work shows it probably still continues into the present day. It doubles the amount of hydrogen escape previously calculated by planetary scientists, upending our understanding of present-day hydrogen escape on Venus.

Understanding Venus with data, models and Mars: To study DR on Venus we used both computer model-

ling and data analysis. The modelling actually began as a Mars project. My Ph.D. research involved exploring what sort of conditions made planets habitable for life. Mars also used to have water, though less than Venus, and also lost most of it to space. To understand martian hydrogen escape, I developed a computational model of the Mars atmosphere that simulates Mars' atmospheric chemistry. Despite being very different planets, Mars and Venus actually have similar upper atmospheres, so my colleagues and I were able to extend the model to Venus. We found that HCO+ dissociative recombination produces lots of escaping hydrogen in both planets' atmospheres, which agreed with measurements taken by the Mars Atmos-

phere and Volatile Evolution, or MAVEN, mission, a satellite orbiting Mars. Having data collected in Venus' atmosphere to back up the model would be valuable, but previous missions to Venus haven't measured HCO+ – not because it's not there, but because they weren't designed to detect it. They did, however, measure the reactants that produce HCO+ in Venus' atmosphere. By analysing measurements made by Pioneer Venus, a combination orbiter and probe mission that studied Venus from 1978-1992, and using our knowledge of chemistry, we demonstrated that HCO+ should be present in the atmosphere in similar amounts to our model.

Follow the water: Our work has filled in a piece of the puzzle of how water is

lost from planets, which affects how habitable a planet is for life. We've learned that water loss happens not just in one fell swoop, but over time through a combination of methods. Faster hydrogen loss today via DR means that less time is required overall to remove the remaining water from Venus. This means that if oceans were ever present on early Venus, they could have been present for longer than scientists thought before water loss through hydrodynamic escape and DR started. This would provide more time for possible life to arise. Our results don't mean oceans or life were definitely present, though – answering that question will require lots more science over many years. There is also a need for new Venus missions and observations. Future Venus missions will provide some atmospheric measurements, but they won't focus on the upper atmosphere where most HCO+ dissociative recombination takes place. A future Venus upper atmosphere mission, similar to the MAVEN mission at Mars, could vastly expand everyone's knowledge of how terrestrial planets' atmospheres form and evolve over time. With the technological advancements of recent decades and a flourishing new interest in Venus, now is an excellent time to turn our eyes toward Earth's sister planet.

(The Conversation)
(The writer is Postdoctoral researcher, University of Colorado Boulder)

TOY IMPORTS DOWN FROM \$304 MN IN FY19 TO \$65 MN IN FY24

NIVEDITA MUKHERJEE
NEW DELHI

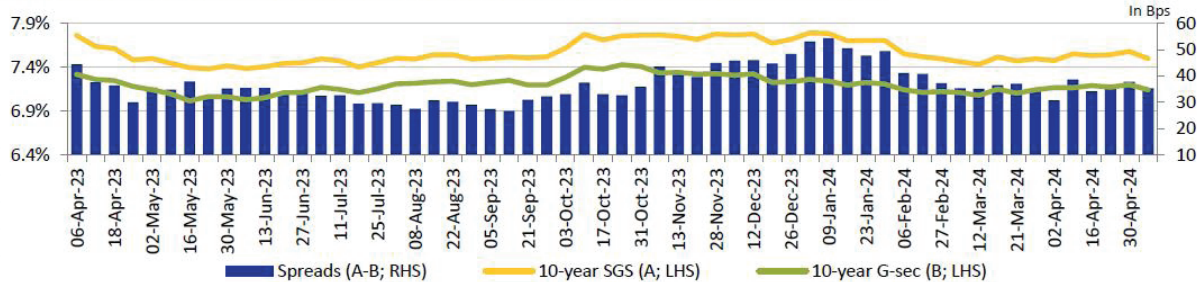
The introduction of higher import duties and the Quality Control Order (QCO) has significantly impacted the toy trade in India with imports falling drastically from USD 304.1 million in FY2019 to USD 64.9 million in FY2024. Decisive steps -- which include raising import duties -- to curb the inflow of substandard toy imports by the Indian Government since 2020, especially from China, while simultaneously strengthening the domestic toy industry, as per a latest insight from Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI). The steepest decline occurred between FY2020 and FY2022, demonstrating the direct impact of the new regulations. Imports dropped from USD 279.3 million in FY2020 to USD 35.9 million by FY2022, then slightly rose to USD 62.4 million in FY2023 and USD 64.9 million in FY2024. This sharp decrease over the last four years is directly due to (QCO) measures, as per GTRI data. There was an increase in imports from other regions such as ASEAN countries, Sri Lanka, and the Czech Republic.

One of the foremost impact was that the share of imports from China dropped from 87 per cent of India's total toy imports in FY2019 to 64 per cent in FY2024. The Indian toy industry has an estimated value of USD 3 billion in contrast, to USD100 billion of China. In FY2019, share of China was 87 per cent in India's global imports of USD 304.1 million. In FY2024,



Amount in Rs. Billion	Indicated	Notified	Raised	Cumulative till this week
Week of May 7, 2024	234	99	99	611
Week of May 9, 2023	77	97	97	472
Growth	203.9%	2.1%	2.1%	29.4%

Exhibit: Spread between weighted average cut-off of 10-year State and Gol G-sec yield



share of China was 64 per cent in India's global imports of USD 64.9 million. Share of other suppliers was ASEAN with 16.7 per cent, Sri Lanka with 12.4 per cent and Czech Republic contributing 4.7 per cent.

Government data quotes an IIM Lucknow case study to highlight that Indian toy industry witnessed remarkable growth in FY 2022-23 in comparison to FY 2014-15, with the decline in imports by 52 per cent rise in

exports by 239 per cent and development of overall quality of the toys available in the domestic market. The study at the behest of Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) shows that the efforts of the

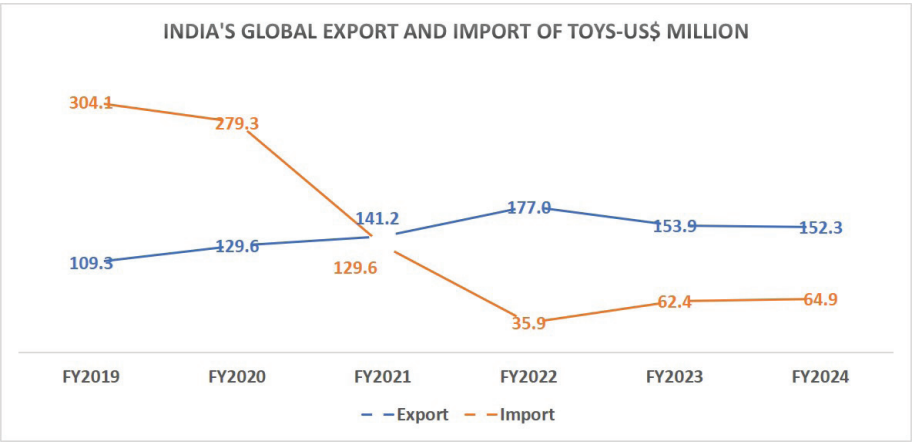
Government have enabled in creation of a more conducive manufacturing ecosystem for the industry in a span of 6 years, from 2014 to 2020, which has seen doubling of the number of manufacturing units, reduction in dependence on imported inputs from 33 per cent to 12 per cent, increase in gross sales value by a CAGR of 10 per cent, and overall rise in labour productivity.

According to GTRI, Government measures which have focused on increasing import duties and introducing the QCO. India dramatically raised import duties on toys beginning in February 2020. The basic customs duty was increased from 20 per cent to 60 per cent and then to 70 per cent in July 2021, where it currently remains. This substantial increase in duties made imported toys significantly more expensive, thus creating a competitive advantage for locally produced toys.

- In 2022, the global market imported toys valued at approximately US\$60.3 billion.
- Dominating this market, China exported toys worth US\$48.3 billion, securing an 80 per cent share of the global exports.
- Other significant contributors to the global toy export market include the Czech Republic with exports of US\$3.2 billion, the European Union with US\$2.7 billion, Vietnam with US\$1.7 billion, and Hong Kong with US\$1.1 billion.
- India's share in the global toy export market is minimal, totalling USD167 million, which represents only 0.3 per cent of the global exports, ranking it 27th. On the import side, India ranks even lower, at 61st, with toy imports amounting to USD 60 million.
- The largest importers of toys are led by the USA, which alone imported toys worth USD 22.2 billion.
- The European Union followed with imports totalling USD 9 billion and other significant importers include Japan at USD 2.8 billion, Canada at US\$1.6 billion, Australia at US\$1.5 billion, Mexico at US\$1.1 billion, and South Korea at US\$927 million.
- This distribution highlights the vast potential and opportunities in the global toy trade, areas where India could aim to increase its presence.

toys at international fairs to establish global connections are the other recommendations.

That apart, says Srivastava, there is need to encourage global toy brands to manufacture in India and invite international toy manufacturers who currently operate in China, such as Hasbro, Mattel, Lego, Spin Master and MGA Entertainment to consider setting up facilities in India. This move could help shift part of the global toy production market to India. There are also lessons from China like analysing and adopting best practices from Chinese manufacturers who manage a vast range of toy types and scale production efficiently. India could study the capacity to produce both low-cost and high-quality toys, handle a wide range of toy types, from simple plush



The second intervention in the form of QCO, implemented from January 2021, mandates that all toys sold in India, whether domestically produced or imported, must comply with specific Indian standards for safety.

However, according Ajay Srivastava, founder GTRI, exports did not benefit from the QCO. While the domestic measures were primarily aimed at boosting local industry and ensuring safety, they did not significantly enhance India's toy exports. From FY2020 to FY2022, exports increased modestly from USD 129.6 million to USD177 million. However, by FY2024, exports had decreased to USD 152.3million. India exported electronic toys worth USD 25.7 million and imported such toys worth USD 0.06 million, exported plastic dolls, metal and other non-electronic toys amounting to USD 78.74 million, while imports were at USD 18.74 million. Parts of electronic toys saw exports of USD 0.15

million and imports of USD 20.99 million. Parts of other toys category had exports worth USD 47.75 million and imports of USD 25.13 million.

The report suggests more comprehensive approach for development of toy industry with focus on developing a robust domestic ecosystem by investing in research and development to foster innovation in toy design and functionality and positioning Indian toys competitively on the global stage. The GTRI suggests strengthening partnerships between toy manufacturers and design institutes to continuously introduce innovative products and establishing specialised toy manufacturing hubs to reduce costs and increase efficiency. Modernising traditional Indian toys while preserving their cultural value to create unique products and support to small and medium enterprises in leveraging digital marketing and promoting Indian

toys to complex electronic gadgets and easily scale production up or down to meet the demands of international brands.

The GTRI founder also emphasises on reducing dependency on imports by developing local production capabilities for critical toymaking materials and components, such as glass eyes for dolls, beads, imitation stones, various types of plastics, electric motors and remote control apparatus will decrease costs and enhance the self-sufficiency of the Indian toy industry. Imports of inputs used for making toys is much higher than import of finished toys. For example, India imported glass eyes for dolls or other toys, beads and imitation stones of value USD 137.2 million in FY2024. These steps aim to not only strengthen India's position in the global toy market but also ensure a sustainable and innovative domestic industry that can meet both local and international demands.

INDIA NEWS SURVEY	
SURVEY ON ARVIND KEJRIWAL	DATE: 7 TH MAY 2024
MALE: 95%	FEMALE: 5%
Q-1 What do you consider to be the biggest crime of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal?	
A- Involved in liquor scam	41%
B- Protection to scammers	16%
C- Do not consider guilty	28%
D-Can't say	15%
Q-2 Aam Aadmi Party has been accused of funding from pro-Khalistan groups, your opinion?	
A- The matter should be investigated.	43%
B- Anti-national activity	10%
C- Allegations in election rivalry	29%
D-Can't say	18%
Q-3 Which agency's investigation has become the biggest problem for Arvind Kejriwal?	
A- Delhi Police	10%
B-ED	53%
C-CBI	10%
D-NIA	8%
E-Can't say	19%
Q-4 Should Arvind Kejriwal resign from the post of CM?	
A-Yes	51%
B-No	49%
C-Can't say	5%

INDIA NEWS SURVEY	
SURVEY ON MUSLIM RESERVATION	DATE: 7 TH MAY 2024
MALE: 92%	FEMALE: 8%
Q-1 Why did Lalu Yadav raise the demand for Muslim reservation during the elections?	
A- For electoral benefits	60.00%
B-Muslim appeasement	13.00%
C- Muslim Yadav equation	17.00%
D-Can't say	10.00%
Q-2 Which party will benefit from the move on Muslim reservation in Bihar?	
A- RJD	29.00%
B-BJP	25.00%
C- JDU	4.00%
D-Congress	27.00%
E-Can't say	15.00%
Q-3 Should reservation be given on the basis of religion in the country?	
A- Yes	31.00%
B-No	68.00%
C-Can't say	1.00%
Q-4 Do political parties use Muslims only for vote bank?	
A-Yes	74.00%
B-No	22.00%
C-Can't say	4.00%

FROM PAPER TO PIXELS

Modernisation of Indian legal system

OPINION

DEVENDRA PRATAP SINGH



In an era dominated by digital advancements, the traditional systems of justice are also undergoing significant transformation. In India, the digitalization of courts has emerged as a pivotal step towards modernizing the judicial system. This shift towards digital platforms and technologies promises to streamline processes, enhance efficiency, and improve access to justice for millions across the country. The traditional image of the judicial system often conjures up visions of somber courtrooms, stacks of paperwork, and lengthy legal proceedings. However, in recent years, the landscape of justice has been evolving rapidly, propelled by technological advancements. From artificial intelligence (AI) to data analytics, courts around the world are increasingly turning to technology to aid in the decision-making process. Technology has permeated every facet of modern life, and the judicial system is no exception. Courts are leveraging various technological tools and solutions to streamline processes, analyze vast amounts of data, and facilitate informed decision-making. Gone are the days of scouring through dusty law books in dimly lit libraries. Today, legal professionals have access to so-

phisticated online databases and research platforms that provide comprehensive information on case law, statutes, and legal precedents. AI-powered tools can analyze large volumes of legal documents and extract relevant insights, saving time and improving the quality of legal research. Predictive analytics software uses historical data to forecast case outcomes and assess the likelihood of success in litigation. By analyzing factors such as judge rulings, case facts, and legal arguments, these tools can provide valuable insights to lawyers and litigants, enabling them to make more informed decisions about case strategy and settlement negotiations. The pendency of cases in India persists, particularly when courts adhere to traditional modes of operation, owing to a confluence of factors. Firstly, the sheer magnitude of litigation inundates the judicial system, exacerbated by a burgeoning population and a corresponding increase in legal disputes. The reliance on manual, paper-based processes further exacerbates delays, as administrative tasks consume significant time and resources. Moreover, outdated infrastructure and insufficient staffing levels contribute to inefficiencies, hindering the expedient resolution of cases. Additionally, the prevalence of frequent adjournments, procedural complexities, and the backlog of unresolved cases exacerbate the problem, perpetuating a cycle of pendency. These challenges underscore the pressing need for modernization and reform within the Indian judicial framework to address systemic issues and

streamline processes, thereby ensuring the swift and equitable administration of justice. The digitalization of courts in India involves the integration of technology into various aspects of the judicial process, ranging from case filing to case management and communication between stakeholders. Several initiatives have been undertaken to facilitate this transition:

1. E-Courts Project: The E-Courts project, initiated by the Government of India in 2005, aims to computerize all aspects of the judicial process. Under this project, district and subordinate courts are equipped with computer hardware, software, and networking infrastructure to automate processes such as case filing, case status tracking, and generation of orders and judgments. Electronic case management systems (CMS) digitize and automate various aspects of case management, including scheduling, document filing, and communication between parties. These systems streamline workflow processes, reduce administrative burdens, and ensure that cases progress through the judicial system in a timely manner.

2. National Judicial Data Grid (NJDG): The NJDG is a centralized database that provides real-time information on pending and disposed of cases across district and subordinate courts in India. This platform enables transparency, accountability, and better monitoring of judicial performance.

3. Online Case Filing: Digital platforms allow litigants to file cases and documents online, eliminating the need for physical presence at court premises. This not only saves time and resources but also reduces administrative burdens.

4. Virtual Court Proceedings: With the advent of video conferencing technology, virtual court proceedings have become increasingly common, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This enables remote participation by lawyers, litigants, and witnesses, thereby enhancing access to justice, particularly for those in remote areas. The advent of video conferencing technology has revolutionized court proceedings, allowing parties to participate in hearings remotely. Virtual courtrooms enable greater flexibility and accessibility, particularly for individuals residing in remote areas or facing mobility constraints. Moreover, virtual hearings help expedite case resolution by eliminating the need for physical presence and reducing logistical challenges.

Benefits of Digitalization of Courts: The digitalization of courts in India offers a plethora of benefits, both to the justice system and its stakeholders:

1. Enhanced Efficiency: Digital platforms automate routine tasks, such as case filing and document management, reducing manual intervention and paperwork. This leads to faster processing of cases, thereby reducing backlog and delays in the dispensation of justice. Technology automates repetitive tasks and streamlines procedural workflows, leading to faster processing of cases and reduced backlog. Electronic case management systems enable judges and court staff to manage caseloads more efficiently, thereby enhancing overall courtroom productivity.

2. Improved Access to Justice: Digitalization makes the judicial process more accessible to citizens, especially those residing in rural and remote areas. Online case filing and virtual court proceedings eliminate geographical barriers, enabling individuals to participate in legal proceedings from anywhere with an internet connection. AI-powered tools and predictive analytics enhance the accuracy and consistency of legal decision-making by analyzing vast amounts of data and identifying patterns and trends. By reducing human error and bias,

technology helps ensure fair and impartial adjudication of cases.

3. Transparency and Accountability: The digitization of court records and case management promotes transparency in the judicial process. Access to real-time data on case status and proceedings fosters accountability among judicial officers and helps identify areas for improvement in the justice delivery system.

4. Cost Savings: By reducing the reliance on physical infrastructure and paper-based processes, digitalization leads to cost savings for both the judiciary and litigants. The use of virtual court proceedings also minimizes travel expenses and time spent on court appearances, particularly for parties residing in distant locations.

5. Better Case Management: Digital platforms enable efficient case tracking and management, allowing judges to prioritize hearings based on urgency and complexity. This ensures equitable distribution of judicial resources and helps expedite the resolution of cases.

Despite the numerous benefits, the digitalization of courts in India also presents certain challenges, such as infrastructural limitations, cyber security concerns, and resistance to change among stakeholders. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from policymakers, judiciary, and technology providers. Investments in infrastructure and capacity building are essential to ensure seamless implementation of digital initiatives across all levels of the judiciary. Moreover, robust cyber security measures must be put in place to safeguard sensitive judicial data from cyber threats. Protecting sensitive legal information and ensuring data security is paramount in the digital age. Courts must implement robust cyber security measures to safeguard against unauthorized access, data breaches, and cyber threats.

The digital divide, characterized by disparities in access to technology and digital literacy, remains a significant challenge in ensuring equitable access to justice. Efforts must be made to bridge this gap and ensure that all individuals have equal access to technological tools and resources. Furthermore, awareness and training programs should be conducted to familiarize judges, lawyers, and court staff with digital tools and processes. Embracing a culture of innovation and collaboration will be crucial in leveraging technology to its fullest potential in the realm of justice delivery. The digitalization of courts in India marks a significant milestone in the evolution of the country's judicial system. By harnessing the power of technology, India can overcome longstanding challenges such as backlog, delays, and access barriers, thereby ensuring swift and equitable justice for all. However, realizing the full potential of digitalization requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders and a commitment to leveraging technology as a catalyst for positive change in the administration of justice. The adoption of technology in decision-making represents a paradigm shift in the judicial system, offering unprecedented opportunities to enhance efficiency, accuracy, and access to justice. By leveraging technological tools and solutions, courts can navigate complex legal challenges more effectively and deliver fair and impartial outcomes for all. However, the successful integration of technology requires careful planning, collaboration, and a commitment to upholding the principles of fairness, transparency, and accountability in the administration of justice. As the judicial system continues to evolve in the digital age, embracing technological innovation will be essential in meeting the evolving needs and expectations of society.

PERSPECTIVE OPTICS REASSURING

ONE HOPES THE MEANS WILL HONOUR THE ENDS

The Lok Sabha polls are poised very interestingly at the halfway mark, with three of the seven phases completed by 7th May - and one month into the poll campaign. While there is no one issue that is dominating, a couple of narratives have held sway. The Opposition has been able to generate a debate on caste based survey & the politics of reservations. The Congress, specially Rahul Gandhi has been very vocal in pitching the mandal plank against the BJP's kamandal. More than Rahul, other opposition leaders such as Akhilesh Yadav and Tejashwi Yadav make more convincing votaries of the cause, especially Akhilesh with his PDA plank. This has lead the BJP to ratchet the Mandir issue with the PM and UP CM, Yogi Adityanath making a high profile visit to Ayodhya right on the eve of the third phase. The politics of religion are very much part of the poll debate, but so are issues of jobs and employment. After a long time the Congress has come up with a very comprehensive Nyay Patra that focuses on the latter rather than playing on the BJP's pitch and



talking about minority (or majority) politics. The BJP did try to claim that the Congress manifesto was written at the behest of the Muslim league but that bizarre claim found few takers. Apart from the Congress, even other Opposition leaders were seen at TV studios with the Congress manifesto in hand, challenging the BJP to make good its claim. Even the drama over inheritance tax led to some interesting debates on what model India should follow - left leaning socialist or capitalist. Should wealth creators be feted or taxed? These make for more positive studio debates than those that degenerate into playing one religion against the other. Although the BJP is still the dominant party and the Prime Minister the fulcrum of the election, the narrative is not as one sided as one had expected it to be. The crowd is not blindly chanting Modi-Modi but reacting on specific issues. The elections are also being fought on state issues and constituency wise. While the BJP still remains the best bet to deliver on the needs of the masses, the opposition has succeeded in making its presence felt. And in the best interests of democracy which demands a strong opposition, these are reassuring optics. In the end, there is still a month to go and while may the best party win, one hopes the means will honour the ends.

PRIYA SAHGAL

University campus protests in USA & Biden's bid to remain in the White House

OPINION

SURENDRA KUMAR



It's an open secret that the Israeli Lobby enjoys, arguably, the maximum political, financial & academic clout in USA. It also commands enormous influence in the media, both the print media & the electronic media and, now, in diverse social networks. No Presidential candidate can hope to win the race if the American Jews turn against him or her. So, it wasn't surprising that following Hamas' terrorist attack against Israel on 7th Oct 2023 in which they killed 1200 Israelis and took over 200 hostages, there was countrywide expression of

solidarity with Israel and Shock & outrage against the Hamas for their heinous crime and the brutality they engaged in. The President & other senior members of his Govt loudly declared that they stood behind Israel. Conversely, there was, understandably, an air of coolness and unmistakable anger against the Palestinians in general. But six months on, Netanyahu's obsessive mission to obliterate the Hamas for ever has reduced Gaza to a "death yard", killed over 34 Palestinians including more than 15000 children and pushed 1.6 million Palestinians on the verge of starvation. His repeated threats to attack Rafah which is bound to result in further loss of Palestinian lives has been publicly opposed by many Israeli friends, including the US President Biden and his

Secretary of State Blinken as well as European allies. Relatives of the hostages have been coming out on the streets accusing Netanyahu of pursuing his political objectives and not doing enough to get the remaining hostages released. The plight of helpless Palestinians who have nowhere to go and the haunting visuals of the humanitarian crises in Gaza have moved conscientious citizens world over including those who were initially horrified and outraged by the brutality of Hamas terrorist attack. In this backdrop, it isn't surprising that the youth, especially the students on the University and college campuses in the US have burst out protesting against the senseless killing of Palestinians in Gaza. These protest, arguably the most extensive since Civil Rights protests and the Protests against the Vietnam war in mid 1960s aren't confined the Columbia university where more than 200 students have been arrested and their encampments have been demolished and UCIL & University of California but have spread to several other prominent universities and colleges leading to arrest of over 2000 students so

far. The world has watched with dismay and concern tv coverage of clashes between anti and pro-Palestinian protesters and protesters and the Police whose action has come in for a lot of criticism for being highhanded. Joe Biden, the oldest and perhaps the strongest supporter of Israel, faces one of the toughest tests of his presidency. He has to attempt a delicate tight rope walk. He keenly wants the protests to be brought under control as prevailing disorder might show him in bad light in the election year and tarnish America's image internationally. But while quelling protests, the Security personnels shouldn't create scenes reminiscent of what happened in Tiananmen square in Beijing in 1998! If he is seen not to be doing enough to stop the Israeli operations in Gaza, thousands of Palestinian/Arab Americans are likely to vote against him. And if Israeli Americans feel that he is siding with Palestinians, he might lose their votes which might cost him his bid to return to the white House for the second term. The opinion polls reveal that 71% Americans disapprove of his handling of Israeli-Hamas

conflict; this disapproval rises to 81% among Americans under 35 years of age. This must be worrying his campaign managers. Though anti-Vietnam war protests were much more extensive and emotionally charged up thanks to strong opposition to military drafting and the loss of over 58000 American soldiers, the Current protests might be evoking ghosts of 1968 in the minds of many Democrats when Vice President, Hubert Humphrey lost to Richard Nixon. Notwithstanding the plummeting approval ratings and rising protests, no sane observer can find fault with Biden's following statement: "I understand people have strong feelings and deep convictions.....In America, we respect the right and protect the right for them to express that. But it doesn't mean anything goes. It needs to be done without violence, without destruction, without hate, and within the law." "We are not an authoritarian nation where we silence people or squash dissent....." "The American people are heard". While in response to a pointed question from a journalist if the US Policy was changing in the light of

unprecedented humanitarian crises in Gaza, Biden uttered only one word: NO, the US policy has been slowly evolving since 7th Oct 2023 without shifting the basic foundation: it still stands with Israel. Many analysts believe, the US is, as usual, playing a double-faced policy. For blunting growing criticism of failure in preventing or containing the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, it has accelerated delivery of critical humanitarian assistance and is building a temporary pier off the coast of Gaza. On the other hand, more weapons and ammunition have been flowing into Israel since Oct last year and only last month, Biden has succeeded in getting US Congress's nod for Aid to Israel worth US\$ 26 billion! It will be foolhardy to conclude that these protests are taking place only on the University & college campuses in USA; protests are taking place in the UK, Canada, Australia, Japan which are friendly with USA. But protests are also taking place in Columbia, Iran & Turkey which aren't too friendly to USA. As a matter of fact, the Turkish President, Erdogan has decided to break relations with Israel and has accused

it of committing genocide following in the footsteps of the South African President Ramaphosa who has dragged Israel to the ICJ for having committed genocide in Gaza. The seven-month-old Israel-Gaza conflict has exposed utter irrelevance of the UNSC to establish peace and security in the world. It shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone as the P-5 with veto power seldom agree on measures to avoid eruption of violence and loss of human lives. The Palestinians including women, elderly and children in Gaza who have seen the worst missile, bomb and drone attacks by Israel reducing their homes to rubble and causing death of thousands their relatives and loved ones see death staring in their faces 24x7! What kind of life the survivors lead? What future holds for those children whose mothers, fathers, brothers & sisters have perished in the ongoing war? Who cares? It's just amazing and unbelievable that in this age and time when we talk of driverless cars, AI & setting up colonies in space, human life has become so worthless: just a number. And those who have means, resources and

authority to save human life just turn their heads away. Is it a technology driven world or an animal farm? Though the Spokespersons of the State Dept and the White House have refrained from commenting and Israel has not officially announced it's acceptance and has instead carried out some air strikes in Eastern Gaza, Hamas have declared that they have agreed to a three phased truce brokered by Egypt which will result in cessation of Israeli attacks & eventual withdrawal of Israeli troops and release of all the hostages by Hamas and release of agreed number of Palestinian prisoners by Israel. Apparently, Israeli PM Netanyahu and his right wing Ministers still favour an attack on Rafah camp and consider the proposed agreement far short of their demands. But under tremendoud pressure from the US, they have agreed to send a delegation to meet the Egyptian and Qatari mediators. The agreement still shrouded in uncertainty has been greeted by the Palestinians in Gaza with jubilations. Let us hope, their hopes and euphoria aren't too short lived or misplaced.

THE CLAY CHRONICLES

Pottery in India is not just a craft but a living tradition that embodies the country’s cultural diversity, creativity, and resilience since thousands of years and continues to evolve.

KAUSHAL VERMA
NEW DELHI

Pottery in the Indian subcontinent has an ancient history and is one of the most tangible and iconic elements of Indian art. Evidence of pottery has been found in the early settlements of Lahuradewa and later the Indus Valley Civilisation. Today, it is a cultural art that is still practiced extensively in the subcontinent. Until recent times all Indian pottery has been earthenware, including terracotta.

Early glazed ceramics were used for making beads, seals, bangles during Neolithic period but these glazes were very rarely used on pottery. Hindu traditions historically discouraged the use of pottery for eating off, while large matki jars for the storage of water or other things form the largest part of traditional Indian pottery, as well as objects such as lamps. Small simple kulhar cups, and also oil lamps, that are disposable after a single use remain common. There has also been much figurative sculpture and decorative tilework in ceramics in the subcontinent, with the production of terracotta figurines being widespread in different regions and periods. In Bengal in particular, a lack of stone produced an extensive tradition of architectural sculpture for temples and mosques in terracotta and carved brick. The approximately life-size figures decorating gopurams in South India are usually painted terracotta. Traditional pottery in the subcontinent is usually made by specialized kumhar potter communities

Pottery in India has a rich and diverse history dating back thousands of years, with evidence of pottery-making found in archaeological sites dating as far back as the Indus Valley Civilization (c. 3300–1300 BCE) and way back. Here's an overview of the history of pottery in India:

Neolithic Age: It is also called New Stone Age, is “final stage of cultural evolution or technological development among prehistoric humans. It was characterized by stone tools shaped by polishing or grinding, dependence on domesticated plants or animals, settlement in permanent villages, and the appearance of such crafts as pottery and weaving.” Ahar-Banas culture is a Chalcolithic archaeological culture on the banks of Ahar River of southeastern Rajasthan state in India, lasting from c. 3000 to 1500 BC, contemporary and adjacent to the Indus Valley civilization. Amri-Nal culture (6000 – 1300 BCE) in Sindh and Balochistan. Amri, also has non-Harappan phases during 6000 BC to 4000 BC, and later Harappan Phases till 1300 BCE. Bhirrana culture (7570 – 1900 BCE) along paleo Saraswati in Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan The pottery repertoire is very rich and the diagnostic wares of this period included Mud Applique Wares, Incised (Deep and Light), Tan/Chocolate Slipped Wares, Brown-on-Buff Wares, Bichrome Wares (Paintings on the exterior with black and white pigments), Black-on-Red Ware and plain red wares. Kunal culture (4000 BCE) along in Haryana, Rajasthan, and



Pottery in India has a rich and diverse history dating back thousands of years, with evidence of pottery-making found in archaeological sites dating as far back as the Indus Valley Civilization (c. 3300–1300 BCE) and way back.



Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

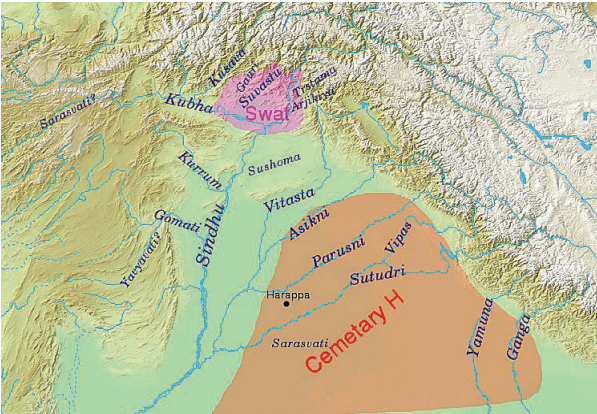
Indus Valley Civilization (c. 3300–1300 BCE): The people of the Indus Valley Civilization were skilled potters, creating a wide range of pottery for various purposes including storage, cooking, and ritualistic uses. Their pottery featured intricate designs, often with geometric patterns and motifs inspired by nature. During the Indus Valley Civilization, there is proof of pottery being constructed in two ways, handmade and wheel-made.

Damb-Sadat culture: Based on the pottery found here, it is classified as a separate archaeological culture / sub-culture of Indus Valley Civilization. The type site is Harappa. This phase has been found at numerous other sites, all of which have earlier much older indigenous cultural phases, example of those sites include Bhirrana, Rakhigarhi, Kunal, Siswal in Haryana in India; Sothi in Rajasthan in India; Mehrgarh and Amri in Pakistan. Cemetery H culture in Punjab and Jhukar and Jhangar culture in Sindh flourished during this phase. Rangpur culture in Gujarat India was also contemporaneous with this phase of IVC, which had distinct cultural characteristics, and traded with IVC cultures. Bara culture (2000 BCE) in Shivalik foothills of

Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh. Painted pottery urns from Harappa, Cemetery H culture, c. 1900–1300 BCE.

Vedic Period (c. 1500–500 BCE): Pottery continued to be an integral part of everyday life during the Vedic period. The pottery of this era was characterized by simple shapes and designs, often made using wheel-throwing techniques. Together with the Gandhara grave culture and the Ochre Coloured Pottery culture, the Cemetery H culture is considered by some scholars as a factor in the formation of the Vedic civilization. Vedic pottery is for example hand-made and unpainted. It has different types of potteries like: Ochre Coloured Pottery culture (2000 – 1500 BCE) in Eastern Punjab, Western UP and Rajasthan- The Ochre Coloured Pottery culture has the potential to be called a proper civilisa-

Pakistan is majorly a grave culture and also called Swat culture, emerged c. 1600 BC, and flourished c. 1500 BC to 500 BC in Gandhara, which lies in modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. It may be associated with early Indo-Aryan speakers as well as the Indo-Aryan migrations into the Indian subcontinent, which came from the Bactria–Margiana region. According to Kochhar, the Indo-Aryan culture fused with indigenous elements of the remnants of the Indus Valley Civilisation (OCP, Cemetery H) and gave rise to the Vedic Civilization. Black and red ware culture (1450 – 1200 BCE) in northern and central Indian subcontinent is a late Bronze Age and early Iron Age archaeological culture of the northern and central Indian subcontinent, associated with the Vedic civilization. The Painted Grey Ware (PWG) culture is an Iron Age culture of the



tion (e.g., the North Indian Ochre civilisation) like the Harappan civilisation, but is termed only as a culture pending further discoveries. Copper Hoard Culture (2800 – 1500 BCE) in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. This occurred in the northern part of India mostly in hoards large and small and are believed to date to the later 2nd millennium BCE, although very few derive from controlled and dateable excavation contexts. Gandhara grave culture (1500 – 500 BCE) in Afghanistan and Northwest

western Gangetic plain and the Ghaggar-Hakra valley, lasting from roughly 1200 BCE to 600 BCE.

Mauryan Empire (c. 322–185 BCE): The Mauryan period saw advancements in pottery techniques, with potters producing a wider variety of vessels for both utilitarian and decorative purposes. This era also witnessed the use of finer clay and more elaborate designs. Northern Black Polished Ware (abbreviated NBPW or NBP) is an urban Iron Age culture of the Indian

Subcontinent, lasting c. 700–200 BCE, succeeding the Painted Grey Ware culture and Black and red ware culture. It developed beginning around 700 BC, in the late Vedic period, and peaked from c. 500–300 BC, coinciding with the emergence of 16 great states or mahajanapadas in Northern India, and the subsequent rise of the Mauryan Empire.

Gupta Empire (c. 320–550 CE): During the Gupta period, pottery reached new heights of artistic expression. Pottery was not only functional but also highly decorative, featuring intricate carvings, paintings, and glazing techniques. Red Polished Ware has also been found in Kushan (39–375 CE), Gupta (4th to early 6th century CE) and Vardhan period (Pushyabhuti dynasty, early 6th century to 7th century CE) in North India, one such example is Harsh Ka Tila in Haryana.

Terracotta is the term used for unglazed earthenware, and for ceramic sculpture made in it. Indian sculpture made heavy use of terracotta from a very early period (with stone and metal sculpture being rather rare), and in more sophisticated areas had largely abandoned modelling for using moulds by the 1st century BC. This allows relatively large figures, nearly up to life-size, to be made, especially in the Gupta period (319–543 CE) and the centuries immediately following it. Several vigorous local popular traditions of terracotta folk sculpture remain active today, such as the Bankura horses. Often women prepare clay figures to propitiate their gods and goddesses, during festivals. In Moela deities are created with moulded clay on a flat surface. They are then fired and painted in bright colours. Other parts of India use this style to make figures like horses with riders, sometimes votive offerings

Medieval Period (c. 600–1600 CE): Pottery continued to evolve during the medieval period, with regional variations emerging across different parts of India. Islamic influence brought new decorative styles and techniques, while pottery remained an essential part of daily life.

Colonial Period (c. 1600–1947 CE): The colonial period saw changes in pottery production due to the introduction of European techniques and materials. Traditional pottery coexisted with new forms influenced by European styles.

Modern Era (c. 1947–present): In the post-independence era, traditional pottery-making techniques persisted alongside modernization. However, there has been a decline in traditional pottery due to the rise of industrialization and mass-produced ceramics. Nonetheless, there has been a resurgence of interest in traditional pottery, driven by efforts to preserve cultural heritage and promote artisanal crafts.

A kulhar is a traditional handle-less pottery cup from Indian subcontinent that is typically undecorated and unglazed, and is meant to be disposable.

Throughout its history, pottery in India has been influenced by various factors including cultural exchanges, trade, religion, and technological advancements.

Today, Indian pottery continues to be celebrated for its craftsmanship, diversity, and cultural significance.

SIGNIFICANCE

Pottery holds significant cultural, economic, and social importance in India, spanning thousands of years of tradition. Here are some key aspects highlighting its significance:

Cultural Heritage: Pottery in India is deeply intertwined with the country’s cultural heritage. It reflects the artistic expressions, traditions, and craftsmanship of various communities across different regions. Each style of pottery carries its own cultural symbolism, motifs, and techniques, often passed down through generations.

Everyday Utility: Pottery has been an integral part of everyday life in India for centuries. From cooking vessels to



India. Earthen lamps (diyas) are used in various religious ceremonies, while clay pots are employed in rituals like weddings, births, and festivals such as Diwali and Holi. These rituals often involve the creation and decoration of pottery items imbued with spiritual significance.

are renowned for their pottery traditions, generating income and employment opportunities for local communities.

Cultural Exchange: Pottery reflects the historical exchanges and influences between different cultures and civilizations. Over the centuries, Indian pottery has been influenced by trade routes, migrations, and interactions with neighboring regions and civilizations, resulting in a diverse array of styles, techniques, and designs.

Artistic Expression: Pottery is a form of artistic expression in India, with artisans showcasing their creativity through intricate designs, patterns, and motifs. From hand-painted pottery to sculptural forms, pottery serves as a canvas for artistic innovation and experimentation.

Environmental Sustainability: Traditional pottery in India is often made from locally sourced natural materials such as clay, which is eco-friendly and sustainable. Compared to modern industrial ceramics, traditional pottery production has a lower environmental footprint, contributing to the promotion of sustainable



storage containers, pottery serves practical purposes in households across urban and rural areas. Its durability, thermal properties, and affordability make it a preferred choice for many.

Rituals and Ceremonies: Pottery plays a significant role in religious rituals, ceremonies, and festivals in

Economic Livelihood: Pottery provides a livelihood for numerous artisans and communities across India. Pottery-making is often a generational occupation passed down within families. Artisan clusters in regions like Khurja (Uttar Pradesh), Jaipur (Rajasthan), and Bankura (West Bengal)

WEIRD FACTS OF INDIAN POTTERY

Traditional Indian pottery encompasses a variety of fascinating and sometimes quirky practices. Here are some weird facts about Indian traditional pottery:

Cow Dung Coating: In certain regions of India, especially rural areas, traditional pottery is coated with a mixture of cow dung and water before firing. This unusual practice helps in maintaining moisture levels during the drying process and prevents cracking in the clay.

Pottery for Frog Marriage: In parts of West Bengal, particularly in the district of Bankura, there’s a unique tradition of making clay frogs and conducting mock marriage ceremonies for them. This ritual, known as “Bengali Frog Marriage” or “Mandar Parinay,” is believed to bring rain and prosperity to the community.

Clay Brides for Mangalore’s Kambala: In Mangalore, Karnataka, there’s a traditional buffalo race called “Kambala” where clay figurines of brides, known as “Kambala Soorulu,” are made and placed on the racing buffaloes as a symbol of good luck and fertility. This quirky tradition adds a touch of cultural significance to the sporting event.

Pottery for Snake Worship: In parts of rural India, especially in states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Rajasthan, pottery is intricately linked with snake worship. Clay pots known as “Ghadalas” or “Nagpals” are crafted with snake motifs and used in rituals to appease the snake gods and ensure protection from snake bites.

Pottery for Childbirth Rituals: In certain communities across India, there’s a tradition of using pottery in childbirth rituals. Clay pots are specially crafted and used during pregnancy and childbirth ceremonies, symbolizing fertility, protection, and blessings for the mother and child.

Pottery for Rainmaking Rituals: In drought-prone regions of India, pottery is sometimes used in rainmaking rituals. Clay pots are decorated with sacred symbols and filled with offerings, then buried or submerged in water bodies as part of ceremonies aimed at invoking rain gods and bringing much-needed precipitation.

Pottery for Solar Cooking: In some rural areas of India, especially in regions with abundant sunlight, clay pots are used for solar cooking. These specially designed clay pots, often called “solar cookers” or “solar ovens,” harness the sun’s energy to cook food slowly over several hours, offering an eco-friendly and sustainable cooking solution.

Pottery for Divination Practices: In some folk traditions and tribal cultures, pottery is used for divination and fortune-telling purposes. Clay pots are decorated with symbols, runes, or patterns, and used in rituals to seek guidance, predict the future, or communicate with spirits.

Pottery for Water Purification: In remote rural areas where access to clean drinking water is limited, pottery is sometimes used for water purification. Clay pots with porous walls are filled with water and placed in direct sunlight, allowing the evaporation and condensation process to purify the water naturally.

Pottery for Cultural Preservation: In efforts to preserve traditional pottery-making techniques and cultural heritage, various organizations and initiatives across India are promoting the revival of ancient pottery practices. These efforts include skill development workshops, cultural exchanges, and documentation of indigenous pottery traditions.

Pottery for Natural Remedies: In Ayurvedic medicine and traditional healing practices, pottery vessels are sometimes used to prepare and store herbal remedies, medicinal pastes, and aromatic oils. Clay pots are believed to have natural properties that enhance the efficacy of herbal medicines and maintain their therapeutic benefits.

Pottery for Sound Healing: In alternative healing practices, such as sound therapy or sound meditation, clay pots are sometimes used as resonant instruments. When struck or rubbed with a mallet, these pots produce soothing sounds and vibrations believed to promote relaxation, balance energy, and facilitate healing. These weird and wonderful facts highlight the versatility, cultural significance, and innovative uses of pottery in India beyond its conventional roles.



SUPREME COURT UPHOLDS MINIMUM MARK CRITERIA FOR INTERVIEW: ‘HIGH SCORE IN WRITTEN EXAM ALONE DOES NOT DETERMINE MERIT’ | JUDICIAL SERVICE

TDG NETWORK
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court in the case Abhimeet Sinha And Ors. Versus High Court Of Judicature At Patna And Ors. observed and has upheld the constitutionality of the Rules wherein stipulating minimum qualifying marks in the viva voce test which being as a part of the selection criteria for the appointment to the District Judiciary in the State of Bihar and State of Gujarat.

The court in the case observed and has rejected the petitioners' contention that the prescription of minimum qualifying marks in the interview violates the Article 14 and Article 21 of the Constitution of India.

The court in the case explained the importance of prescribing minimum qualifying marks in the interview.

The bench comprising of Justice Hrishikesh Roy and Justice Prashant Kumar Mishra was hearing the

present matter. Further, the court emphasized that an interview unveils the essence of a candidate—their personality, their passion, and their potential. The Judgment authored by the bench of Justice Hrishikesh Roy in the case underscored the importance of prescribing minimum qualifying marks in the interview which being for the recruitment of judicial officers, wherein the court also noted that the effort should be to not only test the candidate's intellect but also their personality. The court stated that an interview unveils the essence of a candidate—their personality, their passion, and their potential. Thus, while the written exam measures knowledge, the interview reveals character and capability. Therefore, the court observed that the person seeking a responsible position particularly as a judicial officer should not be shortlisted only by their performance on

paper, but also by their ability to articulate and engage which will demonstrate their suitability for the role of a presiding officer in a court. It was contended by the petitioners i.e., the unsuccessful candidates before the court that the Rule prescribing minimum qualifying marks in the viva voce does not provide a level battle playing field to the candidates who have secured more marks in the written examinations but scored less than the minimum qualifying marks in the interview against those candidates who have secured less in the written examinations but scored more than the minimum qualifying marks prescribed for the viva voce. The court doubted the arguments made by petitioner as to whether those who had high marks in the written test could by itself be considered in the 'meritorious' category. Adding to it, the court stated that there is a debatable issue since the high scores for the written test by itself do not determine the merit and suitability of an aspirant and the performance of the aspirant would also depend on the social, economic, and cultural capital of the candidate and the access to resources such as coaching institutes, quality school education, financial stability, time and flexibility, networking opportunities, mentorship, and access to relevant study materials, are vital factors which also manifestly contribute to the performance in the written test. Further, the court stated that the written test cannot possibly capture the full spectrum of the abilities and the potential of individual's. The court in the case observed that an interview can also provide a medium for marginalized candidates in order to showcase the talents of students in ways that a written test may not possibly allow. Further, the court observed

that a caveat may be necessary here that candidates hailing from English-speaking urban environments might possess linguistic fluency and familiarity with cultural norms typically associated with interviews and are likely to navigate the viva voce segment with relative ease. It has also been stated by the said court that the candidates from marginalized communities may face challenges due to their lack of exposure to urban settings. Thus, this is further exacerbated by conscious and unconscious bias on grounds of gender, religion, caste etc. The court in the case observed and has held that there is a reasonable and direct nexus with the object sought to be achieved i.e. the appointment of well-rounded judicial officers by prescribing the minimum qualifying marks in the viva voce. The court while considering the facts and circum-

stances of the case held that the prescription of minimum cut off is also not perceived to be of such a nature that it reeks of irrationality or was capricious and/or without any adequate determining principle. Thus, it does not appear to be disproportionate so as to adversely affect 'meritorious' candidates, as has been argued. It is certainly not manifestly arbitrary, or irrational or violative of Article 14 of the Constitution of India. The counsel, Mr. Ajit Kumar Sinha, Sr. Adv. Mr. Deepak Goel, AOR Mr. Mithilesh Kumar Jaiswal, Adv. Ms. Alka Goyal, Adv. Ms. Urvashi Sharma, Adv. Ms. Harshita Maheshwari, Adv. Mr. Kumar Kartikay, Adv. Mrs. Archana Preeti Gupta, Adv. Mr. Naveen Soni, Adv. Mr. Vipin Kumar Saxena, Adv. Mr. Rameshwar Singh Malik, Sr. Adv. Mr. Jitesh Malik, Adv. Mr. B C Bhatt, Adv. Mrs. Leelawati Suman, Adv. Mr. N D Kaushik, Adv. Mr. Satish

Kumar, AOR Mr. Yatindra Singh, Sr. Adv. Mr. Anil Kumar Sahu, Adv. Mr. Arvind Gupta, AOR Mr. Prakash Gautam, Adv. Mr. Sujeet Kumar, Adv. Mr. Arunansh Bharti Goswami, Adv. Mr. Brahma Prakash, Adv. Mr. Pawanshree Agrawal, Adv. Mr. Sunil Kumar Jain, AOR Ms. Rashika Swarup, Adv. Mr. Rishabh Sncheti, Adv. Ms. Padma Priya, Adv. Mr. Garvit Sharma, Adv. Mr. K. Paari Vendhan, AOR Ms. Shraddha Deshmukh, AOR Mr. Arjun Singh Bhati, AOR Mr. Gurdeep Singh, Adv. appeared for the Petitioner(s). The counsel, Mr. Gautam Narayan, AOR Ms. Asmita Singh, Adv. Mr. Harshit Goel, Adv. Mr. Sujay Jain, Adv. Mr. K.Prasad, Adv. Mr. Purvish Jitendra Malkan, AOR Ms. Dharita Purvish Malkan, Adv. Mr. Alok Kumar, Adv. Mr. Kush Goel, Adv. Ms. Deepa Gorasia, Adv. Ms. Deepanwita Priyanka, AOR Ms. Preena Singh, Adv. Mr. Guntur

Prabhakar, AOR Mr. Guntur Pramod Kumar, Adv. Mr. Lalit Kumar, AOR Mr. Devendra Singh, AOR Mr. Mritunjay Kumar Sinha, AOR Mrs. Vimal Sinha, Adv. Mr. Abhay Kumar, AOR Mr. BS Rajesh Agrajit, Adv. Ms. Rajbala, Adv. Ms. Meetu Goswami, Adv. Mr. Shyamal Kumar, AOR Mr. Krishnavani Sharma, Adv. Mr. Hitesh Kumar Sharma, Adv. Mr. Akhileshwar Jha, Adv. Mr. Sandeep Singh Dingra, Adv. Ms. Tanishka Grover, Adv. Mr. Amit Kumar Chawla, Adv. Mr. Verendra Mohan, Adv. Ms. Niharika Dewivedi, Adv. Mr. Ranjit Kumar Sharma, AOR Mr. Amit Pawan, AOR Mr. Ratnesh Kumar Shukla, AOR Mr. Purushottam Sharma Tripathi, AOR Mr. Vimal Dubey, Adv. Mr. Mukesh Kumar Singh, Adv. Mr. Ravi Chandra Prakash, Adv. Ms. Vani Vyas, Adv. Mr. Deepak Goel, AOR Mr. Anup Kumar, AOR M/S. Parekh & Co., AOR represented the Respondent(s).

Supreme Court Says, Prima Facie Inclined To Hold That Accused Under Custody In One Case Can Seek Anticipatory Bail In Another Case

TDG NETWORK
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court in the case Dhanraj Aswani Versus Amar S. Mulchandani And Anr. observed and has agreed to consider the legal question as to whether anticipatory bail can be granted when the accused is being arrested in another case.

The bench headed by CJI DY Chandrachud in the case was hearing the criminal matter wherein the court noted that a brief question of law pertained—whether a person who is already arrested under one set of criminal charges in one case can be given anticipatory bail in another case altogether.

The counsel, Senior Advocate Mr Siddarth Dave appearing for one of the parties stated that the question was not just of the grant of anticipatory bail in such a scenario but also of maintainability of such a plea for anticipatory bail. The bench headed by CJI DY Chandrachud in the case expressed that prima facie

not permitting anticipatory bail in one case while being apprehended for another would restrict the essence and purpose of the criminal provision dealing with the grant of anticipatory bail. The court stated that, this court is prima facie inclined to take the view that you cannot stultify Section 438 of Code of Criminal Procedure, CrPC like this and if a person is under arrest for a given offence, he cannot get anticipatory bail in that case I am sure. He is entitled to get anticipatory bail in other, which being subject to a hearing. Accordingly, the bench will hear the final arguments on the issue on May 08, 2024.

SUPREME COURT SEEKS EXPLANATION FROM REGISTRY AGAINST LISTING OF CASE WITHOUT FOLLOWING PROPER PROCEDURE

TDG NETWORK
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court in the case Rahul Vinodkumar Board @ Jain vs. State Of Maharashtra observed and sought an explanation from its Registrar, the Judicial against the listing of the case without following the proper procedure. In the present case, the Special Leave Petition, Criminal was filed and it was listed before the court without an exemption from the surrender application. Thus, this being not the

practice of the court. The bench comprising of Justice JK Maheshwari and Justice Sanjay Karol in the case observed and has asked the registry how the matter came to be listed without following the proper procedure. The bench stated while passing an order that, we cannot let off like this. The court in its order stated that along with the SLP, the surrender certificate must be on record otherwise an application filed seeking exemption from surrender ought to be filed

which is required to be listed before the chamber judge. The court stated that on passing of an order by the chamber judge, it would be listed for passing an order to grant an exemption by the chamber judge, the SLP is required to be listed. In the present case no such procedure has been adopted. Further, the court directed the Registrar, the Judicial to look into the said procedural lapse and submit an explanation within a week. The court in the case observed that this being not

the first time that the Supreme Court expressed displeasure over the registry's failure to list cases despite judicial instructions. The bench headed by Justice Abhay Soka noted with dismay that a civil appeal ought to have been listed on a Thursday, as directed, instead of Friday when the matter was listed. The bench headed by Justice Oka orally observed, 'What is worrying is that some members of the staff have bye-passed the judicial order directing listing of the civil appeal.'

The bench led by Justice (Retd.) Aniruddha Bose pulled up the Registry for not listing a matter related to Adani Power Rajasthan Ltd despite a judicial order to post it on January 23, 2024. Last Year, the bench led by Justice Oka pulled up the registry for shifting the blame on court masters for non-compliance with the court's orders, calling it a 'very sorry state of affairs'. Accordingly, the court listed the matter for further consideration for next week along with an explanation.

SUPREME COURT: FORMER JHARKHAND CM HEMANT SOREN MOVES AGAINST HIGH COURT’S ORDER DISMISSED HIS CHALLENGE TO ED ARREST

TDG NETWORK
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court in the case observed wherein the former Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren has approached the court against the High Court's dismissal of the challenge to his arrest by the Enforcement Directorate, ED in the land scam case. It has been urged by the former Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren for an early listing of the matter considering that the election phase begins on May 13. The Jharkhand High Court in the case observed and has dismissed the petition filed by Soren's challenging his arrest by the Enforcement Directorate 4 days after the Supreme Court agreed to hear the Soren's plea against Enforcement Directorate, ED arrest in the week commencing from May 6, 2024. Further, the Supreme

Court stated that it would be open to the High Court for pronouncing the judgment which was reserved in February. The High Court had also rejected his plea for interim bail but the court allowed him to participate in funeral rites of his Uncle Raja Ram Soren. The counsel, Senior Advocate Kapil Sibal appearing on behalf of Soren requested the bench to give an early consideration to the Special Leave Petition which is filed challenging the rejection of High Court's, especially in light of the election phase which will begin in the State of Jharkhand from May 13 and last till June 1, 2024. The counsel, Senior Advocate Kapil Sibal appearing on behalf of Soren submitted that Hemant Soren was arrested on Jan 31, we moved the High Court on 4 Feb...and High Court did not deliver the judgement, the phase of election starts

on 13th, we moved the said court under 32 petition, thus, the said court issued notice and he delivers the judgement on 3rd. We have filed overnight the SLP, very unfortunate that rights are being trampled in this fashion. The bench comprising of CJI DY Chandrachud, Justice JB Pardiwala and Justice Manoj Misra in the case was informed that the previous pending petition is to be taken up by the Bench of Justice Sanjiv Khanna. The other matter is also before Justice Khanna tomorrow. The bench headed by CJI asked the senior counsel to circulate an email in this regard so that both matters may be listed together. 'Circulate an email will look at it.' The court noted that Soren had moved the Supreme Court, wherein citing the High Court's delay in pronouncing the verdict on his petition challenging

the Enforcement Directorate, ED arrest. Therefore, the order in the petition was reserved by the High Court on February 28, 2024. The Supreme Court on April 29 in the case observed and has issued notice on Soren's petition with liberty to the HC to pronounce verdict. **BACKGROUND OF THE CASE:** The former chief minister of Jharkhand, Hemant Soren is being investigated for money laundering charges in connection with an illegal mining case, as well as an alleged land scam in Ranchi, the state's capital. The Enforcement Directorate, ED is investigating both cases and contends that approximately 8.5 acres of property in question constitutes proceeds of crime. The Enforcement Directorate, ED has charged

Soren with unauthorised possession and usage. Further, the Enforcement Directorate, ED alleged the Soren's direct involvement in the acquisition, possession, and utilisation of these proceeds, accusing him of colluding with others, which includes Bhanu Pratap Prasad, in concealing original records to portray the acquired property as untainted. Last Year, In September, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha chairperson approached the Supreme Court challenging summonses by ED in connection with the money laundering case. The Supreme Court in the case in the case observed and has expressed disinclination to entertain the matter, pointing to the alternative remedy available under Article 226 of the Constitution of India. Accordingly, Soren agreed to withdraw his plea.

Delhi Court Extends CM Arvind Kejriwal’s Judicial Custody In ED’s Liquor Policy Case Till May 20

TDG NETWORK
NEW DELHI

The Delhi Court in the case observed and has extended the judicial custody of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in the money laundering case which is connected to the liquor policy scam till May 20, 2024. The bench headed by Special Judge Kaveri Baweja of Rouse Avenue Courts passed the order on the expiry of his judicial custody in the Enforcement Directorate, ED case. The Supreme Court in the case was hearing the issue of granting interim bail to Kejriwal is currently underway. In the present case, Kejriwal was arrested by the Enforce-

ment Directorate, ED on the night of March 21, 2024. **FACTS OF THE CASE:** Kejriwal had skipped nine summon issued to him by ED. The Aam Aadmi Party leaders Manish Sisodia and Sanjay Singh are also accused in the case and are presently in judicial custody. While following his arrest, Kejriwal had promptly moved an urgent petition before the Supreme Court challenging his arrest. However, the same was withdrawn later. Kejriwal has previously moved the Delhi High Court, the division bench wherein it challenged the summons issued to him by the central probe agency. He has also filed

an application seeking interim protection. The matter is fixed for hearing on April 22. The Kejriwal has skipped the summons, claiming that they are illegal. It has also been alleged by the ED that Arvind Kejriwal is the 'kingpin' of Delhi excise scam and is directly involved in the use of proceeds of crime amounting to over Rs. 100 crores. It being the case of ED's that the excise policy was implemented as part of a conspiracy to give wholesale business profit of 12 percent to certain private companies, although such a stipulation was not mentioned in the minutes of meetings of Group of Ministers, GoM.

Themeless election

India needs a positive agenda

It has been over 50 days since the Election Commission of India announced the Lok Sabha election and the Model Code of Conduct came into force. Three phases of voting have concluded, with voters in over half the Lok Sabha constituencies having exercised their franchise. While both the ruling National Democratic Alliance, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Opposition bloc, with the Congress as its largest constituent, are campaigning to improve their chances, what voters are missing is a substantive debate on crucial issues. To be sure, both parties have released their manifestos, but they are not necessarily the main talking points. And, in any case, campaigning in India is much more than manifestos. What India instead has are debates on mostly irrelevant and often undesirable issues. An electorate that would soon be running the world's third-largest economy was expecting better. Since the focus is not on substantive issues, the language has also been a casualty.

This is in sharp contrast to the Lok Sabha election 10 years ago. The BJP capitalised on the weaknesses of the United Progressive Alliance government with the promise of "*achhe din*". It was a positive campaign for change and delivered a single-party majority after decades. The 2019 election was dominated by the national-security theme, with Pulwama and Balakot forming the backdrop. Nothing of that sort is visible today. The campaign thus far has moved around history — sometimes medieval history — who ate what and when, preserving or increasing reservations — often pitting one section of the population against another — and redistributing wealth and resources, among others. None of these will help increase, say, the pace of economic growth or improve learning outcomes in schools. The issue of inheritance tax, for instance, became a debating point for no reason for a few days and faded away. It is well known that imposing and administering such a tax will be enormously difficult in India.

One of the reasons why political parties end up talking about irrelevant issues could be a long election cycle. Completing the process in two or three phases would have perhaps kept them more focused on important matters. The primary responsibility for improving the political discourse rests with both the BJP and Congress. For the BJP, which aims to make India a developed nation, it was an opportunity to show its achievement and campaign on the future road map. For the Congress and the Opposition at large, it was a chance to highlight areas where the government could not make an impact and present a better alternative in front of voters. Unfortunately, none of these are happening. Indian voters are largely getting to hear personalised attacks and issues that are unlikely to take India forward.

What India needs is rapid economic development. Political capital and energy thus should be focused on enabling sustainable higher growth. A related issue in this context is employment generation. India needs to generate productive employment for its rising workforce and to pull people out of agriculture, which still engages nearly half the workforce, to increase productivity and growth. How India can achieve such goals should be a major feature of any policy or political debate. A pre-poll survey by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies showed inflation and employment were the biggest concerns for the majority of Indians. It's time for the political debate to pivot towards issues directly affecting people's lives.

Berkshire's record run

Many Indian companies fit its mould

The annual Berkshire Hathaway (BH) shareholders' conference in Omaha, Nebraska, is an eagerly awaited event. BH is a behemoth of a holding company with a standalone market capitalisation of over \$870 billion, making it the eighth-most valuable company in the world. It was, until recently, run by two investing legends, Vice-Chairman Charlie Munger and Chairman Warren Buffett. Every casual quip or chance remark in their joint interactions with shareholders was parsed in excruciating detail for clues as to future strategies. One such remark at the 2024 meet suggests Berkshire may be interested in future India exposure. Munger passed away recently at the age of 99, and Mr Buffett, at 93, cast a sombre note when he said he hoped he would be there in 2025 to chair the annual meet. The succession strategy was obviously a matter of debate. Most probably it will be one of the two vice-chairmen, Greg Abel or Ajit Jain.

BH has an incredible investment record with a compound return of around 20 per cent per annum since 1965 — that's over twice the growth rate of the S&P 500. It is one of the world's largest general insurers, and owns large stakes in many other Fortune 500 businesses as well as controlling stakes in many smaller businesses. A single BH voting share trades for about \$600,000 because the company doesn't believe in stock splits, or paying dividends. The strategy is logical only if a company believes that it can earn a high return on retained earnings. In BH's case, it has beaten the market by a massive margin over six decades. One of the many unusual features of the Buffett-Munger partnership has been transparency. They have taken the trouble to explain investment decisions and confess their mistakes to shareholders, usually with humour and self-deprecation thrown in. The Buffett-Munger investment philosophy has been to find growth businesses they understand, and to invest in those for the long term if they reckon the price is right.

This philosophy lent itself to another logical extension that seems an eccentricity at first glance: A reluctance to invest in tech companies since neither of them self-confessedly understood tech. The internet boom and bust was ignored by BH, although it has, at various times, owned stakes in IBM and Apple among other tech plays. The two have also indulged in trenchant criticism of complex financial derivatives, instruments both understood very well since they were experts in insurance, which thrives on such complexities. Mr Buffett's comment about "unexplored opportunities" in India was in response to a query by Rajeev Agarwal of Doordashi Advisers, a US hedge fund. BH's last-known transaction in India occurred in November 2023, when it sold a 2.5 per cent stake in Paytm (One97 Communications) for a loss.

Mr Buffett also pointed out that BH would want to have "any advantage or insights into those businesses in India or any contacts that will make possible transactions" before it entered India in a meaningful way. The presence of Mr Jain may, of course, give BH a headstart in this regard. But given the philosophy, India's overt thrust on digitisation may actually be a drawback when it comes to attracting BH. The 93-year-old chairman has pulled back from day-to-day management and it's possible there could be a radical shift in investment attitude as new management takes over. There are plenty of Indian companies that fit the BH mould and it could be a formidable player.

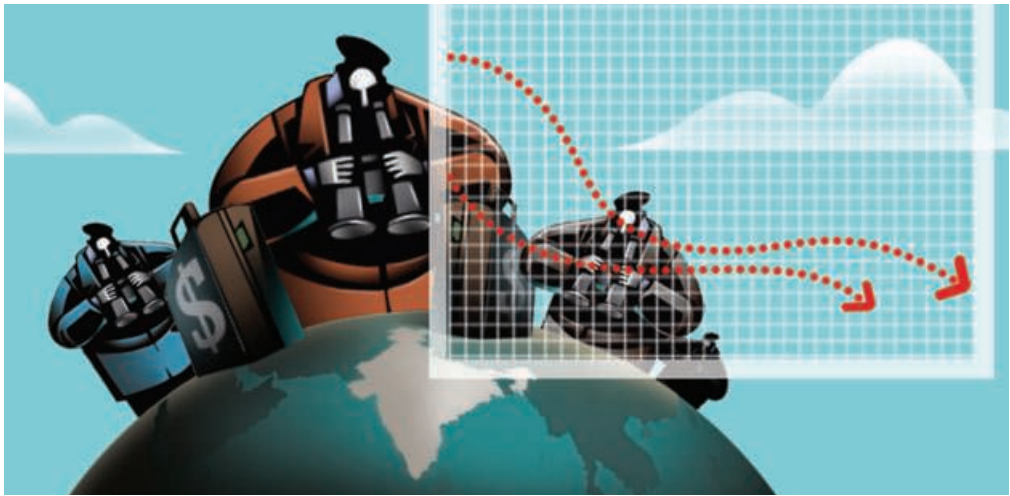


ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY

Rising repatriation

As worrying as the recent decline in gross foreign direct investment is the increasing pace of disinvestment

About a fortnight ago, this newspaper reported that as many as 46 proposals for foreign direct investment (FDI) were pending with about 17 departments of the Union government for more than 12 weeks, which was the time limit set for clearing such applications. The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, or DPIIT, was understandably concerned and wrote to all the departments, asking them to expedite the clearance of these applications. Significantly, these delays took place in many cases despite the Union home ministry having accorded them the mandatory security clearance.

Could this have been one of the reasons for a slowdown in India's gross FDI inflows in the last few months? While it is true that global FDI has been slowing in general, the fall in India's gross FDI inflows was quite sharp at 16 per cent to \$71 billion in 2022-23. Remember that this was the first time in nine years that a decline had taken place in India's gross FDI flows. Worryingly, the declining trend continued during the first eleven months of 2023-24, even though the pace of decline had slowed considerably. Gross FDI flows in the April-February period of 2023-24 fell by 2.7 per cent to \$65 billion. The data for the full year is not yet available.

How serious is this decline? The Narendra Modi government would argue that of the 10 years of its regime, each of the first eight years saw gross FDI flows rise, and a decline in the remaining two years should be attributed to hardening interest rates in developed markets and global economic problems affecting FDI flows in most countries.

But that explanation appears to be missing a larger problem afflicting India's FDI flows. What is happening to repatriation or disinvestment by existing foreign direct investors in the country could point to a more serious problem.

From 2001-02 to 2008-09, repatriation and disinvestment by existing foreign investors were a tiny

proportion of gross FDI inflows into India — a share that ranged between 0.08 per cent and 1.15 per cent. However, this share surged to 12 per cent in 2009-10 (\$4.6 billion of repatriation against gross FDI of \$38 billion) and skyrocketed to 29 per cent in 2011-12 (\$13.6 billion of repatriation against gross FDI of \$46.55 billion).

It was remarkable that even as gross FDI flows between 2009 and 2012 were healthy at 2.1-2.8 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), a good number of existing foreign investors were either repatriating their capital back to their home countries or other destinations and exiting from their ventures in India or diluting their stake through disinvestment. Such repatriation during these three years rose from 0.3 per cent of GDP to 0.7 per cent. This was a period of global economic turmoil and hardening interest rates. But such exits also reflected poorly on the country's ability to retain the foreign investment that it had already attracted.

The situation improved somewhat in the following four years. Even as gross FDI flows improved from 2012-13, and more remarkably after the formation of the Modi government in 2014, the share of repatriation and disinvestment by existing foreign investors in gross FDI flows saw a sharp decline from 29 per cent in 2011-12 to 19 per cent in 2015-16. While more foreign investment was flowing in, the rate at which existing investors were pulling their capital out of India had slowed.

However, the trend changed from 2016-17 for about three years. India's gross FDI flows kept rising, although at a lower annual rate of between 1 and 8 per cent. But the share of repatriation and disinvestment in gross FDI flows rose in this period to about 30-35 per cent. Did demonetisation of November 2016 and the disruption caused by the launch of the goods and services tax (GST) in July 2017 play any role in the increased withdrawal of existing FDI through the repatriation and disinvestment route?



RAISINA HILL

A K BHATTACHARYA

Yen's avoidable slide to 1990 level

Failure of existing rules is the prelude to a search for new ones — Thomas S Kuhn (1962)

The exchange rate of the yen has plummeted all the way back to its 1990 level of around 160 yens per dollar. Why? What can be the policy solution in such matters for the future?

The Bank of Japan (BoJ) has abandoned its zero interest rate policy but even now its short-term interest rate is only 0.1 per cent. This is because of apprehension that Japan may once again return to low inflation or even deflation, coupled with low economic growth. On the other hand, the US Fed is not in a position to reduce its repo rate below 5.5 per cent as the US economy appears to be somewhat stuck with an inflation rate of 3.5 per cent, which is well above the 2 per cent target. The gap between the interest rates in the two countries is huge, and this is accentuating the capital flows from Japan to the US. Hence, the very low yen.

The BoJ apparently intervened by depleting its foreign exchange reserves by about \$35 billion. There was some rise in the yen but the effect does not seem to be lasting. This is understandable, given that the basic problem lies elsewhere. The gap between the interest rates in Japan and the US is huge. And, it is unlikely to be bridged substantially anytime soon, given the very different macroeconomic conditions in the two countries. All this is in the context of the prevailing interest rate policy. The question is — can

we have an altogether different policy so that the side-effect of the policy on the currency market is absent or minimal? Yes. Before we come to the interest rate policy proposed here, note two features of the prevailing interest rate policy.

First, the interest rate policy of the central bank has an inbuilt and implicit tax or subsidy scheme. At present, the BoJ has kept interest rates low for borrowers. It is like giving a subsidy to borrowers. On the other hand, the Fed is keeping interest rates high. It is like imposing a tax on the borrowers.

Second, the changes in interest rates by the central banks are intended to affect borrowing for investment, residential projects, and durables (Bird hereafter); the idea is to affect the aggregate demand in the economy. However, the policy is blunt as it affects other variables like the exchange rate.

With the above two observations, we can now come to the proposed interest rate policy. This policy is not implemented by the central bank.

Instead, it is enacted by the Ministry of Finance (MoF) in Japan and the Treasury in the US. Let the MoF give an explicit subsidy in Japan and let the Treasury impose an explicit tax in the US. The subsidy in Japan or the tax in the US is applicable for BIRD only; it does not apply to all borrowings. Let us see how it all works.

Under the proposed policy, in Japan the demand for funds would go up as a result of the explicit subsidy. So, the interest rate observed in the market

The situation in 2019-20, the year before the outbreak of Covid-19, saw not only a 20 per cent increase in gross FDI inflows for India, but also a slowing pace of repatriation and disinvestment. As a result, against gross FDI flows of \$74 billion in 2019-20, the amount of repatriation and disinvestment was about \$18 billion, with the share falling to 25 per cent.

The following two Covid years saw gross FDI inflows rising, but the pace of increase had slowed, and then they fell by 16 per cent in 2022-23 to \$71 billion. But all these years, repatriation and disinvestment rose to account for a 33-34 per cent share in gross FDI inflows during 2020-21 and 2021-22, and then 41 per cent in 2022-23. The first 11 months of 2023-24 saw a further deterioration in this worrying trend. Repatriation and disinvestment during April-February 2023-24 spurted by 41 per cent and accounted for 59 per cent of gross FDI flows during this period.

Therefore, it is only natural that DPIIT, the department responsible for promoting FDI, will be examining why there are delays in clearance of applications from foreign investors. Its task has become more challenging because of an institutional restructuring brought about by the Modi government in 2017. The Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB), which used to be located in the Union finance ministry, was abolished through an order in June 2017 and individual departments of the government were empowered to clear FDI proposals in consultation with the department of industrial policy and promotion, which was later renamed as DPIIT.

Given the nature of the decline in India's FDI flows, it will make sense for DPIIT to explore an institutional revamp. A decentralised system of clearance of foreign investment applications needs more checks and balances. Indeed, the government could look at reviving an institution similar to the FIPB that is adequately empowered and tasked with facilitating the clearance of foreign investment proposals. This institution should not just have a streamlined approvals process but also be empowered to remove any procedural and policy irritants that come in the way of India becoming a preferred destination among foreign investors. At present, individual departments and ministries may not be sufficiently enthused or empowered to play such a role.

More importantly, a new inter-ministerial institution could examine the more worrying trend of how existing investors are repatriating their capital through disinvestment or other means. It is true that even as the cumulative value of FDI flows increases, some of those investments would flow out through repatriation and disinvestment. But in India, the rate of such exits has been rising at a rapid pace, neutralising the positive impact of FDI flows on the country's balance of payments.

Therefore, as important as attracting foreign investors and expeditiously approving their applications is the need to ensure that existing investors stay invested and expand their operations to help the Indian economy reap the dividends of higher investment. The first step, under these circumstances, will be to initiate a process to understand why the share of repatriation and disinvestment in India's gross FDI flows has been rising in the last few years.

would rise even as the *effective (post-subsidy) interest rate for Bird* falls in Japan. On the other hand, in the US, the demand for funds would fall as a consequence of the explicit tax. So, the interest rate observed in the market would fall even as the effective (post-tax) interest rate for Bird rises in the US.

It is interesting that under the proposed policy, it is only the gap between the effective interest rates for Bird in the two countries that is increased. The gap between the interest rates observed in the markets in the two countries is, in fact, *reduced*. And, given this reduced gap between the interest rates observed in the markets in the two countries, there is much less of an incentive for capital flows from Japan to the US. Accordingly, if the proposed interest rate policy were in place, the yen would not have fallen sharply. And, the objective of macroeconomic stabilisation in the home countries would be achieved. QED.

There is, of course, a whole lot more to the story that includes not only the possible side-effects of the policy for currencies but asset prices as well. It is all explained in this author's forthcoming book, *Macroeconomics and Asset Prices - Thinking Afresh on Basic Principles and Policy*. The proposed policy is intrinsically simple. It is just new and unfamiliar.

In conclusion, the prevailing interest rate policy is very blunt and it has side-effects, which is why the yen fell sharply. This would not have happened under the proposed interest rate policy.

The writer is an economist. He taught at Ashoka University, ISI (Delhi) and JNU. He thanks Chetan Ghate for comments on the initial draft; gurbachan.arti@gmail.com

Making family businesses last



BOOK REVIEW

PROSENJIT DATTA

Few family-owned firms anywhere in the world last beyond three generations. The late Andrew Carnegie, who built up US Steel and became the richest man in the world for some time, had coined a phrase for it: It takes three generations to go from shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves. Other countries have similar proverbs. The assumption is that the first generation starts the business, the second builds it up, while the third generation of the family squanders away the legacy.

What goes wrong and how can a family-owned enterprise thrive beyond three generations? Like several books

had attempted earlier, *Beyond Three Generations* seeks to answer those questions and give tips on how to ensure longevity, especially for family-owned and -run small and medium-sized businesses in India. It also looks at how they can scale up from a medium-sized enterprise to a big business.

It is not a big book — a mere 215 pages — but is unusual in that it gives equal billing to four co-authors. Two are brothers — Navas Meeran and Firoz Meeran — the chairman and vice-chairman of Kerala-headquartered Group Meeran, respectively. They represent the second generation — their father, the late M E Meeran founded the enterprise called The Eastern Condiments Group, which has evolved into Group Meeran now.

The third co-author is M S A Kumar, a family business adviser and CEO coach, who has helped many family-run businesses to scale up beyond ₹100-150 crore revenues, where these often get stuck.

The fourth co-author is veteran business journalist George Skaria who held senior editorial roles in multiple business publications, including *Businessworld* and *Business Today*.

Though Professor Kavit Ramachandran of the Indian School of Business is not one of the co-authors, he provided the co-authors with valuable advice from time to time.

While the book looks at family businesses in general for lessons, the focus is particularly on how small and medium family-run businesses in India manage after a couple of generations and also once they have reached a certain size.

They examine in particular 12 case studies — Group Meeran being one of them. The others are a mix of well-known names as well as those that do not attract much attention from mainstream business newspapers, though they have all built up significant organisations and businesses. The case studies include Aravind Eye Care System, OmniActive Health Technologies, Evolve Back

Resorts, Popular Automobiles, Sandu Pharmaceuticals and others.

The businesses profiled are in very different sectors and geographies, and have little in common except for founders who believed in hard work, ethics and in the way their descendants have kept true to the founder's principles. Some entrepreneurs started from scratch with little capital or

resources while others were somewhat luckier to have got some share during the partition of an older family business group.

In some cases, the second and third generation of the family have grown by building up the core business started by the founder and also building adjacencies while in others there has been a sharp pivot.

The co-authors bring out a lot of issues that crop up — from problems when family members have ambition

but not the capability, to the issues that might become evident when a professional is given charge of the group.

Sometimes, despite having an impeccable resume, a professional may not work out. It may be the fault of the entrepreneur or the family members who could not let go fully. Or it could be simply that the professional was used to working in a very different environment and despite all his ability and qualifications, made little effort to understand the ethos of the new company.

There are plenty of interesting anecdotes and nuggets strewn throughout the book. There are cases where family dynamics have resulted in havoc. Sometimes, a family member is given charge but proves to be inept but no one knows how to move him out or reduce his role. In other cases, there is a clash between the ideas and management

styles of generations within the family.

Beyond Three Generations offers plenty of strategies and ideas to deal with different situations including a list of things not to do. They are good and the book is quite easy to read. Some solutions appear to be little beyond common sense advice but are difficult to follow. Others offer insights that are often missed.

One of the co-authors, M S A Kumar, gives his Expert Takes in chapters, breaking down the issues involved, making it easier to understand and decide on the solutions.

The book will be a useful read for all the family businesses that are grappling with the issues highlighted. Eventually though, how helpful the book is will depend on how willing the founder or family members are to learn the lessons and set their egos aside to find a proper solution. It is, after all, egos, personalities, ambitions, and capabilities that often destroy the business by the time the third generation takes over.

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



BEYOND THREE GENERATIONS: The Definitive Guide to Building Enduring Indian Family Businesses
Author: Navas Meeran, MSA Kumar, Firoz Meeran, George Skaria
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Pages: 215
Price: ₹599

OUR VIEW



Bank fraud: Not too late to set the record straight

It would serve our banking sector well if the Supreme Court clarifies that its ruling on giving borrowers a hearing before classifying their accounts as ‘fraud’ did not apply retrospectively

At a time when Indian courts are overburdened with cases, it might seem irresponsible to ask for a ruling to be reviewed. Yet, it is sometimes necessary. As reported this week, a few large banks have decided to move the Supreme Court to resolve differences over borrowers tagged as ‘fraud accounts’ by lenders. Even if it could result in opening up a can of worms, the apex court would do well to take up for review its ruling last year which held that a borrower must be “given a hearing” before the account is labelled as ‘fraud.’ Back then, many seasoned bankers had privately averred that it’s not as if clients get no chance to explain loan defaults. But matters have come to a head, reportedly, thanks to the insistence of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), which is probing many fraud cases, that the apex court’s verdict covers all fraud accounts with retrospective effect. As banks see it, the court’s order does not apply to accounts classified as fraud before it was issued. This divergence in view needs to be resolved quickly.

In practice, as anyone who has worked in a commercial bank knows, defaulting borrowers are given a long rope before the bank resorts to extreme measures like marking accounts out as ‘fraud.’ This is not surprising. Under the Banking Regulation Act of 1949, banking is defined as “the business of taking deposits, repayable on demand or otherwise, for the purpose of lending.” It follows from this that bank deposits must be returned to depositors if they want their money back. A failure to do so could potentially result in a run on the bank and even bring it down. Since these funds are used by the bank to lend on, what it seeks

above all is to get its dues back from borrowers on time. Under normal circumstances, no stone is left unturned to recover the money when a borrower fails to pay up. Bankers spend days, if not months, and sometimes even years meeting defaulters to work out schemes of repayment. Sure, the sector’s regulator frowns on ‘evergreening’ debt (giving more loans in order to get back the original loan), but short of that, banks usually give their borrowers enough opportunity to make good on the promise they made while taking these loans—namely, timely repayment.

It would be good if the Supreme Court were to clarify that its ruling on the due process for classifying accounts as fraud was for prospective application, not retrospective. This would reassure banks that they will not have to revisit past frauds and get bogged down in needless litigation involving stacks of old cases. What qualifies as a hearing and what doesn’t could be a point of dispute if old records are raked up. Ideally, the Supreme Court should presume that certain practices such as giving borrowers—including defaulters—a hearing is embedded in standard banking practice. Let us not risk undoing some of the progress made in the cause of credit discipline, which laws like the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code have sought to inculcate. If errant borrowers begin to look at their legal options as tools to keep banks dangling, done by filing one challenge after another in courts, lenders might respond by reducing their lending to risky businesses and opting instead for the safer options of lazy banking. This would not only go against the very grain of banking—which is, after all, a business of taking risks—but could also harm the larger economy.

MY VIEW | A VISIBLE HAND

Could a few swing states determine who governs India?

NARAYAN RAMACHANDRAN



is chairman, InKlude Labs. Read Narayan’s Mint columns at www.livemint.com/avisiblehand

India is in the midst of conducting its 18th Lok Sabha elections. In the first eight of these Parliamentary polls held after independence, the winning party had more than the required majority of seats to form a government, ranging from a high of 143 more for Rajiv Gandhi of the Congress in 1984 to a low of just 22 over the majority-mark for his predecessor Indira Gandhi in 1967. The reason to look at it this way is that the number of Lok Sabha seats has varied over time, from a low of 489 for the first elections held in 1951 to the current 543, so using a benchmark of the majority’s size allows direct comparison. From the ninth through the 15th general elections in 2009, the winning party was short of a majority, with the deficit ranging from 127 in the 2004 Congress victory for Manmohan Singh to 24 in the same party’s 1991 win that saw P.V. Narasimha Rao become prime minister. Negative majority margins necessitate coalition governments. The pattern changed in the elections of 2014 and 2019, when the Bharatiya Janata Party

(BJP) won 10 and 31 seats over majority-mark, respectively.

Will the BJP or Congress maintain the trend of a single party returning more than the required majority to Parliament in 2024? It can only be either of these parties, as they are the only two contesting more than the majority number of 272 seats; BJP candidates have registered in 446 constituencies and Congress leaders in 327. Statistically speaking, the probability of the Congress achieving the halfway mark alone, with an 82% success rate required on contested seats, is very low. In terms of candidates, the third largest party at the moment is the Samajwadi Party (SP), with 62 constituencies. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has not yet announced its full list of candidates, as India’s multi-phase elections allow later declarations.

There are various types of voting systems around the world, too numerous and too arcane to review here. Suffice it to say that they attempt to balance proportionality, voter choice and local representation. Like the UK, India uses a first-past-the-post system (FPTP). This term is a reference to horse racing, where the first horse to cross the post is the sole winner, whether it leads by just a nose or a whole mile. The candidate with the most votes in a constituency wins, even if the

person’s vote share is less than half the total votes cast, as often happens when there are more than two contestants in the fray.

In the 2019 elections, BJP candidates in as many as 224 Parliamentary constituencies won with a voter share greater than 50%, implying that they would have won those seats under any electoral system. An excellent analysis on *Print.in* puts paid to the unexamined notion that those 224 seats came exclusively from BJP strongholds in five states, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, which together account for 200 Lok Sabha seats. Instead, it is less concentrated than expected in those states (except Gujarat) and reasonably well spread across other states like Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Haryana. In 2019, counter-intuitively, non-BJP parties secured over half the votes cast in 117 constituencies in states as diverse as Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, but also including Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, among others.

One way to predict the outcome of these elections is to notionally award those 224 ‘safe seats’ to the BJP and the 117 others to non-BJP parties (with some adjustments to be made for differences in who is with the BJP this time versus the last), with the remaining 202 constituencies counted as ‘swing seats’ for analysis. But this could yield erroneous results for two reasons. One, the past is not necessarily prologue; and two, the nature (in a structural sense that matters to the FPTP system) of the BJP’s opposition at the state level has changed. For instance, in Uttar Pradesh, the ‘*mahagatbandhan*’ (grand coalition) between the SP and BSP of the last election has broken down since then, and the SP has allied itself with the Congress in the ‘INDIA’ bloc, even as the BSP fades. In Bihar, Nitish Kumar’s Janata Dal (United) has been allocated 16 seats in the NDA bloc, and it is hard to tell what his constant flip-flops will imply for results. In Maharashtra, there are now two Shiv Senas and two Nationalist Congress

Parties (NCPs). There is heated debate about whether citizens would prefer the original versions of these parties under Uddhav Thackeray and Sharad Pawar, respectively, or the newer splinters that have been awarded the original party symbols.

Even though each seat counts as one and it matters not from which state it comes, in the 17 states with more than 10 seats each (that together make up 502), six states count as swing states. These are Maharashtra, Karnataka, West Bengal, Punjab, Chhattisgarh and Haryana. You could add Bihar to this list for 2024. These battle-ground states form a sort of cummerbund around India’s heartland. These aren’t ‘swing states’ in the American sense, as the whole state isn’t awarded to a sole winner, but because the FPTP winner in each constituency will likely be determined by a small margin and will be deeply influenced by the number of candidates, as well as local factors. There are a total of 152 seats in these six states (192 if you add Bihar). By my estimate, about half of these will be ‘too close to call’ and will thus determine whether the recent trend of non-coalition governments is maintained or reversed.

P.S. “With the slightest push—in just the right place—it can be tipped,” said Malcolm Gladwell, author of ‘The Tipping Point.’

THEIR VIEW

Climate action mustn’t leave the goal of gender equality behind

We need a gender-just plan of action to avert the loss of lives and livelihoods in intense heat waves



ARCHANA DATTA
is a former director general of Doordarshan and All India Radio.

The European Court of Human Rights recently ruled in favour of KlimaSeniorinnen (Senior Women for Climate Protection), an association of more than 2,000 Swiss women, all above the age of 64, who had filed a case against the Swiss government for its failure to cut greenhouse gas emissions, which has put them at a greater risk of dying during heatwaves because of their age and gender. The ruling made the Swiss government accountable for violating its citizens’ Right to Life and Health, and created a binding legal precedent for all 46 countries that are part of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Swiss government, however, argued that decisions on climate policy should be taken by democratically-elected lawmakers, not by courts.

The world has been warming up at an average rate of about 0.2° Celsius per decade since the late 1970s. Europe has emerged as a major climatic hotspot, almost 1° Celsius worse off than the corresponding global increase. A study in Europe that assessed the sex- and age-specific mortality burden during a period of record-breaking temperatures from 30 May to 4 September 2022 found a spike in heat-related deaths in older age groups, especially of women. A 2014 study in India revealed that more women than men died during a 2010 heat wave in Ahmedabad, when

temperatures reached 47.8° Celsius and heat-related hospital admissions of newborns went up by 43%. Arsh-Rock research work in India, Nigeria and the US has forecast that heat could claim the lives of 204,000 women annually across these three countries alone by 2050. In India, in an extremely hot year, the toll may go up to 131,000, which would be about 1.1% of total deaths.

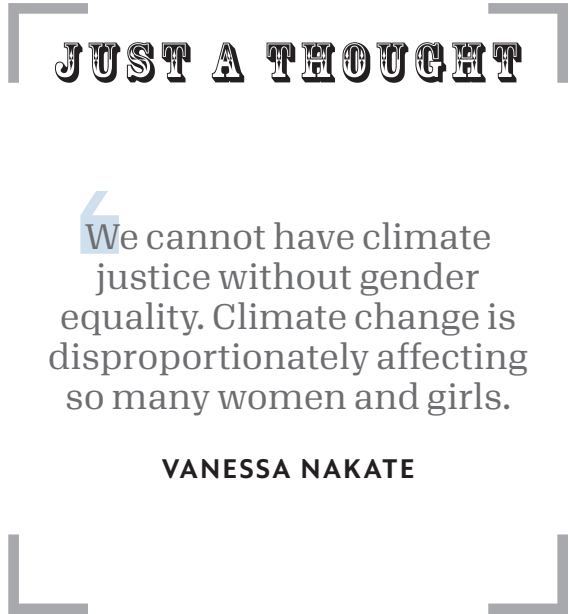
The Swiss ethnologist Elisabeth Stern, an active member of the KlimaSeniorinnen, has urged further research to ascertain the reasons for women’s greater vulnerability to heat waves. A 2018 study in 272 cities in China attributed it to physiological causes, like “greater cardiovascular strain on women” caused by heat. Hein Daanen, a physiology researcher at Free University, Amsterdam, has observed that “sweating is a particularly effective method of cooling, and, women, who have a lower capacity to perspire and evaporate sweat, are at a disadvantage.” After a 2003 heatwave killed thousands in France, it emerged that many of the victims were elderly women living alone in top-floor apartments, which led some scientists to ask if elderly women may be at higher risk of dying because of social factors like a greater propensity to live in seclusion. Another study on Ahmedabad’s 2010 deadly heatwave (by Rand Corp) pointed out that lack of access to toilets compelled many women to drink less water to avoid relieving themselves outdoors, noting that “women didn’t have the agency to cool themselves down.”

As rising temperatures reduce the quality and length of people’s lives, they cast a shadow on our economic health too. Projections based on a global temperature rise of 1.5° Celsius by the end of this century show that in 2030, 2.2% of the world’s total working hours will be lost to heat. In situations of extreme heat in countries like the US, India and Nigeria, where unpaid work done by women varies between 40% and 70% of all working hours, and that too mostly in

heat-exposed areas, the time taken by such work is likely to get stretched much longer. It could be a whole extra working day per month in the US, 90 more minutes per day in India and 150 additional minutes a day in Nigeria.

Women in these three countries earn at least 24–45% less than men and heat-related income losses will worsen that disparity. Heat-related labour productivity losses are a key reason that average wages in Nigeria have fallen below the minimum wage in women-dominated sectors, affecting 22 million women. In India, where heat-exposed labour accounts for a vast share of the workforce, it is estimated that by 2030, there will be 34 million job losses from productivity declines caused by heat-stress, a large share of a projected 80 million such job losses globally. As a World Bank report shows, South Asian countries are expected to bear the brunt of the heat-exposure impact. As for India, women are estimated to be at risk of losing 19% of their paid working hours, costing the Indian economy 0.8% of its annual GDP, a loss that could go up to a level which costs the country 1% of its GDP by 2050. A 2023 Cambridge University study showed that since April 2022, almost the entire country had been exposed to increased risks stemming from hunger, loss of income or premature death during heat waves, and 43% of women reported an increase in caregiving work (HomeNet South Asia).

Our climate crisis is now visible in extreme heat, apart from more intense and frequent natural disasters. Life, livelihood and productivity losses are in evidence too. As it always happens, women are at the receiving end of the misery. As nations reviewing the Gender Action Plan this year under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, they must ensure that future climate adaptation strategies have an inclusive agenda. We need gender-just action plans for a sustainable and more equal future.



GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

The Godrej family saga: Business succession should be vision-led

The Godrej division is a reminder of the necessity to periodically revisit the family's own vision, values, strategies and policies



SOUGATA RAY
is professor and executive director, Thomas Schmidheiny Centre for Family Enterprise, Indian School of Business.

The recent split in the illustrious Godrej family business group, a behemoth that has been a cornerstone of India's industrial landscape for over a century, has captivated the business and investor community. With roots stretching back to 1897, the Godrej Group has epitomized resilience, innovation and stewardship across five generations. However, the fissures that have emerged within the family in recent years underscore the intricate challenges of sustaining harmony and continuity in multi-generational family enterprises.

Discords within the Godrej family came to the forefront in the 2010s, primarily revolving around a combination of succession-related issues and differing strategic visions among some family members on the future portfolio and direction of the family business group's businesses. Despite Adi Godrej's longstanding and remarkable tenure as the group's patriarch and leader, the absence of a designated successor appears to have led to uncertainty and contention among family members over the future leadership of the family and its complex portfolio of diversified businesses. Moreover, the failure of the current and next-gen leadership of the Godrej family to agree on a unified strategic vision and set of priorities for the business group's direction is said to have led to disagreements over key business decisions, fuelling tension within the family.

Many observers bemoan the division of businesses built over a century by this iconic business family, a rare exemplar of enduring familial success in India, as it splits its business portfolio into two, each charting its distinct course. In the realm of business, few entities embody tradition, resilience and complexity as profoundly as multi-generation family enterprises. These enterprises often serve as pillars of economic stability, passing down values, expertise and wealth through successive generations, and emerge as an integral part of a nation's history and heritage.

However, it is important to recognize that the possibility of a carve-up of businesses is intrinsic to enterprises that are exposed to the vagaries of uncertain, intricate and often inexplicable familial relationships that can either fortify or fracture both families and their businesses. Moreover, the topic merits nuanced consideration, as splits in family businesses *per se* should not be viewed negatively. They can bring about both positive and negative consequences for all stakeholders.

At the heart of multigenerational family rifts often lie fundamental tensions between tradition and innovation, legacy and progress. The continuity of any family-owned business group lies in the owning family's ability to develop a unified family vision that strikes a delicate balance between pre-



serving the values and ethos of the past while embracing imperatives of the future. While family splits can be disruptive and challenging, they are sometimes not only unavoidable, but also welcomed, the reasons for which could range from differing visions and conflicts of interest to the need for a clear transition from one generation to the next. Therefore, every business family should proactively prepare for potential splits in the future, rather than staying oblivious of the possibility or trying to avoid them altogether. By proactively preparing for splits, business families can not only mitigate the adverse impact on their businesses and ensure their continued success, but also avoid splits.

One classic example of proactive preparation for family splits is that of the Merck family, owners of the pharmaceutical giant Merck & Co. In the early 20th century, the family foresaw potential conflicts among descendants and took proactive measures to prevent family disputes from affecting the business. They established a complex ownership structure that separated ownership of the pharmaceutical company from operating control of the business. This allowed all family members to retain ownership stakes in the business, while professional managers were appointed to run it for the most part, with only a select few professionally competent family members part of the management. Multi-tier governance mechanisms both within the family and business were put in place, so that the family could play an effective stewardship role. This proactive approach helped prevent family disputes from disrupting the operations of the

company and ensured its continued success over many generations.

A multigenerational business family can be seen as a complex social unit that requires meticulous attention to crafting its vision and strategy as much as it needs the same exercise for its enterprises. Succession planning emerges as a pivotal component of this endeavour. In multigenerational family business groups, this process transcends mere transfers of ownership and control; it encompasses nurturing talent, cultivating leadership, fostering a unified family vision and delineating strategic priorities to ensure seamless power transitions across generations within the family and its businesses. Transparency and open communication play a paramount role in addressing succession-related challenges within these families. Regular and clear communication within the family, using both formal and informal channels, helps understand and align the aspirations of individual family members with the family's collective vision for its businesses. Unfortunately, this aspect remains neglected across large parts of India's family business landscape, impeding the revitalization and growth of many enterprises. The division within the Godrej Group of family businesses serves as a poignant reminder of the necessity to periodically revisit and revise the family's vision, values, strategies and policies. Consensus-building through continuous communication is essential for navigating generational transitions. It plays an important role in preserving and growing the wealth, legacy and identity not only of the family, but also of the businesses under its stewardship.

The neutrality of 'Civil War' is what makes the film powerful

The movie could help stir a real debate across the aisle in America



FRANK BARRY
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist and member of the editorial board covering national affairs.



Alex Garland's film shows a future America at war with itself

Alex Garland's box office hit, *Civil War*, which is set in a future America at war with itself, has drawn criticism for not telling audiences what caused the conflict—and for its refusal to more realistically portray the battle lines that divide Red and Blue America. That critique not only gets the movie wrong, but it's also blinding people to the film's potential to positively influence the US political landscape, including the presidential poll.

The power of *Civil War* lies in the question it forces us to ask: "How could this have happened here?" In a recent column calling Garland's evasion of that question "a total cop-out," *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat offered several possibilities: defeat in a war with China that causes an economic crisis, a pandemic that leads states to close borders, new technology like AI that fuels desperation or a climate catastrophe. I was astonished that Douthat, who frequently writes about religion, did not mention another dangerous force: Christian nationalism. But nor did he do so in a 2022 column throwing cold water on Barbara F. Walter's outstanding book, *How Civil Wars Start*. Douthat is hardly the only conservative who seems to be in denial about the threat that Christian nationalism poses to US democracy. The danger of that denialism is powerfully brought home in *Bad Faith*, an excellent new documentary now streaming on Apple TV.

Like the Rob Reiner-produced film *God and Country*, which came out earlier this year, *Bad Faith* draws on Katherine Stewart's 2019 book, *The Power Worshipers*, which pulls the curtain back on evangelical efforts to erase the line between church and state in legislative bodies, public schools and courtrooms—and to turn America into a theocracy, by any means necessary.

The films and book sound the alarm that some of Garland's critics wish *Civil War* had incorporated, and understandably so. As *Bad Faith* makes clear, theocrats were in the vanguard of the 6 January attempted coup. Today, as some evangelical pastors speak of a coming civil war, religiosity is increasingly at the centre of former US president Donald Trump's campaign. Some of his rallies end with a prayer that mimics evangelical altar calls, when congregants approach the altar and commit themselves to Jesus. Trump-branded Bibles seem like an attempt to blur the line between Donald and deity—and to tie his political trials to the persecution of Jesus. Recently, Trump shared an article headlined, "The Crucifixion of Donald Trump."

And he has not ruled out more violence—potentially much worse violence—should he lose again this year.

In this sense, critics of *Civil War* have a valid point. It is almost impossible to talk about an American civil war without talking about Christian nationalism's theocratic goals and violent tendencies.

Nevertheless, it's also almost impossible for Democrats to engage conservatives on the topic of political violence by harping on Christian nationalism. Like Douthat, many conservatives just do not see—or do not want to believe—the connection. And that is precisely what makes the political neutrality of *Civil War* a virtue.

Had Garland's plot mirrored current politics, conservatives might have shunned the movie as another example of Hollywood's liberal bias. Instead, he helped open a door for Trump's opponents, giving them a chance to extend the discussion of political violence—and the ruinous, horrifying consequences it could bring—to the very people who will probably decide the November election.

Or, in other words: Garland has done what Democrats have spent more than three years trying to do with little success: inviting more Republicans and independents into the most important conversation in America.

The question is: What are Democrats doing to capitalize on it?

Liberal complaints about *Civil War*, like complaints about the bad faith of evangelicals, won't move any votes. Encouraging Republicans to watch *Bad Faith* probably won't be any more successful, unfortunately.

For *Civil War* to be a vehicle for bipartisan dialogue on political violence, Democratic leaders need to show themselves capable of engaging in some good faith reckoning of their own. This is also part of the film's power: Garland wisely does not foreclose the idea that many of his liberal critics seem disinclined to entertain, that democracy could be threatened from the left as well.

What shape that threat could take, and what we can do about it, is a question I'll explore later in a column. But suffice it to say: In leaving important questions [about democracy and peace] open to viewers, Garland got it right.

MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

Releasing the EVM source code could enhance security

RAHUL MATTHAN



is a partner at Trilegal and also has a podcast by the name Ex Machina. His Twitter handle is @matthan

This year, as with nearly every recent election, questions were raised about the functioning of electronic voting machines (EVMs). While the Supreme Court upheld their use in elections, when asked if the source code of EVM machines could be released for open source use, it tersely shut down that line of argument, pointing out that if the source code is released, it would be misused.

While I have no desire to wade into the debate over whether and how electronic voting machines should be used, I do want to unpack the Supreme Court's somewhat off-hand rejection of open source. This is a line of thinking I've come up against time and again in my dealings with the government, and, for the life of me, I cannot understand where it comes from.

As far as I can tell, there is a belief among the powers-that-be that source code is some sort of an access pass that gives anyone who gets hold of it the power to do whatever they want with the digital systems that have been

built with it. All it will take to compromise a digital system, they seem to believe, is access to its source code—which is why there is such a concerted effort in government circles to keep it a secret.

As anyone who builds digital systems will tell you, this is simply not true. Source code merely explains how a system works. But just because you know how it works doesn't mean you will be able to access it, much less get it to do what you want.

Take Signal, for example, an open-source messaging app that ensures that messages sent to anyone using its protocol are encrypted end-to-end. Even though its source code is publicly accessible, without access to the private decryption keys specific to that messaging session, it is impossible to decrypt the messages. With perfect forward-secrecy implemented, each session uses temporary encryption keys that are continually updated, which means that even if a key is compromised, it cannot be used to decrypt previous or future messages.

For a malicious actor to wreak harm, he would need administrative access to a system. He would have to get deep enough into its workings to be able to rewrite the ways in which it functions, before he can twist it to do his bidding. Mere knowledge of the

source code will not allow him to do that. At best, it will allow him to exploit any overlooked vulnerabilities—and that too, only until they are discovered.

This, counter-intuitively, is another reason why we should be releasing software as open source in the first place. The reason open-source software is believed to be more secure in the long-run than its proprietary counterparts is that a broader community of developers, security experts and researchers is able to see the code. Once there is a critical mass of developers who are invested in trying to identify vulnerabilities in the code, they will be spotted quicker than would have been the case had it remained proprietary. Given that this community is both diverse and agile, we can identify the problem and find solutions for it far sooner than would otherwise have been possible. It is precisely because the Signal protocol is open-source that it can be audited and improved upon by a global community of security experts who

take pains to ensure that the cryptographic methods employed are among the best in class for securing private communication.

Many of the systems that we depend on everyday use open-source software. Apache Web Servers power a third of the internet, while the Linux operating system (on which the Android operating system was built) powers the vast majority of smartphones in the world. It is telling that even though both of them are open-source software, the world is none the worse for the fact that everyone knows what their code contains. When the Heartbleed bug threatened to compromise the OpenSSL libraries that are central to the security of communications over the internet, it was the agility of the open-source community that patched the vulnerability before it could cause too much damage.

We need to learn from these examples and apply similar logic when it comes to the source code that powers our government systems. We need to understand that simply

because the source code of a given technology solution has been released as open source, it does not mean that the system itself is any more likely to be compromised. To the contrary, having multiple eyes on the code will help shore up our defences against attacks and bring to bear the entire collaborative might of the open-source community. When the code of our digital systems are available for everyone to scrutinize, we will be able to see for ourselves how these systems function and what they do with the data they collect. And that will restore public faith in how these systems have been designed.

In 2010, the Indian government released the National Open Standards Policy, a commitment to use open source in governance. This was the culmination of a three-year effort to get it to join the ranks of governments committed to using open source.

Despite the initial fanfare, not much progress has been made. A few standards have been notified, but there has been negligible progress on the ground. Even so, considering the government's express support for the concept, the last thing I thought I'd see was a dismissive disposition towards the very notion of open source from the highest court in the land.

Open source software isn't more exposed to bad actors but less, thanks to highly skilled public vigilance



THOUGHT FOR THE DAY: What would life be if we had no courage to attempt anything?

— VINCENT VAN GOGH



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High Court boost for inclusive education

It's a blow to the Eknath Shinde government that a two-member Bench of the Bombay High Court has found the February 9 notification, which tampered with the Right to Education Act, unconstitutional and, therefore, untenable. According to the Act, all unaided private schools were required to reserve 25 percent of seats at the entry level for children from economically weaker and disadvantaged sections. It was the responsibility of the state government to pay the schools their tuition fees. However, the Maharashtra government tried to be too clever by half when it exempted private unaided schools situated within a one-kilometre radius from a government-run school from reserving 25 percent of seats for poor children. What's worse, the students had to apply to the government, which would admit a student only to a government school if there was such a school within a kilometre of his residence.

Parents knew that their children could go directly to a government school for admission, instead of waiting for the government's decision. Small wonder that there has been a drastic fall in the number of students applying for admission through this process. No doubt, the ordinance was promulgated to favour private schools that did not want to admit such students. On the government's side, it did not want to pay fees for such students. The purpose of the provision, as envisaged in the RTE Act, was to promote inclusive education. Many school managements were not willing to allow children from poor classes and backgrounds to sit with children from privileged groups. The purpose of the provision when the law was enacted in 2009 was precisely to fight this mindset.

The crux of Chief Justice DK Upadhyaya's and Justice Arif Doctor's judgment is that a subordinate law cannot take precedence over the main law, with the ordinance being subordinate to the RTE Act. It is difficult to say whether the 25 percent reservation has been a success, as many children who were admitted were unable to face the competition and dropped out. In fact, there is a strong case for strengthening the provision, instead of weakening it. Private schools that admit 25 percent of poor students and allow them to complete their education in the same schools should be recognised and honoured. Only then will the dream of inclusive education, where poor children are entitled to a level-playing field, become a reality.

Kangana's WW folly

In the ever-entertaining world of Bollywood, there's one actor who's truly mastered the art of cracking jokes without even trying. Enter Kangana Ranaut, the queen of unintentional humour. While most comedians labor over crafting jokes, Kangana effortlessly drops pearls of wisdom that leave everyone in stitches. Take her recent gem delivered at an election rally in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh. Claiming that Prime Minister Narendra Modi single-handedly prevented World War III, she left the audience rolling in laughter. Oh, the irony! Instead of global gratitude, her plea for eight billion people to thank Modi might just earn her a spot in the next comedy lineup. But Kangana didn't stop there. She elevated Modi's supposed "intervention" to mythical proportions, suggesting it averted the apocalypse itself. Who needs reality when you can spin tales of geopolitical heroism? Of course, Kangana's musings align perfectly with the Sangh Pari-var's narrative of Modi as the saviour of nations. Ministers spin yarns of Modi's fleeting interventions, each more fantastical than the last. But then, who needs facts when you've got a good story?

Mandi, Kangana's battleground, boasts a hefty contingent of military folk who know a thing or two about global politics. They're well aware that India's neutrality at the UN and oil deals with Russia aren't exactly winning us friends in Ukraine. But facts are mere inconveniences in Kangana's world, where Modi and self-obsession reign supreme. Ah, self-obsession—the other pillar of Kangana's comedic empire. While she basks in the glow of her imagined popularity, her box office record tells a different tale. It's been flop after flop since 2015, but who needs hits when you've got Modi and Amitabh Bachchan to name-drop? So, here's to Kangana Ranaut, the accidental comedian extraordinaire. Long may she reign, bringing laughter to the masses, one unintentional joke at a time!



PEACE RETURNS TO INDONESIA

Batavia, May 7. New hope of peace for Indonesia was born today when Dutch and Republican delegations, who had been meeting for a month under the auspices of the United Nations Commission, announced preliminary agreement on the main points of the Security Council's directive of March 23.

Farmers' turnout in 3 phases is key to results

Fuzzy Logic

✖ Rohit Chandavarkar



Polling for the third phase of Lok Sabha polls of 2024 got over on Tuesday evening with top leaders of all political parties reaching out to their supporters trying their best to convince them to vote for their candidates. It became clear that in most non-urban constituencies that faced issues related to agrarian crisis, saw higher turnout of voters, in other words farmers were seen voting in large numbers. It is obvious that the key to the trends which will be seen in the first three phases will be decided by the farmers and results will be in farmers hands.

Barring a few exceptions in some parts of the country the third phase extensively covered mainly non-urban centres. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was seen campaigning hard, travelling far and wide and talking about development projects and farm related issues. But he was also seen talking about National issues such as terrorism, national security, the caste and communal divide as well as Hindutva issues. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi was seen focusing mainly on farmers' plight and kept talking about the deprived classes. It is clear that in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra or many other parts

of the country, the campaign ahead of the second and third phase of polling is mainly about agriculture issues. So farmers have been the main target audience in these campaign phases and farmers will decide the fate of the political parties here.

Later in the fourth, fifth, sixth phase the polling will happen in urban centres and metro cities.

In Maharashtra in the third phase that went to polls on Tuesday, out of the 11 that went to polls, four constituencies were such where farmers are very vocal and powerful were very important. Baramati, Sangli, Ratnagiri-Sindhudurg and Satara..

Baramati of course is the bastion of the Pawars, and for the first time in the last 50 years it was a Pawar versus Pawar battle in Baramati. This battle has attracted not just the entire state's attention but also national attention this time as NCP founder Sharad Pawar and his nephew Ajit Pawar locked horns for the traditional family bastion. The BJP in its campaign tried to portray that this was a Narendra Modi versus Rahul Gandhi battle or it was an NDA versus INDIA alliance battle, however one could see on the ground that it was a Sharad versus Ajit battle. NCP Sharad Pawar groups MLA Rohit Pawar levelled allegations against Ajit Pawar on Tuesday evening saying there was large scale distribution of money and use of muscle power in the Baramati contest. Observer say this was by and large a battle between Promises of devel-

opment versus sympathy factor for Sharad Pawar and his daughter Supriya Sule. No matter who wins in this constituency it is clear that BJP has succeeded in the agenda to divide NCP's first family and make it a Pawar versus Pawar contest to diminish their strength.

In Sangli, that comes in the sugar belt of Maharashtra and has been a bastion of the Congress party, it's a completely different situation with late Congress stalwart Vasantdada Patil's grandson Vishal Patil deciding to enter the fray as a third candidate despite INDIA alliance announcing the name of wrestler Chandraraj Patil's name

Will Modi's promises work with voters or will the sugarcane farmers, who have been a little unhappy, go with Sharad Pawar, is the big question

as the Shiv Sena candidate against BJP's Sanjay Kaka Patil who won the Sangli seat in 2014 as well as in 2019. It looks like the anti-BJP vote in this prestigious Congress bastion is going to get divided this time. Shiv Sena leader Uddhav Thackeray announced at a public rally that he was not going to concede this seat to the Congress party and went ahead with Chandraraj as the contestant. However what makes the situation interesting is that Prakash Ambedkar's VBS has decided to support Vishal Patil in this contest that could perhaps damage the BJP's chances making the contest really interesting. Sangli politics has revolved around

sugar cooperatives so the govt policies about Sugar pricing etc will make their impact here making farmer's votes most decisive.

In Konkan's Ratnagiri-Sindhudurg constituency it is a one on one straight fight between BJP's Narayan Rane and UBT Shivsena's Vinayak Raut. The BJP gave Narayan Rane Union Cabinet ministry so that they could use him in Konkan to counter Uddhav Thackeray Couple of months ago during the Rajya Sabha contest many eyebrows were raised when the BJP refused to give candidature to Narayan Rane. However there was speculation that perhaps Rani

Rane family and supporters is missing this time because the Rane's have realised that any wrong move on their part would generate a further bigger sympathy wave for Udhav in Konkan. Since this is a direct one on one fight it would be interesting to see what kind of margin the winner gets. It is likely to remain very small.

In Satara constituency, again another big hub for sugarcane farmers, it's a fight between BJP's Udayanraje Bhosle and Sharad Pawar NCP's candidate Shashikant Shinde. This is another constituency apart from Baramati where Sharad Pawar has dominated the scene for more than 30 years, in 2019 despite the Pulwama Balakot factor, NCP's Shrinivas Patil won this seat with a comfortable margin. Will Modi's promises work with voters or will the sugarcane farmers, who have been a little unhappy, go with Sharad Pawar, is the big question. In the third phase many important factors were active. Farmers coming out in large numbers, women's votes becoming a deciding factor and issues such as Maratha reservation becoming a silent but forceful social media campaign issue. How all this affects the results will be seen soon.

Rohit Chandavarkar is a senior journalist who has worked for 31 years with various leading newspaper brands and television channels in Mumbai and Pune

Power, politics and predation in Karnataka

Here, There, Everywhere

✖ Sayantan Ghosh



In the wake of allegations against Janata Dal Secular MP Prajwal Revanna, the silence from India's political parties is deafening. The charges of sexual assault transcend political allegiances, demanding a unified stand against such abuses. Yet, the response—or lack thereof—raises unsettling questions. Why did the JDSMPV India support him? Is the central government complicit, or will the Congress-led state government pursue his arrest?

The core issue is the pervasive silence despite the knowledge of Revanna's alleged misconduct. This tacit complicity is a damning indictment of the political establishment's willingness to overlook serious allegations for political expediency. It's a stark reminder that when it comes to holding their own accountable, political institutions often fail, reflecting a broader societal issue where power shields the powerful.

This isn't just about one individual; it's about a system that allows such allegations to go unchallenged. As India approaches the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, voters must scrutinize the integrity of their representatives and the par-

ties they support. The Revanna case could be a catalyst for change, prompting a societal reckoning with the entrenched power dynamics that have long shielded political figures from accountability. It's time for a collective voice to demand justice and transparency, proving that no one is above the law.

The Prajwal Revanna scandal has ignited a fervent debate around India's enduring struggle with dynastic politics, shedding light on the intricate web of power, privilege, and governance. Central to this controversy is the grave allegation of sexual misconduct against Prajwal Revanna, a prominent figure in the Janata Dal (Secular) party and scion of a distinguished political lineage. This case serves as a stark reminder of the challenges posed by political accountability and the susceptibility to abuse within systems where familial connections often dictate authority.

Dynastic politics, a prevalent phenomenon where leadership positions are hereditarily transmitted within a family, has long been ingrained in various societies. The Revanna saga, in this context, prompts critical reflections on the consolidation of power and the mechanisms in place for effective oversight. This scandal has catalyzed a wider discourse on the implications of such entrenched political structures for democratic principles and the sanctity of the rule of law. The Prajwal Revanna case has thrust the issue of dynas-

tic politics in India into the spotlight, revealing the inherent challenges it poses to democratic norms and legal integrity. Dynastic politics, characterized by the perpetuation of political control within a single family across generations, often results in a concentration of power and a governance framework that tends to prioritize familial interests over public welfare.

In the context of Prajwal Revanna, a prominent figure in the Janata Dal (Secular) party and scion of

In essence, the Prajwal Revanna case transcends individual actions, serving as a mirror to the systemic challenges posed by dynastic politics in India

a renowned political dynasty, allegations of sexual misconduct have sparked widespread apprehensions regarding the efficacy of accountability mechanisms within political dynasties and their impact on the political ecosystem. This controversy sheds light on the potential for misuse of authority when political power is intricately intertwined with familial connections.

Furthermore, this unfolding narrative exposes the intricate intersection between politics and gender dynamics. The handling of these allegations epitomizes entrenched societal attitudes towards women and the exploitation of power differentials. It serves as an urgent call to action for compre-

hensive reforms that ensure political systems prioritize the interests of all citizens, devoid of personal agendas and familial legacies.

It is crucial to highlight that the scandal has ignited a pertinent discourse surrounding the role of political parties in addressing such sensitive issues. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in alliance with the Janata Dal (Secular), has faced criticism for its handling of the allegations, while the Congress party governing Karnataka has been under scrutiny for its man-

nasty, have thrust the spotlight on the contentious issue of dynastic politics and the attendant challenges it brings to the forefront of public discourse.

The timing of this scandal, coinciding with Karnataka's 14 constituencies heading to polls in the third phase, cannot be overstated in its significance. The BJP's ambitious 'Mission South' agenda and the Congress's bid for resurgence are hanging in the balance, alongside the JD(S)'s struggle to maintain relevance amidst diminishing influence. Revanna's entanglement in allegations of sexual assault, coupled with the ongoing investigation, has not only clouded the JD(S)'s political horizon but has also strained its alliance with the BJP.

In essence, the Prajwal Revanna case transcends individual actions, serving as a mirror to the systemic challenges posed by dynastic politics in India. It underscores the urgent need for structural reforms that prioritize the responsible and ethical exercise of political power, grounded in a commitment to serving the public interest rather than perpetuating family legacies. This case could mark a pivotal juncture in reshaping public perceptions of dynastic politics and charting a more accountable and transparent political landscape in India.

The author, a columnist and research scholar, teaches journalism at St Xavier's College (autonomous), Kolkata. He tweets at @sayantan_gh. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Downslide of press freedom

It is really unfortunate that in the world's largest democracy, press freedom has been on a constant slide down. Many observers describe a decline in the quality of freedom of expression in India ever since 2014. The press is called the fourth pillar of democracy, but its state has been a worrying factor in the country in the last some years, as India's score in the World Press Freedom Index fell over the last year from 36.62 to 31.28 as reported by Reporters Without Borders (RSF for Reporters sans Frontiers) recently. Under the current government, journalists, especially from smaller media outlets, have constantly been facing harassment and threats. But every attack on the fundamental right of freedom of speech and expression only adds to the strength of the fourth estate in our country.
Ranganathan Sivakumar, Chennai

Reach out to Maldives

After winning the presidential election in September, the Maldivian President Mohammed Muizzu-led Progressive Party of

Maldives (PPM) in coalition with the People's National Congress (PNC) has swept the parliamentary elections late last month in what was considered a foregone conclusion. Muizzu's pro-China stance and anti-India rhetoric is here to stay but for how long, is the question. Indian troop withdrawal from the Maldivian shores is said to be reviewed on May 10, and foreign minister Moosa Zameer is expected to come visiting India very soon. Maldives is a country that thrives on tourism. India was keen to use tourism as a handy tool to beat Maldives. For a giant nation like India, carrying small neighbours together can be a diplomatic victory; but that can be done with tact, and with New Delhi's dehyphenation policy nothing is impossible.

Dr Ganapathi Bhat, Akola

Thane station in a mess

With addition of new FOBs and an excellent central concourse, Thane railway station's overcrowding issues looked like they would be solved... but the authorities seem to be bungling things again. At platform 2, one staircase has been closed for repairs which don't seem forthcoming. The escalators at platforms 1 and 2 are sometimes working and sometimes mysteriously stationary. Some sort of construction work on both West and East

sides of the station causes piling up of debris, making the situation worse. Food and water stalls on platform 5/6 at the south end have been shifted to platform 10. So commuters taking fast local trains from platform 5/6 have only one food stall to avail of - at the extreme north end of the platform. Even for bottled water, people have to walk all the way to the north end. At the south end there is a drinking water facility where commuters can refill their own bottles, but no sale of bottled water. The small chips/bhel shop on the south end has started stocking bottled water but has no chilling facility for the same. And the aim of relocating these stalls to platform 10, ostensibly to ease crowding, doesn't seem to have worked as the place is still crowded and now people are also hungry, thirsty and frustrated. Moreover, the stalls shifted to platform 10 have lost out on a lot of business as it is a harbour line platform, and sees only a fraction of the footfall as against platform 5/6. While Thane station is being beautified from the outside, it badly needs streamlining with reference to these issues.

Deepa Satya, Thane

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We are eager to know your opinions, comments and suggestions. Write to letters@fpj.co.in with the title of the letter in the subject line. Using small mail? Send your letters to The Free Press Journal, Free Press House, Free Press Marg, 215 Nariman Point, Mumbai 400021.





Searching for a wave

The campaign is degenerating into hate speeches and false accusations

In the third round of polling for the 18th Lok Sabha on Tuesday, over 1,300 candidates were in the fray in 93 Lok Sabha constituencies across 12 States and Union Territories. With this phase, voting is complete in more than half of the constituencies – 283 out of 543 seats. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate in Surat, Gujarat, was declared elected unopposed, after all his opponents, including the Congress candidate, withdrew under dubious circumstances. The next four phases of the general election will be on May 13, 20, and 25 and June 1. Counting is scheduled for June 4. Of the 93 seats on Tuesday, 71 were won in 2019 by BJP candidates, while four went to the Congress. In Gujarat, the BJP had won all 26 seats in the last two elections. One of the most watched battles was in Baramati, Maharashtra, between veteran Nationalist Congress Party leader Sharad Pawar’s daughter Supriya Sule and Sunetra Pawar, wife of his estranged nephew and Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar. The first two phases had registered a dip in voter turnout, compared to 2019, and the Opposition had questioned the inordinate delay by the Election Commission of India in the publication of the cumulative figures.

The BJP and the Congress-led alliance have crossed swords over the issue of reservation, offering their respective, conflicting interpretations of constitutionalism in the process. The Opposition has accused the BJP of a conspiracy to end reservation by amending the Constitution, while offering to amend the Constitution to remove the 50% ceiling on reservation. Unused to being on the defensive, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has alleged a conspiracy by the Congress and its partners to give away the reservation meant for Hindu subalterns to Muslims. While the Congress and its partners are aiming at a Hindu subaltern consolidation against the BJP in their favour, the ruling BJP’s focus is on consolidating its Hindu base by constantly targeting Muslims. Serious charges of sexual crimes against Prajwal Revanna, the grandson of former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, have put the BJP on the defensive. Mr. Gowda’s Janata Dal (Secular) and the BJP are allies in Karnataka where the BJP had won 25 of 28 seats in 2019. The allegations against Mr. Prajwal, a sitting JD(S) MP, raise serious questions about the functioning of the JD(S). The Congress is counting on women voters of the State consolidating behind it. With no overwhelming wave of any kind apparent, the principal rivals are struggling to create one in their favour, often with means less than honourable.

Plastic solution

Plastic pollution cannot stop by treaties, without investment in alternatives

The Global Plastics Treaty, an ambitious initiative involving at least 175 United Nations member nations to eliminate the use of plastics, concluded its fourth round of negotiations recently. The goal is to finalise a legal document by the end of 2024 with timelines by when countries must agree to curb plastic production, eliminate its uses that create wastage, ban certain chemicals used in its production and set targets for recycling. Unfortunately, an agreement is not in sight. There is yet another round of negotiations scheduled in Busan, South Korea this November. The primary hurdles are economic. Oil producing and refining countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United States, Russia, India and Iran are reluctant about hard deadlines to eliminate plastic production. A coalition of African countries, supported by several European nations, is in favour of a year, around 2040, to ensure that a timeline for reduction is in effect. There is also disagreement on whether contentious elements in the treaty should be decided on by a vote or consensus – the latter implying that every country has a veto. India’s opinion, other than being uncomfortable with binding targets, is that a legally binding instrument to end the plastic pollution must also address “... availability, accessibility, affordability of alternatives including cost implications and specifying arrangements... for capacity building and technical assistance, technology transfer, and financial assistance”. This language – and India is not the only proponent – is reminiscent of the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibility’ enshrined in climate talks. Under this, countries must have a common target but those more privileged must support others and take on stricter targets themselves.

In the year that the plastics treaty was mooted, in 2022, India brought into effect the Plastic Waste Management Amendment Rules (2021) that banned 19 categories of “single-use” plastics. It, however, does not include plastic bottles – even those less than 200 ml – and multi-layered packaging boxes (as in milk cartons). Moreover, even the ban on single-use plastic items is not uniformly enforced nationally, with several outlets continuing to retail these goods. The global distribution of the plastic pollution is unequal with Brazil, China, India and the U.S. responsible for 60% of plastic waste, according to a report by the non-profit EA Earth Action. Much like how transitioning away from fossil fuel invites its own challenges, plastic pollution cannot be ended by merely signing treaties. There needs to be much greater investment in alternative products and making them affordable before realistic targets are decided upon.

Ronald Reagan, the 40th President of the United States of America, died in 2004 at the age of 93 at his home surrounded by his family. He had dementia which he lived with for nine years. His wife, Nancy Reagan, called his last moments of a peaceful death “the greatest gift” he could have given her. Compare this with the way India’s former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee died in 2018, nine years after a stroke that had left him non-ambulant. The last 35 days of his life were spent in the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi. He died on artificial life support systems.

Death is inevitable, the one certainty in life. When the time comes, and if you have an incurable disease, how would you like to go? Would you prefer your bed in your home, with your loved ones around you? Or would you prefer being all alone in an intensive care unit (ICU) with a tube in every orifice, hooked to machines that measure the functioning of every vital organ in your body, with each malfunctioning organ supported artificially?

In the West and India

The stories of Ronald Reagan and A.B. Vajpayee follow a certain pattern each. In Euro-American countries, more and more people are now documenting advance medical directives (living will) to express the way they would like to die. In these countries, terminally-ill people are allowed to die a natural death by taking them off life support systems if the likelihood of a return to a reasonable quality of life is low.

In a study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 2019, C.L. Sprung and colleagues showed that in European ICUs, people died while on life-support systems only in 10.3% of such cases. In the remaining cases, such artificial support measures were withheld or withdrawn and replaced by palliative care to permit death with some dignity.

Now let us compare this with what happens in India. In an editorial, Dr. Raj K. Mani, former president of the Indian Society of Critical Care Medicine, shows the cruel contrast in Indian ICUs. In India, approximately 70% of patients with incurable critical illness die on life support systems – alone in the ICU; the families outside in



Dr. M.R. Rajagopal

is the founder-chairman emeritus of Pallium India and the author of the book ‘Walk with the weary.’



Dr. Parth Sharma

is a physician, researcher, and founding editor of Nivarana, a public health information and advocacy organisation

Most Indian families seem to be unprepared ‘when the time comes’

a crowded area are left to deal with hefty hospital bills, with no time to grieve.

What about the other 30%? To quote Dr. Raj K. Mani, these deaths were “mediated through the so-called Left Against Medical Advice/Discharged Against Medical Advice (LAMA/DAMA)” (an ethically unjustifiable practice representing unplanned treatment limitations without a formal shift to palliative care). The suffering that is meted out to the patient and family (physically, socially, mentally, and spiritually) with such a practice is unimaginable. This, however, starkly differs from what people desire. In a survey of nearly 3,500 people in Pune, 83% of the people reported their preferred place of death to be their home.

ICU routinisation, lack of legal clarity

Why do such practices continue? Perhaps it is a mistaken belief that the doctor must prolong life by delaying death at all costs by hours or days even when the futility of treatment is clear. However, no ethical principle says that doctors have such a duty. In India, the official definition of the ‘duty of care’ of a health-care provider as per the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) is “to mitigate suffering. To cure sometimes, relieve often and to comfort always” with no exception to this rule. But this document gathers dust in obscure corners of medical college libraries, with practice across ICUs in India being vastly different.

This practice of routinisation of intensive care deaths is barely a quarter of a century old. Before that, ICUs were for people with salvageable health issues. Now, a good chunk of the society seems to have come to accept ICU deaths as normal. The nuclearisation of families could be a reason as death is no longer familiar to the average person. The consequence: families are unable to think about death, and unable to make the right decisions in the face of a major health issue. A 2022 Report of *The Lancet* Commission on the Value of Death points out that modern society has become death-illiterate. It calls for ‘death literacy’ which brings ‘death back to life’. A society that is brave enough to discuss death and dying among friends and family is likely to leave people empowered to cross that difficult bridge when they come to it.

The lack of legal clarity is also a contributing

factor. India has no law covering end-of-life care. In its absence, a Supreme Court of India verdict of 2023 remains valid. According to this, any advance medical directive left by a mentally competent person will be valid and binding on health-care professionals. The Court also ratifies the withdrawal of life support in the context of futility. The process stipulated by this verdict is still a little complicated; but more than that, the lack of awareness about it amongst the public and professionals is the bigger barrier.

The unfortunate use of the phrase “passive euthanasia” adds to the confusion. According to the ICMR document referred to above, this is a misnomer. Euthanasia involves killing even if the intentions are good; therefore, euthanasia cannot be passive. Withholding or withdrawing artificial life support in the face of the futility of treatment involves no act of killing; it only allows natural death.

On palliative care and a living will

World Health Day (April 7) has passed and the theme for 2024 was “My health, my right”. The World Health Organization officially defines health as “physical, social and mental well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. On March 7, 2024, in response to a public interest litigation, a three-member Bench of the Supreme Court chaired by the Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud observed that the right to health includes the right to palliative care. Let us hope that this results in a rational system in place to allow everyone to live with some dignity during the last few days and to allow them to go in peace.

When the time comes, none of us will have the power to fight for our rights. Unless the immediate family concurs with our desire for a peaceful death, we will have no way of exercising our rights. Therefore, it would be good to protect ourselves by preparing a living will, getting it witnessed and countersigned by a gazetted officer, and discussing the matter with the immediate family.

(A sample living will is available at <https://palliumindia.org/2023/04/living-will-and-attorney-authorisation>. It can be customised according to personal choices and wishes.)

Rules for a new dawn for the Indian legal industry

India’s tryst with globalisation began in 1991, when the country liberalised its economy. Since then, few sectors have remained as insulated from global practices as the Indian legal industry. At one level, this is understandable given the suitability of Indian qualified lawyers, or advocates, for applying Indian laws in accord with the country’s socio-economic values. However, as India increasingly becomes a leading hub for cross-border commerce, the globalisation of the Indian legal industry becomes inevitable. After years of consultations, the Bar Council of India has also embraced this reality.

Globalisation refers to the range of forces sweeping the world, unhindered by geographical boundaries, which seek to replace protectionist tendencies with a sense of universalism and synchronisation. The broader goal is to craft an ecosystem in which actors, including lawyers, can interact with one another harmoniously and without significant constraints. It is with this spirit that the Bar Council of India had notified the “Rules for Registration and Regulation of Foreign Lawyers and Foreign Law Firms in India, 2022” in early 2023 (BCI Rules), allowing foreign lawyers to set up their offices in India for some limited purposes. Indeed, the objects and reasons of the BCI Rules consciously note that “the world is becoming a global village” and that “the legal profession in India has to rise to the occasion”.

A greater role for foreign lawyers

To summarise the nuanced regulatory framework prescribed by the BCI Rules is challenging. Yet, at the risk of oversimplification, the Bar Council of India has permitted registered foreign firms and lawyers to practise on transactional or corporate work (such as joint ventures, mergers and acquisitions, and intellectual property matters)



Arun Chawla

is Director General, Indian Council of Arbitration

As a liberalisation project, there should be careful optimism about the Bar Council of India Rules

on a reciprocal basis. Foreign lawyers cannot appear before Indian courts, tribunals, or statutory authorities. But, they are now permitted to advise and appear in international arbitration cases conducted in India, irrespective of whether foreign law may or may not be involved.

Previously, the Supreme Court of India had prohibited foreign lawyers from practising law in India in either litigation or the non-litigation side and restricted their participation in international arbitration cases to visiting India on a “fly in and fly out” basis. The BCI Rules clearly envisage a greater role for foreign lawyers, albeit in an intensely regulated framework. Thus, it is a significant step forward from the existing system. Time will tell how this impacts the Indian legal industry, but the initial signs are that of promise and optimism.

Long-term benefits, but also risks

While the BCI Rules may affect the immediate profitability of some Indian law firms and lawyers, the long-term benefits are expected to be immense. For instance, the reciprocity requirement can ensure that Indian lawyers receive increased access to the legal profession in foreign jurisdictions. This could enable a sustained exchange of know-how, skills, and expertise between lawyers across jurisdictions. The entry of foreign firms in India will also increase competition; thereby creating more job opportunities for Indian lawyers, fostering a better work culture and remuneration, and incentivising competing stakeholders to heighten the quality of their services. This should augur well not only for the Indian lawyer community but, equally, for also India’s emergence as an economic leader.

But, as with any liberalisation project, any

optimism must be balanced against the risks that an unregulated market often brings. Indian stakeholders have already identified some of these risks in ongoing conversations with the Bar Council of India. For instance, the differences in how Indian and foreign law firms are regulated in their home jurisdictions can create unintended distortions. While Indian lawyers are prohibited from soliciting clients through advertisements, such restrictions rarely exist in other jurisdictions. The ethical rules governing foreign-qualified lawyers may also differ from those in India, creating confusion as to which set of rules will apply in a transaction or arbitration setting. Finally, certain multi-jurisdictional law firms with offices in various countries may have greater monetary capabilities than their Indian counterparts, making it difficult for the latter to compete. This would require the Bar Council of India to carefully regulate the speed and extent of foreign lawyers’ entry into India. If not, the pitfalls of liberalisation may soon outweigh its anticipated benefits.

There is dialogue

It appears that the Bar Council of India is conscious of the pros and cons of its decision. This is clear from the imposition of stringent registration (and renewal) requirements on foreign entrants and their continued exclusion from any litigious work in the BCI Rules. But the most important encouragement emanates from the consultative approach adopted by the Bar Council of India. The regulator is not taking any decision in a hurry and remains in dialogue with the critics of its decision. It is for these reasons that one may perceive the BCI Rules with careful optimism, and hope that it ushers the Indian legal industry towards a brighter future.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ceasefire proposal

Hamas’ acceptance of a ceasefire proposal offered by Egypt and Qatar is a welcome step (Page 1, May 7). For a permanent and lasting solution, the five big powers of the world should take the regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, into confidence and arrive at a solution. A solution under the ambit of the United Nations seems to be remote.

Rettavayal S. Krishnaswamy,
Chennai

Could we be seeing light at the end of the tunnel? History will never pardon Israel, America and its allies. The gory bloodbath in Gaza remains unparalleled in modern wars. And even more shameful is the fact that the world remained a mute spectator; more so the eerie silence of the Islamic

countries. One needs to compliment South Africa for filing a case in the International Court of Justice for genocide against Israel. One hopes and prays that the ceasefire proposal should be implemented in letter and spirit and those displaced given proper accommodation, food, medical treatment and counselling to take their lives forward.

T. Anand Raj,
Chennai

There has been much bloodshed and it is high time that better sense prevails over Israel. There should be some trade off between both sides. Otherwise, another attack would only worsen Gaza’s humanitarian catastrophe.

Bal Govind,
Noida, Uttar Pradesh

Plunder of wealth

Coal, iron ore, oil, spectrum, sand and water are all natural resources and the nation’s wealth. Hence it is the duty of the State and central governments to ensure that these are used for public benefit in the best possible way. But for years, we have been witness to scams involving the large-scale misuse of this precious wealth. The political class, officials and private parties have amassed wealth in this process. Not surprisingly courts have stuck down government actions and licensing processes. The need is for good governance practices and ethical functioning of government departments (“SC seeks report as T.N., ED spar over sand mining case”, May 7).

B. Sundar Raman,
Coimbatore

On NEET

This is another letter, after the one that appeared yesterday (‘Letters to The Editor’, May 7) on the way the NEET was held. At the exam at the Rajadhani Institute of Engineering, Attungal, Thiruvananthapuram, on Sunday, May 5, which was conducted by NTA, the invigilators did not allow the candidates to begin answering the question paper till 2:30 p.m. This was in examination hall no. 706, on the seventh floor. The official start time for candidates was from 2 p.m.. When the candidates pointed this out at the end

of the exam, the invigilators came up with a shocking answer: ‘You lost only 30 minutes’. Every minute counts in a (tough) competitive examination. An invigilator should understand that for a student who spends a few years preparing for such an examination, such actions end up causing him great distress.

Zulphée I.,
Thiruvananthapuram

Animal attacks

It is distressing that pet animals too are turning out to be menace as far as children and the elderly are concerned. There are

certain breeds of dogs that are dangerous and this must be made clear. There is hardly any area in Chennai that is free of stray cattle and dogs. People getting attacked by these animals and facing injuries has become common.

V. Johan Dhanakumar,
Chennai

Badminton prospects

In badminton, India needs to have two reasonably good doubles teams. In the Uber Cup, the relatively inexperienced girls gave a very good account of themselves. A good coach can help the Indian girls achieve greater heights.

J.R. Vedasirromoni,
Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu

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

An inheritance tax will help reduce inequality

A remark by Chairman of Indian Overseas Congress Sam Pitroda on implementing an inheritance tax as a tool of wealth redistribution has sparked massive debates. In this article, we present rationale on why high inequality is harmful, and advocate for progressive taxes as a mechanism to reduce inequality.

Primarily, we underscore the need to take a view of citizenship where the poor and the rich can participate equally in democratic decision-making. However, in an unequal society, a handful of dominant individuals can wield a disproportionate amount of power through control of resources. This will likely lead to a few wealthy elites dictating the socioeconomic and political decisions aimed to benefit them at the cost of the majority. The recent electoral bonds scam bears witness to this. The citizenship of wealthy elites would then carry more weight than the majority of the country. This is ethically hazardous.

Why inequality matters

First, inequality harms growth in the medium-to-long run, by hampering firm productivity, reducing labour income, and diverting resources away from rights such as education. Second, in unequal countries, the place of birth holds inordinate power in directing lifetime outcomes. In India, almost a third of the variation in consumption can be explained by the place of residence: the State, and city or village. Third, high inequality is also associated with political polarisation and increased conflict. Fourth, inequality is likely to have a negative multiplier effect on the economy – diminished earnings for the poor lead to reduced consumption and savings and increased indebtedness. This reduces aggregate demand, limits production and investments, and leads to lower growth rates in the future. Using labour bureau data, Jean Drèze and Reetika Khera showed that while real wages of



Advait Moharir

is an independent researcher



Rajendran Narayanan

teaches at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru and is affiliated with LibTech India.

Views are personal

agricultural labourers grew by 6.8% between 2004-2014, they declined by 1.3% in the last decade. Using Periodic Labour Force Survey data, a Bahutva Karnataka report shows that 34% of households earned less than the recommended daily minimum wage of ₹375 in 2022-23. Using Reserve Bank of India data, Zico Dasgupta and Srinivas Raghavendra voice concern about the sharp reduction in household savings and increased debt. In contrast to these, the richest 1% holds 40% of India's wealth.

Some commentators argue that some inequality during growth is inevitable, and the priority instead should be towards reducing poverty. However, research by Tianyu Fan and co-authors shows that the gains from India's growth over the last two decades have been skewed towards high-income urban residents. Keeping everything else the same, there is nothing inherently special in the children of the wealthy compared to the children of the poor. The Constitution mandates equality of status and of opportunity. As such the government is obliged to take steps to reduce the disparities arising from accidents of birth.

An inheritance tax

A wealth tax is a recurring tax on all physical and financial assets an individual owns. An inheritance tax differs from a wealth tax in two ways: it is intergenerational and levied once in a lifetime. These taxes are meant to be applied to individuals having high wealth above a threshold. When implemented well, these taxes reduce the concentration of wealth and encourage shifting investments from non-productive to productive activities. Property of the elite being bequeathed to descendants implies that the descendants do no work to acquire it. There is no economic reason for it to be a freebie for them. Some might argue that inheritance tax will disincentivise innovations. But this disregards that innovation is needed to be

competitive today and suggests that innovation is solely to propagate dynastic control of resources which is at odds with democratic ideals. On the contrary, revenue generated from inheritance tax can be used to fund a diversified set of innovations. An advanced country like Japan has up to 55% inheritance tax. A variant of the inheritance tax, called estates duty, was levied in India between 1953-1985 but this was abolished owing to administrative costs. However, the economist Rishabh Kumar shows that this was effective in reducing the top 1% personal wealth share from 16% to 6% between 1966 and 1985.

Another approach is the land value tax (LVT): this taxes the rental value of land, without considering the property built on it. This is borne by the landowner and not the tenants. Unlike labour, land is a natural resource and is unresponsive to changes in taxes, making the LVT an efficient source of revenue. Given the role of land ownership in perpetuating feudal caste relations in rural India and the pervasive politician-builder nexus in urban India, LVT can be a useful redistributive mechanism.

Detractors claim that tax evasion among the wealthy makes these taxes impractical. However, recent research by Natasha Sarin (in the U.S.) projects that sufficient investment in improving tax compliance can yield revenue up to 10 times the investment. Nathaniel Hendren and co-authors show that auditing the top 1% and 0.1% generated three to six times the return on investment.

Economists Jayati Ghosh and Prabhat Patnaik demonstrate that a 2% wealth tax and a 33.3% inheritance tax only on the top 1% in India can raise an additional public expenditure of 10% of the GDP. This can be used to ensure a bouquet of socioeconomic rights for the poor like living wages, right to health, employment, and food. Given technological advancements, these are possible if there is political will.

An example of language tolerance

For years, Hindi has peacefully coexisted with Gujarati in Gujarat

STATE OF PLAY

Mahesh Langa
mahesh.langa@thehindu.co.in



Since 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has, with only a few exceptions, been consistently speaking in Hindi to connect with the Gujarati people in his home State, whether at government events or election rallies. As these speeches and events are telecast live by news channels, they reach a national audience.

During the campaign to the ongoing Lok Sabha elections, for instance, Mr. Modi addressed six rallies in the north and central provinces and the Saurashtra region. All his speeches were in Hindi; he spoke occasional sentences in Gujarati. Even in the run-up to the 2022 Assembly polls, he mainly used Hindi while addressing over a dozen rallies across the State.

This was not the case before Mr. Modi became Prime Minister. During his nearly 13 years as Gujarat Chief Minister, the majority of his speeches were in Gujarati, which is also his mother tongue.

Normally, a political leader speaks in their mother tongue – at least in their native State. In this context, Mr. Modi's preference for Hindi to communicate with the people of his home State may seem strange. In April 2017, he explained why he does so, during a visit to Surat to inaugurate a multi-specialty hospital built by a trust dominated by the diamond barons of the city. "I was in a dilemma whether to speak in Hindi or Gujarati, but since you have done such a big job, I decided to speak in Hindi. That's how the country will know about it," he said.

During his election speech-

es in Gujarat, he sometimes switches to Gujarati. At a recent rally in north Gujarat's Banaskantha, for example, Mr. Modi switched to Gujarati while talking about the inheritance tax and how it will impact the masses. "If you have two buffaloes, the Congress will take away one if it comes to power," he said. This was done intentionally to drive home a point to the rural dairy farmers of north Gujarat, where dairy farming is a major source of livelihood.

The Prime Minister's use of Hindi in Gujarat does not lead to much chatter or discussion. This is because first, as a political observer said, Hindi is mostly understood in the State, even by those in rural areas, thanks to the penetration of Bollywood movies and Hindi television serials. Congress leaders Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi would also address the public in Hindi without a translator whenever they campaigned in Gujarat. Second, Mr. Modi is seen as a national leader and not just a regional leader in Gujarat. The common feeling among the public is that he is expected to speak in Hindi as he is the Prime Minister.

In 1960, Gujarat was carved out of the bilingual Bombay State. Ever since, Hindi has peacefully coexisted with Gujarati. There have been no demands that those who live in the State must speak in Gujarati alone. This tolerance, said Pranav Joshi, a Gujarati film-

maker, is probably the reason why Bollywood films do well in the Gujarat market while Gujarati films struggle.

Also, since Gujarat has become a hub for migrants from across the country, there is linguistic diversity. This is best seen in Surat where the civic body municipal corporation runs public schools in Odia, Telugu, Urdu, Marathi, and Hindi besides Gujarati.

According to a retired bureaucrat, though Gujarati remains the primary language of communication in the State, bureaucrats freely speak and communicate in Hindi or English without any inhibition even in the Secretariat. "Chief Minister Chimanbhai Patel used to conduct his Cabinet meetings in Gujarati and English. He would speak in Gujarati with Ministers and in English with bureaucrats," the bureaucrat said. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, who is a Rajya Sabha member from Gujarat, always speaks in English during government-organised events in the State.

Even in the Assembly, the Governor's speech is delivered in Hindi. Though a Gujarati translation of the speech is shared with the members of the House and the press, the speech is never translated into Gujarati by a translator sentence by sentence as it is delivered or read.

Gujarat in a way presents a remarkable example of language tolerance where non-Gujarati migrant workers based in any part of the State can freely speak their own language or dialect. Since the State attracts the maximum of migrant workers from north Indian Hindi-speaking States such as Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh, Hindi has almost become a second language in Gujarat.

A look at the regional differences in voting patterns

Despite a much bigger win in 2019, the NDA's vote share marginally reduced in the south compared with 2014

DATA POINT

Rebecca Rose Varghese & Vignesh Radhakrishnan

The aspirations and opinions of voters in the southern States – Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana – vary considerably compared to those in other regions, especially the north, according to the pre-poll survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)-Lokniti in March-April. For example, in the survey, when asked to rate their satisfaction level with the Central government, only 16% in the south said they were fully satisfied compared with 27% from the north and west and 21% from the east and north-east. When asked whether the construction of the Ram Mandir will impact Hindus, 28% from the south said it won't impact Hindus much, the highest share among all the regions. Also, 38% from the south said they intend to vote for the BJP and its allies in 2024 compared with 50% in the north and west and 47% in the east and north-east.

Past election results show that such stark differences in opinions impacted the regions' voting behaviour too. The tables in the graphic depict the region-wise voting patterns in 2019 and 2014. However, the comparison is based on the alliances formed to fight the 2024 general election. The regions are based on geographical and linguistic divides (see graphic footnote).

Table 1A shows the percentage of seats won by alliances (based on current coalitions) in 2019 across regions. **Table 1B** shows the percentage of votes secured by them in 2019 across regions. **Table 2A** and **2B** show the same for 2014. **Table 3** shows the difference in seat and vote share between 2014 and 2019.

As can be seen from Tables 1 and 2, the NDA was strongest in

the Hindi heartland and the west in both 2014 and 2019. In the Hindi heartland, the NDA secured a vote share of 47.1% in 2014 and 53.9% in 2019. In the west, it secured a vote share of 52.1% in 2014 and 54.8% in 2019. The NDA also secured 85-90% of seats in these regions in both the polls. Note that in the west, the Shiv Sena is counted as the NDA's ally for these calculations as the Eknath Shinde faction retained the party symbol. The Uddhav Thackeray faction is fighting the election as a part of the INDIA alliance.

Interestingly, between 2014 and 2019, the NDA's vote share reduced only in the south, by 0.2% points, even as it increased everywhere else. As Table 3B shows, the NDA's vote share increased by 21.4% points in the east, 8.6% points in the north-east, and 3.8% points in the non-Hindi-speaking north. This means that the NDA's performance improved considerably in the east, north-east and non-Hindi north, which were its relatively weaker areas in 2014, while worsening marginally in the south.

The INDIA alliance's only increase in vote share between 2014 and 2019 came in the south – 5.5% points (Table 3B), largely owing to a surge in support in Tamil Nadu (over 20% points). In 2019, while the alliance's strongest showing came from the non-Hindi north, with a 45.7% vote share, it still lost 7.7% points in the region.

This time, the NDA's performance in the south depends on factors such as the impact of the snapping of ties between the AIADMK and the BJP on the NDA in Tamil Nadu, the performance of the new alliance of the BJP, TDP, and the Jana Sena Party in Andhra Pradesh, and the ramifications of the Prajwal Revanna videotapes scandal on the BJP-JD(S) alliance in Karnataka. The INDIA bloc's fortunes depend on the cohesion of the alliance in Tamil Nadu, Kerala's polity remaining bipolar, and the Congress' resurgence in Karnataka and Telangana.

Voting trends across the country

Past voter data was sourced from Lok Dhaba and the 2024 alliance-based calculations are done by *The Hindu* Data team



International Day of Democracy: College students read the Preamble of the Constitution of India as part of International Day of Democracy in front of Vidhana Soudha in Bengaluru in 2023. MURALI KUMAR K

Table 1A: % of seats won in 2019

Region	Total seats	NDA	INDIA	Others
Hindi heartland	225	87.1%	5.8%	7.1%
Non-Hindi north	20	30%	60%	10.0%
South	132	25%	49.2%	25.8%
West	78	88.5%	7.7%	3.8%
East	64	40.6%	4.7%	54.7%
North-East	24	70.8%	16.7%	12.5%

Table 1B: % of vote share secured in 2019

Region	NDA	INDIA	Others
Hindi heartland	53.9%	29.7%	16.5%
Non-Hindi north	18.2%	45.7%	36.1%
South	29.8%	37.9%	32.3%
West	54.8%	32.2%	13%
East	39.6%	13.6%	46.8%
North-East	45.8%	36.4%	17.8%

Table 3A: Change in seats won between 2014 and 2019. Figures in % points

Region	NDA	INDIA	Others
Hindi heartland	+1.8	-3.1	+1.3
Non-Hindi north	0	+25	-25
South	-6.8	+26.5	-19.7
West	-2.6	0	+2.6
East	+35.9	-4.7	-31.3
North-East	+29.2	-25.0	-4.2

East: Odisha, Sikkim, West Bengal; North-East: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura; North non-Hindi: Punjab, Jammu & Kashmir UT, Ladakh UT and Chandigarh; West: Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu UT, Goa, Gujarat and Maharashtra; South: A&N Islands UT, Lakshadweep UT, Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana; Hindi heartland: Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi, Chhattisgarh, Bihar

Table 2A: % of seats won in 2014

Region	Total seats	NDA	INDIA	Others
Hindi heartland	225	85.3%	8.9%	5.8%
Non-Hindi north	20	30%	35%	35%
South	132	31.8%	22.7%	45.5%
West	78	91%	7.7%	1.3%
East	64	4.7%	9.4%	85.9%
North-East	24	41.7%	41.7%	16.7%

Table 2B: % of vote share secured in 2014

Region	NDA	INDIA	Others
Hindi heartland	47.1%	33.2%	19.7%
Non-Hindi north	14.4%	53.4%	32.2%
South	30.0%	32.4%	37.7%
West	52.1%	36.5%	11.5%
East	18.2%	36%	45.8%
North-East	37.1%	38.4%	24.4%

Table 3B: Change in vote share secured between 2014 and 2019. Figures in % points

Region	NDA	INDIA	Others
Hindi heartland	+6.8	-3.6	-3.3
Non-Hindi north	+3.8	-7.7	+3.9
South	-0.2	+5.5	-5.3
West	+2.7	-4.3	+1.6
East	+21.4	-22.4	+1
North-East	+8.6	-2.1	-6.6

An in-depth interactive on current and past LS elections



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 8, 1974

Brandt resigns following spy scandal

Bonn, May 7: The West German Chancellor, Mr. Willy Brandt, resigned suddenly last night over an espionage scandal. In his letter to the President, Mr. Gustav Heinemann, Mr. Brandt said he was resigning, assuming "the entire political responsibility" for the scandal involving his former personal aide, Guenter Guillaume, who was arrested on April 24 as a spy for East Germany.

Mr. Brandt asked the President to appoint the Foreign Minister, Mr. Walter Scheel, as the acting Chancellor, until a successor had been elected by the Bundestag (Parliament's Lower House). Mr. Scheel is coincidentally the ruling coalition's candidate to succeed Mr. Heinemann as the President. The election is scheduled for May 15.

The ruling Social Democratic Party met later and nominated the Finance Minister, Mr. Helmut Schmidt, to succeed Mr. Brandt. Mr. Heinz Kuehn, Deputy Chairman of the party, told newsmen that Mr. Brandt himself had proposed Mr. Schmidt as his successor. Mr. Brandt would, however, retain the Federal Chairmanship of the party. Mr. Schmidt (55) has been Finance Minister for two years and was Defence Minister under Mr. Brandt before that. A Social Democrat who stands to the right of his party Chairman politically, he has long been tipped as the man most likely to succeed him.

Known in Bonn as "Schmidt-schnauze (Schmidt the lip)" for his articulate performances in parliamentary debates, he is known to feel that Bonn should represent West German interests more forcefully within the common market.

Shadow cast over Europe: London, May 7: Mr. Willy Brandt's resignation as West German Chancellor has cast a pale shadow on the political map of Europe to-day. The consequences for West Germany and for Europe – whose cause of unity Mr. Brandt had so long espoused – are unforeseeable.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 8, 1924

Steamer collision

London, May 7: An Antwerp message states that the Swedish steamer "Yedoo" from Gothenburg and the German steamer "Barenfels" from Bremen, both bound for Calcutta, collided in the Sche'dt. The former sank and the latter was badly damaged.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of activists arrested at pro-Palestine protests

125 Police arrested the activists as they broke up a pro-Palestinian camp at the University of Amsterdam. Protests that have roiled campuses in the U.S have spread into Europe. AP

Number of voters to cast vote in special forest booth

1 Deep inside the Gir forest in Gujarat, a Hindu monk cast his ballot at a voting booth in Banej, on Tuesday, ensuring a 100% turnout at the polling station. Mahant Haridas Udaseen is the sole registered voter. AFP

The marginal decline in India's toy exports in 2023-24

152.34 in \$ million. India's toy exports declined marginally in 2023-24 from \$153.89 million in the previous financial year, according to a report by the GTRI. PTI

The economic benefits that can be generated with EO data

3 in \$ trillion. Earth Observation (EO) data refers to collection, analysis, and presentation of information about the Earth's physical, chemical, and biological systems using remote sensing technologies. PTI

The Indian military personnel withdrawn from Maldives

51 The soldiers were withdrawn from Maldives ahead of the May 10 deadline set by President Mohamed Muizzu for the complete withdrawal of Indian military personnel. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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The Kotak Mahindra Bank controversy

What are the restrictions imposed by the Reserve Bank of India on the bank? Has the apex banking regulator carried out similar actions in the past? What do global agencies say about the issue? How has the CEO of Kotak Mahindra Bank responded?

EXPLAINER

Saptaparno Ghosh

The story so far:

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on April 24 barred Kotak Mahindra Bank (KMB) from onboarding new customers on its online and mobile banking channels, and issuing fresh credit cards. It would however be allowed to provide these services to its existing customers. The RBI stated the actions were necessitated because of deficiencies observed in the private lender's IT systems and controls commensurate to its growth. KMB's CEO Ashok Vaswani stated recently the bank was in continuous dialogue with RBI to attain the desired compliance outcomes.

What are these actions based on?

RBI observed "serious deficiencies and non-compliances" concerning KMB's IT inventory and user access management, data leak and leak prevention strategy, business continuity and disaster recovery rigour and drill, among other things. This was based on the regulator's examination of the private bank's systems for two years, that is, 2022 and 2023. The regulator said KMB continually failed to address concerns in a "comprehensive and timely manner". The bank was also deemed non-compliant with RBI's subsequent recommendations or 'Corrective Action Plans' (CAPs). CAPs are part of an intervention scheme of the RBI to ensure robustness of regulated entities.

As per the RBI, the compliances submitted by KMB were either "inadequate, incorrect or not substantiated". Further, in the absence of robust IT infrastructure and risk management systems, its online and digital banking channels have suffered "frequent and significant outages in the last two years". The latest incident happened on April 15. In a post on 'X', the bank's customer care representative informed that its technical servers were



REUTERS

experiencing "intermittent slowness". The current measures would be reviewed in an external audit to be commissioned by the bank with RBI's approval to assess remediation undertaken.

Is this a first?

No. The RBI, like its peers world over, has been particularly wary of how digital banking and the overall financial landscape functions. In December 2020, the regulator had ceased HDFC from launching any new digital products and sourcing new credit card consumers. This was also based on a two-year assessment that had come across recurrent incidents of outage in its internet and mobile banking platforms, alongside payment utilities. The restrictions were lifted more than a year later in March 2022 after a successful remediation.

On similar lines, the RBI in October

2023 directed the Bank of Baroda to suspend any fresh onboarding of customers onto its 'bob World' mobile application. This was also based on "certain material supervisory concerns" with the RBI demanding the rectification of observed deficiencies.

What about the bank's financials?

According to S&P Global Ratings, the regulatory action may set back the bank's credit growth and profitability. It added that credit cards are among the higher-yielding target growth segment of the bank. The portfolio grew 52% YoY as on December 31 last year compared with a total loan growth of 19%. "Action by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) this week could push the bank to rely more on physical branch network expansion to supplement growth thus entailing higher operating costs," its note read. However,

the agency maintained that RBI's action will not "materially affect" its ratings. This is because credit cards accounted for only 4% of the bank's total loans at the end of the year and it would still be able to cross-sell its products.

The banks' net profit in the fourth quarter rose 18% to ₹4,133 crore from ₹3,496 crore in the year-ago period. This was on the back of a 13% YoY growth in net interest income at ₹6,909 crore. Importantly however, the CEO Mr. Vaswani stated that while the financial impact (from the RBI action) is expected to be minimal, he was more worried about the "reputational impact". Earlier, Mr. Vaswani had listed previous efforts taken by the bank to up their tech resilience, including capacity building and addressing risk and resilience. Importantly, he stated that technology expenses accounted for about 10% of their total operating expense.

Kotak Mahindra however had plans to continue investing in their card franchise. As stated in an investor call earlier, its overall credit card advances grew by over 50% on a YoY basis. The plan may now be put on hold. Brokerage services provider Motilal Oswal observed that the ban would bother the growth trajectory of the bank's retail products. It would also adversely impact their margins and profitability. Its note explained that KMB's growth trajectory for retail products was aided by a higher mix of digital sourcing and a thrust on unsecured products.

For perspective, the private lender sold 95% of their personal loans and 99% of their (fresh) credit cards by digital means. On the profitability front, Shivaji Thapliyal, Head of Research and Lead Analyst at YES Securities, observed that HDFC ended up losing market share in credit card spends during the time it was barred. S&P anticipates KMB to potentially take a year to fully address RBI's key concerns. It observed that while the bank has made "significant progress" on technological enhancements, implementing changes and the external audit will take time.

THE GIST

▼ The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on April 24 barred Kotak Mahindra Bank (KMB) from onboarding new customers on its online and mobile banking channels, and issuing fresh credit cards.

▼ RBI observed "serious deficiencies and non-compliances" concerning KMB's IT inventory and user access management, data leak and leak prevention strategy, business continuity and disaster recovery rigour and drill, among other things.

▼ CEO Mr. Vaswani stated that while the financial impact (from the RBI action) is expected to be minimal, he was more worried about the "reputational impact".

How is the U.K. deporting migrants to Rwanda?

Does the East African nation have an economic incentive to be part of the U.K's asylum plan?

Sumeda

The story so far:

Last week, the British authorities deported an asylum seeker to Rwanda under a voluntary returns scheme and started detaining other migrants in the country in preparation for deportations to Rwanda by July as part of an immigration law passed by the U.K. Parliament. In April 2022, the U.K. struck a deal with Rwanda to address issues related to undocumented migration. However, the relocation policy was declared unlawful by the U.K. Supreme Court. In response, the Conservative government finalised a new agreement with Rwanda to ensure additional safeguards. The new legislation allows authorities to remove asylum seekers who have made "unauthorised journeys" since January 1, 2022, to Rwanda for processing of asylum claims.

How was the deportation facilitated? The Voluntary Returns Scheme (VRS),

under which the migrant was sent to Rwanda by the U.K. government, is not an entirely new programme. The plan was introduced by the Home Office in 1999 and co-funded by the European Refugee Fund. In 2002, a reintegration assistance programme was added to the scheme to help repatriated migrants meet their basic needs after arrival, such as finding a place to live, finding a job etc. The current plan is an extension of the existing VRS.

Under the new programme, the British government offers financial assistance to migrants and failed asylum seekers who opt to depart to a "safe third country," or a country they are "admissible to." A person is eligible to apply for the service if they have been in the U.K. illegally or have overstayed their visa; withdrawn, or want to withdraw their application to stay in the country; claimed asylum; or have an official letter confirming that they are a victim of modern slavery. A one-off payment is available to those departing to a country recognised as developing by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation

and Development (OECD). The OECD categorises Rwanda as a low-income developing country. Over the years, several individuals have been sent to Rwanda from the U.K. under the VRS. As per the latest data, 19,253 individuals were voluntarily returned from Britain under the returns scheme last year.

Is Rwanda safe for refugees?

The landlocked country of Rwanda is one of the most densely populated countries in the world with a population of over 13 million people. While the country has recorded significant progress in recent years in developing its economy, it continues to feature among the least developed nations in the world.

Additionally, the government in Rwanda has been accused of stifling dissent, keeping a tight control on media and opposition, and supporting rebel groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo. "Arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, and torture in official and unofficial detention facilities were

commonplace, and fair trial standards were routinely flouted in cases deemed sensitive," the Human Rights Watch noted. The agency has also highlighted how Rwanda's government has continued to exert pressure on refugees. "Refugees who are known critics of the government have been threatened and harassed. In Africa, the Human Rights Watch has documented Rwandan refugees and asylum seekers being forcibly disappeared and returned to Rwanda, or killed," it added. Around 90% of these refugees live in five camps across the country, while around 80% of the refugee population is highly vulnerable and fully relies on humanitarian assistance, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). It is in such a context that Rwanda has now agreed to open its borders to over 50,000 more refugees in the next few years.

What's in it for Rwanda?

As part of the asylum plan, the U.K. government will give development funding to the country and has promised to meet processing and integration costs for each relocated person. Britain has already paid Rwanda 220 million pounds, and the total cost is estimated to go up to 600 million pounds for 300 refugees. Despite criticism from several quarters, Rwanda's President Paul Kagame maintains that its decision to be part of the U.K.'s asylum plan is not economically driven or about "trading people," but to offer them a better chance at life.

THE GIST

▼ Under the new programme, the British government offers financial assistance to migrants and failed asylum seekers who opt to depart to a "safe third country," or a country they are "admissible to."

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▼ The government in Rwanda has been accused of stifling dissent, keeping a tight control on media and opposition, and supporting rebel groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Independence in boards

New norms lift demand for independent directors

KE Ranganathan

The corporate world in India is clamouring for independent directors (IDs) for more than one reason. The Companies Act has made it mandatory for public unlisted companies to have a certain number of IDs, and it requires at least one-third of the board members of listed companies must be IDs. The other key reason for the demand for IDs is they cannot serve continuously for more than two terms of five years each.

While these norms came into force from 2014, the demand is more acute now as 10 years has just been completed and many IDs will need to leave the board on this condition alone.

With ‘corporate governance’ topping the agenda of companies, there is obviously greater demand for well-informed IDs. Also, there are many new corporates coming on board through the evolution of start-ups gaining business expansion — requiring, thereby, more IDs.

Clearly, the word ‘independent’ means someone not related or associated with the management or shareholders in any manner to affect his/her ‘independent thinking’.

The role or job of an ID is to guard the interests of shareholders in an impartial manner and guide the management in proper diligent conduct of the business.

QUALITY MATTERS

The qualities of IDs need to measure up to the expected output from them. Deep knowledge of business processes, fairness in conducting of business, basic knowledge of applicable laws of the land and high level of integrity are essential qualities.

How the IDs add value depends on their ‘capabilities’. There are many IDs who remain mute spectators and go with the flow of the board. This goes against the purpose of their role as IDs. That said, there are also many IDs who add immense value by bringing in their various skills to full play and ensure the corporate they belong to is held in high esteem in all aspects.

The demand-supply situation in the ID market is interestingly poised. There are over 5,800 companies listed in India and assuming an average of three



IN SHORT SUPPLY. Independent directors with substance

directors per company the total demand is around 15,000 IDs. The latest estimates show there are over 1,000 IDs retiring in mid-2024 due to end of term. And, currently, there are already over 1,500 ID positions not filled in listed entities. Add to this the unlisted entities where ID is mandatory as per law. This comes to around 5,000 IDs. Thus, the overall demand for IDs is around 20,000.

Coming to ‘supply’ side, per Indian Institute of Corporate Affairs estimates, there are around 22,000 IDs (including 6,000+ women IDs).

The question is how many of them are good enough to be on the board as ID. The situation is more challenging when it comes to women IDs. The law mandates a certain number of women IDs in companies, which itself is difficult to fulfil as there is a huge supply shortage.

The need for high quality IDs will continue to grow at a much faster pace than GDP and there is a dire need to address the ‘supply’ side more than the ‘demand’ side.

While there are many forums and independent bodies working on increasing the availability of IDs, the lawmakers should also step in and find ways to manage the supply side.

There are so many compliance and governance areas that need to be covered these days. The knowledge of many IDs in these areas is limited. With many of the IDs in the fag end of their term, the motivation to learn is also limited.

While IDs have knowledge, experience and wisdom there is also a strong need to help corporates deliver superior results to all stakeholders through innovative strategic actions and flawless execution.

The writer, a former MD of Roca India, is an Independent Director on the boards of a few companies

THE WIDER ANGLE.



PARAN BALAKRISHNAN

Is the world edging closer to a nuclear war? We seem to be in tinderbox territory. First, it’s the Israelis battling Hamas and firing missiles at the Iranians. Now, another terrifying scenario is unfolding as Russian President Vladimir Putin orders his troops to carry out nuclear drills. The main culprit for ratcheting up tensions is French President Emmanuel Macron, who raised the prospect of EU troops entering the Ukraine battlefield.

British foreign secretary David Cameron followed that up gung-ho style by suggesting British weapons might be used to strike targets within Russia. Putin retorted that if that happened, British military facilities and equipment in Ukraine or abroad could be targeted. The US, meanwhile, has raised the heat by shipping ATACMS long-range ballistic missiles to Ukraine that can be aimed at targets deep inside Russia. The Kremlin response was almost understated, saying an “unprecedented new round of tension.. was being created.” Another TV presenter put it more dramatically, saying: “If NATO countries deploy their forces to Ukraine... we’ll send everything flying everywhere.”

These are the worst but not the only unsettled parts of the globe. And that’s reflected in global defence spending which, according to SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), has climbed for nine straight years and now is at a record \$2.44 trillion. Unsurprisingly, India’s right up there with the world’s fourth-largest defence budget at \$83.6 billion, 4.2 per cent higher than the previous year. Still, we’re puny beside global leaders like the US (at a colossal \$91.6 billion) and China (\$296 billion).

India isn’t the only Asian country upping military expenditure. Just about everyone’s adding more might to their arsenal, due mainly to China, though for the West, Russia could be the biggest immediate threat. Japan, for instance, has cast off its self-imposed post-war defence spending shackles. Japan’s military budget was up 11 per cent to \$50 billion in 2023. Tiny Taiwan, too, hiked its defence budget, by 11 per cent, to \$16.6 billion.

That’s an enormous budget for a small island but it has to face almost daily



REUTERS

Chinese aggression, Russia-Ukraine conflict and tensions in Middle East have pushed global defence spending to a record high

challenges. Just last week, 30 Chinese warplanes flew close to the island in 24 hours.

Similarly, the Chinese are aggressively pursuing their claim to Japan’s Senkaku Islands. An extraordinary 1,287 Chinese ships entered the Senkaku Islands’ contiguous zone in 2023. It’s the same story with the Philippines which faces regular water cannon attacks from Chinese Coast Guard ships. China expressed its annoyance at joint naval exercises between India and the Philippines. China has disputes involving large swathes of the South China Sea.

In Europe, too, it’s much the same story. Countries like Finland and Sweden

India isn’t the only Asian country upping military expenditure. Just about everyone’s adding more might to their arsenal, due mainly to China.

have joined NATO and are spending way more on defence.

WARFARE IS CHANGING

Also escalating spending is that warfare’s changed with new technology. India is spending on weapons like the Predator and its marine cousin, the Sea Guardian. We’ve also bought thousands of drones. The Azerbaijan-Armenia war showed military strategists globally that drones had altered the way wars are fought and the Russia-Ukraine war has underscored those lessons. Even the Houthis, with their limited resources, have proved that relatively inexpensive drones can have devastating impacts. In Myanmar, rebel forces like the Chins and the Arakan Army are demonstrating that \$400-drones can destroy army camps.

There are even questions about whether tanks now are obsolete. No, analysts reply, they’re still critical and that massive Russian tank losses at the start of the Ukraine invasion reflected poor preparation. The Indian Army’s answer to new forms of warfare has been to create the FRCV (future ready combat

vehicle) which have added protection and weapons able to destroy incoming missiles.

India has also been forced to dramatically boost spending in regions like Ladakh, creating new airfields and building heated quarters for troops to brave the savage winters. Till 2020, our main focus was Pakistan. Now, it’s vastly richer and more powerful China.

But the greatest current dangers are flashpoints like Ukraine and Gaza. NATO could possibly strike a deal with Russia that it wouldn’t sign up Ukraine as a member. In Israel/Gaza, Hamas said it accepted a ceasefire deal but the Israelis are going ahead with their offensive.

While defence spending looks set to keep rising, it’s unlikely to make the world safer.

The Doomsday Clock, devised in 1947 amid Cold War nuclear tensions, says humanity remains closer than ever to global catastrophe at 90 seconds to midnight. It was furthest from “midnight” in 1991 when it fell back to 17 minutes after the Cold War ended. Those were the good old days.

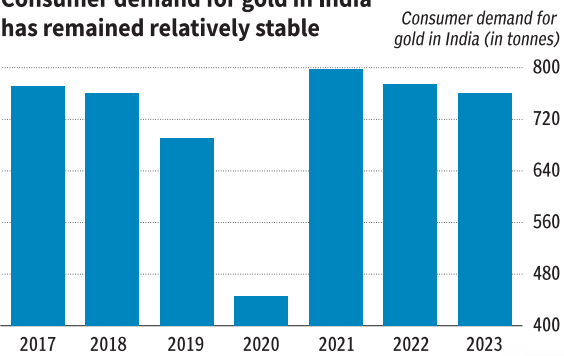
STATISTALK.

Compiled Arunachalam Vaidyanathan | Graphic Visveswaran V

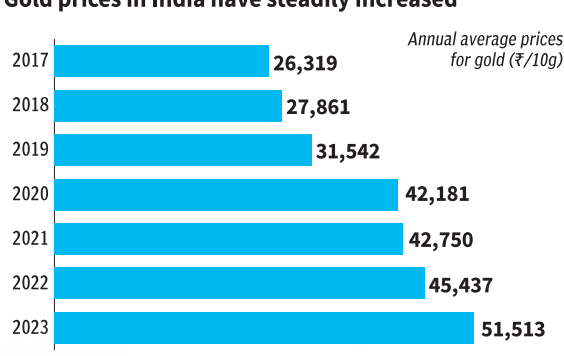
Landscape of gold industry in India

The consumer demand and consumption of gold have remained relatively stable over the years (except 2020) even though prices have steadily risen, signifying the role gold plays in Indian society and culture. The middle class continues to be the primary consumer of gold in India with the upper class having a less than expected share. Regional consumption also differs with the south having the biggest share due to higher per capita incomes and an affinity for plain gold jewellery while the economically underdeveloped east has the least

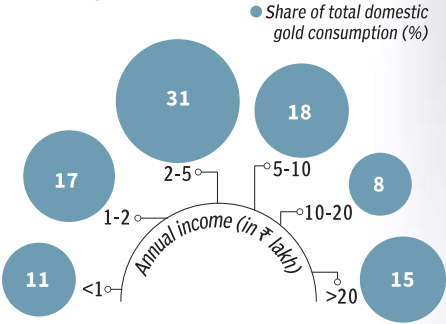
Consumer demand for gold in India has remained relatively stable



Gold prices in India have steadily increased

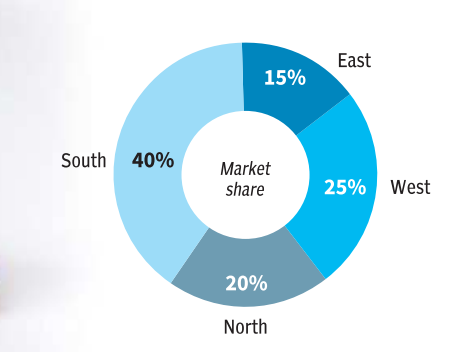


The middle class continues to be the primary gold consumer



Source: World Gold Council

Southern India leads in gold consumption



thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

May 8, 2004

Steel subsidy pact not acceptable, OECD told

A two-member team from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has met representatives of the steel industry to discuss the proposed steel subsidy agreement that envisages phasing out of all State subsidies and ban on greenfield capacities. The industry has told the OECD delegation that the terms and conditions of the draft agreement are against the interests of the Indian industry and are not acceptable until changes are made.

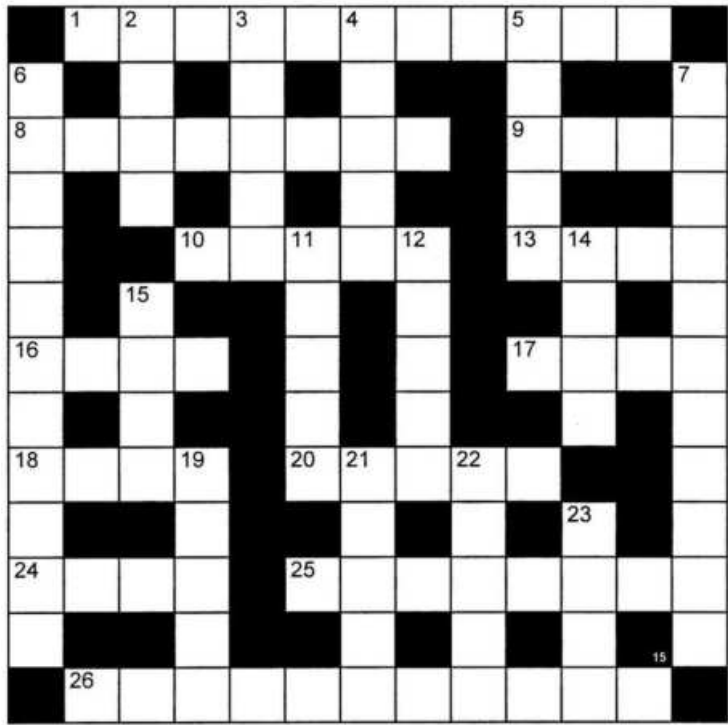
India ‘squandered’ capital, says Greenspan

India, China and Russia have “squandered” capital by financing inefficient technologies, the US Federal Reserve Chairman, Mr Alan Greenspan, has charged. “The very high savings rate of the Soviet Union, of China and that of India in earlier decades, often did not foster significant productivity growth in those countries,” Mr Greenspan said.

Ministry exploring ways to encash FM cos’ guarantees

The Information and Broadcasting (I&B) Ministry is holding talks with banks to explore the possibility of encashing the bank guarantees of FM radio companies operating out of Mumbai which have defaulted in payment of the annual licence fee.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2434



EASY

ACROSS

- Destroying (11)
- Trees (4)
- One having legal possession (5)
- Satirical utterance (5)
- Unqualified (5)
- Mildly reproving (11)
- Renovates (11)
- Other name for (5)
- Cuttlefish ink (5)
- Curve of ball in flight (4)
- Unprofitability (4)
- Argot (5)
- Object (5)
- Aviator (5)
- Record (4)

DOWN

- Destroying (11)
- Trees (4)
- One having legal possession (5)
- Satirical utterance (5)
- Unqualified (5)
- Mildly reproving (11)
- Renovates (11)
- Other name for (5)
- Cuttlefish ink (5)
- Curve of ball in flight (4)
- Unprofitability (4)
- Argot (5)
- Object (5)
- Aviator (5)
- Record (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Model is nigh break-up, doing away with a lot (11)
- Lordship will cheat on a servile dependant (8)
- The bill he is after is something that hurts (4)
- Is on one’s knees: quietly lift one up, one is told (5)
- 1,000 (or 500?), you old-fashioned thing, you! (4)
- Club that’s fashionable, about to get back the gold (4)
- What one makes by way of handsome profit may be incendiary (4)
- What audience does disapprovingly showing man’s first surprise (4)
- Firm’s workers may carry the flag (5)
- Star turn of Shakespeare’s river (4)
- Small car, semi-ruined: make as little of it as you can (8)
- Haul gauntlet to torture instrument on which I rest my case (7-4)

DOWN

- Trees that put the French up to writing (4)
- He has legal title now awkward with The Queen (5)
- Form of humour of one such as Reagan at the end of the day (5)
- To mix paint like this isn’t suitable (5)
- Hind is among letters needed for telling-off (11)
- Renovates her American briefs somehow (11)
- Assumed name, as when embracing endless liar (5)
- Coloured ink is, in the main, sanctimonious (5)
- To get the ball from the scrum may be a snare (4)
- Bereavement leaves one sobbing such beginnings (4)
- Give one a mouthful – of jargon! (5)
- That which is wanted is a slender note (5)
- Man in the air needs refill endlessly adaptable (5)
- Being round and flat, cold is common: that holds it in! (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2433

ACROSS 1. Contrite 4. Spur 8. Wig 9. Torso 10. Rob 11. Retires 12. Moist 13. Infatuation 17. Thumb 18. Precede 20. Ash 21. Rails 22. Use 23. Keys 24. Reticent

DOWN 1. Cowers 2. Night 3. Turns 5. Portico 6. Rebate 7. Committees 9. Threadbare 14. Naughty 15. Attack 16. Recent 18. Price 19. Elude

Themeless election

India needs a positive agenda

It has been over 50 days since the Election Commission of India announced the Lok Sabha election and the Model Code of Conduct came into force. Three phases of voting have concluded, with voters in over half the Lok Sabha constituencies having exercised their franchise. While both the ruling National Democratic Alliance, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Opposition bloc, with the Congress as its largest constituent, are campaigning to improve their chances, what voters are missing is a substantive debate on crucial issues. To be sure, both parties have released their manifestos, but they are not necessarily the main talking points. And, in any case, campaigning in India is much more than manifestos. What India instead has are debates on mostly irrelevant and often undesirable issues. An electorate that would soon be running the world's third-largest economy was expecting better. Since the focus is not on substantive issues, the language has also been a casualty.

This is in sharp contrast to the Lok Sabha election 10 years ago. The BJP capitalised on the weaknesses of the United Progressive Alliance government with the promise of “*achhe din*”. It was a positive campaign for change and delivered a single-party majority after decades. The 2019 election was dominated by the national-security theme, with Pulwama and Balakot forming the backdrop. Nothing of that sort is visible today. The campaign thus far has moved around history — sometimes medieval history — who ate what and when, preserving or increasing reservations — often pitting one section of the population against another — and redistributing wealth and resources, among others. None of these will help increase, say, the pace of economic growth or improve learning outcomes in schools. The issue of inheritance tax, for instance, became a debating point for no reason for a few days and faded away. It is well known that imposing and administering such a tax will be enormously difficult in India.

One of the reasons why political parties end up talking about irrelevant issues could be a long election cycle. Completing the process in two or three phases would have perhaps kept them more focused on important matters. The primary responsibility for improving the political discourse rests with both the BJP and Congress. For the BJP, which aims to make India a developed nation, it was an opportunity to show its achievement and campaign on the future road map. For the Congress and the Opposition at large, it was a chance to highlight areas where the government could not make an impact and present a better alternative in front of voters. Unfortunately, none of these are happening. Indian voters are largely getting to hear personalised attacks and issues that are unlikely to take India forward.

What India needs is rapid economic development. Political capital and energy thus should be focused on enabling sustainable higher growth. A related issue in this context is employment generation. India needs to generate productive employment for its rising workforce and to pull people out of agriculture, which still engages nearly half the workforce, to increase productivity and growth. How India can achieve such goals should be a major feature of any policy or political debate. A pre-poll survey by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies showed inflation and employment were the biggest concerns for the majority of Indians. It's time for the political debate to pivot towards issues directly affecting people's lives.

Berkshire's record run

Many Indian companies fit its mould

The annual Berkshire Hathaway (BH) shareholders' conference in Omaha, Nebraska, is an eagerly awaited event. BH is a behemoth of a holding company with a standalone market capitalisation of over \$870 billion, making it the eighth-most valuable company in the world. It was, until recently, run by two investing legends, Vice-Chairman Charlie Munger and Chairman Warren Buffett. Every casual quip or chance remark in their joint interactions with shareholders was parsed in excruciating detail for clues as to future strategies. One such remark at the 2024 meet suggests Berkshire may be interested in future India exposure. Munger passed away recently at the age of 99, and Mr Buffett, at 93, cast a sombre note when he said he hoped he would be there in 2025 to chair the annual meet. The succession strategy was obviously a matter of debate. Most probably it will be one of the two vice-chairmen, Greg Abel or Ajit Jain.

BH has an incredible investment record with a compound return of around 20 per cent per annum since 1965 — that's over twice the growth rate of the S&P 500. It is one of the world's largest general insurers, and owns large stakes in many other Fortune 500 businesses as well as controlling stakes in many smaller businesses. A single BH voting share trades for about \$600,000 because the company doesn't believe in stock splits, or paying dividends. The strategy is logical only if a company believes that it can earn a high return on retained earnings. In BH's case, it has beaten the market by a massive margin over six decades. One of the many unusual features of the Buffett-Munger partnership has been transparency. They have taken the trouble to explain investment decisions and confess their mistakes to shareholders, usually with humour and self-deprecation thrown in. The Buffett-Munger investment philosophy has been to find growth businesses they understand, and to invest in those for the long term if they reckon the price is right.

This philosophy lent itself to another logical extension that seems an eccentricity at first glance: A reluctance to invest in tech companies since neither of them self-confessedly understood tech. The internet boom and bust was ignored by BH, although it has, at various times, owned stakes in IBM and Apple among other tech plays. The two have also indulged in trenchant criticism of complex financial derivatives, instruments both understood very well since they were experts in insurance, which thrives on such complexities. Mr Buffett's comment about “unexplored opportunities” in India was in response to a query by Rajeev Agarwal of Doordashi Advisers, a US hedge fund. BH's last-known transaction in India occurred in November 2023, when it sold a 2.5 per cent stake in Paytm (One97 Communications) for a loss.

Mr Buffett also pointed out that BH would want to have “any advantage or insights into those businesses in India or any contacts that will make possible transactions” before it entered India in a meaningful way. The presence of Mr Jain may, of course, give BH a headstart in this regard. But given the philosophy, India's overt thrust on digitisation may actually be a drawback when it comes to attracting BH. The 93-year-old chairman has pulled back from day-to-day management and it's possible there could be a radical shift in investment attitude as new management takes over. There are plenty of Indian companies that fit the BH mould and it could be a formidable player.

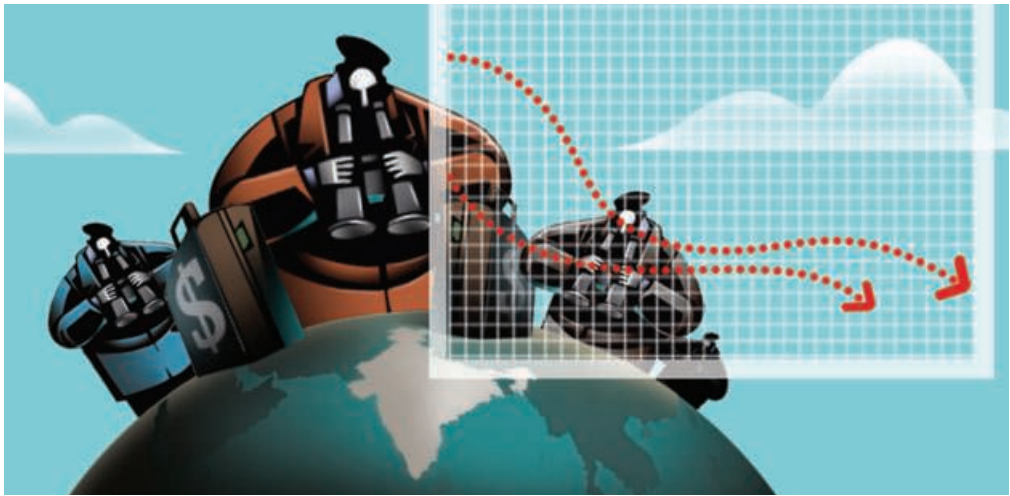


ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY

Rising repatriation

As worrying as the recent decline in gross foreign direct investment is the increasing pace of disinvestment

About a fortnight ago, this newspaper reported that as many as 46 proposals for foreign direct investment (FDI) were pending with about 17 departments of the Union government for more than 12 weeks, which was the time limit set for clearing such applications. The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, or DPIIT, was understandably concerned and wrote to all the departments, asking them to expedite the clearance of these applications. Significantly, these delays took place in many cases despite the Union home ministry having accorded them the mandatory security clearance.

Could this have been one of the reasons for a slowdown in India's gross FDI inflows in the last few months? While it is true that global FDI has been slowing in general, the fall in India's gross FDI inflows was quite sharp at 16 per cent to \$71 billion in 2022-23. Remember that this was the first time in nine years that a decline had taken place in India's gross FDI flows. Worryingly, the declining trend continued during the first eleven months of 2023-24, even though the pace of decline had slowed considerably. Gross FDI flows in the April-February period of 2023-24 fell by 2.7 per cent to \$65 billion. The data for the full year is not yet available.

How serious is this decline? The Narendra Modi government would argue that of the 10 years of its regime, each of the first eight years saw gross FDI flows rise, and a decline in the remaining two years should be attributed to hardening interest rates in developed markets and global economic problems affecting FDI flows in most countries.

But that explanation appears to be missing a larger problem afflicting India's FDI flows. What is happening to repatriation or disinvestment by existing foreign direct investors in the country could point to a more serious problem.

From 2001-02 to 2008-09, repatriation and disinvestment by existing foreign investors were a tiny

proportion of gross FDI inflows into India — a share that ranged between 0.08 per cent and 1.15 per cent. However, this share surged to 12 per cent in 2009-10 (\$4.6 billion of repatriation against gross FDI of \$38 billion) and skyrocketed to 29 per cent in 2011-12 (\$13.6 billion of repatriation against gross FDI of \$46.55 billion).

It was remarkable that even as gross FDI flows between 2009 and 2012 were healthy at 2.1-2.8 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), a good number of existing foreign investors were either repatriating their capital back to their home countries or other destinations and exiting from their ventures in India or diluting their stake through disinvestment. Such repatriation during these three years rose from 0.3 per cent of GDP to 0.7 per cent. This was a period of global economic turmoil and hardening interest rates. But such exits also reflected poorly on the country's ability to retain the foreign investment that it had already attracted.

The situation improved somewhat in the following four years. Even as gross FDI flows improved from 2012-13, and more remarkably after the formation of the Modi government in 2014, the share of repatriation and disinvestment by existing foreign investors in gross FDI flows saw a sharp decline from 29 per cent in 2011-12 to 19 per cent in 2015-16. While more foreign investment was flowing in, the rate at which existing investors were pulling their capital out of India had slowed.

However, the trend changed from 2016-17 for about three years. India's gross FDI flows kept rising, although at a lower annual rate of between 1 and 8 per cent. But the share of repatriation and disinvestment in gross FDI flows rose in this period to about 30-35 per cent. Did demonetisation of November 2016 and the disruption caused by the launch of the goods and services tax (GST) in July 2017 play any role in the increased withdrawal of existing FDI through the repatriation and disinvestment route?



RAISINA HILL

A K BHATTACHARYA

Yen's avoidable slide to 1990 level

Failure of existing rules is the prelude to a search for new ones — Thomas S Kuhn (1962)

The exchange rate of the yen has plummeted all the way back to its 1990 level of around 160 yens per dollar. Why? What can be the policy solution in such matters for the future?

The Bank of Japan (BoJ) has abandoned its zero interest rate policy but even now its short-term interest rate is only 0.1 per cent. This is because of apprehension that Japan may once again return to low inflation or even deflation, coupled with low economic growth. On the other hand, the US Fed is not in a position to reduce its repo rate below 5.5 per cent as the US economy appears to be somewhat stuck with an inflation rate of 3.5 per cent, which is well above the 2 per cent target. The gap between the interest rates in the two countries is huge, and this is accentuating the capital flows from Japan to the US. Hence, the very low yen.

The BoJ apparently intervened by depleting its foreign exchange reserves by about \$35 billion. There was some rise in the yen but the effect does not seem to be lasting. This is understandable, given that the basic problem lies elsewhere. The gap between the interest rates in Japan and the US is huge. And, it is unlikely to be bridged substantially anytime soon, given the very different macroeconomic conditions in the two countries. All this is in the context of the prevailing interest rate policy. The question is — can

we have an altogether different policy so that the side-effect of the policy on the currency market is absent or minimal? Yes. Before we come to the interest rate policy proposed here, note two features of the prevailing interest rate policy.

First, the interest rate policy of the central bank has an inbuilt and implicit tax or subsidy scheme. At present, the BoJ has kept interest rates low for borrowers. It is like giving a subsidy to borrowers. On the other hand, the Fed is keeping interest rates high. It is like imposing a tax on the borrowers.

Second, the changes in interest rates by the central banks are intended to affect borrowing for investment, residential projects, and durables (Bird hereafter); the idea is to affect the aggregate demand in the economy. However, the policy is blunt as it affects other variables like the exchange rate.

With the above two observations, we can now come to the proposed interest rate policy. This policy is not implemented by the central bank.

Instead, it is enacted by the Ministry of Finance (MoF) in Japan and the Treasury in the US. Let the MoF give an explicit subsidy in Japan and let the Treasury impose an explicit tax in the US. The subsidy in Japan or the tax in the US is applicable for BIRD only; it does not apply to all borrowings. Let us see how it all works.

Under the proposed policy, in Japan the demand for funds would go up as a result of the explicit subsidy. So, the interest rate observed in the market

The situation in 2019-20, the year before the outbreak of Covid-19, saw not only a 20 per cent increase in gross FDI inflows for India, but also a slowing pace of repatriation and disinvestment. As a result, against gross FDI flows of \$74 billion in 2019-20, the amount of repatriation and disinvestment was about \$18 billion, with the share falling to 25 per cent.

The following two Covid years saw gross FDI inflows rising, but the pace of increase had slowed, and then they fell by 16 per cent in 2022-23 to \$71 billion. But all these years, repatriation and disinvestment rose to account for a 33-34 per cent share in gross FDI inflows during 2020-21 and 2021-22, and then 41 per cent in 2022-23. The first 11 months of 2023-24 saw a further deterioration in this worrying trend. Repatriation and disinvestment during April-February 2023-24 spurted by 41 per cent and accounted for 59 per cent of gross FDI flows during this period.

Therefore, it is only natural that DPIIT, the department responsible for promoting FDI, will be examining why there are delays in clearance of applications from foreign investors. Its task has become more challenging because of an institutional restructuring brought about by the Modi government in 2017. The Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB), which used to be located in the Union finance ministry, was abolished through an order in June 2017 and individual departments of the government were empowered to clear FDI proposals in consultation with the department of industrial policy and promotion, which was later renamed as DPIIT.

Given the nature of the decline in India's FDI flows, it will make sense for DPIIT to explore an institutional revamp. A decentralised system of clearance of foreign investment applications needs more checks and balances. Indeed, the government could look at reviving an institution similar to the FIPB that is adequately empowered and tasked with facilitating the clearance of foreign investment proposals. This institution should not just have a streamlined approvals process but also be empowered to remove any procedural and policy irritants that come in the way of India becoming a preferred destination among foreign investors. At present, individual departments and ministries may not be sufficiently enthused or empowered to play such a role.

More importantly, a new inter-ministerial institution could examine the more worrying trend of how existing investors are repatriating their capital through disinvestment or other means. It is true that even as the cumulative value of FDI flows increases, some of those investments would flow out through repatriation and disinvestment. But in India, the rate of such exits has been rising at a rapid pace, neutralising the positive impact of FDI flows on the country's balance of payments.

Therefore, as important as attracting foreign investors and expeditiously approving their applications is the need to ensure that existing investors stay invested and expand their operations to help the Indian economy reap the dividends of higher investment. The first step, under these circumstances, will be to initiate a process to understand why the share of repatriation and disinvestment in India's gross FDI flows has been rising in the last few years.

would rise even as the *effective (post-subsidy) interest rate for Bird* falls in Japan. On the other hand, in the US, the demand for funds would fall as a consequence of the explicit tax. So, the interest rate observed in the market would fall even as the effective (post-tax) interest rate for Bird rises in the US.

It is interesting that under the proposed policy, it is only the gap between the effective interest rates for Bird in the two countries that is increased. The gap between the interest rates observed in the markets in the two countries is, in fact, *reduced*. And, given this reduced gap between the interest rates observed in the markets in the two countries, there is much less of an incentive for capital flows from Japan to the US. Accordingly, if the proposed interest rate policy were in place, the yen would not have fallen sharply. And, the objective of macroeconomic stabilisation in the home countries would be achieved. QED.

There is, of course, a whole lot more to the story that includes not only the possible side-effects of the policy for currencies but asset prices as well. It is all explained in this author's forthcoming book, *Macroeconomics and Asset Prices - Thinking Afresh on Basic Principles and Policy*. The proposed policy is intrinsically simple. It is just new and unfamiliar.

In conclusion, the prevailing interest rate policy is very blunt and it has side-effects, which is why the yen fell sharply. This would not have happened under the proposed interest rate policy.

The writer is an economist. He taught at Ashoka University, ISI (Delhi) and JNU. He thanks Chetan Ghate for comments on the initial draft; gurbachan.arti@gmail.com

Making family businesses last



BOOK REVIEW

PROSENJIT DATTA

Few family-owned firms anywhere in the world last beyond three generations. The late Andrew Carnegie, who built up US Steel and became the richest man in the world for some time, had coined a phrase for it: It takes three generations to go from shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves. Other countries have similar proverbs. The assumption is that the first generation starts the business, the second builds it up, while the third generation of the family squanders away the legacy.

What goes wrong and how can a family-owned enterprise thrive beyond three generations? Like several books

had attempted earlier, *Beyond Three Generations* seeks to answer those questions and give tips on how to ensure longevity, especially for family-owned and -run small and medium-sized businesses in India. It also looks at how they can scale up from a medium-sized enterprise to a big business.

It is not a big book — a mere 215 pages — but is unusual in that it gives equal billing to four co-authors. Two are brothers — Navas Meeran and Firoz Meeran — the chairman and vice-chairman of Kerala-headquartered Group Meeran, respectively. They represent the second generation — their father, the late M E Meeran founded the enterprise called The Eastern Condiments Group, which has evolved into Group Meeran now.

The third co-author is M S A Kumar, a family business adviser and CEO coach, who has helped many family-run businesses to scale up beyond ₹100-150 crore revenues, where these often get stuck.

The fourth co-author is veteran business journalist George Skaria who held senior editorial roles in multiple business publications, including *Businessworld* and *Business Today*.

Though Professor Kavit Ramachandran of the Indian School of Business is not one of the co-authors, he provided the co-authors with valuable advice from time to time.

While the book looks at family businesses in general for lessons, the focus is particularly on how small and medium family-run businesses in India manage after a couple of generations and also once they have reached a certain size.

They examine in particular 12 case studies — Group Meeran being one of them. The others are a mix of well-known names as well as those that do not attract much attention from mainstream business newspapers, though they have all built up significant organisations and businesses. The case studies include Aravind Eye Care System, OmniActive Health Technologies, Evolve Back

Resorts, Popular Automobiles, Sandu Pharmaceuticals and others.

The businesses profiled are in very different sectors and geographies, and have little in common except for founders who believed in hard work, ethics and in the way their descendants have kept true to the founder's principles. Some entrepreneurs started from scratch with little capital or

resources while others were somewhat luckier to have got some share during the partition of an older family business group.

In some cases, the second and third generation of the family have grown by building up the core business started by the founder and also building adjacencies while in others there has been a sharp pivot.

The co-authors bring out a lot of issues that crop up — from problems when family members have ambition

but not the capability, to the issues that might become evident when a professional is given charge of the group.

Sometimes, despite having an impeccable resume, a professional may not work out. It may be the fault of the entrepreneur or the family members who could not let go fully. Or it could be simply that the professional was used to working in a very different environment and despite all his ability and qualifications, made little effort to understand the ethos of the new company.

There are plenty of interesting anecdotes and nuggets strewn throughout the book. There are cases where family dynamics have resulted in havoc. Sometimes, a family member is given charge but proves to be inept but no one knows how to move him out or reduce his role. In other cases, there is a clash between the ideas and management

styles of generations within the family.

Beyond Three Generations offers plenty of strategies and ideas to deal with different situations including a list of things not to do. They are good and the book is quite easy to read. Some solutions appear to be little beyond common sense advice but are difficult to follow. Others offer insights that are often missed.

One of the co-authors, M S A Kumar, gives his Expert Takes in chapters, breaking down the issues involved, making it easier to understand and decide on the solutions.

The book will be a useful read for all the family businesses that are grappling with the issues highlighted. Eventually though, how helpful the book is will depend on how willing the founder or family members are to learn the lessons and set their egos aside to find a proper solution. It is, after all, egos, personalities, ambitions, and capabilities that often destroy the business by the time the third generation takes over.

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

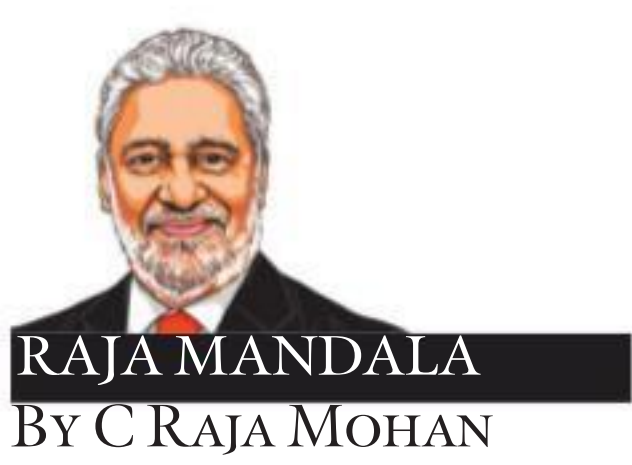


BEYOND THREE GENERATIONS: The Definitive Guide to Building Enduring Indian Family Businesses
Author: Navas Meeran, MSA Kumar, Firoz Meeran, George Skaria
Publisher: Harper Business
Pages: 215
Price: ₹599

THE IDEAS PAGE

Playing the field

Xi Jinping's swing through Europe highlights China's play to exploit the differences the continent has within — and with the US



RAJA MANDALA
By C RAJA MOHAN

XI JINPING'S SWING through Europe this week highlights China's bold play to exploit the divisions within Europe and across the Atlantic with the United States. It also underlines Europe's trilemmas in navigating the great power dynamic between the US, Russia and China. The prospects of Trump returning to power in Washington, Russia's growing military confidence in Ukraine, and the mounting economic pressures from Beijing are squeezing Europe into a tight corner.

Speaking at the Sorbonne University a fortnight ago, French President Emmanuel Macron sought to shake Europe out of its complacency. Macron warned that Europe could well die if it does not get its act together in addressing the range of challenges presented by the US, Russia and China. During his visit to France, Serbia and Hungary this week, Xi will try to make Europe's trilemma harder to resolve.

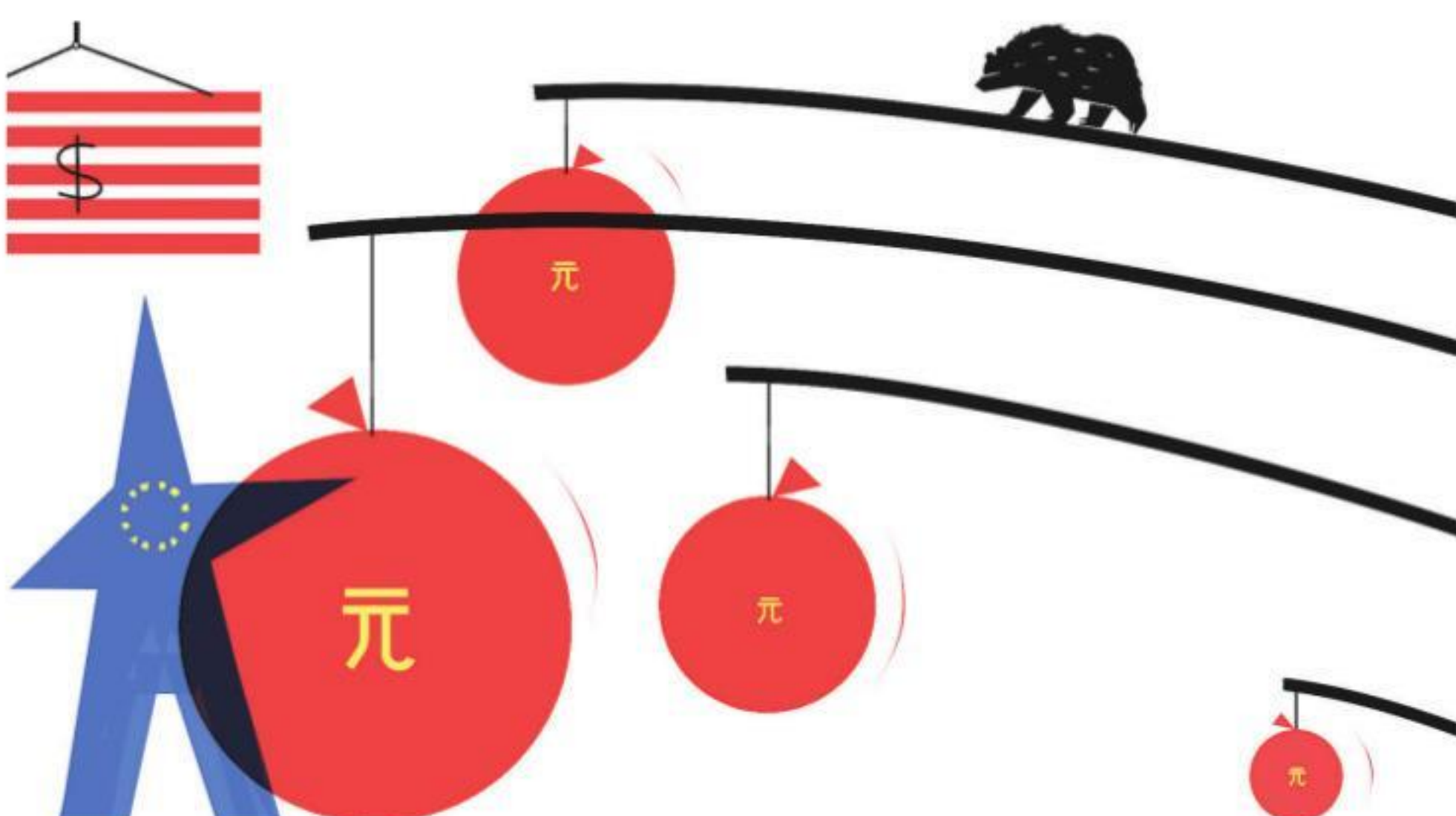
Xi's travel to Europe after five years amid a spying scandal points to the growing Chinese penetration of the European ruling caste. Even more important is the European investigation into the Chinese dumping of electric vehicles and the prospect of major sanctions against China's EV makers. Xi, on his part, is eager to persuade the Europeans not to escalate the trade war with China and reverse the declared strategy of "de-risking" the economic relationship with Beijing. China has economic carrots to offer, in the form of investments.

In Hungary, President Viktor Orban is a friend of China and will showcase Beijing's plans to set up an EV factory in the country, undermining Europe's ambitions to develop its own capability in this sector. China already is a major investor in the Serbian economy.

France too is eager to attract Chinese investments and insists that it will not participate in the attempted isolation of China by the US. "We need the Chinese", Macron said, calling for a "reset" in the economic relations with China on the eve of Xi's visit this week. During his visit to China last April, Macron declared that "Europe will not be America's follower" on Taiwan. On the eve of Xi's visit to France, Macron reaffirmed the message of European strategic autonomy and suggested that Europe will be a balancing power between the US and China. That is music to Xi's ears, and he would want to probe the extent of the cleavage between Europe and the US on their China strategy.

While China remains a valuable economic partner and a weighty global actor in dealing with issues like climate change, Xi's support for Putin's invasion of Ukraine has generated much concern in Europe. As Russia moves from a defensive posture in eastern Ukraine towards a more offensive one, there are growing fears that Putin might destabilise Central Europe.

Macron sought to stop the war in Ukraine in early 2022 by reaching out to Putin, arguing that Russia is a natural part of European secu-



C R Sasikumar

rity architecture and should not be isolated. Today, Macron affirms that Putin poses the biggest threat to Europe's future. While thanking the US for its support, Macron says Europe can't bet on this forever and needs to take charge of its security.

Macron has also floated the idea that Europe should be prepared to send troops into Ukraine to stop further advances by Putin's armies. But it has met much resistance across Europe, including from Germany, which has no desire to put boots on the ground in Ukraine. Some in Europe bet Xi is the only world leader who can moderate Putin's policies towards Ukraine. They are eager to have his presence at the Ukraine Peace Conference being organised by Switzerland in June this year. But there is nothing to suggest that Xi is willing to undermine, let alone, abandon Putin at this moment.

After Paris, Xi stops in Serbia and Hungary, which have two of the most pro-Russian regimes in Europe. Xi's bonhomie with the leaders in Budapest and Belgrade will at once underline the divisions in Europe and the extent of support for the Sino-Russian alliance.

While the US characterisation of the Sino-Russian entente as an "axis of the authoritarians" has some resonance in liberal Europe, Xi's call to reject Cold War mentality and bloc politics sounds right to the peace constituencies in the continent. Xi has timed his visit to Serbia to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. China has never stopped using that incident to counter the Western narrative of upholding international law and a rules-based order.

As Xi and Putin step up political attacks on NATO, there is some unintended reinforcement from the US. In a recent interview with Time magazine, former President Donald Trump, the presumptive nominee of the Republican Party for the presidential elections later this year, reaffirmed his well-known complaints against Europe. Trump, who has long accused NATO allies of not contributing their share of the European defence burden, insisted that the US will not defend those countries in Europe that do not pay

Irrespective of its eventual choice, Europe's response to its geopolitical trilemma will have major consequences for India's relations with the US, Russia, and China. Europe sees Russia as the principal threat and China as an opportunity and is under pressure from the US to share a greater part of the defence burden in Europe against Russia and contribute to Asian security by boosting the US balancing effort against China. For Delhi, Beijing is the principal challenge and Moscow is part of the answer.

their fair share. Trump also excoriated the European Union for their protectionism and has promised to press for a more equitable trade relationship.

In his recent interview with the Economist, Macron underlined the need to build European sovereignty to survive and prosper amid the unfolding political, economic, and technological domination of the US and China. But sceptics point to the deep divisions within Europe that limit the possibilities for translating Macron's ambitious quest for "European strategic autonomy". Yet, the bonds between the US and Europe are too tight for either side to simply walk away from the other.

Irrespective of its eventual choice, Europe's response to its geopolitical trilemma will have major consequences for India's relations with the US, Russia, and China. Europe sees Russia as the principal threat and China as an opportunity and is under pressure from the US to share a greater part of the defence burden in Europe against Russia and contribute to Asian security by boosting the US balancing effort against China. For Delhi, Beijing is the principal challenge and Moscow is part of the answer.

Meanwhile, US domestic politics has become a variable in shaping great power relations. If Delhi does not want to be a passive victim of potential big shifts in the relations between Washington, Brussels, Moscow, and Beijing, it will need to step up its engagement with Europe. This must include a greater focus on trade and security challenges like Ukraine. The last few years have seen India end its traditional neglect of Europe. It has enhanced the outreach to individual European powers like France, sub-regional groups like the Nordics, small economic groups like EFTA, and the European Union. But Delhi has barely scratched India's strategic possibilities in Europe.

The writer is contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express and visiting professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"UN Secretary-General António Guterres has said the Rafah invasion would be the 'final nail in the coffin' for humanitarian activities in Gaza. The self-professed guardians of the 'international rules-based order'... have no one to blame but themselves and their Israeli allies."
— DAWN, PAKISTAN

Golden generation of Indian chess

Success at the Candidates Tournament shows that if one rises to the top in India, one is probably close to the top of the world as well



VISWANATHAN ANAND

NOW THAT INDIA'S remarkable success at the Candidates tournament has sunk in, it is time to think back at all the factors that have led up to it. One thing that was always present was the sacrifice of parents. My mother used to accompany me to tournaments for years, till I was 15-16 years old and started travelling alone. My parents put themselves out there a lot to support me. To some degree, that has been the case with the new crop of players too. Whether it is Gukesh D, Pragg (R Pragganandhaa) or Vidit Gujrathi, their parents have been behind them like a wall, to ensure that the boys have the support to go out and play to their best.

While that has fairly been a constant, when I was growing up, coaching wasn't such a big part of the game. I didn't, for instance, have a coach until I was almost 20. By then, I was already one of the best players in the world. Things are different now. You can't play without coaching. It's much harder because of the amount of sophistication that training methods have acquired, and because of the competition. With so many kids playing chess now, one has to ensure that one is a step ahead. So, there is a huge amount of personal investment in coaches and support mechanisms. The tools of technology have exploded, forcing everyone to think of ways to maximise its benefits and include that in the training.

A question that crops up frequently is what can you get in India now that wasn't available before. The answer to that is that the chess ecosystem in India has developed tremendously over the last many decades. One of the things that happened is that the first generation of players after me went on to have successful careers of their own — they got public-sector jobs, started coaching centres and academies of their own. And so, when the generation after came in, they had access to a great many things already. For instance, Gukesh trained in Vishnu's (grandmaster Vishnu Prasanna) academy, Pragg at (RB) Ramesh's. The number of strong players around in the country is so high that for most of your training needs, India is a good enough place to be in. One needs to be on one's toes because you are competing against the very best in the country — it's more or less like appearing for the IIT entrance examinations or the civil services examination. This, to some degree, is new. If you get to rise to the top in India, you are probably very close to the top of the world as well.

The other thing that has happened is, of

course, that all these have contributed to an increase in the popularity of the game. People no longer consider it to be an unusual career decision. You can be an engineer, sure, but being a successful chess player is good too. Part of it also, surprisingly, has to do with how chess has been made "cool" by the world of streaming and e-sports. There are OTT series etc based on it. And that has had a big impact. People following chess on their phones have become commonplace. The Candidates tournament was widely watched. There is crucial engagement through streaming and commentary. Being in the public eye has drawn the sponsors in. Earlier, the public-sector companies would sponsor chess teams, which was a big support for the game. Now, that has been supplemented by many private sponsors coming in. For instance, WestBridge Capital came in to support my academy (WestBridge Anand Chess Academy, WACA). Through that we had D Gukesh, R Pragganandhaa and R Vaishali among our first batch of students. Besides, India has been steadily increasing its sports expenditure and the results are showing in chess but also in many other Olympic sports.

When I was picking the mentees for the WACA, I realised that we had a wealth of people who had become grandmasters by the age of 14. The current crop of players are simply among the best in the world. Most of them are in the top 20. Maybe on a bad day, they get up to the top 30 but they have established themselves in that sphere. This is the golden generation for Indian chess. They are all fairly young — Gukesh is 17, Pragg is 18 — and have their best years ahead of them. They are focused, sincere and the fact that they have a long way to go is also what the excitement is about.

The gender disparity, however, remains pretty persistent in chess, despite significant efforts to improve it. For instance, many companies and organisers try to have equal prize money for women and men. The World Chess Federation (FIDE) supports the women's tour and has increased prize amounts because we realise that unless it is attractive enough for girls to come and take part, it won't happen. So we have to make the extra effort. If one looks at recent performances by Koneru Humpy, Vaishali R, one can sense that there's been an improvement. But the gap persists and needs to be worked on.

What else would I like to see more of? Well, hopefully that chess can spread more and more nationally. We still have regional differences in how chess is played. Tamil Nadu is the leading state, maybe even by some margin. Then you have Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and West Bengal. I think it should be one of the areas of focus just to get people from everywhere to connect to the game.

The writer, India's first grandmaster and five times world champion, is FIDE deputy president



PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

Sugar and spice, not all nice

Issues with baby food, ground spices show why India needs stricter food safety laws

A SERIES OF food safety issues in recent weeks involving ground spices, infants and children's foods have not only caused considerable concern among consumers, but also raised serious doubts about the ability of the food regulator, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), to ensure the safety of food sold in the country.

Following rejection of several varieties of ground spices of popular brands MDH and Everest by Hong Kong, Singapore and the United States for the presence of the carcinogenic ethylene oxide and salmonella bacteria, the FSSAI has ordered countrywide inspections and testing of all branded spices. But it requires more than that to assuage consumer fears about the quality of ground spices because generally, foods that are exported, have better quality control than those manufactured for the domestic market. So, it raises several questions about the quality of these spices, our safety standards and enforcement.

Besides, the Food Safety and Standards Act prohibits the sale of unpacked ground spices, the logic being that packaged spices manufactured under licence from the food regulator are safe. So, the consumer has every right to demand that the FSSAI's quality seal fulfils its promise.

But what's generated more anger and consternation among consumers are the issues pertaining to the safety of foods for infants and children. It is well known that sugar, except those naturally present in food, should not be given to children till the age of

three years. In fact, in 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) called for a ban on added sugar and sweeteners in food products for babies and children under the age of three years, following which many countries incorporated such a ban. The WHO urged the industry to be proactive and reformulate their baby food products.

Yet, according to recent reports, Nestle sold Cerelec with added sugar in India. Of course, the blame rests squarely on the food regulator, but Nestle would have earned the respect of Indian parents if it had brought into practice here, its healthy recipe (no added sugar) followed in Europe. The FSS (Foods for Infant Nutrition) Regulations say that "Lactose and glucose polymers shall be the preferred carbohydrates for food for infant nutrition. Sucrose/or fructose shall not be added, unless needed as a carbohydrate source and provided the sum of these does not exceed 20 per cent of total carbohydrate".

The fact that the food regulator allowed added sugar in baby foods and high amounts of sugar in malt/dairy cereal-based beverages touted as "health drinks" for children, despite the knowledge that children on high-sugar diets are prone to obesity and are at risk for diabetes and cardiovascular diseases, casts a shadow on the capability of the food regulator to protect vulnerable groups like infants and children. It is only now, after considerable public debate on the high sugar levels in Bournvita that the regulator has asked e-commerce companies to remove drinks such as Bournvita and Horlicks from the list

of "health" drinks.

Given the adverse impact of consumption of high levels of fat, sugar, and salt in all processed foods, the FSSAI ought to have mandated long ago, a specified, time-bound reduction of these ingredients and ensured compliance. However, in 2018, it opted for a voluntary pledge from manufacturers. Evaluating voluntary cutbacks requires recording the percentage of these components in the beginning. But the FSS (Packaging and Labelling) Regulations 2011, did not even require food manufacturers to provide sodium content under the "Nutrition Information", despite the direct link between sodium and hypertension and diabetes. It was only in 2022, under the FSS (Labelling and Display) Regulation, that mentioning the sodium content became mandatory. But the issue of "front of package" colour coding to warn consumers of foods high in salt, sugar and fat is still hanging fire.

From the Comptroller and Auditor General in 2017, Parliamentary Standing Committee in 2018 to the Public Accounts Committee in 2021 and 2022, all have focused on the need to formulate food standards and regulations quickly and update them at regular intervals based on not just international standards, but also new scientific research, with wider consultation of all stakeholders. They have also emphasised the need for a more transparent system of licensing, inspection, sampling and market surveillance and better handling of cases to ensure larger convictions. They have also rued

the absence of adequate infrastructure that has stymied the work of the regulator.

The Public Account Committee's "action taken report" presented to Parliament in December 2022 throws light on the low priority given to food safety by state governments. In Bihar, for example, out of a requirement of 115 Food Safety Officers, the state had only 14. The low staff and infrastructure showed in the low sampling and poor conviction rates. In 2022-23, out of 1,72,687 samples analysed in the country, 44,421 were found to be non-conforming. Out of 38,053 civil and 4,817 criminal cases launched, only 27,053 and 1,133 were convicted respectively.

The Consumer Protection Act gives consumers the right to information, informed choice, and the right to safe food, but more importantly, a fundamental right to healthy food. The Supreme Court underscored this in the Centre for Public Interest Litigation Vs Union of India (2020) when it said that "any food article which is hazardous or injurious to public health is a potential danger to the fundamental right to life guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution of India. A paramount duty is cast on the States and its authorities to achieve an appropriate level of protection to human life and health."

What is needed is a complete overhaul of the food safety and standards regulatory system in the country, with full emphasis on the citizen's right to safe food.

Girimaji is an author and specialist in consumer rights



Will higher default limit for pesticides in spices impact health?

ANONNA DUTT
NEW DELHI, MAY 7

THE FOOD SAFETY and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), the country's apex food safety regulator, last month increased the default limit for pesticide residues present in spices.

The new default limit will be applicable only in cases where Indian regulation and international standards do not specifically mention the maximum residue limits (MRLs) — the highest amount of pesticide residue that is legally tolerated in or on food or feed.

The default limit for spices has been increased to 0.1 mg/kg, which is a 10-fold increase over the previous 0.01 mg/kg. The default MRL for other food products remains the same at 0.01 mg/kg.

The development has come at a time when some Indian spice mixes were removed from shelves in Singapore and Hong Kong after higher than permissible limits of the pesticide ethylene oxide was found in them.

Why have the limits for spices been increased?

One, the MRL takes into account not just the pesticide but also metabolites — compounds that are formed after the pesticides break down into smaller particles. As a result, higher levels of pesticide residue is detected during tests.

Two, pesticide residues are difficult to detect below the level of 0.1 mg/kg. To detect them more effectively, the limits have been raised.

Three, the levels of pesticide that can be effectively controlled in agriculture often make achieving an MRL of 0.01 mg/kg impractical. Santhosh J Eapen, one of the scientists on the panel that recommended the new measure to FSSAI, told *The Indian Express*.

Can the increased pesticides limit impact your health?

Even with the increased limits, the pesticide residues remain at very low levels, and are unlikely to harm human health.

Eapen said MRLs are based on the maximum pesticide residue expected in a crop and are distinct from safety thresholds. MRLs are designed to be much lower than the levels that can pose harm to humans.


With Indians consuming a lot of spices, these limits take into account the fact that small quantities of pesticides can accumulate over time.

The MRLs are decided and periodically reviewed based on field trial data provided by companies to the Central Insecticides Board and Registration Committee (CIB & RC). Scientists study the chemical composition of pesticides, the relationship between the quantity of pesticide and its toxic effects, and the level of residues present in food items.

More than 295 pesticides are registered by CIB & RC in India, of which 139 pesticides are registered for use in spices, according to government data.

What is the concern?

Activists have cautioned that a higher default limit may allow for more pesticides to reach the human body. However, experts from the FSSAI have said action would be taken if pesticides higher than the limit are used. The government has repeatedly highlighted that the limits set by India continue to be among the lowest in the world.



HOW LIMITS SET BY FSSAI COMPARE WITH INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS				
S. No.	Name of the pesticides /insecticides	Spices	FSSAI MRL (mg/kg)	Codex MRLs (mg/kg)
1	Metalaxyl and Metalaxyl-M	Black pepper	0.5	2
2	Myclobutanil	Chilli, dried	1	20
3	Spiromesifen	Chilli, dried	2	5
4	Thiamethoxam	Chilli, dried	5	7

Of India's 969 million electors, more than 18.4 million are between the ages of 18 and 19. This is the story of elections to India's House of the People, for the younger readers of *The Indian Express*

Indira's triumph & tragedy

1980: The Janata government's spectacular collapse was followed by Indira Gandhi's return with a near two-thirds majority. A terrible personal tragedy would strike the Prime Minister soon afterward, followed by one of the bloodiest chapters in the contemporary history of India

SHYAMLAL YADAV
NEW DELHI, MAY 7

INDIRA GANDHI'S defeat and the coming to power of Janata after 21 months of the Emergency brought hope to the country. Prime Minister Morarji Desai's cabinet was full of stalwarts — Charan Singh (Home), Jagjivan Ram (Defence), Atal Bihari Vajpayee (External Affairs), Madhu Dandavate (Railways), L K Advani (Information & Broadcasting), George Fernandes (Industry), Biju Patnaik (Steel), Shanti Bhushan (Law), Mohan Dhar (Commerce) and Raj Narain (Health). However, the Janata Party failed to hold on to power.

Morarji's 16 months

On April 30, 1977, about a month after taking oath, Desai, in a style typical of Indira's, dismissed all nine Congress-ruled state governments. In December 1978, Indira — who had won a byelection and returned to Parliament in the previous month — was arrested for a week after Lok Sabha voted in its favour, and also expelled her for breach of privilege and contempt of the House.

Even as the Congress rapidly regained public sympathy, the contradictions within Janata, an amalgam created only to defeat Indira, intensified. Charan Singh walked out for a second time, bringing down the government's strength in Lok Sabha to 246 from 298. On July 10, 1979, Leader of Opposition Y B Chavan moved a motion of no-confidence, forcing Desai to resign on July 15.

President Neelam Sanjiva Reddy called on Chavan to form the new government, but he declined. So, Charan Singh, with his faction of Janata called Janata Party (Secular), took oath as Prime Minister on July 28. He was dependent for survival on two factions of the Congress — Devaraj Urs' Congress (U), which joined the government, and Indira's Congress (I), supporting from outside.

Hurting to elections

Urs, who was then Chief Minister of Karnataka, had split from Indira's Congress in July 1979, protesting against the control that her son Sanjay exercised on the affairs of the party. Urs and K Brahmananda Reddy, a former Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh who was then president of the Congress, positioned themselves against Indira and Sanjay. They were joined in the Congress (U) by Congress leaders including Sharad Pawar, A K Antony, C Subramanyam, and Karan Singh.

Y B Chavan became Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister in Charan Singh's



Indira is greeted by people after her victory in the 1980 Lok Sabha election. PMML

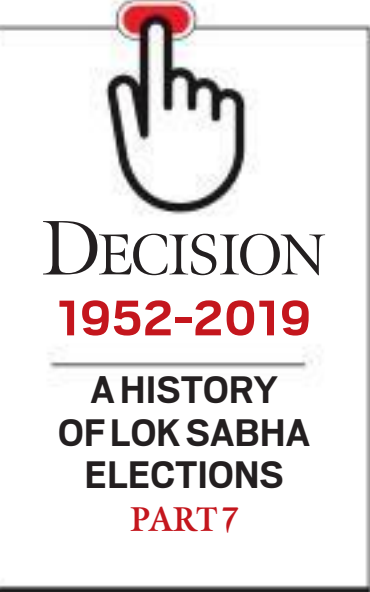
government, and Karan Singh was appointed Minister of Education and Culture.

The Prime Minister was asked to prove his majority on August 20, 1979. On the morning of the vote, the Congress (I) withdrew support to Charan Singh. The tallest farmer and Jat leader of the country could not last even a month as Prime Minister. Based on his advice to the President, Lok Sabha was dissolved on August 22, 1979.

Following the dissolution of Lok Sabha, a faction of the Janata Party led by Raj Narain claimed before the Election Commission of India that it was the "real" Janata. However, its claim was rejected, and in September 1979, Charan Singh's Janata Party (S) was recognised as a national party and allotted a new symbol, that of 'Farmer Ploughing a Field'. In September, the party was renamed as Lok Dal.

The return of Indira

Votes were cast on January 3 and January 6, 1980 — the first time that elections were held in peak winter. For the first time, two or three observers were appointed in each Lok Sabha constituency — a practice that was begun during the Assembly elections of 1978, breaking



from the earlier system of appointing observers at only a few sensitive constituencies. For the first time, votes were cast in a particular booth — Bilona in Harlakhi Assembly constituency in Bihar — thrice due to malpractices.

A total 36.39 crore voters, including more than 17 crore women, voted for 543 seats, 79 of which were reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and 40 for Scheduled Tribes (STs). In the fray were 4,634 candidates, including 142 women.

Results were declared early on January 9, 1980. Indira's Congress (I) swept to 353 seats, marking a triumphant return with almost two-thirds majority. Charan Singh's group won 41 seats, and Chandra Shekhar's Janata 31. The CPI(M) won 37, and CPI 10. The Congress (U) won just 13 seats.

Indira won from Rae Bareilly in UP and Medak in Andhra Pradesh (now Telangana), and retained Medak. Sanjay won from Amethi, Kamal Nath from Chhindwara, Shankar Dayal Sharma (who would be President) from Bhopal, V P Singh (who would be Prime Minister) from Allahabad, and Zail Singh (another future President) from Hoshiarpur.

Chandra Shekhar retained Ballia, the seat

from where he was elected in 1977 for the first time. Fernandes won from Muzaffarpur in Bihar and Devi Lal from Sonapat in Haryana on Janata Party (S) tickets.

Janata's split, BJP's birth

Following the election debacle, on February 25, 1980, Jagjivan Ram wrote to Chandra Shekhar to discuss the issue of "dual membership" of leaders who had come to Janata from the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), but remained members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

In his autobiography, Advani, who was one of the "dual" members, wrote that he responded that BJS members in Janata "were being treated like Harijans (political untouchables)". On April 6, 1980, a faction of leaders from the erstwhile BJS elected Vajpayee as their president, and staked claim to the Janata Party symbol.

On April 24, 1980, the Election Commission froze the 'Farmer Holding a Plough Inside a Circle' symbol, and granted the Vajpayee faction the status of a national party. This faction of Janata now became the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with a new election symbol — the 'Lotus'. Chandra Shekhar's faction was allowed to retain the name Janata Party (JP), but was given a new symbol, the 'Umbrella'.

Indira's tragedy

Back in power, Indira dismissed nine non-Congress state governments, and dissolved those Assemblies. Polls in these states were held in May-June 1980, and the Congress came to power in most.

On June 23, 1980, Sanjay, Indira's 33-year-old political heir, was killed in a plane crash at Delhi's Safdarjung Airport. Indira was in mourning — but the years to come would bring her more difficulties. Sanjay was replaced in Amethi by his older brother, the "reluctant" politician Rajiv Gandhi.

The separatist movement in Punjab was Indira's biggest challenge. To flush out Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale from the Golden Temple, the government launched Operation Blue Star on June 1, 1984. On June 3, a 36-hour curfew was imposed in Punjab, which included the suspension of all communication, public travel and electricity, and complete media censorship. The Indian Army killed Bhindranwale, but the holiest shrine of the Sikhs was heavily damaged, and the operation left very deep scars.

On October 31, 1984, Indira was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards, triggering mass attacks on innocent members of the community. Rajiv, 40, stepped into his mother's shoes as Prime Minister.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

3-PHASE CEASEFIRE DEAL THAT HAMAS BACKED; ISRAEL REJECTED AS 'SOFT'



A house destroyed by an Israeli strike in Rafah on Tuesday. Reuters

ISRAELI FORCES seized the control of Gaza's vital Rafah border crossing — the sole crossing between Egypt and southern Gaza — on Tuesday. The development came a day after Palestinian militant group Hamas had agreed to a three-phased deal for a ceasefire and hostages-for-prisoners swap. Israel rejected the deal, saying it was not acceptable because its terms had been "softened".

Based on details available so far, the deal that the Palestinian group said it had agreed to included the following:

Phase one

- A 42-day ceasefire, during which Hamas would free 33 Israeli hostages, alive or dead, in return for Israel releasing 30 children and women for each released Israeli hostage, based on lists provided by Hamas according to the earliest date of detention.
- From the first day, entry of intensive and sufficient quantities of humanitarian aid, relief materials, and fuel would be allowed. A total 600 trucks per day, including 50 fuel trucks, of which 300 would be for northern Gaza would arrive.
- Hamas would release three Israeli hostages on the third day of the agreement, and then release three more hostages every seven days, prioritising women if possible, including civilians and conscripts.
- In the sixth week, Hamas would release all remaining civilian hostages covered by this phase. Israel would release the agreed number of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons.

- Israel would then partially withdraw troops from Gaza, and allow the free movement of Palestinians from south to north Gaza.
- Cessation of military flights over the Gaza Strip would take place for 10 hours per day and 12 hours on the day of releasing the hostages and prisoners.
- On the third day after releasing the first Palestinian prisoners, Israeli forces would completely withdraw from al-Rashid street in northern Gaza, and all military sites would be dismantled.
- On the 22nd day of the first phase, Israeli forces would withdraw from the centre of the strip, east of Salah al-Din road to an area near the Israeli border.

Phase two

- Another 42 days with an agreement to restore a "sustainable calm" in Gaza.
- The complete withdrawal of most Israeli troops from Gaza.
- Hamas would release Israeli reservists and some soldiers in return for Israel releasing Palestinians from jail.

Phase three

- Completion of exchanging bodies.
- Blockade of Gaza Strip would end.
- Implementation of a 3-5-year plan for reconstruction of Gaza would start. Homes, civilian facilities, and infrastructure, would be rebuilt. Compensation would be given to all those affected, under the supervision of a number of countries and organisations including Egypt, Qatar, and the UN.

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Why EVs lie at the heart of trade frictions between China and Europe

ANIL SASI
NEW DELHI, MAY 7

PRESIDENT XI Jinping's first visit to Europe in more than five years — he arrived in France on Monday and will travel to Belgrade on Wednesday and Budapest on Thursday to meet President Aleksandar Vucic and Prime Minister Viktor Orban respectively — is taking place at a time of increased tensions between China and some European countries over trade barriers and alleged Chinese espionage.

China's trade issues with the European Union (EU) arise mainly out of friction over exports of cheap Chinese electric vehicles (EVs), and constrained access for European companies to markets in China. Last month meanwhile, six people were charged in Europe with spying for Beijing, and in

December 2023, Italy wriggled out of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

President Xi would like to avoid opening a hostile front with Brussels when it is already in a trade confrontation with the United States. He could sign several deals in France, possibly including fresh orders with French aviation major Airbus.

At the same time, his visits to Serbia and Hungary, countries that have close business and ideological ties with China, is a visible outreach to pockets within the EU where the criticism of China's support for Russia's war against Ukraine is far more tempered than in much of western Europe.

The question of EVs

Chinese exports to European markets significantly outweigh European exports to mainland China. The EU has complained

Presidents Xi and Macron with their wives, Peng Liyuan and Brigitte Macron, at a restaurant at the Tourmalet pass in the Pyrenees on Tuesday. Reuters

that unfair market access is a key reason for this situation.

China's car shipments to foreign markets, and to the EU in particular, have surged in recent years. Last year, the EU opened an investigation into subsidies going into Chinese EVs, which Beijing denounced as

an example of "naked protectionism".

Brussels has also opened separate investigations that could limit Chinese solar exports to the EU, and put restrictions on imports of wind turbines and medical devices.

Ahead of Xi's visit, the European Commission (EC) told three big Chinese EV mak-

ers that they had failed to supply "sufficient information" to the anti-subsidy investigators. Should the EC conclude that BYD, SAIC, and Geely had not provided all facts, it could use "facts available" elsewhere to compute tariffs, which could potentially inflate duties on imports of these vehicles into the EU.

This is significant because the EC used the "facts available" in 10 previous anti-subsidy cases against China to fill in certain gaps, which allowed Brussels a free hand to impose higher duties.

The investigation, launched by EC President Ursula von der Leyen last year, coincides with declining (though still sizable) exposure in China for European companies, including carmakers Volkswagen of Germany and Renault of France. Beijing on its part has launched its own anti-dumping investigation into imports of European brandy — a measure against France, which is said to have lobbied for the EV probe.

Fear of a Chinese flood

China-made EVs are projected to make up more than a quarter of all EV sales in Europe in 2024, with the country's share in the market increasing by more than 5 percentage points from a year earlier.

According to the Brussels-based European Federation for Transport and Environment (T&E), an umbrella entity for non-government organisations in the field of transport and the environment, nearly 20% of battery-powered EVs sold in the EU last year were from China. In France and Spain, close to a third of all EVs sold were shipped from China.

The share of China-made vehicles could rise to more than 25% in 2024, according to the T&E report, as brands such as BYD and SAIC step up their global expansion plans.

The majority of foreign EVs currently sold in the EU are from Western brands such as Tesla, which manufactures and ships from factories in China.

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Uncertain ceasefire

The Gaza talks have resumed, but the outcome depends on reconciling the maximalist positions of Israel and Hamas

THERE ARE GROUNDS for cautious optimism regarding the outcome of the Qatar, Egypt, and US-mediated truce between Israel and Hamas. Much rides on a successful outcome as the ceasefire agreement will bring much-needed relief for Gazans as more trucks ferrying food, medical supplies, and other essentials will be allowed in. For the first time, Israel has allowed aid to enter through the Erez/Beit Hanoun crossing in northern Gaza and the US is also building a floating pier off the Gaza coast to facilitate more aid. But they are vastly inadequate to take care of the sheer scale of the humanitarian disaster. A top United Nations official has warned of a “full-blown famine” in northern Gaza and it’s moving its way south. All of this will be possible with an extended cessation of hostilities which will provide much-needed respite for Gazans from the relentless bombardment that has reduced much of the Strip to rubble and killed 34,600 Palestinians, including 15,000 children. On the other side, Israel has lost 1,200 lives and as many as 266 of its soldiers have died due to the ground assault in Gaza since end-October last year.

The uncertainties regarding the resumption of ceasefire negotiations include reconciling the different proposals on the table. Hamas has accepted the Egyptian and Qatari three-stage proposal each lasting 42 days while Israel has its own offer — which US secretary of state Anthony Blinken termed as “extraordinarily generous” — for an initial six-week pause in fighting during which Hamas would hand over 33 Israeli hostages — including children, elderly, women, and wounded captives — in return for the release of thousands of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails.

In the second phase, there is a euphemistic call for “restoring a sustainable calm” instead of a permanent ceasefire, during which the remaining captives (including bodies of those deceased) and more Palestinian prisoners would be exchanged. Israel also has made an important concession to allow displaced Palestinians to return to northern Gaza to rebuild their livelihoods. Israel’s response to Hamas accepting the Egyptian and Qatari proposal is that it is far from its demands but the good news is that it is sending a delegation to Cairo for the ceasefire talks.

The uncertainties also pertain to reconciling the maximalist positions of Israel and Hamas. Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has declared at the outset that his forces would invade the southern Gaza city of Rafah, whether or not there was a ceasefire agreement. Without waiting for the outcome of the truce talks, Israeli forces have started pounding Rafah, in which more than a million Palestinians shelter. The military has ordered them to move out of the eastern part warning that it is about to use “extreme force”. Hamas, for its part, seeks not just an extended cessation of hostilities but a permanent ceasefire and withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza. Israel will not accede to this as it hasn’t achieved its objectives in destroying Hamas. Out of the latter’s 24 battalions, each about 1,000 strong, as many as 20 have been reportedly “dismantled” by Israeli forces with the remainder in Rafah. Dismantled doesn’t imply being destroyed as the remnants are capable of continuing the resistance against Israel. Nevertheless, the ceasefire talks are to be welcomed as there is a sharp shift in international opinion, including widespread protests in US campuses, to end the war in Gaza.

UBS seems set to keep its promises to shareholders

THE BIG QUESTION for UBS Group AG shareholders is how badly its share buy-back promises will be knocked by the Swiss government’s desire to pursue higher capital requirements. The answer isn’t clear yet, but the truth might be: Not much.

Chief executive officer Sergio Ermotti said during UBS’s first-quarter results on Tuesday that the bank itself was in the dark and hadn’t been consulted on the government’s thinking, leaving some uncertainty hanging over its longer-term goals. But in the here and now, UBS is seeing fine progress. Results for the first three months put the bank well on course to beat its targets for integrating Credit Suisse and returning capital to investors this year. The shares rose 10% in morning trading.

UBS’s rescue takeover of Credit Suisse last spring has inflated its balance sheet to more than double Switzerland’s gross domestic product. The government is worried it’s way too big to fail and that the country’s financial watchdog doesn’t have enough powers — or resources — to oversee it properly. UBS supports many of the regulatory changes being proposed, but not the demands for increased capital that the government is apparently leaning toward. These new requirements haven’t been detailed, but finance minister Karin Keller-Sutter has said that an extra \$15 billion to \$25 billion was plausible.

Ermotti repeated UBS’s mantra that it was Credit Suisse’s unsustainable loss-making business model, rather than overly-easy capital requirements, that ruined its former rival. He also said that the enlarged group was already increasing its capital by nearly \$20 billion as part of the takeover.

This number isn’t as hard and fast as it might seem, however. About half of it is already in UBS’s current, more-than-ample capital ratio and should be reduced later, while the other half won’t start being applied until 2026 and won’t be fully required until 2030. The impact on its payout capacity then looks minimal.

To explain briefly, the first roughly \$9 billion relates to the previous under-capitalisation of Credit Suisse subsidiaries. UBS has a more conservative approach for the calculations involved, so has already met the higher capital levels it needs for these. But this shouldn’t last because one of UBS’s key objectives this year is to simplify the enlarged bank by slashing the number of different legal entities it’s acquired around the world. That means fewer units that must be separately capitalised in the first place.

The full \$20 billion that Ermotti referenced is also already baked into its aims and forecasts and so shouldn’t affect its target of paying out more than \$7.3 billion in buybacks and dividends in 2026. The bank also isn’t too worried about the potential for stress tests to be used to add an extra chunk of what the government called forward-looking capital in its announcements last month.

The plans outlined by the Swiss government so far could mean that Keller-Sutter’s plausible additions more or less match with Ermotti’s number. What UBS is worried about is an even stricter treatment of foreign subsidiaries than Switzerland had previously proposed. There’s a reasonable chance that the government could turn round and say its demand for more capital have been satisfied.

UBS wants to move the debate away from equity capital alone and onto the full amount of loss absorbing capital the bank already has, including CoCo bonds and senior debt that are designed to be zeroed in the event of a major crisis. Together, these three forms of capital amount to \$197 billion, or slightly more than 12% of its entire balance sheet. That seems like a lot, but there are legitimate questions as to whether regulators would be able to write off the senior loss-absorbing debt in particular in the event that UBS was sunk by a major crisis. The pain caused to the owners of this debt might mean taxpayers end up footing some of the bill after all — this has happened before with more junior debt in previous failures elsewhere.

Ultimately, the main objective should be avoiding this question arising in the first place. That’s why the strengthening of the powers and culture of oversight at the main financial watchdog, rather than how UBS treats its overseas units in its accounts, is the more important change that Switzerland needs to get right.



COOPERATIVE FEDERALISM

Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman

It is a myth that all GST collections are pocketed by the Centre. GST contributes significantly to state revenues — states receive 100% of SGST collected in that state, approx 50% of IGST

POPULISM AND INDIA

BJP’s ‘MAKE INDIA GREAT AGAIN’ NARRATIVE IS UNLIKELY TO BECOME A REALITY ANYTIME SOON

The decimation of democracy

PRANAB BARDHAN

Professor emeritus, University of California, Berkeley



emphasise the participatory aspects of democracy; but in India, the procedural aspects are particularly weak, enabling vicious forms of majoritarianism and state-abetted persecution of dissenters and, particularly, of religious minorities. Illiberalism thrives among India’s radical left as well, for whom liberal institutions reek of “bourgeois” democracy, and among traditionalists, including Gandhians, as even Mahatma Gandhi, for all his tolerance and empathy, subscribed to the patriarchal and hierarchical values of traditional Indian society.

Poorer Indians, who have traditionally favoured centre-left national or regional parties, have been attracted to the BJP by the party’s strategy of Hindu consolidation, which includes bringing historical leaders (and even deities) of marginal groups under the broad tent of religious nationalism. Social-welfare benefits — often framed as “gifts” from Modi (prominently bearing his photograph) — have helped, as has the BJP’s cooptation of sub-caste leaders with promises of official privileges.

Two key narratives further bolster support for the BJP, though neither withstand scrutiny. The first is that Modi’s government alone can slay the demon of corruption. But there is little evidence that his administration has made progress on this front. On the contrary, according to Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index,

India ranked 93rd for corruption in 2023 (out of 180 countries), having fallen eight places since Modi took power in 2014. A recent survey in India by Lokniti also shows that 55% of respondents think that corruption has increased over the last five years.

Petty corruption remains rampant in India. Demands for bribes by police officers, inspectors, or contractors do not seem to have declined in recent years. Moreover, the disastrous demonetisation that Modi oversaw in 2016 — which was particularly harmful for small businesses and the poor — unearthed hardly any of the “black money” it was supposed to flush out.

Meanwhile, the BJP — which exerts near-total control over Indian media — has ensured that the nexus between politics and business remains opaque. As we know, absolute power can corrupt absolutely. By blocking investigations of questionable business deals involving BJP leaders, the government effectively grants those it favours a kind of “sovereign guarantee” of impunity. These are often the same crony firms for which regulatory exemptions and other favours tend to be reserved.

It has long been suspected that large sums of money from favoured firms flow into the BJP’s coffers. This process was facilitated by “electoral bonds” — an opaque mechanism, introduced by the Modi government in 2017, allowing businesses, individuals, and organisa-

Political donations might not always be entirely voluntary, as they sometimes follow raids. In any case, it is clear that electoral bonds were only the tip of the iceberg

Direct listing of domestic firms overseas



PUNIT SHAH VISHAL LOHIA

Respectively, partner, and principal, Dhruva Advisors LLP

A strong framework could allow Indian public companies, especially start-ups and those in the sunrise and tech sectors, to access global capital

DURING THE LATER half of 2023, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman had mentioned that India was looking to reconsider the proposal of allowing domestic firms to list on foreign stock exchanges directly. She also indicated that the government was considering the option of listing, starting with GIFT International Financial Services Centre (GIFT IFSC) in Gandhinagar, Gujarat.

In line with this, the government made changes to the Companies Act (on October 30, 2023) and to the relevant company law rules (on January 24), laying down the framework for entities eligible to directly list on international stock exchanges. Simultaneously, changes were made to the Indian exchange control laws (on January 24). The international stock exchanges at GIFT IFSC under the regulatory supervision of the International Financial Services Centres Authority — India International Exchange and NSE International Exchange — have been currently prescribed under the company law rules as permitted for listing.

Some key features of the above mentioned enactments are:

■ Only Indian public companies, listed or unlisted, are allowed to issue and list their shares on an international exchange. As of now, the framework allows unlisted Indian public firms to list their shares on an international exchange. The Securities and Exchange Board of India is in the process of issuing the operational guidelines for listed Indian public companies.

In other words, it is not mandatory

for an unlisted public company intending to list on international exchanges to also list on domestic exchanges. However, there is no restriction on such companies to opt for listing on domestic as well as international exchanges.

■ Flexibility has been provided to the company to issue fresh shares as well as the offer for sale by existing shareholders.

■ Certain companies (such as Section 8 companies, those with negative net worth, or with outstanding deposits from the public) are ineligible for listing their equity shares.

■ Companies in the prohibited sectors (as laid down under the foreign direct investment norms) are ineligible for listing their equity shares. Companies in the permitted sectors need to comply with sectoral caps, pricing norms, and other conditions.

■ Only the “permissible holder” can invest, trade, or hold equity shares of Indian companies listed on international stock exchanges. For the purposes of this clause, the permissible holder is not a person resident in India.

■ The following persons are not eligible to subscribe to the shares listed on international exchanges: persons resident in India; and citizens/entities (including their beneficial owners) of a

country which shares land border with India, without government approval.

■ The mode of payment and other attendant conditions for remittance of proceeds of issue would be specified by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

Recently, the RBI, via a notification dated April 19, amended the relevant Indian exchange control regulations, broadly laying down the following mode of payments and other conditions:

■ Indian companies are now permitted to hold the funds raised, which are pending utilisation or repatriation to India in a foreign currency account maintained with banks outside India.

■ The amount of consideration for purchase/sale of equity shares of the Indian company listed on international exchanges shall be paid by the subscriber through banking channels either directly to the foreign currency account of the company as inward remittance from abroad or deposited in a bank account in India. Further, the sale proceeds (net of tax) shall be remitted outside India or may be credited to the account of the permissible holder.

The changes appear to provide the operational flexibility to Indian companies to retain funds in their overseas foreign currency banks and utilise them for their overseas requirements in compli-

The changes in rules may provide sthe operational flexibility to Indian companies to retain funds in their overseas foreign currency banks and utilise them for their overseas requirements

tions to anonymously donate unlimited amounts to political parties — until the Supreme Court declared them unconstitutional in February. Subsequent disclosures have revealed that these donations were largely from sectors tending to have high levels of extractive rents, owing to dependence on links to the state, with the BJP being by far the largest beneficiary. According to *The Economist*, Indian billionaires derived nearly half (43%) of their wealth from such sectors in 2021, up from 29% in 2015. Crony capitalism is, after all, a corrupt form of capitalism.

Making matters worse, political donations might not always be entirely voluntary, as they sometimes follow raids or charges by investigative agencies. In any case, it is clear that electoral bonds were only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to political dark money in India.

The second BJP narrative that resonates most with voters can be summed up as MIGA (“Make India Great Again”). With the BJP in charge, the propaganda proclaims, India will soon be a global superpower, with all the influence, advantages, and prosperity this implies.

This narrative — which the West, seeking an alternative market and geopolitical counterweight to China, has often echoed and reinforced — has captured the imagination of India’s huge number of young people, even those who are unemployed and underemployed. But it is unlikely to become a reality anytime soon: despite some achievements in digital and other infrastructure, and plenty of wealth accumulation by the richest decile of the population, India’s economic performance has been middling, at best, over the last decade. By lending credence to BJP hype, Western business leaders, politicians, and media have become complicit in the hollowing out of India’s democracy.

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PAUL J DAVIES

Bloomberg

units that must be separately capitalised in the first place. The full \$20 billion that Ermotti referenced is also already baked into its aims and forecasts and so shouldn’t affect its target of paying out more than \$7.3 billion in buybacks and dividends in 2026. The bank also isn’t too worried about the potential for stress tests to be used to add an extra chunk of what the government called forward-looking capital in its announcements last month.

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against ending reservation. The support of the Dalits for the BJP has significantly dwindled in this election as the party could not convincingly allay their fears that it has plans to end reservation. They remain sceptical about Narendra Modi’s guarantee in this regard. True patriotism is expressed and reflected in “sharing” among compatriots. —G David Milton, Maruthancode

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New Delhi

RELEGATION FROM TOP TIER NEEDED TO BOOST INDIAN FOOTBALL

ANOTHER season of the Indian Super League is over. Mumbai Football Club lifted the title after beating Mohun Bagan Super Giant on Saturday. There were moments of jubilation and thrilling encounters interspersed with a sprinkling of controversies. Despite all this, there is a substantial debate on the quality of football being played in the middle. The topic that is dominating the discussion is the issue of relegation from the league. This was suggested by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) in its roadmap for improving Indian football and making it more competitive. Intriguing as it may sound, ISL is one of the few top-flight national leagues that does not have relegation. And that needs to begin by the next season. The other side of the move—promotion from the I-League—started last year, when Punjab FC (formerly RoundGlass Punjab) joined ISL.

However, the All India Football Federation (AIFF) is still not clear about it. Things got a little more circumspect after AIFF president Kalyan Chaubey said that ISL would not be ready for relegation unless the I-League raised its bar. It is understandable if there is no promotion, but relegation is needed to keep the bottom-of-the-league clubs motivated and busy. It would push the likes of Hyderabad FC, which won only one match this entire season.

One must also understand that AIFF runs the I-League—so if its standard is not good enough, they should concentrate on improving it. The I-League has been going on for over 15 years and was the premier league until ISL was given the top status. And the I-League is not without promise either. If its quality was so hopeless, the just-promoted Punjab FC would have finished at the bottom of the ISL; instead, there were four clubs including East Bengal, Jamshedpur and former champions Bengaluru below Punjab. Even ISL teams scout from the I-League. It's not that all ISL teams are doing well financially either—there was an exodus from Hyderabad FC when it failed to pay players. So the onus is on AIFF; the I-League's supposed lack of quality should not be an excuse to not introduce relegation in ISL. Instead, AIFF should help nurture the I-League, which in turn will help ISL and, in the long run, the national team. To keep ISL healthy and kicking, other leagues need to prosper, too.

CONG FAILS TO GRAB OPPN ROLE IN ODISHA

THE closer Odisha comes to its first phase of polls, the faster the Congress seems to be unravelling in the state. There are three major political parties in the fray. The ruling Biju Janata Dal and the challenger BJP are engaged in a no-holds-barred contest. But the Congress is busy fighting its own demons. Last week, the party's Puri Lok Sabha candidate Sucharita Mohanty returned her ticket days before the nominations closed, citing a lack of funds for campaigning. She was apparently told by the party that her constituency was in a category in which the candidate must fend for herself or himself. For the record, at her first electoral outing in 2014, Mohanty polled 2.59 lakh votes. The grand old party has, so far, changed candidates in 10 assembly and two parliamentary constituencies, leaving little scope for the nominees to even make a serious bid. On Sunday, its change of the Puri assembly candidate led to violence.

This is only a symptom of the greater malaise that has gripped the party. This election presented the Congress a chance to regain political space in the state when the BJD and BJP were busy planning an alliance. It was an ideal opportunity to take up the vacant opposition space, but the party—riddled with favouritism, infighting and a self-over-party ideology—squandered it. It was on show when a nondescript place was chosen for Rahul Gandhi's campaign meeting on April 28. While a politically strategic location could have created an impact over the bigger region, the candidate's interest was preferred to the party's. Unsurprisingly, many of its senior members with electoral relevance quit ahead of the elections to join either the BJD or the BJP. Disenchanted by the top leadership's inability to grasp the situation—the need for young leaders, resources and change—the Congress has seen exodus of even its hardcore followers.

In Odisha, once ruled by the Congress for close to 40 years, there are still pockets where the party enjoys support, but has made little effort to revive it. With its base slipping away fast, the GOP could find itself decimated as the BJD and BJP are out to swallow its vote share. The opposition space is important in a democracy. But such is the state of affairs that the Congress appears in no mood to even grab that role.

QUICK TAKE

RECOGNISE INDIA'S WW2 EFFORT

THE UN observes May 8-9 as a time for remembering all Second World War victims. It marks the Allied forces' victory in Europe and is bookmarked by state events every year. One acknowledgement that goes missing is for India's contribution. More than 85,000 Indian soldiers died in the war. Claude Auchinleck, commander of the Indian army during the war, said the British could not have done without India's help, which included money and rations too. Yet the contribution is now airbrushed out of official Western accounts. The repayment that was expected around independence was not realised. The West can at least start by honouring the Indian soldiers' efforts.

AS an individual, I have been associated with the RSS, ABVP and BJP for more than 40 years. From the controversy over the renaming of Marathwada University in Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar (previously Aurangabad) to the vexed issue of quota for the underprivileged, from the 1982-83 movement led by Bal Thackeray against Baba-saheb Ambedkar's writings in *The Riddle of Rama and Krishna* and the RSS's vocal opposition to that movement, I have witnessed how the Sangh leadership had adroitly handled scores of issues with a firm commitment to its total opposition to caste-based discrimination.

As per my understanding, there are at least three key aspects of the RSS's approach to castes. First, its unequivocal support to quota for the socially marginalised. Second, its emphasis on ensuring that social justice is reflected in our day-to-day conduct. And third, its approach towards smaller identities as an inseparable part of a larger identity.

However, the overarching philosophy guiding the RSS's approach to all these vexed issues associated with the caste question is that of *samajik samarasata* or social harmony. In the RSS scheme of things, the term adds significant value to the idea of social equality. It is more meaningful as it connotes not just intellectual acceptance for equality and justice, but also emotional participation in the process with an emphasis on sharing and caring. *Samarasata*, to me, is all about emotional integration. It is about a sense of belonging (to the entire society), about making every social group feel that the entire society needs every marginalised group and values its contribution. *Samarasata* is more about empathy than just sympathy.

But make no mistake. This emphasis is not for the sake of emotions alone. It aims to complement our intellectual conviction and commitment to social justice. Atal Bihari Vajpayee's decision to rename the social welfare ministry as social justice ministry was not for no reason. Besides, this element of emotions makes social equality not just an egalitarian value, but a matter of experiential harmony.

As pointed out by Ram Madhav in a blog, "*Samata* is equality in thoughts; *samaanta* is equality in law; but *samarasata* is equality of emotions and feelings. For achieving *samarasata*—social harmony, to put it simply—fraternity is the basic requirement." Madhav further brings to our notice that, "Buddha, Mahavir, Basaveshwara, Kanakadasa, Ram-

The Sangh takes *samarasata* or social harmony among castes as an essential concept that goes beyond tokenism. That's why it has always supported quotas for the underprivileged

WHY THE SANGH SUPPORTS RESERVATION

VINAY SAHASRABUDDHE

Senior BJP leader



SOURAV ROY

akrishna, Vivekananda, Narayana Guru, Dayananda Saraswati, Tilak, Gandhi, Ambedkar, Savarkar, Jyotiba Phule—endless is the list of great men who have sacrificed their lives in the pursuit of achieving the lofty ideal of social harmony."

Way back in 1982, at a grand RSS conclave in Pune, the then Sar-Sangchalak Balasaheb Deoras said without mincing words that if untouchability is not a sin, there is no sin on earth, and hence this social evil has to go lock, stock and barrel. The same kind of unambiguity was again witnessed when the present Sar-Sangchalak, Mohanrao Bhagwat, repeatedly stated that quotas for the SC, ST and OBCs will have to continue uninterrupted. As recently as April, he said, "The RSS had always stood for reserva-

tion, as sanctioned and guaranteed under the Constitution, and that the organisation believed reservation should continue as long as it was necessary for those who needed it, provided it was for reasons of backwardness and lack of parity in terms of their living or social standing." He elaborated, "We kept our own fellow human beings behind in the social system. We did not care for them and it continued for 2,000 years. Until we provide them equality, some special remedies have to be there, and reservation is one of them." All in all, there is no scope for even an iota of doubt about the Sangh's unequivocal support for quota.

Social equality and justice are principles that are supremely important and hence nobody can oppose. However,

FOR AN AKSHAYA TRITIYA WITHOUT CHILD MARRIAGES

IN early April 2024, the world woke up to the disturbing news of a 62-year-old high priest in Ghana marrying a 12-year-old girl at an event attended by many community members.

Closer home, while one in four girls in India are married below the legal age, in 257 high-prevalence districts of the country the incidence of child marriage is more than the national average of 23.3 percent, according to the National Family Health Survey.

By the time you finish reading this article, hundreds of marriages would have been planned to be solemnised on Akshaya Tritiya or Akha Teej, which falls on May 10 this year. While the day is considered auspicious for marriages, the socially accepted crime of child marriage also takes place on this occasion.

The law of the land is clear: From the Age of Consent Bill 1860, and the Indian Penal Code provisions barring abduction for the purpose of marriage, to the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 (PCMA), India has one of the most comprehensive legal systems to prevent child marriage.

The Supreme Court dealt with the issue of sexual intercourse with a child in a marital relationship as an offence tantamount to child rape, first in *Bachpan Bachao Andolan vs Union of India* in January 2017 and then in *Independent Thought vs Union of India*. Yet people continue to celebrate the crime as a happy occasion due to many reasons: cultural acceptance, disparity in laws, poverty, safety concerns for the girl child, patriarchy and gender issues.

In recent years, several high courts have opined that child marriage is allowed under personal laws in various communities. Such orders are in direct conflict with the PCMA, POCSO Act as well as Supreme Court judgements, and have created an avoidable confusion. Despite these challenges, data from the last three rounds of the National Family Health Survey signify a substantial reduction in early marriages, largely to the efforts of civil society and the government, particularly through laws like the Right to Education Act 2009.

In NFHS-3 (2005-06), a staggering 44.7 percent of women were found to have been married before 18. NFHS-4 (2015-16) captured a significant shift, with the share dropping to 26.8 percent. This trend continued to NFHS-5 (2019-21), where the share fell further to 23.3 percent.

Globally, eliminating child marriage



BHUWAN RIBHU

Child rights activist, lawyer & author of *When Children Have Children: Tipping Point to End Child Marriage*

was not high on the list of priorities for most countries until it was included in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (target 5.3: "eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations"). Consequently, 193 member states are now racing to eliminate the practice by 2030. In the past decade, at least eight countries have outlawed child marriage or



One in four Indian girls is married before the legal age. The reasons for so many child marriages include cultural acceptance, disparity in laws, poverty and patriarchy. This Akshaya Tritiya, state governments, panchayats and civil society should come together to stop the practice

have increased the minimum marriage age. But in the US, child marriage continues to be legal in 38 out of the 50 states.

India is home to a third of the world's child brides, according to UNICEF. Thus, the recent initiatives in India on awareness, education as well as strict law enforcement, like Assam's anti-child marriage drive, may become the first step towards putting the country at the forefront of global efforts on the count.

The year 2023 saw the world's largest social mobilisation against child marriage, led by 54 government departments across India, leading to over 5 crore people pledging against the practice under the aegis of the Child Marriage Free India campaign. This Akshaya Tritiya will

be a litmus test for those who were a part of this campaign to convert the resolve into deliverables.

First, state governments must prevent mass child marriages through awareness and law enforcement. Awareness campaigns can include school workshops, street plays, and checking the ages of brides and grooms.

Second, strict enforcement of the PCMA can be ensured if the agencies entrusted to uphold the law, such as the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) that's conferred with the power of a first-class judicial magistrate, start issuing injunctions. If a child marriage is solemnised despite an injunction, it is considered void. But in a majority of cases, the CWC has confined its role to short-term rehabilitation of children who need protection.

Panchayats can activate child welfare and protection committees at the village, block and district levels to monitor PCMA implementation; conduct counselling sessions for parents and relatives planning to marry off their children; monitor dropouts and stay vigilant for children missing from schools for more than seven days without intimation.

Third, aggressive prosecutorial drives under the PCMA and application of other criminal laws including those on trafficking, child rape and the POCSO Act will create deterrence. Stern messages should be sent by prosecuting priests, qazis and pandits who preside over such unions.

Fourth, it is time quality education is provided to all children, especially girls, till the age of 18. This must also be included in election manifestos of all parties.

In April 2024, India witnessed the heartening news of a girl topping inter examinations in Andhra Pradesh after her underage marriage was stopped and she was able to pursue studies because of the efforts of her local MLA and district magistrate in Kurnool. This girl could be a living testimony of a brighter future. The time to ensure such a future for our children is now. If we fail to protect our children, nothing else would matter.

(Views are personal)

many who principally agree with these values fail to practice them with all sincerity. Many RSS-inspired organisations may not be passing resolutions or giving sermons on these principles. But their commitment to these values is often reflected in their conduct.

When Mahatma Gandhi and later Ambedkar visited RSS camps, they were satisfied that in the RSS, castes or details of social background are neither asked nor given any importance. Many in the RSS make a conscious effort to identify with underprivileged sections. During the birth centenary of Ambedkar some 23 years earlier, many in the RSS ensured that a portrait of Ambedkar adorned their homes. Many, like Girish Prabhune of Pune, have been untiringly working for the upliftment of the Paradhis and similar denotified, nomadic tribal communities.

In the late 1980s, the RSS emphasis on building bridges was taken to such an extent that Texas Gaikwad, a Dalit Marathi playwright who had written a play depicting RSS volunteers as murderers of the nation, was approached and a dialogue was established to discuss prejudices and misgivings. In 1982-83, when many Hindu leaders including Bal Thackeray demanded a ban on Ambedkar's book, *Riddle of Ram*, the RSS-BJP refrained from seeking such a ban.

The RSS has its own way of explaining the relationship of castes and communities with the entire society. The approach is that, like all parts of the body, every section is important and all of them are interdependent too. Like the relationship of a body part with the entire body, every section of society relates with the society at large. This relationship is simultaneously related mutually as well as with the entire body. Hence the very question of a superiority-inferiority conflict is resolved with this interdependence, complemented by the spirit of co-working and mutuality.

Significantly, when it comes to *samarasata*, the RSS has always refrained from just tokenism. Organisations trying to wear social equality on their sleeves do a huge disservice to the cause. *Samarasata* is a silent revolution that emerged out of the thinking of the RSS leadership. Here, intellectual integrity and commitment are complemented by an element of emotionality. While equality could be just superficial and short-lived, *samarasata* is more profound and enduring with its focus on conduct and emotions. It has become the RSS's own way of doing away with hypocrisy and lip service.

(Views are personal)
(vinays57@gmail.com)

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Planned succession

Ref: *Godrej business split a lesson for family enterprises* (May 7). Exemplary tradition of excellence carved out in a span of 127 years makes Godrej stand head and shoulders above almost all business enterprises in India. Let all the upcoming business houses emulate their steps of succession.
S Madhavan Thampi, Haripad

False promises

Ref: *Andhra sides make similar promises* (May 7). The ruling dispensation made several promises lavishly before the last election. Similar was the experience with the present opposition leader also. People no longer look into the content of the manifesto or take election promises seriously as they tend to evaporate with the election mood.
A G Rajmohan, Anantapur

Off-season break

Ref: *How to deal with the epidemic of overtourism* (May 7). Over-exploitation always leads to under-availability. To cope with the prospects of a tourist destination losing its sheen, some kind of break in operations may be mooted because these days, even off-season has had significant foothall.
Sachidananda Satpathy, Sambalpur

Inorganic growth

It is fallacious to conclude that higher taxes result in better tourist amenities. The government does not have a futuristic vision on tourism development. Tourism is growing in an inorganic manner, which needs better focus, an enabling plan and time-bound action.
Rajarao Kumar, Bengaluru

Owner's negligence

The news that two pet rottweilers attacked a small girl at a park is appalling. It's sad the dog owner's negligence cost the small girl. Although the police have registered a case, nothing will come of it, because the victim belongs to a poor family—the daughter of the park's watchman. That there were similar incidents in the past, too, speaks volumes about the owner's level of respect for the laws of the land.
P G Menon, Chennai

Dangerous search

It's heartbreaking that an elephant was electrocuted by a sagging power line while searching for water. No animal should die due to a lack of water and food. The government must act swiftly to provide water sources, food and protect forest boundaries. Additionally, strict measures are needed to prevent human encroachment into forest areas and ensure habitat preservation.
V Paramesari, Tiruchirappalli

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Pack a Punch Before We Get Fab at Chips

Tatas set ball rolling in earnest for our BSMP

India has moved a step forward in its BSMP — Big Semiconductor Manufacturing Plans — with Tata Electronics test-exporting packaged semiconductor chips. Silicon wafers containing hundreds of computer chips need to be packaged in material that keeps them safe and allows electricity to pass through them. This is the means through which chips communicate with the rest of the computer system. Although not as fundamental as fabricating chips — turning semiconductor material into a usable product before chips can be manufactured — packaging them involves advanced materials research to prevent overheating. Tatas are seeking feedback ahead of upcoming chip packaging capacity in Assam. This is in addition to a fabrication unit they are setting up in Gujarat with Taiwan's Powerchip Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation.

Tatas could make up for India's initial missteps over semiconductor manufacturing. GoI rolled out incentives for chip-making when the need to diversify this concentrated value chain became evident to policymakers globally. The scheme was revised after initial proposals in an effort to broaden the product range, which led to the dissolution of a JV between Foxconn and Vedanta. Subsequently, Micron proposed to set up a chip-testing and packaging unit in Gujarat. Tatas have gone beyond with plans for both fabrication and packaging.

GoI is okay with peripheral development in the domestic semiconductor industry. It gives play to PLIs in the expectation that the scheme will be able to eventually draw in the really big investment in chip manufacturing. It also allows infrastructure to reach levels required for chip fabrication. The Tata project timelines put them ahead in the race with industries seeking resilient chip supply after the chokehold of the pandemic. In the process, it puts India on the map of chip-making nations. Speed is of essence, as countries try to establish domestic manufacturing to break Chinese dominance of the export market. With the direction set right, it's now one chip off the block at a time.

A Tip from Tipper on How to Chill to Music

Do we run the risk of becoming a nation of Tipper Gores? For those unfamiliar with the name and context, in the 1980s, Tipper Gore, then Democrat senator and future US veepee Al Gore's wife, formed the Parents Music Resource Centre (PMRC) with other spouses of powerful US politicians. No, this wasn't a group of guardians encouraging young people to take up music. PMRC's purpose was to increase parental control on what kind of music their children *shouldn't* be listening to.

This culminated in Senate hearings in September 1985 to determine the need for 'industry standard' appraisals on rock and pop music. The 15 songs that came under the Tipper-led microscope included numbers by Black Sabbath, Madonna and Prince. PMRC considered them to be 'obscene' or promoting violence, drug use, 'sexual deviance' and other things that give moralistic mums (and dads) sleepless nights. The result of the hearings was that 'parental advisory' stickers on cassettes and CDs became de rigueur. But, thankfully, no censorship machine was switched on.

Today, music can be far more explicit than it was in Tipper-era America. What was OMG yesterday has become meh today. This pertains to songs in Indian languages, too. Most parents don't bat an eyelid and 'see' it as part of the growing-up game. But in the political arena, some 'mai-baap'-types still get het up. As some overenthusiastic BJP karyakartas did against AAP's campaign song, 'Jail Ka Jawab Vote Se', when they wanted the ditty banned for 'slander' and spreading 'false propaganda'. The matter was brought up before EC. Thankfully, after some reported modifications — which no one can really spot — the song got an EC go-ahead. It's a relief we're not infected by old Western-style puritanism and touchiness.

JUST IN JEST

Big tech novelties usually settle down and segue into everyday necessities

When We Truly Enter the AI Age

AI, like automobiles and the first typewriters — a machine like a laptop that typed words by pressing metal typefaces against an ink ribbon on to paper — is a novelty for us today. We squeal with delight when we produce a startling image in seconds that would have taken an accomplished artist hours, or when we 'prompt out' an essay or report — again, in seconds — that would have taken a human brain considerable operational energy and time. AI-produced 'creative' arts like music, too, are wowing us to AI's talents more than its music per se. But getting impressed by the machine's increasingly impressive machinations is just part of the ongoing story. Instead of publishers bragging about 'AI-written' content and companies pitching their products as 'AI-generated', content will be consumed and judged for its output value, not whether it has been AI-produced, AI-enhanced or is AI-free.

In the late 1800s, tech inventions like electricity, the telegraph and cinema were *objets d'excitation* for the public at large. It was modernity's equivalent of magic, the machines eliciting as much awe as, if not more than, what they produced. Today, we switch on appliances, send emails, watch movies and travel by air without thinking too much of the 'marvellous gadgets'. When AI becomes like that for us, we would have truly entered the AI age.

SWAMISPEAK Majority of voters in a pre-poll survey think corruption's up from the last poll

Not-Too-Swachh a Bharat?



Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar

Journalist Smita Gupta has travelled through 18 districts of UP to gauge the public mood in the run-up to the general election. She says, among many other things, that people complain that corruption is at an all-time high. This seems to confirm the findings of a pre-poll survey by Centre for the Study of Developing Studies (CSDS) in collaboration with Lokniti. The CSDS-Lokniti survey asked whether corruption had increased, decreased or stayed the same in the last five years, and compared the results with a poll taken just before the 2019 elections. This was sobering.

No less than 55% of those polled said that corruption had increased in the last five years ending 2024. The corresponding figure in the pre-poll survey of 2019 was 40%, at the end of Narendra Modi's first term. Those surveyed seem to believe that things have got worse in his second term.

The proportion of people saying corruption had decreased was 37% in 2019. This figure has fallen to 19% in 2024. This is a disappointment for BJP. The proportion saying corruption was unchanged rose from 14% to 19%.

Corruption is as old as the hills. In most elections, accusations of corruption have little impact, since politicians of all stripes are seen by the general public as venal rascals. But, sometimes, governments are felled by a wave of public anger against corruption.

Chimanbhai Patel's



Masking a continuing concern

Gujarat government in 1974 was dismissed after street agitations made governance impossible. Rajiv Gandhi, who won a record 404 seats in 1984, was ousted in 1989 by rebel Congressman V P Singh, who rode the wave of national anger over the Bofors scam. Congress-led UPA was thrashed in 2014 after a series of scam accusations, principally in telecom and coal block allocations.

The anti-corruption wave of that time enabled two new faces to rise meteorically: Arvind Kejriwal, a key lieutenant in Anna Hazare's anti-corruption agitation of 2013, launched Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on an anti-corruption platform in Delhi state.

He swept to power in the 2015 state election and again in 2020, with huge majorities. His party also won the Punjab state election in 2022.

Far more important was the rise of Narendra Modi. He promised good governance and 'achhe din', combining pledges of economic growth with a return to moral values. He declared, 'Na khaunga, Na khane dunga' — 'I'll neither accept bribes nor allow others to do so. This resonated with voters, who handed Modi a big victory in 2014, and an even bigger victory in 2019.

Today, the moral sheen of both these stalwarts has dimmed. Neither in Delhi state nor in the overall country do people think a moral revolution has taken place. Rather, they feel, cynically and helplessly, that their trust in moral crusaders has been naïve. Many still vote for the two crusaders, feeling that others may be worse. But the initial aura of moral sainthood has gone.

The fact that Modi has no children or dynasty plays well with voters, who

feel he's not personally corrupt, no matter what other party members do. Businessmen also say you can't ask Modi directly for any favour. But the electoral bonds revelation has given the Opposition a big drum to beat.

The Opposition claims that a few very rich businessmen have benefited in the last 10 years, greatly worsening equality. If this were true, since tycoons are urban, urban corruption should appear to have risen more than rural corruption. That is not the case. When asked whether corruption had increased, the 'yes' proportion was similar in villages (55%), cities (57%) and towns (53%). All three locations registered a 19% 'no' vote. Such surveys have a significant margin of error. So, the data should be treated with caution.

Do the rich and poor have radically different perceptions of corruption? The proportion feeling corruption has increased is 57% for the rich, and 58% for the poor; almost identical. The proportion feeling corruption has decreased is 23% for the rich and 16% for the poor. Both the rich and poor pay bribes. But bigger businesses pay much more. So, the data could be interpreted as suggesting corruption at the top decreased a bit.

Whom do voters blame for rising corruption? The central or state governments? They blame the central government (25%) a bit more than state governments (18%). But no less than 56% of voters say 'both'. It doesn't seem that those surveyed thought a crusading Modi was doing well at the Centre but could not rein in venal party members at the state level.

In the case of Delhi state, the survey verdict that both central and state governments are to blame for rising corruption means that voters blame both Kejriwal and Modi, the two moral crusaders 10 years ago. How little things seem to change.



In most elections, accusations of corruption have little impact, since politicians of all stripes are seen by the general public as venal rascals

So, What's in China's Renames?



Satarupa Bhattacharjya

China has been giving names to, and drawing maps of, places it claims sovereignty over — on land and in water. One problem: such areas are in other countries. Or, at best, disputed. To date, its cartographic activities have been aimed at India, countries in the South China Sea region, and Japan.

S Jaishankar says China calling Arunachal Pradesh 'south Tibet' has no consequence, and that the state was, is and will remain a part of India. 'If I change the name of your house, will it become mine?' he had quipped last month.

Some view China's latest attempt at renaming — in Chinese and Tibetan — some 30 locations, including streams and cliffs in Arunachal, as a reaction to Narendra Modi's visit to the northeastern state ahead of India's 2024 general election. Modi inaugurated a high-altitude tunnel there. But there's more to it.

The words 'southern Tibet' or 'south Tibet' — 'Zangnan' — when referring to Arunachal, started to appear in Chinese government documents and statements around 2003-04. China has

been issuing stapled visas to people born in Arunachal for at least 15 years. More recently, Chinese official documents have increasingly used 'Xizang', the Sinicised name of Tibet, the region in China's southwest that it annexed — China calls it 'peaceful liberation' — in 1951.

The Communist Party of China (CPC) has been clever with names. All regions in China with major ethnic minority populations — Tibet, Xinjiang, Ningxia, Inner Mongolia and Guangxi — are officially termed 'autonomous'. The two regions outside the mainland — Hong Kong and Macao — are 'special administrative regions'.

In 2023, China released a new version of its South China Sea map where it added a dash to include Taiwan, the self-ruled island that China seeks to 'reunify' with itself, by force if necessary, and the Spratly Islands, an archipelago whose dispute involves China and five other countries. They rejected China's 10-dash line, which went beyond its 'nine-dash line', by which it has been asserting claim over most of the South China Sea.

In China's 'standard map', a U-shaped line of 700 nautical miles starts from Hainan in southern China. It goes through the 'exclusive economic zones' of Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei and Indonesia. Japan, with which China has a dispute over some islands that the former controls in the East China Sea, also reacted to last year's map. These have heightened



Playing with PIN codes

tensions in the seas/waters. Is China's outward-facing cartography a geopolitical strategy? Or does CPC want to appear stronger at home? It's both.

An increase in China's cartographic campaigns over the past decade can be attributed to Xi Jinping's emphasis, since taking office, on 'core interests' being more important than even economic development. Srikanth Kondapalli, professor of Chinese studies at JNU, describes it as 'psychological warfare' and says that the country is preparing for the long term.

China has gradually included all the area south of the McMahon Line in its 'disputed' list. It doesn't recognise a Shimla (officially 'Simla' until 1972) agreement under which the de facto border, from India's perspective, was established in 1914.

Wouldn't it be bizarre if India tries to rename places in China, in, say, Hindi? That might be counterproductive. The Chinese strategy isn't effective anyway, says Kondapalli. Then why does Beijing pursue such cartography?

Gaffer, or Channelling Inner Joe?



Seema Sirohi

Was it a gaffe, or the essence of Joe Biden's innermost feelings about India that rise to the surface every now and then, despite strict controls and constant monitoring? Everyone is pretending it was the former, because the latter is too uncomfortable to contemplate in our fragile world.

In case you hadn't noticed, last week, the US president used a bad word in public — not the familiar garden variety ones but a long, expressive, twisty one reserved for irredeemable cases. He called India and Japan 'xenophobic' and went on to club them with China and Russia. Mixing up friends and foes, economics and demographics, he said that all four countries were 'falling' because they 'don't want immigrants'. He then sauntered down the aisle of rich donors, sleeves rolled and mic in hand.

With one word, Biden had slayed two Quad members — one a staunch ally, and the other a most 'consequential' strategic partner — for no discernable reason. Why insult friends and alienate people to establish that his im-

migration policy is working? First, it's not, with more than 6 mn illegal migrants crossing the US border on his watch. It's a top election issue. Second, India has hosted people from neighbouring countries for decades, willingly or unwillingly.

Biden's team quickly realised they had a problem on hand and went about fixing it. Interestingly, the White House pool reporter covering the event initially did not report Biden's bombshell comments and filed only on his jokes about Donald Trump. It's possible the audio was bad because Biden was walking around.

But somehow the remarks leaked, and the rather significant Japanese press contingent in the White House demanded a full accounting. The White House decided it was best to issue a transcript, face the music and downplay the 'xenophobic' bit. How you do that is a whole another column. Meanwhile, the pool reporter filed an additional dispatch the next day to include Biden's remarks and correct the record.

As part of damage control, prominent Indian Americans were deployed to say how well the US-India

relationship had done under Biden — which it undoubtedly has — without addressing the insult. Many were in the audience as donors, and they maintained discipline. One of them did admit in private that Biden should have stopped at Russia and China.

Initially, Japan seemed too stunned, and India too busy with elections to react. They said nothing for the first 24 hours perhaps because they were being told it was a normal Bidenism and should be filed under 'gaffes'. Tokyo and New Delhi decided to play along for the most part in the larger interest of all concerned. Japan delivered a mild karate chop to say Biden's comments were 'unfortunate' and not based on 'an accurate understanding of Japan's policy'. Japanese manners are legendary.

From India came a factual and good-humoured explanation by S Jaishankar about the health of the economy with a side helping on the country's mind-boggling diversity and a plug for the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA). The matter rests there at least in terms of public comments. While both New Delhi and Tokyo have 'officially' accepted that Biden was

being Biden, it's hard to buy the 'gaffe' story for real.

Anyone with even a passing familiarity with Democratic Party internal politics knows that Narendra Modi is a polarising figure for large sections of the party elite. Biden meets them halfway by criticising Modi's policies every now and then. His decision to call India 'xenophobic' was most likely a distillation of briefings he regularly receives on New Delhi's domestic policies. How US officials assess and explain CAA, or demands to declare India a country of 'particular concern' for violating religious freedom, or Modi's latest remarks against Muslims to Potus shouldn't be hard to imagine.

As for Japan, Biden might have vented because PM Fumio Kishida had apparently made an appointment to meet Trump while on a state visit in early April. The White House disapproved, and rightly so. Kishida backed down. But two weeks later, former PM and current vice-president of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party Taro Aso was sent to meet Trump in New York. The eagerness to court Trump couldn't have gone down well with Biden and his team.

But let's be honest. Many governments want, and are trying, to connect with the Trump camp. The race is close, and they don't want to be caught flat-footed just in case. That's the cold and hard reality.



THE SPEAKING TREE

Experience Divine Bliss

BRAHMA KUMARI ASHA

We are all beautiful and deeply divine beings. We are also protected by the love and power of the Supreme in every moment of our lives. There is not a single day when we don't experience His help. Have we ever tried to understand how beautiful He is, who helps protect billions of souls at the same time? Every morning, before you begin tasks of your personal and professional life, plan how you will keep God in your thoughts and feelings. This will keep you connected to the Supreme, and you will experience His beauty constantly. Experience Him in seven different relationships — father, mother, teacher, guru, friend, beloved and child. Talk to Him in these different relationships in meditation and feel His response and goodness, which He vibrates and communicates. It's important to be full of divine qualities such as purity, humility, kindness, truthfulness, forgiveness and selflessness. Goodness inside the soul leads to a deeper godly experience.

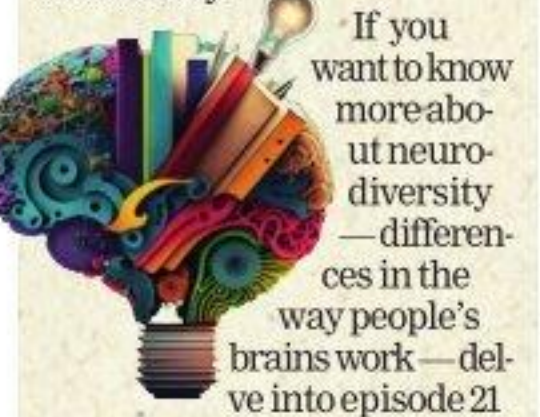
Every day, experience the Divine in a new and beautiful way than the previous day. Think of different special characteristics of God and His divine qualities and powers to discover His benevolent traits and to experience His vibrations in new ways. Share the Supreme's beauty with others. To experience the beauty, blessings and bliss of the Divine each day, help others also experience God's blessings through your thoughts, vibrations, vision, words and actions. The Absolute Being will give you deeper experiences of His love and closeness.



PEAS IN A PODCAST

Think Different: Neurodiversity

The world is a diverse place with different kinds of people. But there is little compassion for those who interact with the world around them 'differently'. The 1990s saw the emergence of the neurodiversity movement that showed that there is no one 'right' way of thinking, learning and behaving, and that differences must not be viewed as deficits. Over the years, this idea has permeated education, with educators being trained on neurodiversity.




If you want to know more about neurodiversity — differences in the way people's brains work — delve into episode 21 of the Neurodiversity Podcast, **Beyond the Page: Empowering Young Minds**, where host Emily Kircher-Morris talks to Brad Wright, a neurodivergent educator, and author of the 'Infinity Blast' series, which features neurodivergent characters. In this 38-minute episode, they discuss his work as an educator and how it influenced his decision to write fiction for young people. Also, there's the important lesson of 'letting neurodivergent children hold on to their special interests and stay true to themselves, as they will find 'their people' and turn fully actualised individuals. 'Think Different' isn't just an Apple slogan.

Chat Room

Cutting T Rates to Help Poor More

Apropos the news report, 'Implementation of GST has Helped Poor: Sitharaman' (May 7), GST collection hitting the highest level at ₹2.1 lakh crore in the opening month of FY25 is, indeed, laudable. While it is mainly due to the robust economic growth, improved compliance pushed by the tax officials' close monitoring at the ground level would have also contributed in good measure. However, as for helping the poor, GST being regressive, granting exemptions on select goods or lowering tax rates on them, intended to help the poor, also benefits the rich. The ideal way is to reduce the number of tax rates to the minimum to achieve a stable tax structure. That would only ensure tax collection moving in tandem with GDP.

TR RUSTAGI
New Delhi



CONTRAPUNTO

I want my children to have all the things I couldn't afford. Then I want to move in with them

PHYLLIS DILLER

No Country For Kids

We obsess about having children, but we don't know how to take care of them

A 13-year-old Mumbai resident, Anamta Ahmed, who lost an arm in an electrocution accident went on to score 92% in her board exams. Much as we celebrate Anamta's ability to cope, her will to overcome her life-altering accident, Anamta is really, yet another reminder how India fails her children – again and again. Children electrocuted is just another horror we appear helpless to fix.

Cities unfit | A 2018 report, Status of Children in Urban India by National Institute of Urban Affairs, looked at lives of children in cities. The under-18 brigade makes up 34% of urban population – 129m kids of India's 472m children live in cities. Viewed through the children's prism, the uneven development of every big city is starkly evident. Vulnerable groups – slum and street children, migrant kids, children with disability – are for policymakers a blind spot, and almost entirely missing from datasets: they work in appalling conditions, they are violated, they are underfed, they are drug mules.

Those in highrises and gated communities have limited access to green spaces and play areas, which contributes to obesity and lack of interpersonal skills. Kids drowning in drains, getting trapped in elevators, and suffering the impact of pollution, are matters that trigger anguish, but absolutely nothing is done about it.

Unsafe & unfriendly | Take any city. Parents' biggest fear is allowing children mobility. Roads are unsafe. One has lost count of the number of school bus accidents, of unauthorised vehicles ferrying kids, of drunk drivers and accidents. In slums, fear of traffickers sees young girls married off. Assault on minor boys is a blind spot in law and society. Schools are unsafe – sexual harassment by teachers, by all accounts, is under-reported. Crimes against children, including cybercrime, are on the rise. Per NCRB, 2022 recorded 8.7% more crimes against kids over 2021. Number of missing children also increased by 7.5% in 2022.

Nutrition, education & self-esteem | What our children eat in their mid-day meals has less to do with wholesome nutrition than with politics. And processed foods for many households are cheaper than fresh produce. The most privileged of homes are forced to send children abroad to study – we failed to expand the public higher education ecosystem. The public school system has shrunk. We don't allow kids to dream, our Kotas flourish, we deny children a childhood, our students must fight the odds. We obsess about having children, yet as a nation, we don't know how to take care of them.



Joe, Stop Bibi

Tel Aviv's Rafah offensive will hurt not just Palestinians, but also Israel. Biden must step in

Israel has begun its Rafah offensive in southern Gaza despite international opposition and US disinclination. This comes a day after Hamas had agreed to a ceasefire proposal. But Tel Aviv says it's not the proposal it had approved. Rafah has been the last refuge for Gazans with more than a million sheltering there. UN has warned of a catastrophe. But Netanyahu, egged on by far-right members of his war cabinet, isn't listening.

Israel's contradictory goals | Israel ostensibly has two goals for its Rafah operation: free remaining 128 hostages and dismantle Hamas once and for all. These are inconsistent. There's no way to ensure that the hostages will be rescued following a major military operation. In fact, a massive operation threatens their lives. Their release requires a ceasefire and a hostages-prisoners swap. This is precisely what the family members of hostages have been demanding for months.

Creating more Hamas | A massive Rafah operation will lead to more Gaza civilian casualties, now numbering more than 34,000. So even if Israel eliminates the current crop of Hamas fighters and leaders through a sledgehammer approach, the destruction it continues to wreak on Gaza will ensure another generation of Palestinians will pick up guns.

Israelis hurting | Plus, any long-term military occupation of Gaza will see Hamas, Hezbollah and other anti-Israel groups in the region further step up attacks. This will deal a bigger blow to the Israeli economy, prevent Israelis from returning home in border areas, and drain Israel's resources.

Stop Netanyahu's war | It's clear that the longer the conflict continues, Netanyahu benefits. Washington has given him a very long rope. But Netanyahu believes he can manipulate Biden. And Biden's tightrope walk may cost him in an election year when many Democrats oppose the war. It's high time Washington reins in Tel Aviv and cuts off Netanyahu.



Never say die

A foolproof way to avoid paying death duties, or inheritance tax, is to become immortal

Jug Suraiya

The saying that nothing is inevitable except death and taxes has had a postscript added to it: nothing is inevitable except death and taxes, and taxes are even more inevitable than death because you can be liable to pay them even after having kicked the bucket.

This addendum has been occasioned by an off-the-cuff remark made by Sam Pitroda, non-resident Congress stalwart, that US, where he lives, has an inheritance tax, and implying that it might not be a bad idea for India to have one as well.

While Congress has been swift to deny any intention of reintroducing such a tax, which was abolished by Rajiv Gandhi in 1985, BJP has seized upon Sambhai's remark to use as a cudgel against the INDIA constituent in the electoral fray.

With both sides accusing each other of harbouring covert designs to bring back inheritance tax, or estate duty, which pursues the taxpayer beyond the funeral pyre, the matter has become a literally life-and-death issue.

Many countries, including US, UK, and Japan, have such a tax by which, after an individual's demise, the person's assets are subject to a government impost before being awarded to heirs.

Advocates of the tax argue that it helps in reducing economic inequality. Opponents say that it demotivates individual enterprise, which is essential for overall prosperity.

The prospect that an inheritance tax might make a backdoor entry could stimulate ingenious ways to evade it. And the most foolproof way to do so is by not dying, and becoming immortal.

Far from science fantasy, virtual immortality might in the not-distant future become technological fact.

Those who call themselves transhumanists claim that through a process of 'mind uploading' the entire cognitive functions of an individual, including speech, memory, emotions, and decision-making abilities, will be replicated in a computer programme through which people will continue to 'live' in a state of cyber-immortality after leaving their 'biological shells'.

No death, no death duty. Or as a transhumanist might put it: nothing is inevitable, not even death and taxes.



Uday Chandra



Always a bellwether state, Bihar tells us why this national election may turn out to be a closer contest than was assumed earlier – a contest between coalitions sans any *hawa*.

Until Nitish switched sides again in Jan, BJP looked like it was out of ideas in the state. Unlike in neighbouring UP, here it lacked a major regional leader. Neither Modi's messaging nor the return of Ram Lalla in Ayodhya looked enough. The opposition had seized upon the promise of a nationwide caste census, like the one in Bihar, to bring the juggernaut of Hindutva to a halt once again in the state.

Nitish takes BJP's offer | Then, with the posthumous Bharat Ratna for Karpoori Thakur, BJP made a last-ditch appeal to OBC voters. Nitish went with BJP – because he had little choice.

POLLITICS

Special Series on Elections

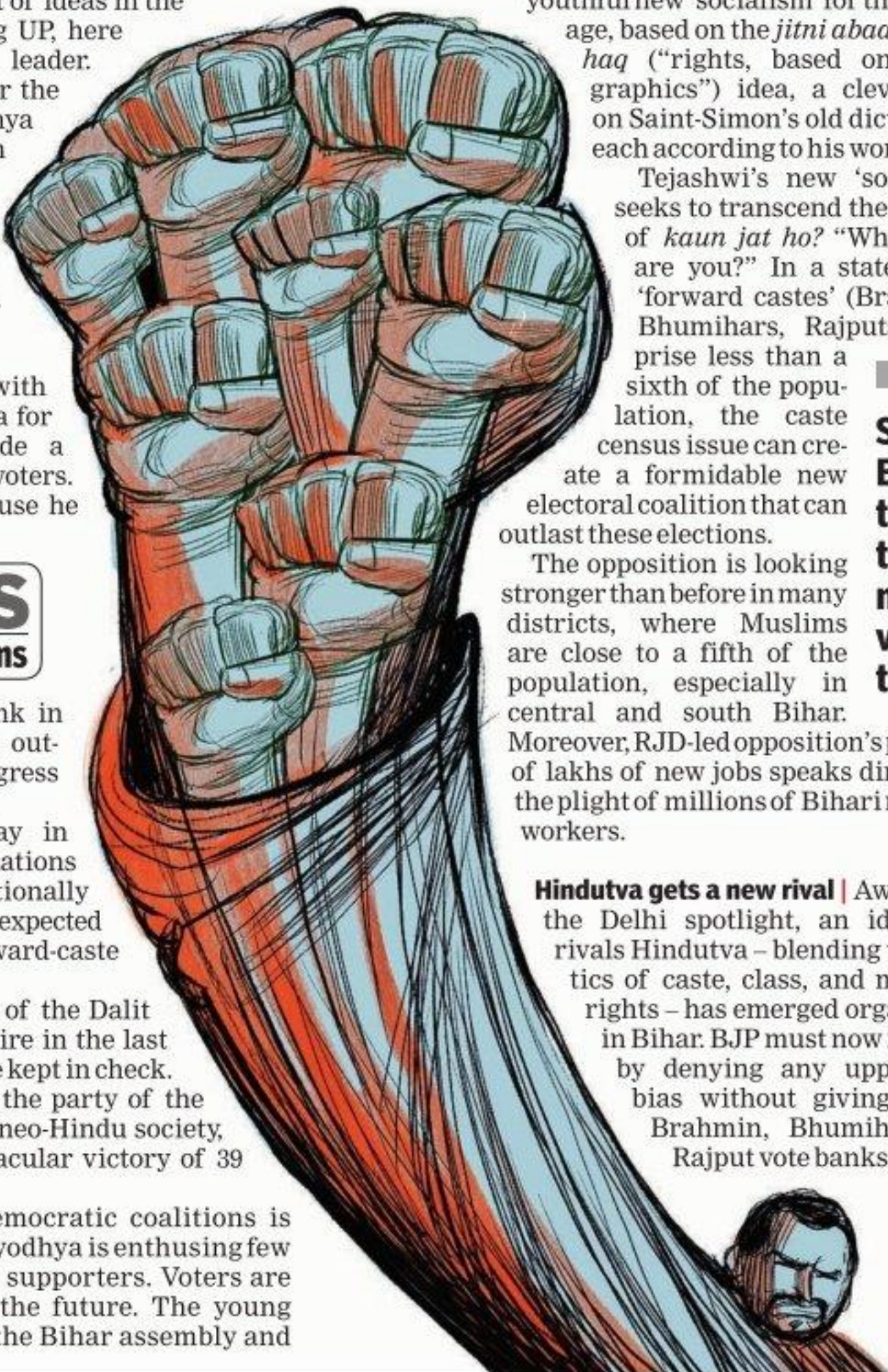
- He was the weakest link in the mahagathbandhan, outflanked by RJD and its Congress and communist allies.
 - JDU's best chances lay in complementary caste equations with BJP, whose traditionally upper-caste voters could be expected now to vote for backward-caste candidates.
 - Chirag Paswan, a voice of the Dalit youth and Nitish's bête noire in the last state election, would also be kept in check.
 - Overall, NDA in Bihar, the party of the top, middle and bottom of neo-Hindu society, wanted to repeat its spectacular victory of 39 out of 40 seats in 2019.
- But the arithmetic of democratic coalitions is messier. The new temple in Ayodhya is enthusing few except the most diehard BJP supporters. Voters are focused on promises about the future. The young chief of the largest party in the Bihar assembly and

former deputy chief minister, Tejashwi Yadav, has claimed credit for pushing a reluctant Nitish to implement the state caste census.

New 'socialism' arrives | Indeed, the Congress manifesto has gone further by promising a national policy agenda based on caste enumeration. The Delhi chatterati has seen this as a déjà vu: Mandal 2.0. In fact, this is really a youthful new 'socialism' for the digital age, based on the *jitni abaadi, utna haq* ("rights, based on demographics") idea, a clever spin on Saint-Simon's old dictum, "to each according to his works."

Tejashwi's new 'socialism' seeks to transcend the politics of *kaun jat ho?* "What caste are you?" In a state where 'forward castes' (Brahmins, Bhumihars, Rajputs) comprise less than a sixth of the population, the caste census issue can create a formidable new electoral coalition that can outlast these elections.

The opposition is looking stronger than before in many districts, where Muslims are close to a fifth of the population, especially in central and south Bihar. Moreover, RJD-led opposition's promise of lakhs of new jobs speaks directly to the plight of millions of Bihari migrant workers.



Hindutva gets a new rival | Away from the Delhi spotlight, an idea that rivals Hindutva – blending the politics of caste, class, and minority rights – has emerged organically in Bihar. BJP must now respond by denying any upper-caste bias without giving up its Brahmin, Bhumihar, and Rajput vote banks.

Uday Deb

- Faced with two well-matched opponents, swing voters must choose between two rival conceptions of citizenship.
- One side promises a strong personality-centred cultural nationalism that efficiently gives out welfare payments.
- The other offers a 'new politics of social justice', drawing on the legacies of the 1980s and 1990s as well as from the changing contours of class, championed by two dynastic parties with a chequered past.
- Across seven phases, voters in Bihar face hard choices.
- Their choices will likely diverge to deliver a split verdict.

Pragmatism rules | In an election not dominated by a strong political wind, aka *hawa*, politicians are compelled to make pragmatic appeals to voters, who must make equally hard-nosed choices.

- Democracy matters because we agree to disagree about our political choices.
- If everyone agreed about politics, we could simply hire managers to get the job done.

In democratic life, charismatic politicians from across the political spectrum have flourished and then seen their appeal produce diminishing electoral returns. Once the spell is broken, voters are often left bewildered and disillusioned. Social and economic rights of citizens are frequently left unaddressed by politicians, whether

from the right or the left or anywhere in between. In polls where one sentiment is not dominant, voters then make choices via judgments on who can do what for them.

So do collective rights | *Haq* or collective rights in India predate the quasi-religious stories about the origins of social contract that dominate the liberal imagination of the Protestant West. Bihar, where Siddhartha became Buddha, may offer us enlightenment on how voters judge what their rights are.

When a *hawa* weakens or ends, democracy does not end in the doldrums. In fact, it can thrive as voters disagree with each other on vital issues of the day, and, ultimately, push unwilling *netas* to renegotiate social contracts – and, therefore, broaden the scope of *haq* in the polity.

The writer teaches politics and history at Georgetown University, Qatar

Bihar votes on May 13 (5 seats) in the fourth of its 7-phase polls

'Protesting students reflect the soul of the university...What US is spending on Israel's war can wipe out so much student debt'

With pro-Palestine student protests sweeping American universities, authorities have been left searching for answers. *Kathy Newman, professor of English and Media Studies at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, spoke with Rudroneel Ghosh about what's fuelling the protests and how they are part of American tradition:*

● **What explains the sudden outburst of pro-Palestine protests across US universities?**

I am not sure that it's sudden. Students have been vocal with their criticisms of Israel's response to the Oct 7 attack since Oct 8. I would say what's new is that after Columbia University called in police, specifically NYPD, on its own students, I think the protesters' encampment strategy has spread across the country. And the encampments have had two foci – criticism of Israeli military strategy in Gaza and solidarity with other students who are making these critiques.

● **What would you say about allegations that outside protesters are instigating student protesters?**

I think one of the questions being raised here is what is a university community and who belongs in it. I don't see foreign influences directly on these students as I am watching these protests unfold. I see the students using a lot of material that they got from their college education – their philosophy classes, political science classes, and classes on war and violence. But I do think that university administrators are bizarrely turning their own students out. They are expelling students, removing them from rolls, denying them the opportunity to get a grade as part of the disciplinary response.

So these protests raise the question of who belongs inside a university. I would certainly think that a young person paying \$70,000 a year belongs in that university community.

● **There are claims that some protesters have indulged in anti-Semitic rhetoric.**

I condemn any act of anti-Semitism by anybody. I have seen three accusations. First, that these protests contain hateful speech and harassment towards Jewish and Israeli students. Second, that the counter-protests have contained hateful speech and harassment towards Jewish protesters, Muslims, Arabs and protesters of colour. Third, that armed police have raised the atmosphere of violence and created an unsafe environment for students to learn in. I have seen with my own eyes some behaviour, chants, signs, and police actions that would support all of those accusations. But I don't think for the most part the protesters have as their aim anti-Semitism or the elimination of Israel.

● **There's also the charge that these protests are driven by deep-seated Leftist impulses in US academia.**

This charge has been long debunked. One valid question is what are students demanding and why are they making these demands at their own places of education. There's no military draft like there was during Vietnam. But I will tell you what is there now: crippling student debt. Congress recently passed a bill that sent \$26 billion to Israel. That amount of money could wipe out a significant amount of student debt. Students aren't being drafted physically like in Vietnam, but their economic futures are being drafted. US is spending unfathomable amounts of money to support this war. If US was not giving this aid to Israel, then Israel would not be able to carry out the kind of military operations it has been carrying out



since Oct 7. So the students' demands are coming from a place of strong criticism of Israel's actions and of US propping up those actions.

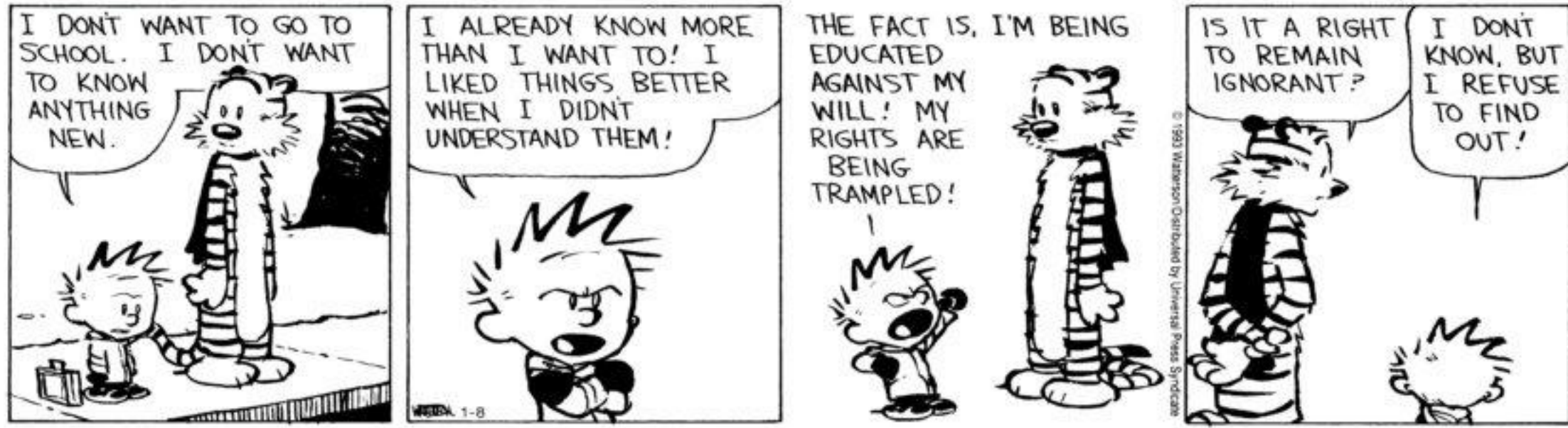
● **Do you think these protests will influence the US presidential elections?**

One of my least favourite things about American politics is our obsession with who's going to be the next president, which usually starts around two years before presidential polls. It's just insufferable. And then much of coverage veers towards 'are these protests good for Biden or bad for Biden' and 'are these protests good for Trump or bad for Trump'. I think this really misses the point. These protests have a very clear target and that is US policy towards Israel, which includes the way in which university endowments are invested in arms companies. My university receives tremendous amounts of funding from the department of defence. So there's a direct connection between universities and US military technology and military policy.

● **Are you concerned about social media and deepfakes fishing in troubled waters here?**

That's not a big concern for me. I would rather focus on something more substantial. The presumed mission of higher education is education. And when I see these protests, I see the students holding teach-ins, conducting mutual aid sessions, eating together, and learning about each other's cultures. I think these protests are a reflection of the best thing about higher education. Therefore, what I'm really worried about is the soul of the university. For me, these students represent the soul of the university. And we as elders, faculty and administrators, we should be listening to our students right now.

Calvin & Hobbes



The Gospels Of Wisdom, Work & Above All Laughter

Swami Chinmayananda

All must act, but humans alone work to achieve spectacular glories in the world. Worshipping an ideal in a perfect personality and self-training are means to sharpen and discipline the faculties of the rational intellect in human beings. These often brighten up our intellect's flashy brilliance. But to widen its embrace or vision, we must be inspired by a healthy philosophy of life. Such an inspired intellect thinks high and spreads a vision of loving concern to enhance a wide universe of interests. A complete and enriching philosophy of life must contain three gospels – the gospel of Krishn, laughter, and work.

The Bhagwad Gita or Krishn's gospel says: Dedicate your life and its work unto Me; act intelligently, and your personality will grow to its real potential and your achievements to

their meaningful dimensions. Keep smiling, never weep – live life meeting the challenges, both within and all around. Regrets, tears, sorrows, and sighs only dissipate our energies, and we do not gain any new strength to solve our problems. Then why weep and despair? Let us keep smiling and be ever hopeful; roll up our sleeves, tighten our belts and plunge into the fields of life to play the game with enthusiasm and joy. This is the gospel of laughter.

Let us work with our physical passions and emotional impulses dedicated unto the Lord, a wakeful intellect, policing our lust, greed, pride, arrogance and other lower urges. Work in love with deep sympathy and tenderness. Work undertaken with this attitude becomes a rewarding fulfilment. When we work thus in love and joy, the achievement

exhibits a glow, at once divine and unique, bringing forth untold happiness to the world around us. Even if plans break down, schemes fail, purpose is shattered, and our efforts are wasted, we will find a miraculous power secretly pouring unending success into our fields and accomplishing things we never planned, showering blessings we never conceived of. This is the gospel of work.

Let us fully obey these three gospels in our day-to-day lives. The gospel of Krishn brings worldly peace and spiritual unfoldment. The gospel of laughter brings relaxation, health, and rewarding glory. The gospel of work makes us partner with the Lord in His grand world plan. These three alone bring enduring achievements in life and a taste of the supreme privilege and prerogative of our higher evolution as human beings. It is



THE SPEAKING TREE

choiceless. We must practise it. Let us grow in cheerfulness, in the ability to act, in our willingness to serve, and in our wealth of peace within. No spiritual student can afford to neglect to cultivate this life-giving spirit of cheerfulness. No morose person, tired of living, exhausted by challenges, can ever lift himself into the ethereal realms of spiritual beauty and true godliness. True spiritual progress is for heroic ones who can laugh at their obstacles, worries and even failures. We must enhance a well-cultivated capacity to laugh away our fears. Constant cheerfulness builds life and vigour, expands capacities, widens interests, and deepens the vision. This sense of cheerful laughter is the heart of all spiritual living. This special blessing is given to human beings alone to strive on spiritual path.

Today is the 108th birth anniversary of Swami Chinmayananda

Sacredspace

If you wish to glimpse inside a human soul and get to know a man, don't bother analysing his ways of being silent...of seeing how much he is moved by noble ideas; you will get better results if you just watch him laugh.

Fyodor Dostoevsky