

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

**Number of attacks against students globally in 2022-2023**

**6,000** The UNESCO warned of a 20% global spike in attacks against students, professionals and educational institutions. *AFP*

**Number of suspicious SIMs blocked by the Rajasthan police**

**2.36** In lakh. In a bid to curb cyber crimes in the Mewat region, the State's police have blocked 2.36 lakh suspicious SIMs and 2.29 lakh mobile handsets with suspicious IMEI. *PH*

**Sweden's aid package to Ukraine for war against Russia**

**440** In \$ million. This is the country's 17th aid package to Ukraine. The new package will include ammunition for infantry fighting vehicles already donated by Sweden. *REUTERS*

**Medals won by India in Deaf Shooting Championships**

**21** According to the National Rifle Association of India (NRAI), India has won seven gold, seven silver and as many bronze medals in the tournament which concluded on Sunday. Ukraine finished second. *PH*

**Palestinians killed in the Gaza Strip since October 7**

**40,988** The toll includes 16 deaths in the last 24 hours, according to the health ministry in Gaza. *AFP*  
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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# On the challenges to road safety in India

What does the 'India Status Report on Road Safety 2024' state with respect to meeting international goals of reducing road accident fatalities? Which States have the lowest rates of road accident deaths? What is a crash surveillance system?

## EXPLAINER

**Tikender Singh Panwar**  
Geetam Tiwari

**The story so far:** The 'India Status Report on Road Safety 2024,' prepared by the TRIP Centre at IIT Delhi, not only highlights India's slow progress towards meeting international goals of reducing road accident fatalities, but also emphasises the organic connection between road construction, mobility, and the need for a differentiated approach to mitigate road accidents.

**What does the report state?** This report analyses road safety in India, using data from First Information Reports (FIRs) from six States and audits of State compliance with Supreme Court directives on road safety governance. It exposes disparities in road traffic death rates across States, emphasising the vulnerability of motorcyclists and the high rate of fatal crashes involving trucks. Road traffic injuries remain a major public health challenge in India, with little progress in reducing fatalities, despite advancements in other sectors. Most Indian States are unlikely to meet the United Nations Decade of Action for Road Safety goal to halve traffic deaths by 2030.

In 2021, road traffic injuries were the 13th leading cause of death in India and the 12th leading cause of health loss (measured in Disability-Adjusted Life Years, or DALYs). In six States (Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh), road traffic injuries ranked among the top 10 causes of health loss.

**Why is crash surveillance necessary?** India's national road safety data systems are insufficient for guiding public policy. Currently, there is no national crash-level database. Road safety statistics at both State and national levels are compiled from individual police station records,

## Safety first

In 2021, road traffic injuries were the 13th leading cause of death in India and the 12th leading cause of health loss.

Percentage of road traffic deaths by victims mode of transport in six States						
	Chhattisgarh	Chandigarh	Delhi	Haryana	Maharashtra	Uttarakhand
Pedestrian	19	23	44	29	24	28
Bicycle	4	13	3	3	1	3
Motorised two-wheeler	58	51	40	47	58	48
Motorised three-wheeler	1	7	4	3	1	3
Car	4	4	5	8	6	7
Bus	1	1	0	1	1	4
Truck	5	1	2	5	5	4
Farm tractor	6	0	0	2	2	0
Others	0	1	1	1	2	1
Unknown	0	1	1	0	0	1
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100

Percentage of road traffic deaths by type of impacting vehicle in six States						
	Chhattisgarh	Chandigarh	Delhi	Haryana	Maharashtra	Uttarakhand
Bicycle	0	0	1	0	1	0
Motorised two-wheeler	13	11	6	10	14	10
Motorised three-wheeler	0	7	2	1	0	1
Car	7	36	14	25	14	21
Bus	3	5	6	4	4	7
Truck	24	12	18	32	27	28
Farm tractor	5	1	1	7	4	6
Others	11	12	5	1	5	2
None	16	9	3	2	16	5
Unknown	18	9	45	17	15	21
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: India Status Report on Road Safety 2024

which are aggregated at district, State, and national levels before being published. These tables allow only the most basic analyses, preventing effective intervention or program evaluation. Furthermore, comparisons with other datasets, such as the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) study and Sample Registration System (SRS), suggest that these tables often contain inaccurate information on key variables like the victim's mode of transport – data crucial for road safety management.

In the absence of a crash surveillance system, the report had to rely on FIRs from six States and State road safety governance audit reports.

## How are States faring in road safety?

Road safety varies significantly across India, with per capita death rates differing more than threefold between States. Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and Chhattisgarh recorded the highest death rates, at 21.9, 19.2, and 17.6 per 1,00,000 people, respectively. In contrast, West Bengal and Bihar had the lowest rates, at 5.9 per 1,00,000 in 2021. Six states – Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu – account for nearly half of all traffic fatalities in India.

The report also reveals that pedestrians, cyclists, and motorised two-wheeler riders are the most common

victims of road accidents, while trucks are responsible for the highest proportion of impacting vehicles. It also notes that in only seven States do more than 50% of motorised two-wheeler riders wear helmets, despite the fact that this simple safety measure could significantly reduce fatalities and serious injuries.

Only eight States have audited more than half of their National Highway lengths, and very few States have done the same for their State Highways. Basic traffic safety measures, including traffic calming, markings, and signage, are still lacking in most States. Helmet usage in rural areas is particularly low, and trauma care facilities are inadequate. Tailored strategies are essential to address the unique road safety challenges faced by different States.

## How does India fare globally?

The report presents a sobering comparison between India and developed countries like Sweden and other Scandinavian nations, which have excelled in road safety governance. In 1990, an Indian was 40% more likely to die in a road accident than someone in these countries. By 2021, this figure had soared to 600%, indicating a sharp rise in road fatalities. The report questions whether better-equipped vehicles with more advanced safety features are the solution, given that two-wheeler riders, cyclists, and motorcyclists represent the majority of road fatalities.

## What is the way forward?

Central and State governments need to prioritise the scale-up of road safety interventions. A national database for fatal crashes should be established. Public access to this system will improve understanding of specific risks to road users and the effectiveness of various interventions implemented in the States. Geetam Tiwari is Professor at the Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi. Tikender Panwar is former Deputy Mayor, Shimla, and Member, Kerala Urban Commission.

## THE GIST

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# The role of district agro-met offices in supporting farmers

What are agro-meteorological advisories? Why did the government shut down district agro-met offices?

**Rishika Pardikar**

**The story so far:** Last week, PTI reported that the India Meteorological Department (IMD) is planning to revive District Agro-Meteorology Units (DAMUs) under the Gramin Krishi Mausam Sewa (GKMS) scheme. The IMD established 199 DAMUs in 2018 in collaboration with the Indian Council of Agricultural Research. The aim was to use weather data to prepare and disseminate sub-district level agricultural advisories. In March, DAMUs were shut down following an order issued by the IMD.

## Why are agro-met units important?

Around 80% of farmers in India are small and marginal. They largely practise rain-fed agriculture in the backdrop of a decades-long farm crisis that is now overlaid with climate change-related weather variability. "The climate is changing. Monsoon onset and withdrawal dates have changed. We also see extended

dry spells and heavy wet spells. Farmers should have this information because it affects crops," Madhavan Rajeevan, former secretary, Ministry of Earth Science, told *The Hindu*.

The DAMUs were located within Krishi Vigyan Kendras (VKs). Scientists and researchers trained in meteorology and agriculture were recruited as DAMU staff. They used weather data provided by the IMD like rainfall, temperature and wind speeds to prepare agricultural advisories related to sowing and harvesting, usage of fertilizers and pesticides, irrigation etc.

These advisories were sent to millions of farmers across the country free-of-cost in local languages twice a week. They were shared via text messages, WhatsApp groups, newspapers and also through in-person communication from DAMU staff and VKV officers. Since these advisories provided weather information in advance, they helped farmers plan activities like irrigation. They also served as early warnings for extreme events like droughts and heavy rainfall. Many studies

conducted over the years have stressed the benefits of agro-met advisories.

## Why were DAMUs shut down?

According to a report by *Article-14*, the NITI Aayog misrepresented the role of DAMUs and also sought privatisation. NITI Aayog falsely claimed that agro-met data was automated, thereby undercutting the role of DAMU staff. In reality, the DAMU staff played a huge role in preparing agricultural advisories based on weather data by the IMD. These advisories were prepared at the block-level across districts and then communicated to farmers in local languages. NITI Aayog also sought monetisation of such services as opposed to the current scheme where agro-met information was provided free-of-cost to all farmers. "Closing DAMUs was not a wise decision. The (GKMS) scheme should have been strengthened to capture the needs of farmers across the country," said Dr. M. N. Thimmegowda, a professor at the University of Agricultural Sciences. In February, the Gujarat-based

Association of Agrometeorologists wrote to the Prime Minister expressing "deep concern and disappointment" about the decision to shut down the agro-met units while highlighting how DAMUs helped build "climate resilience" among the farming community. In the same month, Union Minister Nitin Gadkari wrote to Jitendra Singh, current Minister of State in the Ministry of Earth Sciences seeking a continuation of the services.

## What about private players?

At present, there are a handful of private players in the weather advisory space. But there are serious concerns about the affordability of such services. "Private companies work with a profit motive and the prices become exorbitant for small and marginal farmers who are the majority," Mr. Thimmegowda said. For instance, consider how some companies currently charge ₹10,000 per crop for an annual subscription to their advisories. This would mean an investment of ₹20,000-40,000 for many farmers who cultivate vegetables and cereals. Some companies also charge rates as high as ₹60,000-80,000 for annual subscriptions to downscaled farm-level agromet advisories. Further, Mr. Thimmegowda explained that there could be bias in agro-met advisories related to usage of fertilizers etc. "Their recommendations of fertilizers and pesticides could be biased towards certain brands."

Rishika Pardikar is a freelance environment reporter.

## THE GIST

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# What to watch in high-stakes Harris-Trump presidential debate

ARJUN SENGUPTA  
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 9

KAMALA HARRIS and Donald Trump will face each other in their first and possibly only televised debate on Tuesday evening (6.30 am Wednesday in India). Latest polling indicates they are neck and neck in the race to become the next President of the United States. Here's what to know about the debate.

## Race on a knife's edge

Results of a The New York Times/Siena College poll published on Sunday showed Trump leading Harris 48% to 47% nationally, well within the survey's 2.8% point margin of error. The results were "largely unchanged" from late July, just after President Joe Biden dropped out of the race.

Other polls through August had shown Harris surging as Trump appeared to falter somewhat. But that surge may be ebbing, even as Trump's base remains firmly behind him. With less than two months to go before Election Day, a Politico commentator likened the race to "a knife fight in a phone booth".

## EXPLAINED GLOBAL

### More at stake for Harris

It would seem Harris has more to gain—or lose—from Tuesday's debate. As many as 28% of likely voters in the Times/Siena poll said they needed to "learn more" about her, compared to 9% who said the same about Trump.

The Harris campaign has avoided getting into specifics about her policy platform. While remaining "generic Democrat" makes it less likely she would make a calamitous faux pas, it leaves the Trump campaign with an opportunity to define the vice president in its own terms.

On Tuesday, Harris will have an opportunity to define herself in juxtaposition to Trump, but she will have to do so without giving him more ammunition to attack her. A successful balancing act will be crucial for her campaign.

### Biden flameout lessons

Biden's floundering performance against Trump in the June 27 debate effectively ended his political career. Analysts have pointed to two clear lessons for Harris from the disaster.

First, how Harris speaks and reacts to Trump will be as important as what she says.



Donald Trump (right) and Joe Biden during the June 27 debate on CNN. The AP

His incoherence aside, what cost Biden dearly were pictures in which he appeared lost or moody.

Second, Harris will have to exploit Trump's "weaknesses" much better than Biden could. At 59 years old, she is now the significantly younger candidate, and will have the opportunity to redirect some of the criticisms and ridicule that Trump, 78, previously aimed at Biden, 81.

Also, the former President is prone to rambling rants and going off on tangents, and is often bullying and rude, which many voters likely find distasteful.

As an opinion article in *The Boston Globe* said, "Harris should call out Trump's 'alpha male' behaviour. Harris might consider saying... Donald, you've always been tough on those you perceive as vulnerable and weak against dictators and tyrants."

### Choosing their issues

The moderators from ABC News are expected to ensure that no single issue gets disproportionate airtime; however, both Harris and Trump will try to talk more on topics in which they poll better. Whoever is able to make their pet issue the most memorable moment of the debate will likely be declared the winner on Tuesday.

For Harris, this would be abortion and reproductive rights—something that Trump has vacillated on. Polls indicate women cutting across racial lines care deeply about this issue, and their support—especially that of women who have traditionally voted Republican—will be crucial for Harris.

Trump will focus on immigration and the state of the economy under Biden. Both are top issues for voters, and Harris' association with the Biden administration is seen as a liability.

### Role of rules in debate

Harris and her aides feel handcuffed by the nationally negotiated debate rules. Biden and Trump earlier this summer, Politico reported on Saturday. "Trump's worst moments in the debates are when he gets upset and snaps... And they have neutered that," a Harris aide told Politico.

Under the rules, candidates' mics will be muted when their opponent is speaking. This will mean no interruptions or interjections—something commentators say Harris, a former prosecutor, would have liked, also given Trump's tendency to talk over others.

The rule was apparently intended to "protect" Biden, and the campaign is now "stuck with it", a national Democratic strategist told Politico.

### Short campaign, high stakes

The era of televised debates began with the famous Nixon-Kennedy face-off of 1960, which helped propel the latter to national stardom. Since then, most experts agree, debates in and of themselves have rarely moved the needle in presidential elections. Even gaffes and bloopers by candidates have often been peripheral to the eventual outcome.

Things may be different this time. Harris entered the race just about a month ago, and the shortness of her campaign automatically raises the stakes for each debate, public appearance, and interview. Biden's late withdrawal has forced Trump to make some adjustments in his campaign as well, based on his assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of his new opponent.

## EXPLAINED CULTURE

## SAKTHAN THAMPURAN AND HIS IMPORTANCE TO THRISSUR

ANAGHA JAYAKUMAR  
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 9

MINISTER OF State for Tourism and Thrissur MP Suresh Gopi on Saturday pledged to replace a statue of Sakthan Thampuran that was knocked over by a state transport bus in June by a new bronze statue if the Kerala government did not do so within 14 days.

### Sakthan Thampuran

Raja Rama Varma Kunjipillai or Rama Varma IX, better known today as Sakthan Thampuran, ruled over the Cochin kingdom from 1790 to 1805. He was born in 1751 to Ambika Thampuran and Chendose Aniyam Nambodiri of the Cochin royal family, but was raised by an aunt who called him Sakthan, meaning "powerful". The word *thampuran* is believed to be an appropriation of the Sanskrit *samrat*, meaning emperor.

The Cochin kingdom, which was part of the Late Chera Empire, covered the regions between Ponnani in Malappuram and Thottapally in Alappuzha in today's Kerala. (Ashalatha Thampuran, *History of the Cochin Royal Family: Tracing the Journey of Perumadappu Swarupam*, 2019)

### Strategist and ruler

Sakthan Thampuran became his apparent in 1769 as an 18-year-old. He advised his king to maintain friendly relations with both the Dutch and the English, who were vying for a larger share of the region.

Sakthan is said to have orchestrated Mysore's attempt to invade the Travancore kingdom, which had established relations with the English East India Company. This would result in the Powney treaty which freed the Cochin kingdom from its allegiance to Mysore, and helped formalise its relations with the British.

Sakthan Thampuran put an end to the institution of the *Yogiatirippadis*—the



The magnificent annual Thiruvappad festival in Thrissur. AN

erstwhile spiritual heads of the Vadakkumthangam and Perumam temples, who had conspired against the previous Cochin king in his wars against the Calicut Zamorin—and entrusted temple management to the government.

He built a fearsome reputation for himself, and is said to have largely freed his kingdom of crime.

### Thiruvappad and Pooram

Sakthan Thampuran transferred the seat of the Cochin kingdom from Thrippunithura to modern-day Thrissur. The Thelkinkadu Maidanam and the surrounding Swaraj Round became the basis for the city's elaborate road system and infrastructure.

The king encouraged merchants of all religions and British officials to relocate to the city. He also overhauled and firmed up the kingdom's finances, personally overseeing revenue management.

Sakthan Thampuran started the Thiruvappad in 1797 as an alternative to the Arattupuzha Pooram, then the largest temple festival in the state. The Thiruvappad was conceived as an opportunity for the major temples in Thrissur to come to pay their respects to Lord Shiva, the presiding deity at the Vadakkumthangam Temple.

ANURADHA MASCARENHAS  
PUNE, SEPTEMBER 9

THE DEMOCRATIC Republic of Congo (DRC)—epicentre of the mpox outbreak that has become a global health emergency—has received its first donation of mpox vaccines.

Since January 1, 2022, mpox cases have been reported from 121 countries, including 20 WHO member-states across Africa. As of September 5, 2024, a total 1,03,048 laboratory-confirmed cases, including 229 deaths, have been reported from across the world since January 1, 2022. On Monday, India confirmed its first mpox case, which was a travel-related infection.

Despite the surge in the number of cases, vaccines have been in short supply in Africa. Apart from DRC, the only other African country to have any mpox vaccine is Nigeria. That is one of the main reasons why mpox spread rapidly, prompting the WHO to declare the infection a global health emergency last month.

### Why is the spread of mpox a concern?

Mpox, which was first reported in humans in 1970, has come under the spotlight largely due to the spread of its new clade II variant.

Organisms belonging to a clade share common ancestors. When it comes to mpox, there are two different clades: clade I and clade II; the former is the deadlier of the two.

Clade II seems to be transmitting more rapidly between people than previous variants, including through sexual activity. Clade Ia mostly comes from animals, according to a report in the *Journal Nature*. The new variant is also affecting more women and children in the impacted African countries.

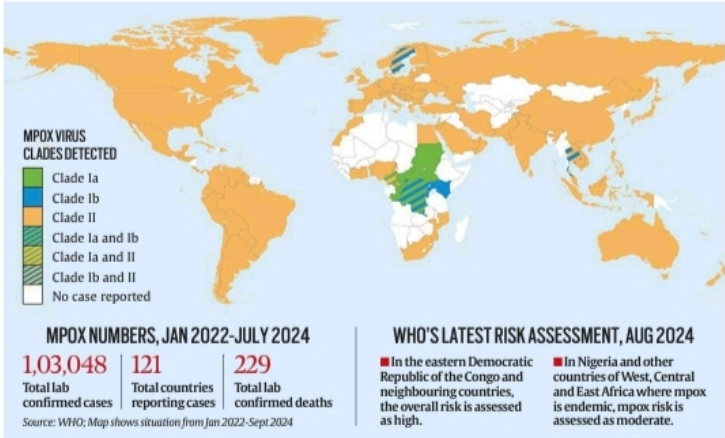
Scientists are still trying to determine the reasons behind these aspects of the transmission.

### What vaccines are being used?

Three mpox vaccines are available currently. All are weakened versions of vaccinia, a live virus that also served as the basis for the smallpox vaccine.

Virologist Dr Gagandeep Kang told *The Indian Express*, "Both smallpox and mpox belong to the same family of viruses. Mpox is less severe and has lower case fatality rates but is spreading fast because it has animal reservoirs, which smallpox did not have."

The most commonly used vaccine is modified vaccinia Ankara (MVA), manufactured by Denmark-based Bavarian Nordic. It



has approval for mpox from both the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and European Medicines Agency (EMA). The DRC has received this vaccine.

The other vaccine is LC16m8, which is produced by KM Biologics, a company in Japan. Only Japan's regulatory authority has approved this vaccine for mpox.

The third is ACAM2000, which is made by a US company, Emergent BioSolutions. It was approved for mpox by the FDA last month.

New mpox vaccines are also being developed. A vaccine by BioNTech, a German biotechnology company, is currently in early clinical development. Dr Kang said, Pune-based Serum Institute of India (SII) has announced it is developing an mpox vaccine, and hopes for a positive outcome within a year.

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) last week called for experienced pharmaceutical companies and research organisations to "collaborate on royalty basis" for developing mpox vaccine and diagnostic kits.

### Why did Africa not get vaccines sooner?

The currently available mpox vaccines are too expensive—\$50 to \$75 per dose, accord-

ing to the WHO—for African countries. As a result, they have to usually rely on direct donations from countries and vaccine producers, and on purchases by Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance) and UNICEF.

Gavi and UNICEF cannot buy vaccines unless the WHO issues an Emergency Use Listing to products or gives them full approval, according to a report in the *Journal Science*. To get these, companies have to submit efficacy and safety data about their products.

Some experts have said the WHO has been too slow in giving such approvals. However, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said last month that the delay was due to the companies' failure to complete the required paperwork.

"WHO would give its stamps of approval within weeks, he promised, adding that he had given Gavi and UNICEF permission to start the purchasing process in the meantime," the *Science* report said.

Dr Raman Gangakhedkar, former head of Epidemiology and Communicable Diseases at ICMR, told *The Indian Express*, "High-income countries have their own drug regula-

tors and rely on them. Low and middle-income countries are dependent on clearances by the WHO, which is risk-averse."

Another reason is that during previous mpox outbreaks, the number of cases remained quite low. Many African countries did not ask for mpox vaccines as health officials had to tackle far more serious health problems in the region.

Gangakhedkar, however, said that the WHO and the developed world should have encouraged the sharing of smallpox vaccines earlier to protect people against a more virulent disease. "Preventive strategies and surveillance are just as crucial as that there is no vaccine inequity in places that need it most."

### When should one take the vaccine?

Getting a vaccine is recommended for a high-risk population, especially during an outbreak. The vaccine can also be administered after a person has been in contact with someone who has mpox. In these cases, the vaccine should be given less than four days after contact with an infected person. The vaccine can be administered for up to 14 days if the person has not developed symptoms.

# Why apex court intervened in Himachal Pradesh HC collegium's decision

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM  
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 9

THE SUPREME COURT has directed the Himachal Pradesh High Court collegium to consider again the names of two judicial officers it had first recommended for elevation to the Bench 21 months ago.

The unusual decision came after the affected individuals moved the SC against the HC collegium's decision to recommend two other names for judgeship. The SC has previously placed strict limits on when it can review HC decisions relating to the appointments of judges. On Friday, a Bench of Justices Hrishikesh Roy and P K Mishra decided the current case fell within the scope of review.

### What is the procedure for appointing

(and transfer) of judges of the SC and HCs was laid down by a nine-judge Bench of the SC in *Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Association vs Union of India* (1993), commonly known as the Second Judges Case.

The ruling made the recommendations of the SC collegium binding on the Centre, giving the power to appoint and transfer judges of the higher judiciary to the judiciary. Under the collegium system, judges choose judges—the government can delay appointments, but cannot reject the collegium's choice.

In 1998, the SC clarified how the collegium system would function. (Third Judges Case) The court said that collegiums for HC appointments would include the Chief Justice of India (CJI) and the two senior-most judges of the SC. This collegium would be required to consult the "Chief Justice and senior judges" of the HC concerned, the "senior-most" SC

The court also spelled out the limited grounds on which a recommendation could be challenged. First, if there was lack of "effective consultation" with any of these individuals or institutions. Second, if the candidate in question was not "eligible" to be a judge—these qualifications are laid down in Articles 217 (for HCs) and 124 (for SC) of the Constitution.

Later in 1998, the Centre and SC entered into a Memorandum of Procedure (MOP) which detailed the process, from the beginning, for the appointment of HC judges.

As a part of this process, the Chief Justice of the HC must consult two other senior-most judges at the HC—together forming the High Court collegium—and send their recommendations, with reasons, to the Chief Minister, the Governor, and the CJI.

Minister of Law and Justice at the Centre, who will conduct a background check and send the entire material to the CJI, who will consider it with the rest of the SC collegium.

### What happened in the Himachal case?

In December 2022, the then HC collegium comprising the Chief Justice and two senior-most judges recommended district judges Chiarg Bhargu Singh and Arvind Malhotra for elevation.

On January 4, 2024, the SC collegium sent the recommendation back to the HC Chief Justice for "reconsideration". On January 16, the Union Law Minister wrote to the HC Chief Justice, requesting that fresh recommendations be made for Singh and Malhotra.

However, on April 23, the HC collegium recommended two other judicial officers for

that the HC collegium had ignored their seniority (as the two senior-most district judges in the state) by not first considering them again before recommending two other officers.

The SC had in both the Second and Third Judges cases highlighted the importance of considering seniority among judges while making recommendations for appointments. In a report submitted to the SC by the Registrar General of the Himachal Pradesh HC, it was revealed that the HC Chief Justice had written to the SC collegium on the "suitability" of appointing the two judicial officers on March 6, 2024. The HC argued that this was in "full compliance" of the SC collegium's January 4 resolution, which was addressed only to the HC Chief Justice.

### What did the SC decide?

**MAINTAINABILITY:** The SC first decided

ments. Relying on the Second and Third Judges cases, the court held that this case was limited to whether there was "effective consultation" after the SC collegium's January 4 resolution, and had "nothing to do with the 'merits' of the officers in question".

**PROPER PROCEDURE:** The second issue was whether the HC Chief Justice individually sending a letter (on March 6) could qualify as "effective consultation".

The court held that even though the SC collegium's January 4 resolution was addressed to only the HC Chief Justice, "the language therein by itself cannot be understood as permitting the Chief Justice...to act on his own, in matters of recommendation or reconsideration, for elevation to the HC Bench".

The court ruled that the decision must be made only after "collective consultation amongst the three Constitutional functionar-

## EXPLAINED LAW



"The social goods associated with markets — above all the economic growth to which Sir Kair and Rachel Reeves have pinned the nation's hopes — must be balanced with values of care, respect for life and a sense of responsibility in those with power over others."

— THE GUARDIAN

# THE IDEAS PAGE

## The books our children need

There has been an improvement in the quality, range of children's literature in India. But more needs to be done to turn the fledgling gains into a much-needed cultural movement



DESHIKAAL  
BY YOGENDRA YADAV

LAST MONTH, I received a beautiful gift: An exquisitely designed, produced and packaged box of 'Samay Post', containing 14 children's books written by Gulzar with fabulous illustrations by Allen Shaw. Most people don't know that our renowned lyricist-poet is also one of the finest storytellers for children. My favourites in this series are the nonsensical rhymes in *Upatung* (which reminds one of Sukumar Ray's *Abol Tabol*) and *Ye Kavve Kale* that demystifies how the crows took their colour. This latest offering from Ektara (Imprint: Jugu) was no exception.

Earlier, too, I was captivated by the range and quality of their publications for children — mega picture books, posters, poem cards, story books and short novels besides *Mito and Cycle* magazines — at their stall at the last World Book Fair. This was a marked improvement over the days when my wife and I desperately searched for quality Indian books for our two children, now 25 and 20, so that they do not become monolingual English-speaking kids, cut off from their Bengali and Hindi heritage. We found that Hindi publications were only a wee-bit better than my childhood staple of bland and text-heavy stories of Akbar-Birbal, Chacha Chowdhary, Tenali Ram and Panchatantra or comics like *Vetor* or *Amar Chitra Katha* (an occasional glossy Soviet book was a bonus) and magazines like *Champak*, *Parag* and *Lotpot*. We discovered that the two public sector publishers, the National Book Trust (NBT) and Children's Book Trust (CBT) had some decent titles — like *Rupa Haathi* by Mickey Patel — for our children. Occasionally, we found some quality books by independent publishers.

*Mulu Bhalu* by Kamla Bhasin remained the favourite bedtime story for both of our kids. They discovered *Tulika* Books through *Ikti Doki*, a lovely folktale from Maharashtra and audiobooks of *Karadi Tales* through the value of "Raja Kapi", the monkey king. *Katha* Books brought for them tales from other Indian languages. But we had to hunt for these new publications. Such exceptions aside, the overall quality of storytelling, illustrations and production of children's books in India did not stand up to the competition from Europe and America.

This was a pity in a country with a rich oral and written heritage of mythologies and storytelling. We found to our shame that none of our books were a patch on *The Gruffalo* or other books by Julia Donaldson. We finally lost this cultural battle to Harry Potter. Reluctant as I am, I had to concede. Such exceptions taken by the Golden Fortresses were overtaken by the quality of children's literature is a measure of the quality of life of a nation, we were not doing very well.

Two months ago, I landed up in Chennai at the office-cum-shop of *Tulika* Books, one of the pioneers of the new wave of children's books, to see if the state of children's literature had changed from those times. Indeed it had. Building on the success of early publications like *Ikti Doki*, *Tulika* now has a large collection of a thousand-plus titles across nine languages. *Tulika* founder Radhika Menon gave



C.R. Sasikumar

me an overview of the big changes in children's books in India, mainly those published in English. Besides some big global names, it is mainly small and independent publications (like Ektara, Ekavya, Pratham, Katha, Karadi Tales, Tara, Pickle Yolk, Duckbill and Talking Cub) that lead a new wave of experimental and innovative trends in children's literature that reflect Indian ethos and reality.

A recent volume *Children's Books: An Indian Story*, edited by Shailaja Menon and Sandhya Rao, helps us to go beyond anecdotal evidence and see the big picture of this new trend. The last three decades have seen a sudden expansion in the sheer volume of children's books, also reflected in an expansion in the number of publishers, authors, illustrators, etc. The readers have expanded too, as there is a class now that can afford to go beyond textbooks. There is also a wider range of genres including graphic novels and age-group-specific books, including young-adult literature. And there is a discernible improvement in the quality of design, translation and production. At the same time, the two editors conclude that "given India's large, diverse and multilingual character, both the production and consumption of children's books are mere drops in terms of actual needs".

Children's books (other than textbooks) amount to just about one per cent of all books produced in India. Their producers and consumers are still largely "middle" class (a euphemism for the top 10 per cent) and "upper" caste urban Indians. It is hard to make a career out of writing for children. This market is still dominated by imported or Western books, poorly produced adaptations of mythological books or novelty or activity books. For me, the most concerning part is that much of this upsurge is limited to English. Hindi is a partial exception. Besides Ektara, Ektara (the publisher of *Chalkmak Magazine*) has moved beyond educational publications to open their "Pitara" of imaginative story and picture books. Pratham Books, Katha and Tulika offer good Hindi books as a part of their titles in multiple languages. I believe the state of affairs is poorer in other Indian languages except a strong legacy (of *Gujubhai Badheka* in Gujarati), famous writers (like Sukumar Ray in Bengali) and movements (like KSSP in Kerala). This is borrowed wisdom and I would be happy to be wrong, but it seems that the new wave of children's books is very weak or

non-existent in other languages, except for occasional pieces in children's magazines that most languages still have. We may have now reached a tipping point. This fledgling new wave of children's books can be consolidated into a cultural movement that can open up a better future for coming generations. Here are four things you and I can do to make this happen. First, as parents, we can buy books for children, use books as birthday presents and "return gifts". We can focus our purchase on Indian books, not for any nationalist reason but for the simple reason that children relate better to books that reflect their own lived experiences. But buying books is not enough. We must read books to and with children. And ensure that children read books in their "mother tongue", the Indian language spoken at home and in the locality. Remember, children learn best in their mother tongue and multilingual children are better learners. Second, established authors can write more for children. This is not a lower, simple or didactic form of literature. Vinod Kumar Shukla, arguably the leading Hindi writer of our times, shifted his focus to writing for children and young adults. Others can follow his lead. Third, "civil society" and private philanthropy can support this effort by subsidising the cost of producing quality books in Indian languages, supporting workshops for book writing and fellowships to authors and illustrators for books. The Sahitya Akademi has instituted Bal Sahitya Puruskar, but we also need hundreds of awards to be instituted in every language for authors, illustrators, designers, editors and publishers of children's books. I hope Purnima, Telugu, Tamil and Bengali NRIs who are nostalgic about their language are reading this. Finally, the government can step in with well-funded programmes on public libraries and bulk purchasing of quality children's books. Karnataka's Revitalisation of Rural Public Libraries could serve as a model for the rest of the country, especially Hindi states that lag in the culture of public libraries. If a fraction of the money spent on free textbooks is devoted to supplying colourful and joyful storybooks to school libraries and anganwadis, we could serve our future generations better.

Yadav is member, Swarnaj India and National Governor of Bharat Jodo Abhiyan

## A win-win for academia, industry

Anusandhan National Research Foundation is a crucial step towards becoming a knowledge-driven society



AJAI CHOWDHURY

ON JULY 23, 2024, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's announcement of operationalising the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF), a move that was five years in the making since its first mention, was a pivotal moment for India's research ecosystem.

Established under the ANRF Act, 2023, the foundation aims to fund, coordinate, and promote research across India's universities and colleges, which have long suffered from a lack of infrastructure, particularly in state-run institutions. This initiative is a crucial step in pushing India towards becoming a knowledge-driven society, following the model of research powerhouses like the US, Germany, South Korea, and Israel.

One of the primary goals of ANRF is to address the infrastructure gap in state and central universities, where 95 per cent of students are enrolled but research capabilities are often non-existent. The foundation aims to facilitate timely disbursement of funds, reduce bureaucratic hurdles, and foster industry-academia collaboration. With a total budget of Rs 50,000 crore over five years, the government's contribution is Rs 14,000 crore, while the rest must be raised from non-governmental sources like industry and philanthropists. This approach mirrors the successful model in the US, where much of R&D funding comes from the private sector.

Inspired by the US National Science Foundation (NSF), ANRF aims to create a similar ecosystem where high-risk, cutting-edge research can flourish within academic institutions. In the US, once a proof-of-concept is established in academia, industries often step in to further develop the technology, creating a win-win scenario for both academia and industry. Universities in the US have excellent technology transfer offices, which help faculty set up companies and consult for industries, and this is something ANRF aspires to replicate in India. By creating these frameworks, ANRF can ensure that academia remains a hub for innovation while industry benefits from cutting-edge technology ready for commercialisation.

The decision to bring ANRF into action aligns well with the goals outlined in the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, which

emphasised the need to make India a knowledge-based economy. Given that India has over 4.3 crore students spread across 1,168 universities and 45,473 colleges, it is essential to bridge the gap between teaching and research. Centrally funded institutions like IITs and IIMs, though prestigious, enroll less than 1 per cent of the total student population. ANRF seeks to address this "missing middle" by supporting state universities and other under-funded institutions, thereby democratising access to quality research infrastructure.

Coordination is another crucial challenge that ANRF aims to tackle. Currently, several ministries, including defence, agriculture, and health run separate R&D programmes, often leading to duplication and inefficiency. ANRF will serve as a coordinating body, ensuring that resources are used efficiently and R&D efforts across sectors are aligned. This streamlined approach is expected to make India's R&D landscape more cohesive and impactful.

The reliance on non-governmental funding is a bold yet necessary move for ANRF. Industry participation ensures that research aligns with market needs, while philanthropists can drive research in social or public good areas. By involving industry, India can address current R&D funding challenges, such as general financial regulations (GFR) and cumbersome paperwork, which often delay the release of funds and stifle innovation.

ANRF's focus on supporting lower Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs) is also vital. Academic institutions are better suited for this stage of research, where capital requirements are lower, failure rates are higher, and students can contribute significantly to long-term projects. The government's recent announcement of a Rs 1 lakh-crore corpus for higher TRL research in Focused Research Organisations (FROs) and deep-tech startups complements ANRF's efforts. Together, these two initiatives aim to cover the entire spectrum of research from basic to industry-driven development, creating a comprehensive R&D ecosystem.

ANRF is undeniably a step in the right direction. The move is a major leap forward for India's research capabilities, drawing inspiration from global best practices while addressing the unique challenges of India's higher education and research system. With the right execution, ANRF has the potential to position India as a knowledge-driven economy, paving the way for sustainable and inclusive development.

The writer is Founder HCL, Chairman, Mission Government Board, National Quantum Mission

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### PERSEVERANCE IS KEY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Building on success' (IE, September 9). The prestigious science journal *Nature* has rightly hailed the success of the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM). Relentless and continuous efforts to make areas Open Defecation Free (ODF) have yielded long-term positive results, bringing down infant deaths. By making SBM a mass movement and roping in celebrities to spread the message, the government has created an impactful, effective campaign. Similar endeavours to provide clean piped water to households are also critical moves towards robust health. As the editorial points out, it is not so much about the annual statistical data pertaining to such programmes, as their long-term, visible effects. Perseverance here is the key.

Vijai Pant, Hapur

### LEARN FROM CHINA

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'India generates highest plastic pollution in world' (IE, September 9). The conclusion of the latest research comes as no surprise given the increasing use of plastic in our daily lives. Even the two-year-old ban on single-use plastic appears to have stagnated. Corruption, bureaucratic incompetence, and a lack of political will contributed to regulations being largely ineffective. China, the world's largest producer and consumer of plastic, banned SUPs the same year we did but has made remarkable strides in tackling plastic pollution through stringent measures. It banned the import of recyclable plastic trash and invested extensively in waste-to-energy and alternative biodegradable technologies. We need to act resolutely. The government has acquired a new dimension in the form of microplastic—invisible plastic particles embedded in everything we consume.

Kamal Laddha, Bengaluru

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Government is not the nation' (IE, September 9). Our nation is the nation of those who hold power to account is at odds with the ideals of our national movement. There is a pressing need to remind ourselves that the foreign tyrants, who were intolerant of any criticism, are long gone, and we are blessed with the right to freedom of speech. Though a remark critical of the ruling dispensation may make it uneasy, it cannot be termed "anti-national". People in power rushing to describe any criticism of themselves or their policies forget they were critical of the then government while in Opposition. Was their hitting out at the then government an unpatriotic act? To demand unquestioned loyalty from the citizenry is detrimental to democracy. By doubting its critics' loyalty to the nation, the government is resorting to a time-tested trick to hide its failure in fulfilling the promises made to its electorate.

SH Quadri, Bikaner

### WHY BAN THE FILM?

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Let it play' (IE, September 9). The Emergency days were traumatic for all sections of society, including the media. The objection has been raised by some to the film's failure in fulfilling the promises made to its electorate. The Censor Board must certify the film with the necessary cuts. *Padmavati* was subjected to several changes by the Censor Board as a means of pandering to Rajput sentiments. The film, *Uda Patang*, was certified with just one cut of a scene. If the film on Kashmir is to be shown, saying that such painful episodes should not be whitewashed, then why ban *Emergency*?

SS Paul, Nadia



DEEPAK K SINGH

WHEN SHEIKH HASINA dialled New Delhi on August 5, with a frantic appeal to be allowed into Indian territory, the Government of India's decision to allow her safe passage was, perhaps, the only available option under the circumstances. What weighed in favour of the Centre's decision to allow Hasina into the country was, no doubt, her unambiguously warm and friendly relationship with India over the years, and her crusade against religious extremism and terrorism, resulting in a severe crackdown on anti-India militant outfits operating from Bangladesh. In sharp contrast, its subsequent decision to deny asylum to the persecuted Bangladeshi minority Hindus in India goes against its consistently held position of making India the "natural home of persecuted Hindus around the world". Reports continue to pour in about the ongoing religious persecution of minority groups in Bangladesh, with scores of Hindu teachers being forced to resign and other officials and academics being racially profiled.

Reportedly, there have been as many as 205 cases of attacks on members of the minority communities in Bangladesh after August 5, with five confirmed cases of deaths. Neem Chandra Bhownik, president of Bangladesh Hindu, Buddhist, Christian Unity Council in an interview (5 dead, 200 injured; Fear grips Hindus in Bangladesh, leaders meet Yonus today, IE, August 14) said: "We have been getting reports of vandalism, intimidations and threats on telephone from 52 of the 64 districts; the situation is dynamic, we are constantly trying to verify them."

## By withholding refuge

India's unwillingness to give asylum to Bangladeshi Hindus signals a policy shift

The denial of refuge to the persecuted minority groups is also inexplicable given the fact that it is the same government that had recently enacted the controversial Indian Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019. The CAA, which is a law of the land now, allows members of religious minorities — the Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Parsis, and Christians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who came to India before December 31, 2014 — to apply for the grant of Indian citizenship on grounds of religious persecution in their respective countries. While the central government might find itself hamstrung by its own cut-off date in extending the benefits of such a law, it could still have granted temporary refuge to the beleaguered Bangladeshi minorities seeking asylum. So out of sync with its stand is the current practice that some vocal pro-BJP supporters have begun asking why the government is not accepting the persecuted Hindu despite mounting evidence of atrocities against them.

However, the likelihood of granting refuge to the persecuted minority Hindus, about whom much concern is being expressed by government functionaries as well as members and supporters of the NDA, is rather slim. As evident from the official Indian government's response posted on X by Home Minister Amit Shah, "In the wake of the ongoing situation in Bangladesh, the Modi government has constituted a committee [instead] to monitor the situation in the strife-torn country and along the India-Bangladesh border. The committee will maintain communication channels with their counterpart authorities in Bangladesh to ensure the safety and security of Indian nationals, Hindus, and other minority communities living there. The committee will be headed by the ADG, Border Security Force, Eastern Command." Reportedly, the government has deployed BSF personnel at the land borders who have "peacefully failed" an attempt by hundreds of Bangladeshi Hindus to enter India.

Denying persecuted Hindus, as well as other minority groups, a refuge in India lies in the face of its otherwise impeccable track record of being a generous host to refugees. The spate of recent attacks on minorities in Bangladesh constitutes solid legal ground for the grant of asylum even though India is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol. Not being a signatory does not absolve India of its commitment under customary international law to extend the much-needed succour to hapless asylum seekers.

Further, granting refuge to persecuted religious minorities from Bangladesh would have only been in line with India's past track record, which remained consistent regardless

The writer is a professor, Department of Political Science, Punjab University, Chandigarh and author of *Stateless in South Asia: The Chakmas between Bangladesh and India*



# Smart industrial cities

A blueprint for sustainable economic growth

Pawan Goenka

The world is stepping into a new phase of industrialisation. Popularly known as Industry 5.0, this phase will see humans and machines working together, improving the efficiency of industrial production manifold. It is therefore commendable that the Centre plans to set up 12 Smart Industrial Cities under the National Industrial Corridor Development Programme.

India's manufacturing sector, which currently contributes 17 per cent to GDP, is targeted to grow to 25 per cent, driven by the 'Make in India' initiative. The government also has a goal of increasing exports from 10-11 key sectors, including automobiles, space, medical devices and textiles, to \$1 trillion by 2030. The proposed smart industrial cities will play a crucial role in transforming our ambitious vision into reality.

These smart industrial cities are not just about industrial expansion — they are a blueprint for India's future. The strategic location of these cities in regions beyond the traditional metro hubs will ensure that the roots of economic development will spread evenly across the nation. This shift is critical, as it moves away from the concentrated development of the past that was limited to certain urban regions and opens up opportunities in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities. Regions like Gaya in Bihar and Zaheerabad in Telangana are poised to become the new centres of economic activity, fostering growth and reducing regional disparities.

**ENHANCED JOB CREATION**  
One of the most significant impacts will be on India's demographic dividend. With over 25 lakh youth graduating every year, there is a need to ensure employment, which will direct their knowledge for the nation's growth. At the same time, the existing workforce needs to be reskilled and upskilled to prepare them for the transition to Industry 5.0.

The smart industrial cities will not only create millions of direct and indirect jobs but will also play a crucial role in upskilling and reskilling the workforce. These cities are designed to be hubs of innovation and learning, where our talent can be trained to adapt to new technologies.

The focus on infrastructure in these cities extends beyond just



MODEL CITIES. Growth engines

industrial setups. By integrating "plug-and-play" infrastructure, they will drastically reduce the time and effort required to establish a new manufacturing unit. This innovative approach will make India an attractive destination for both domestic and international investors. With operations set up swiftly, businesses can drive productivity and economic output at an accelerated pace.

With climate change on the world's agenda, the smart industrial cities will be designed with sustainability at its core. The inclusion of effluent treatment plants, recycled water systems, and green energy sources underscores a commitment to reducing environmental impact.

The modern approach to urban planning in these cities will also include the "walk-to-work" concept. By integrating residential areas with industrial zones, these cities will create environments where work-life balance is a reality, not just a concept. This, in turn, will lead to higher productivity and a more satisfied workforce.

The rapidly growing space sector is an opportunity to contribute to the development of these smart industrial cities. The space sector can participate by setting up advanced manufacturing capabilities in some of these cities, particularly in the areas of aerospace engineering, satellite production, and related high-tech industries. Additionally, the use of space-based services in planning and management can enhance the efficiency and sustainability of these industrial hubs.

These will send a powerful signal to global investors that India is ready for modern industrialisation. The strategic placement of these cities along major highways, ports and airports to ease connectivity with integrated Dedicated Freight Corridors will frame them as hubs of global trade and commerce.

The writer is Chairman, IN-SPACE



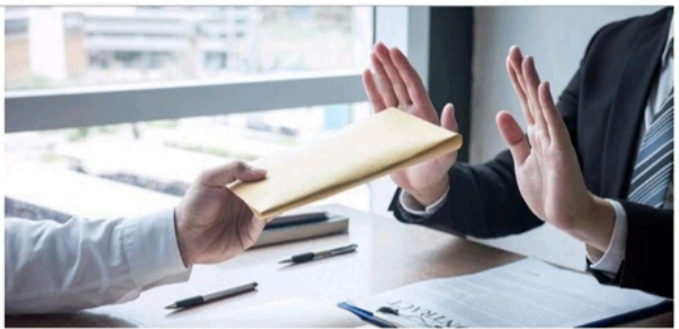
K.R. SRIVATS

The recent controversy surrounding Madhabi Puri Buch, the chairperson of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), has brought to the forefront a crucial issue that plagues India's regulatory ecosystem: the absence of a comprehensive and enforceable code of conduct for chairpersons and members of regulatory bodies. Allegations against Buch, which include, among others, receiving rental income from a firm linked to a pharmaceutical company under SEBI investigation, have raised questions about conflicts of interest and the integrity of India's capital market regulator.

When the Congress party has called for an independent probe, the braver issue at hand is the need to establish clear, transparent, and enforceable ethical guidelines for those who hold positions of power in regulatory bodies such as SEBI, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (IRDAI), the Competition Commission of India (CCI), the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA) and others. These bodies hold the mandate to regulate vast sectors of the economy, ensuring their smooth functioning, transparency, and accountability. When their leadership is alleged to be compromised, even by the appearance of impropriety, the consequences ripple across the economy, affecting investor confidence, market stability, and public trust in the regulatory framework.

**COMPREHENSIVE CODE**  
Regulatory bodies in India wield immense influence over financial markets, competition regulation, corporate governance, and consumer protection. They are entrusted with safeguarding public interest by ensuring compliance with laws, maintaining market integrity, and upholding fair practices. However, the trust that the public, businesses, and the government place in these bodies rests heavily on the perception of their impartiality and independence. A formal and enforceable code of conduct for chairpersons and members of these bodies would serve as a critical tool in maintaining the integrity of these institutions.

As the current SEBI controversy illustrates, conflicts of interest — whether real or perceived — are among the most serious threats to regulatory integrity. Chairpersons and members of regulatory bodies are privy to confidential information and have significant influence over key decisions. A robust code of conduct must mandate full disclosure of financial interests, previous associations, and any relationships that may create a conflict. Furthermore, it should include mechanisms for recusal in cases where such conflicts exist. The mere act of transferring investments to a spouse, as



# Needed, a code of conduct for regulatory chiefs

**NET EFFECT.** This will address conflicts of interest and preserve institutional integrity

alleged in Buch's case, is insufficient to issue a clean chit. Financial transparency must be absolute.

Regulatory leaders often come from backgrounds in banking, finance, civil services or industry, where they may have accumulated wealth, shares, or property. This creates potential conflicts when they are tasked with regulating sectors in which they have financial stakes.

A comprehensive code should set strict guidelines on financial conduct, including the mandatory divestment of holdings in regulated entities, restrictions on receiving income from entities under regulation, and even post-retirement cooling-off periods. Such measures would align India with global best practices, where regulators are required to sever financial ties with industries they oversee.

**REGULATORY CAPTURE**  
Regulatory capture occurs when those tasked with regulation act in the interest of the entities they are supposed to regulate rather than the public good. India's regulatory bodies have often been criticised for their leniency towards big corporations and industries with substantial political influence. A well-defined code of conduct, backed by an independent oversight mechanism, would act as a safeguard against

**A well-defined code of conduct, backed by an independent oversight mechanism, would ensure that the regulators remain answerable to the public and not to vested interests**

regulatory capture, ensuring that the regulators remain answerable to the public and not to vested interests.

While transparency and independence are crucial, accountability is equally important. Regulatory heads should be held to the highest standards of accountability, with clear provisions in the code of conduct for investigating and addressing misconduct or unethical behaviour.

This would require setting up independent ethics committees with the power to investigate allegations of misconduct, impose sanctions, or recommend dismissal where necessary. The current controversy surrounding SEBI's leadership underscores the need for such a body to investigate conflicts of interest impartially and independently. Ultimately, the integrity of regulatory bodies directly impacts public trust in the financial and economic system. India's financial markets have grown significantly in recent years, with over 10 crore Indians now holding investments in various forms. These investors deserve a regulatory system that they can trust, free from any hint of bias or corruption.

A code of conduct would not only protect the public interest but also strengthen India's financial markets by bolstering confidence in the regulatory framework.

In the absence of institutionalised mechanisms for conflict disclosures by heads of regulatory bodies, past instances of ethical conduct by regulators have been more a matter of personal choice rather than institutional mandate. For example, former SEBI chairpersons M Damodaran and CB Bhavne to great lengths to avoid even the appearance of impropriety. Damodaran sold his shares in State Bank

of India upon taking over UTI, and Bhavne recused himself from matters involving the National Securities Depository Ltd, where he had formerly been chairman. These examples demonstrate that ethical leadership is possible — but institutionalising it through a formal code of conduct would make it mandatory, rather than discretionary.

SEBI at least has a 'Code of Conflict of Interests for Members of Board' even though the disclosures thereunder are confidential, defeating the very purpose of having such Code in place in the first instance. Sectoral regulators such as PFRDA and IRDAI have not published any such Codes on their websites, leave alone making disclosures on conflicts public. Similarly, CCI — a market regulator with jurisdiction across all sectors of the economy and having vast control on M&As — is yet to publish a similar Code for its Chairperson and Members and make public the potential areas of conflicts.

The current allegations against SEBI's chairperson have cast a shadow over the credibility of India's market regulator and have raised broader questions about governance and ethics in regulatory bodies. To restore confidence, the government must act decisively by implementing a comprehensive code of conduct for all chairpersons and members of regulatory bodies and ensure they are prominently published on the websites of the regulatory bodies. This code should emphasise transparency, independence, financial probity, and accountability. Without such safeguards in place, the integrity of India's regulatory framework will remain vulnerable, and the trust of the public, businesses, market participants and investors will be at risk.

## thehindubusinessline.

### TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

September 10, 2004

#### HC asks Zee, ESPN to make fresh bids

The Bombay High Court suggested ESPN-Star Sports and Zee TV make fresh and final bids for the rights to broadcast national and international cricket matches to be played in India between October 2004 and September 2008. The court said, rights will be granted to the highest bidder and no further appeals will be entertained.

#### Govt to amend laws to facilitate merger of PSBs

The Finance Minister, Mr P Chidambaram, today said that the Government would encourage consolidation within public sector banks and would help bring about a favourable legislative framework that would facilitate mergers. However, he said that the decision on the actual process of mergers would be left to the boards of the banks.

#### PM for strategy to enhance high economic growth

The Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, underlined the urgent need for a strategy that puts in place corrective measures to achieve a sustained high economic growth rate. Dr Singh said this would accommodate a greater degree of inclusiveness and lessen the sense of alienation among people.

# Protectionism isn't an effective path to inclusiveness: WTO

Philip Blenkinsop

Import tariffs tend to disproportionately hit low-income households, the World Trade Organization said in a report on Monday, countering what it sees as backlash against open markets and rising protectionism.

WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala said the 2024 World Trade Report reaffirmed trade's role in reducing poverty and sharing prosperity "contrary to the currently fashionable notion" that trade was creating a more unequal world. Globally, restrictive trade policies often have a disproportionate impact

on low-income households, women and on smaller companies that may struggle with increased fixed costs of trade, the WTO report said.

The US is poised to hike tariffs on a range of Chinese imports, including a quadrupling of the rate for electric vehicles, while Canada has matched the US EV rate and the European Union had introduced its own EV duties. China has responded with investigations into EU dairy, pork and brandy imports and canola from Canada. US presidential candidate Donald Trump has proposed a 10 per cent tariff on all imports and a higher rate for those from China.

The WTO report said that on the



TARIFF HIKE. Hurts the poor more

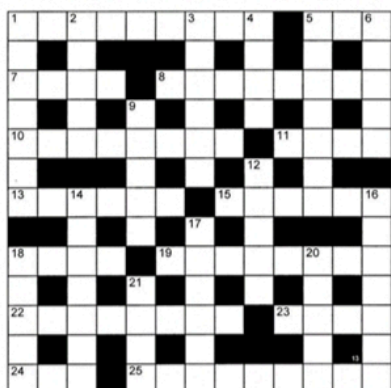
whole, low-income households typically faced a greater burden from higher tariffs.

In the US, consumer goods from China that are now exempt from import tariffs are predominantly

shipped to low-income regions, benefiting poorer households. Richer households consume a greater share of imports from high-income economies, the WTO report said.

Protectionist policies may fail, the report said, because they often lead to higher domestic prices that reduce consumption. Tariffs then prove politically hard to remove even when no protection for a sector is needed, locking in higher prices. The WTO report concludes that protectionism is not an effective path to inclusiveness, but an expensive way to protect specific jobs that can raise costs for other sectors and risk retaliation from disgruntled partners.

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2522



### EASY

#### ACROSS

1. Prudent, thrifty (9)
5. In what manner (3)
7. Annulus (4)
8. Given in recognition of merit (8)
10. Sifting sugar etc over (8)
11. Use breath to cool (4)
13. Relate minutely (6)
15. Start journey (3,3)
17. Triangular piece of land (4)
19. Continued existence when others have gone (8)
21. Work beyond normal hours (8)
23. Operatic vocal solo (4)
24. Also (3)
25. Publicity, public exposure (9)

#### DOWN

1. Marched up and down to show off (7)
2. Sixteenth of pound (5)
3. (They) leave the stage (6)
4. Rip (4)
5. Spanish gentleman (7)
6. Woman surviving husband (5)
7. On the other hand; once more (5)
8. Work at loom (5)
9. Submarine weapon (7)
10. Something deceptive (7)
11. Peak (6)
12. Thin coarse mortar (5)
13. Spirit, animation (5)
14. Stupefy, daze (4)

### NOT SO EASY

#### ACROSS

1. Thrifty, it could portend change when about six (9)
5. In what way could this be a greeting from a Sioux? (3)
7. Give one a bell for a cycle (4)
8. Paid for what one did till returned by editor (8)
10. Doctor moving to one side when removing it from bottom (8)
11. It's a sudden catastrophe: cool it! (4)
13. Small part, or lead it replaces (6)
15. Start one's journey with radio not working (3,3)
18. How bull will produce blood? (4)
19. Ability to pull through virus trouble, values being halved (8)
22. Extra work being finished, back-issue is produced (8)
23. A right one has to a song for an opera-singer (4)
24. It is in excess as well (3)
25. Ill repute of one Tory it replaces (9)

#### DOWN

1. Marched up and down the line of shops with daughter (7)
2. Big cat to weigh so little (5)
3. They leave the stage when former tune is played (6)
4. Sign of sorrow that looks as if it will very quickly go (4)
5. Gentleman from Real Madrid who concealed goal he achieved? (7)
6. Woman whose husband's late (5)
7. A Georgia is at home for the second time (5)
9. Make material move to and fro (5)
14. It is related to skate or tope moving round front of drogue? (7)
16. Deceptive appearance of Autumn starts after cold year (7)
17. At the top French gentlemen appear in coat and trousers (6)
18. Rug to be put out in order to plaster between tiles (5)
20. Tucking into a clever venison dish with gusto (5)
21. No end of a showy performance to astonish one (4)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2521

**ACROSS** 1. Girdle 9. Account 10. Cider 11. Drip 12. Fall 13. You 15. Gear 16. Weak 19. Aid 21. Worm 22. Pica 24. Gloat 25. Drastic 26. Liners 27. Shades  
**DOWN** 1. Guardian angel 2. Rocking 3. Loud 5. Excelled 6. Toddy 7. Circumstances 8. Straw 14. Tap-water 17. Knitted 18. Grade 20. Drown 23. Cash



Opinion

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2024

## Lessons from Dunzo

Even the most promising start-ups stumble if they neglect financial prudence, lose focus on core strengths

LATE LAST MONTH, Dunzo sacked 75% of its people, reducing the total number of employees to just 50. It didn't come as surprise as the once marquee name in hyperlocal delivery had reported a staggering loss of ₹1,801 crore in FY23, a near four-fold increase from ₹464 crore in the previous fiscal year. This ongoing financial strain had led to delays in salary payments for both current and former employees, as well as outstanding dues to vendors. For quite some time, Dunzo has been desperately trying to reduce its costs and extend the runway. It has also been frantically searching for capital to survive, while also trying to clawback profits to settle its mounting liabilities.

The precipitous fall in the company's fortunes left many perplexed, considering its once-impressive valuation of \$757 million and the backing of big names like Reliance Retail, Google, Blacksoil India, and Blume Ventures. Dunzo debuted in 2016, tapping into a nascent demand for efficient hyperlocal deliveries. By 2021, it boasted millions of users, seemingly poised for continued dominance. Amid the euphoria, what attracted little attention is that even in 2021 when it was relatively better off, the firm was losing ₹7.5 for every rupee earned in revenue. The last straw that broke the camel's back, however, was Dunzo's hurried entry into the quick commerce space.

There are several lessons here for start-ups in general. Lesson number 1: Dunzo's pivot to quick commerce, without establishing operational profitability in its core hyperlocal business, was a blunder. The takeaway is that even the most promising start-ups can stumble if they neglect financial prudence, lose focus on their core strengths, and fail to adapt to evolving market dynamics. Quick commerce demanded a different operational infrastructure, requiring significant investment in dark stores. Dunzo simply didn't have the money and expertise to spend so extensively. Result: Despite investing over \$400 million and establishing around 130 dark stores, it failed to secure a significant market share in quick commerce. So it's important to establish operational profitability in the core business before venturing into new segments.

One mistake led to another. In its desperation to secure funding, it turned to Reliance for a \$240-million funding round, relinquishing a 26% stake. This investment provided temporary relief, but there was a lack of a cultural fit between the two. As a result, it struggled to secure additional funds due to valuation disputes with Reliance. So lesson no 2 is that start-ups should choose investors whose interests align with their growth — money alone should not be the criterion.

These lessons are all the more important now as the low tide of funding has exposed the ugly underbelly of the start-up ecosystem in India — financial irregularities, forensic auditing, glaring absence of corporate governance, acts of omission and commission. Those intoxicating days are gone now, so start-ups will have to spend frugally, rework business models, and focus on sustainable profit. Investors are now willing to dish out cash unless start-ups show better operating discipline and make the unit economics work. Setting up a company is no longer just about that amazing sensation that comes along with creating something and sharing it with the world. It's good when lots of people are using your product and gaining value from it. What's not great is when all those feelings and happy product users don't turn into a viable business.

## Google's ad business is tailor-made to be split

ONE PROBLEM THAT quickly became apparent when Google lost its blockbuster antitrust trial last month was the question of an appropriate remedy.

While the Justice Department is considering calling for a judge to break up the company, it is difficult to imagine what that might practically look like and how such a move would do much to loosen Google's dominance of online search.

In the search giant's next antitrust battle, however, the potential lines of separation are much more distinct. On Monday, a court in Alexandria, Virginia, will sit down for the first day in the Justice Department's case targeting Google's advertising business, which accounts for 80% of revenue for its parent company, Alphabet Inc.

Google created its advertising arm through shrewd acquisitions, most notably publisher ad platform DoubleClick, which it bought for \$3.1 billion in 2007. Today, it offers the entire tech stack underpinning the convoluted chain of bidding, selling, user targeting, and placement. Today, it is rare (though certainly not impossible) to visit a website without seeing an ad that hasn't been handled by Google at some point in the chain.

The question is how many points of that chain Google should control. Right now, it's all of them. Google offers a tool for publishers to sell ad space, a tool for advertisers to buy that space, and, in the middle, the software that mediates it all.

Advertisers or publishers can certainly use alternative services to do each of these things. However, Google is accused of using its power to give better deals to companies that use Google's tools for all or most of them. And, in the case of its own highly valuable properties like Google Search and YouTube, advertisers must go through Google's ad platforms, cementing its position further, prosecutors contend.

Last week, the UK's Competition and Markets Authority, investigating the same concerns as the US, said: "Due to the highly integrated nature of Google's ad tech business, the CMA has provisionally found that Google's conduct has also prevented rival publishers and servers from being able to compete effectively [...] harming competition in this market."

Google can challenge these findings and make changes to satisfy the CMA. But if the regulator's view becomes final, Google could face a fine of up to 10% of its global revenue. In the US, the punishment might be even more severe. The Justice Department, backed by a coalition of 18 state attorneys general, is calling for a forced divestiture of Google's ad tech stack, separating those components into individual companies. The EU is calling for the same.

Of course, Google opposes these moves. Its first task in Virginia is to convince the judge that its online advertising market share has been overstated. Its lawyers will also argue that Google should not be forced to give competitors access to its proprietary advertising tech. The trial is expected to take weeks and feature testimony from senior Google executives and figures from the ad tech and publishing industries.

If Google loses, it would be the second time in a year that the company has been deemed an illegal monopoly, having escaped such judgments until now.

In the search case, the Justice Department has been denied more time to develop its proposed remedies, an understandable request given that the ruling has long-time Google watchers and antitrust experts scratching their heads over the smartest way forward.

The ad tech stack is a different story. It will be much easier to devise and then explain to a judge where those separation lines can be drawn and what the immediate competitive impact might be.

Now, whether or not forcing Google to divest parts of its ad tech will seriously dent its advertising business is not entirely clear. Its competitive advantage of user data, web analytics, and browsing habits would remain untouched and in high demand. But it would mark a turning point in the new era of antitrust enforcement in the US, the first time regulators have successfully forced the break-up of at least part of a big tech group.

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## TECHPROOF EXPRESS

AI OPTIMISATION IS THE NEW FRONTIER IN REPUTATION MANAGEMENT FOR PEOPLE AND COMPANIES

# SEO making way for AIO

AS GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL intelligence (AI) becomes increasingly embedded in our lives, how we search for information, engage with brands, and form opinions are rapidly changing. Search engines like Google, Bing, and DuckDuckGo, once the undisputed gatekeepers of the digital world, are no longer the sole arbiters of information access. AI tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and others are poised to take centre stage, offering a more conversational and intuitive approach to information retrieval.

This shift has given rise to a new industry: AI optimisation (AIO), which is quickly becoming as critical as search engine optimisation (SEO) has been over the past two decades. In fact, Fortune magazine says AIO may outshadow the \$68-billion SEO industry in a very period (bit.ly/4dSRSEl). Companies, aware of their online presence and concerned about how AI chatbots present their digital personas, are now looking toward AIO services to manage their AI-based reputations. But what exactly is AIO, and how can businesses and individuals harness its potential to stay ahead in the age of AI-driven searches?

Historically, SEO has been the go-to strategy for anyone looking to improve their visibility online. By tweaking websites, creating keyword-rich content, and building authoritative backlinks, businesses could climb the ranks of search engines. However, GenAI introduces a new paradigm where answers are provided in natural language, often bypassing the need for traditional search results. AI tools now present users with a single, synthesised response. Users, instead of browsing dozens of links to find answers, will get one, maybe two, responses — likely accompanied by an explanation or opinion — directly from the AI. This raises a new challenge: How can individuals and companies ensure that AI tools present them in the best possible light?

Just as SEO ensures your website



SIDDHARTH PAI

Technology consultant and venture capitalist by invitation

appears prominently in search engine results, AIO focuses on how AI systems retrieve and present information about a subject — be it a company, product, or person. AIO involves shaping how AI systems, such as chatbots or virtual assistants, understand and generate responses about specific topics. Since these AI tools rely heavily on vast data sets — from websites and databases to social media profiles and news articles — AIO aims to influence which data is picked up and how it is interpreted. The goal is to ensure AI-generated responses are accurate, relevant, and aligned with the image individuals or companies want to project.

In this light, a few things become more important, such as paying attention to AI's training data sets, content creation, correction of inaccurate data, and shaping perceptions in a structured manner. GenAI models draw from an array of sources — everything from news sites to social media comments, and even obscure blog posts. In some cases, this vast data set can pull up less-than-flattering or outdated information. With AIO, companies can take steps to curate their digital footprint more actively.

Much like SEO, creating authoritative, relevant, and high-quality content helps ensure that AI pulls from the right sources. Whether through blogs, press releases, or social media posts, consistently generating positive and accurate content increases the likelihood that AI chatbots will reflect your preferred nar-

rative. Also, if incorrect or misleading information is spreading online, AIO services can help flag and correct it. For example, contacting websites to update or remove incorrect data or building a content strategy that pushes the correct information to the forefront.

GenAI relies heavily on structured data — such as information it gleaned from corporate websites, publicly available databases, and schema tags embedded in web content.

Structured data tells the AI precisely what something is. Companies should consider enhancing their websites with structured data tags to ensure AI tools can easily identify key information. This includes specifying product details, service offerings, leadership bios, and contact information in a format that AI tools can readily access. By doing so, companies can ensure AI-generated content reflects their preferred narrative.

A critical component of AIO is the ability to monitor how AI tools discuss individuals and brands. While traditional SEO tools can show keyword rankings and website traffic, AIO services will likely evolve to offer insights into how AI platforms present certain queries and topics. This will involve AI feedback loops where tracking how GenAI systems present information on a company, product, or individual is key. Through monitoring tools, businesses can gauge if AI is producing positive, negative, or neutral content and adjust

their AIO strategy accordingly.

Separately, GenAI, despite its intelligence, can sometimes generate factually incorrect or skewed responses. AIO services will help flag these inaccuracies, allowing individuals or brands to act, be it through data correction strategies or outreach to platforms hosting the misinformation. And AI often generate opinions based on the data they consume. For businesses, managing this subjective component of AI-generated content will be crucial. AIO services will likely offer sentiment analysis tools, allowing businesses to track not only what AI systems are saying but how they're saying it. Is the AI portraying your product positively? Is it presenting a balanced view of your services? This analysis can help businesses understand AI-driven reputational risks and adjust their marketing strategies accordingly.

Many companies already use AI to handle customer queries and complaints through chatbots. AIO can help optimise these interactions, ensuring that customer-facing AI systems provide accurate, on-brand, and helpful responses that enhance the customer experience.

As AI systems become a primary interface between consumers and information, ethical considerations will play a large role in AIO. Consumers are becoming more aware of biases in AI and the potential for manipulation. Companies that openly disclose how they manage their AI reputations — by clarifying how they use AIO services and ensuring accuracy in the AI-generated information — are more likely to build trust with customers. Beyond manipulating outcomes, AIO can help companies ensure they're feeding AI systems ethically sourced, unbiased, and truthful information. This not only aligns with corporate social responsibility goals but also reduces the risk of reputational damage due to AI-generated misinformation or bias.

For those who master AIO early, the rewards will be a future-proof digital presence in an increasingly AI-centric world.

## Banking Regulation Act @75



AMOL AGRAWAL

The author teaches at Ahmedabad University

THE FINANCE MINISTER recently proposed amendments in the Banking Regulation (BR) Act, 1949. Interestingly, 2024 also marks 75 years of the BR Act, which is one of the first laws passed after India's independence.

Banking has existed in India for ages but there was no single legislation to regulate and govern the sector. After the arrival of British, the three Presidency Banks of Bengal, Bombay, and Madras were incorporated under a special government charter. The Indian Companies Act, enacted in 1850, did not include banks. The amended Act in 1913 included banks but its scope was limited. In 1930, the Central Banking Enquiry Committee recommended enacting a separate law to govern banks.

The Reserve Bank of India was established in 1935 via the RBI Act, 1934. The RBI Act, modelled on the lines of Bank of England, specified the core function of the RBI to unify currency and credit but had limited scope for bank regulation. Under the RBI Act, the central bank could inspect banks to include them in the Second Schedule of the Act. The Act also specified that banks should publish weekly returns for watching maintenance of the cash reserve ratio.

In 1937, the Indian Companies Act was amended to incorporate recommendations from the Central Banking Enquiry Committee and suggestions from the RBI. For the first time, the banking company was defined and only those

businesses which did banking according to the definition were allowed to function as banks. The amendments also specified minimum capital for banks (₹50,000 and above) and granted moratorium to them in difficult times. The Act also barred managing agencies from banking. This lack of comprehensive legislation and regulation was exposed by the failure of the Travancore National and Quilon Bank in 1938. Then RBI Governor James Taylor decided to establish a comprehensive banking regulation but it had to wait due to the Second World War and Independence. However, there were interim legislation in 1946-49 to manage the banking system.

In 1949, the government of independent India legislated the BR Act. The RBI was also a banking regulator, apart from being a central bank. The Act modified the definition of banking to include time deposits and specify that banks also lend and invest. All banks, new and existing ones, could function as one only after getting a licence from the RBI. The Act also gave the RBI full powers to inspect banks. The new Act also defined minimum capital standards, implemented cash reserve for both scheduled and non-scheduled banks, maintaining liquid assets and so on.

It needs to be reframed as the definition and scope of banking has changed significantly with the advent of digital banking & rise of non-banks and private credit

The BR Act became a potent tool in the RBI's arsenal. It used the Act to clean up India's fragile and fragmented banking system. Banks had no choice but to open themselves to the RBI's supervisory inspections. They had to improve their prudential and governance requirements in order to be eligible for banking licence. Having said that, the RBI got a wake-up call due to the failure of the Palai Central Bank in 1960. Palai was a south-east bank and southern India was home to many small banks. There were concerns that there would be a run on small banks. The government ushered in deposit insurance in 1962 to prevent bank runs. In 1966, the Act was also extended partly to cooperative banks. The regulation of non-banking finance companies was included in the RBI Act (1934).

The next challenge for the BR Act came from bank nationalisation in 1969. It shifted the regulation of nationalised banks to the ministry of finance. As nationalised banks went on to form nearly 90% of the banking system, the scale and scope of the BR Act became highly limited. The 1991 reforms led to the licensing of new private banks, which gradually contributed 30% of the banking system. The rise of new private banks brought the BR Act back to the fore, as

unlike nationalised banks, the Act applied completely to private banks.

In 2007 and 2008, two committees — on Mumbai as an international financial centre, and Committee on Financial Sector Reforms — suggested rewriting financial regulations. In 2013, the Financial Sector Legislative Reforms Commission, acting on these two committees, proposed a unified Indian Financial Code (IFC) repealing 15 financial Acts including the BR Act. The IFC was not implemented due to controversies.

How can the Act continue to play an instrumental role in its next 25 years? First, the conflict over the dual regulation of public sector banks governed by the Bank Nationalisation Act and private banks governed by the BR Act has to end. The 1991 Narasimham Committee had mentioned this duality which has been reiterated by several RBI officials. The regulation and supervision of all types of commercial banks should be shifted to the RBI.

Second, with the advent of digital banking and the rise of non-bank and private credit, the definition of banking and its scope has changed significantly. The BR Act needs to be rethought and reframed to include these realities.

In the recent Budget, the finance minister announced releasing a financial sector vision and strategy document to set the agenda for the next 5 years. It could start with a comprehensive review of all the regulations that govern the Indian banking sector.

against such predators. At this critical juncture Sebi's employees are protesting against a toxic work culture and their chief Madhavi Puri Buch, who refuses to budge from her post like a seasoned politician, it has become the norm to blame all protests against the government as foreign-funded. But it is now time to call a spade a spade. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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the hindu businessline.

TUESDAY - SEPTEMBER 10, 2024

## Prepare the ground

Sort out FPO problems before trying to scale up

**F**armer Producer Organisations have been in the news after a draft 'national FPO policy' was unveiled about three months back. According to a recent report in this newspaper, the Centre is considering the creation of a 'national brand' for FPOs that showcases the quality of their products. However, before embarking on a renewed FPO promotion and 'branding' exercise (the policy to create 10K FPOs over four or five years is supposed to have come to an end), the Centre and stakeholders should take stock of the performance of the sector.



In fact, Agriculture Minister Shrivraj Singh Chouhan struck the right note in July by expressing concern over the performance of 'some' FPOs, and called for a review to identify gaps. Senior government officials have said that close to 9,000 FPOs have come into being over the last four years as part of the 10K policy initiative. Significantly, these FPOs have received on an average ₹210 crore in equity from the government on a matching contribution basis, which works to a meagre ₹2 lakh per FPO. Not surprisingly, private studies point to the sad state of most of these enterprises. The latest policy document emphasises scaling up to a three-tier federated structure to generate membership, scale and capital, citing AMUL as an example — perhaps realising that standalone FPOs will not work in most cases. While this is all very well, it is also important to face up to a central problem with the 10K policy.

To begin with, FPOs need to be a draw over existing systems of input procurement, credit and marketing for them to attract farmers. Farmers will not ditch the status quo for all its problems, only to opt for an alternative idea whose benefits are uncertain. To make this change happen, leadership and professionalism are crucial inputs. The existing policies (10K and its latest avatar which holds out a bigger ambition) have failed to create a skin-in-the-game system for professionals. They funnel ₹18 lakh for three years to a 'resource institution (RI)' that is supposed to provide managerial support, besides a sum of up to ₹25 lakh for 'formation and incubation', without linking these to outcomes. There are enough anecdotal reports to suggest that RIs removed from farming have climbed on to the FPO bandwagon. Worse, it appears that RIs are able to float quite as many FPOs as they like. Such sums for professionals should be equity-linked so that they grow the business. Capital can be garnered through social stock exchanges or the CSR route.

At a broader level, there is policy confusion over the very idea of FPOs. Initially conceived as 'farmer producer companies' to be registered under the Companies Act to overcome governance hassles in the cooperative sector, FPOs are now registered as cooperatives as well. There are a multiplicity of agencies implementing the FPO programme. So, FPOs are faced with an identity crisis, with the Centre going big on cooperatives as well. These issues must be sorted out through wide-ranging consultations.

POCKET



RAVISHANTH

"I worked my monthly budget out. How may I deposit minus five thousand rupees?"

## CIRCUIT BREAKER.



AARATI KRISHNAN

**P**ivate sector employees, especially taxpayers, may not be thrilled at the rollout of the Unified Pension Scheme for government employees. But they can take away one useful lesson from it. It is that, if they aspire to a comfortable retirement, they shouldn't be relying so much on the Employees Provident Fund (EPF).

UPS' design shows that, to fund an inflation-adjusted pension at just 50 per cent of an employee's salary, contributions at 28.5 per cent of her pay are necessary for 25 plus years of her working life. (The employee contribution in UPS will be at 10 per cent and government contribution at 18.5 per cent.) UPS contributions are to be invested in the NPS (National Pension System) with a default 15 per cent equity allocation.

UPS's structure begs the question: If government calculations show that the market-driven NPS is the best way for government employees to fund their retirement, why should private sector employees be forcibly saddled with the opaque EPF?

## EQUITY, A MUST-HAVE

Recent research shows that thanks to inflation and longevity, Indians looking to fund their retirement have a Herculean task ahead of them. To be comfortably off, they will need a corpus equal to 33 times their annual expenses at 60 when they retire. (More details here <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/the-great-indian-retirement-challenge/article67879610.ece>) Therefore, a 35-year-old expecting monthly expenses of ₹1 lakh when he turns 60, will need to accumulate ₹3.96 crore. If he invests in a fund returning 8.5 per cent per annum, the subscriber (with his employer) will need to contribute ₹38,100 per month over the next 25 years to get to that goal. But with a 12 per cent return, the contribution will drop to ₹20,900 per month. While the EPF has declared returns of 8.15 to 8.75 per cent in the last 10 years, NPS equity managers have delivered 12-13 per cent.

This demonstrates the absolute need for employees in India to rely on equity-oriented vehicles rather than debt-oriented ones for their retirement savings.

Returns apart, the EPF suffers from many other shortcomings too as a retirement vehicle.

## EMPLOYER-DEPENDENT

A primary flaw in EPF design is that it forces the employee to route her retirement savings through her employer. The employer organisation is tasked with depositing these contributions with the EPFO or managing them.

The problem with this arrangement is

## Do we need to go beyond EPF?

Given the opacity of EPF and other bureaucratic glitches, it is time private firms offered NPS to their staff



that, when an employer organisation lands in governance or debt trouble, it is tempted to make away with employees' PF contributions. From Kingfisher to Byjus, there are literally hundreds of large organisations which have run into financial hot waters and left employees in the lurch not only on their pay, but also on their PF savings. EPFO's FY23 annual report (its latest) discloses ₹13,953 crore in dues from defaulting employers.

Employer dependency is also a key reason why the EPF has an alarming number of accounts that are dormant or inactive. Organisations often make clerical errors in recording KYC details, or fail to complete transfer formalities correctly when employees switch jobs. This forces the employee to abandon his retirement savings so far, and start all over again from scratch.

Though the introduction of the Universal Account Number (UAN) and an online interface have made transfers, withdrawals and grievance redressal easier for new EPF members, monies from many legacy members remain stuck due to KYC or migration issues. Of the EPF's 29.88 crore subscribers as of March 31, 2023, only 19.10 crore had been allotted UANs and only 6.85 crore were actively contributing to the fund. KYC issues have also led to EPF seeing a high claims rejection rate in recent years. About 24 lakh of the 73 lakh final

**The NPS gives the employee control over her retirement account and allows her to manage her own contributions and withdrawals, without having to route this through the employer**

settlement claims were rejected in FY23.

The NPS (even in its corporate version) gives the employee control over her retirement account and allows her to manage her own contributions and withdrawals, without having to route this through the employer.

## ARCHAIC ACCOUNTING

When you invest in vehicles such as mutual funds or NPS, your contributions are held in a separate unit account that is directly traceable to you. Your investments are processed at the prevailing NAV to fetch you the correct number of units. On maturity, you get to withdraw the unit balance in your account at prevailing NAV.

This unit accounting system ensures there are no leakages between returns earned on the portfolio of the fund and those earned by unitholders and that these returns are fairly distributed. It also ensures that each investor gets the return due to her, based on the timing of entry into and exit from the fund.

The EPFO however is yet to transition to the unit accounting system despite this being talked about for years. It follows an archaic pool accounting method where contributions of all members are co-mingled and claims are paid as and when they crop up. EPF contributions are invested in a mix of government securities, bonds and equities (capped at 15 per cent).

Every year, the expenses of running the fund are deducted from its income which consists of dividends, interest, capital gains and administrative charges levied. The difference is used to 'declare' an annual 'interest'.

Individual subscribers to the EPF therefore have no way to estimate or control their returns.

In the absence of any mark-to-market portfolio disclosures, profit and loss account or a balance sheet, it is also

difficult to gauge if the fund will comfortably meet future maturity claims.

The EPF is not a shining advertisement for ease of doing business either. The EPF came into existence because Employees Provident Fund and Miscellaneous Provisions Act of 1952 requires all establishments with 20 or more employees to enrol with the EPFO and make contributions on their behalf to the fund.

This mandate prompts many micro and small enterprises to restrict their employee roster to below 20. Larger firms avoid taking on full-time employees and hire contract staff to side-step the EPF obligation. This acts as an impediment to formalisation. Firms that don't avoid the enrolment obligation structure their employees' pay so that the basic pay component, on which EPF contributions are mandatory, are kept minimal.

GenZ employees, many of whom are on the new tax regime, aren't too fond of EPF either. Prone to short stints with employers and frequent career breaks, they would rather not route their retirement savings through their employers, or cough up 12 per cent of their pay to a black box until they turn 58. Left to themselves, many of them may prefer open-end equity funds over strait-jacketed vehicles such as the EPF. Yes, on paper, EPF enrolment is currently voluntary for employees earning over ₹15,000 per month in basic pay. But in practice, most employers insist on EPF contributions because the EPF Act requires them to compulsorily enrol with the EPFO.

All this suggests that it is about time the government amended the EPF Act to make EPF optional for both employers and employees. Private enterprises should be permitted to offer NPS as an alternative or replacement to the EPF.

## Urban housing is simply unaffordable

To tackle this crisis there is a need to reconceptualise land use regulations and urban planning systems

Manav Khaira

**C**an we afford to rent a house in a location with good civic infrastructure, including good roads, better health, and better education facilities? How far will it be from our workplace(s)? How much time will we have to spend in commute? These are some of the questions every migrant household faces while moving to a new city.

At the centre of these questions is the problem of housing unaffordability. The United Nations Human Settlements Programme or UN-Habitat, the UN agency for human settlement, provides an operational definition calculating unaffordability for housing as a net monthly expenditure on housing cost (rents or payment payments) that exceeds 30 per cent of the total monthly income of the household.

In other words, housing expenditures of more than 30 per cent of monthly income end up infringing on expenses dedicated to other basic needs, and households are forced to reduce expenses for non-housing needs. Steffen Wetzstein, a political

economist at the University of Applied Sciences Erfurt, Germany, found that housing-related household expenses are rising faster than salary and wage increases in many urban centres around the world. He termed it a Global Urban Housing Affordability Crisis, a crisis warranting urgent interventions by governments.

Let us look at the urban housing affordability status in India, which houses the second largest urban population (461 million) and five megacities. With the rapid growth of the urban population, the need for affordable housing has also grown proportionately.

However, the supply of affordable housing stock has consistently been lacking in the cities, leading to the ever-increasing supply-demand mismatch. A significant indicator of this is the presence of informal housing and slums across Indian cities.

## RBI SURVEY

A Reserve Bank of India (RBI) residential asset price monitoring survey (2019) across 13 cities reported worsening housing affordability as the house price-to-income (HPTI) ratio



THE CHALLENGE. Affordable housing

JITENDRAKOTI

increased from 56.1 in March 2015 to 61.5 in March 2019.

HPTI ratio is an affordability indicator calculated as a ratio of median house price to median monthly household income. Simply put, an HPTI ratio of 61.5 implies it takes 61.5 times the median monthly income to cover the median house price. To put this number in perspective, the benchmark HPTI proposed by the UN-Habitat is below 36, beyond which housing becomes unaffordable. The survey also reported that Bhubaneswar is the most affordable city, with an HPTI of 54.4, and Mumbai remains the least affordable city, with an HPTI of 74.4.

Another RBI study in 2018 attempted to calculate the affordability status of different household groups based on

their income and house prices across 49 Indian cities. The study observed that the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) households (annual income up to ₹3 lakh) and Lower Income Group (LIG) households (annual income between ₹3-6 lakh) could afford to buy a new house in only five of the 49 cities.

Moreover, the Middle Income Group (MIG) households (annual income between ₹6-12 lakh) could afford a house in only nine of the 49 cities, and Higher MIG (annual income more than ₹12 lakh) households could afford a house in 18 of the 49 cities.

So, the affordability issue severely restricts the accessibility to housing for the urban migrants in terms of the selection of cities as the low-income households (EWS and LIG) struggle to find affordable housing in the formal housing markets.

There is an inherent need to reconceptualise the land use regulations and urban planning systems while centering housing affordability issues within urbanisation.

The writer is Assistant Professor of Political Science, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT, Palakkad

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## E-comm's potential

It is with reference to the article 'E-commerce revolution is not inclusive enough' (September 9), the e-commerce industry is powerful instrument to create jobs — both skilled and semi-skilled. The sector connects to customers directly cutting out middlemen, and drives growth. E-commerce also fosters innovation and productivity. More people must be encouraged to use e-commerce for which online banking must be promoted. **P. Victor Selvaraj** Palayamkottai (TN)

## 'Gigification' threat

Apropos of the article 'E-commerce revolution is not inclusive enough' (September 9), the present e-commerce business structure is creating jobs in delivery and logistics segments but are impacting the growth of MSMEs and promoting gigification of mainstream jobs. The technology push lacking in the MSME sector has to be nudged as the financing, procuring, selling and promotion are tech-based on digital platforms. The e-comm companies are 'gigifying' employment which is not healthy. A policy and legal framework for

creating fresh employment in e-commerce companies is needed.

**Vinod Johri**  
New Delhi

## Two-term limit

With reference to the article 'The case for only two terms' (September 9), it is hoped that the political establishment heeds to limiting the number of terms for the PM and CMs. The article establishes the benefits of limiting the terms to two for PM and CMs. The 'third term has been terrible' for the ruler are ruled alive. With our size of population and the demographics, we can think of limiting

tenure to four years. Limitations on term and tenure should apply for office bearers of political parties also.

The case of a vibrant churn in political and executive circles far outweighs the executive circles for the sake of elections. **Jose Abraham** Kottayam (Kerala)

## Data imperatives

With reference to 'Data clarity' (September 9), the data collection on financial savings of households by both RBI and SEBI is significant, which would lead to realistic assessments of national income and support policies based on the distribution of income

spread across various buckets of investment channels. Apart from culling out the accurate savings details sourced from other investment avenues like crypto, unlisted shares, PMS etc., a critical analysis of legacy investments may throw light on the risk propensity of various instruments and help in taking preventive steps to avoid sudden market upheavals. Also, an analysis of leveraged investments through bank loans must also be taken up to achieve more data accuracy. **Sitaram Popuri** Bengaluru



# 10 The EDITORIAL PAGE

**WORDLY WISE**  
HE KNOWS NOTHING; AND HE THINKS HE KNOWS EVERYTHING. THAT POINTS CLEARLY TO A POLITICAL CAREER. —GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

# The audacity of a mission

Swachh Bharat Mission has led to gains on multiple fronts — safety and dignity, health and economy



PARAMESWARAN IYER

THE RECENT RELEASE of the scientific report in the *Nature* journal on the Swachh Bharat Mission's (SBM) impact on the reduction in infant and child mortality broadly coincides with the 10-year anniversary of the programme. Announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his Independence Day speech to the nation from the Red Fort on August 15, 2014, it was formally launched on October 2 of the same year. Focused on the massive challenge of eliminating open defecation in the country by October 2, 2019 (the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi), the SBM sought to change the behaviour of about 550 million Indians from their traditional habit of defecating in the open to using the over 100 million household toilets constructed for them by the government. While the success of the programme had many positive spin-offs, including providing dignity and security to women and girls, the *Nature* report validates its significant health impact, asserting that the provision of toilets under the Mission saved the lives of 60,000–70,000 infants and children under the age of five on an annual basis.

Ten years of a national developmental programme such as the SBM is a good time to take stock of its progress and achievements. To begin with, the audacity of Prime Minister Modi's announcement on August 15, 2014, took not just the nation, but the world by storm. This was the first time in history that any head of government in the world was publicly committing to ending the scourge of open defecation in his country in a specified time frame. Firstly, the Prime Minister was not shirking from bringing out the hitherto taboo topic of sanitation from the closet and, secondly, he was talking about a scale and level of speed almost unimaginable — changing the behaviour of 550 million people in five years. If ever there was a big hairy audacious goal, this was it. No wonder there was a simultaneous sense of shock and awe at the announcement. But, under the personal

leadership of the Prime Minister, the programme took shape and, in the form of a *jan andolan* (mass movement), was successfully implemented in village after village, district after district and state after state.

Communicating directly with the people through multiple platforms, including his monthly Mann Ki Baat radio address, the Prime Minister fired the people's imagination and inspired them to make the SBM a community and village-led initiative. The entire population of a village would passionately work to make their communities open defecation free (ODF) and when they achieved success, would take out a *gaurav yatra* (pride tour). It was a matter of pride for a village community to declare itself ODF and soon a friendly competition broke out across the country between villages, districts and even states. Once states like Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Uttarakhand and Haryana declared themselves ODF, other states followed suit and finally on October 2, 2019, all the states declared themselves ODF. However, the behaviour change focus and work to sustain the achievements of the SBM continued under phase two.

In terms of the outcomes of the SBM, in addition to the health benefits outlined in the *Nature* journal and enhancement of the dignity and security of women and girls, there were other positive spin-offs. One of them was its economic benefit — a study conducted by UNICEF estimated that achievement of ODF status in a village resulted in each of its households saving approximately Rs 50,000 annually on account of avoided medical fees, time savings, etc. One of our annual Sudhir Dar SBM cartoon calendars showed a bored doctor at a primary health centre sitting outside his clinic and idly swatting flies as he had run out of business since the villagers had stopped defecating in the open — and consequently stopped falling chronically ill of diarrhoea.

The SBM also had several lessons and experiences to share with the world. At the

Mahatma Gandhi International Sanitation Convention in October 2018, the Prime Minister chaired the concluding session alongside the Secretary General of the United Nations and in attendance were 55 Health and Sanitation Ministers from around the developing world — all there to share the *swachhata* experience and learn from it. The visiting Nigerian Minister for Water and Sanitation was so impressed by what he learned at the conference that he returned to his country and started the Clean Nigeria Campaign. The four key lessons of the SBM which were enshrined in the Delhi Declaration of the conference became known as the four Ps. These four Ps — political leadership, public financing, partnerships and people's participation — are now globally recognised as vital for the success of most large, transformational developmental programmes. They are being applied in the sanitation sector around the world and leading to significant progress on Sustainable Development Goal number 6: Access to sanitation and water.

As we know, the Swachh Bharat Mission was only one of the many successfully articulated and implemented schemes of the government. Other national basic service initiatives which improved the quality of life and ease of living of ordinary Indians include Ujjwala (cooking gas cylinders), Jan Dhan (bank accounts), the Awas Yojana, the Ayushman Bharat medical insurance scheme and, of course, the Jal Jeevan Mission, which has made tremendous progress in providing *har ghar jal* to a targeted 180 million households. Without question, the bold vision and political leadership of Prime Minister Modi are the key underpinnings of such transformational programmes.

*The writer is the former Secretary of the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation, Government of India and is currently India's Executive Director at the World Bank. Views are personal*

## STATE'S BLIND EYE

Warnings to minority on boards in public spaces in Rudrapuray showed intolerance emboldened by state abdication

TWO KINDS OF warnings could be read on the signboards, now removed, that came up in the villages of Uttarakhand's Rudrapuray district over the last few weeks and put communities on edge. The first is the disturbing and unlawful injunction that was written on the boards — instructing "non-Hindus/Rohingya Muslims" against doing business in the area, threatening them with "punitive and legal action". The second warning — the one that must be heeded by all those who have stakes in keeping the peace — was not literally spelt out but was writ large nonetheless. It is a warning about how intolerance is emboldened and normalised when the state abdicates its responsibility to uphold the rule of law.

The scars inflicted by polarisation fester below the surface and take long to heal. Take the case of Purolo in the state's Uttarakashi district where, in May 2023, allegations of "love jihad" ignited tensions, with right-wing groups organising protest rallies to demand strict action against "outsiders" and where Muslim traders were threatened with dire consequences if they did not shut down their shops. A year later, despite a veneer of normalcy returning, tensions remain. "We can sense a new dislike for us," a Muslim shopkeeper told this newspaper. ("We act like we've forgotten and moved on," IE, July 22.) In a state with no protracted history of communal tension or conflict, the alarm bells have been ringing for a while, recently. Anxieties have deepened with the passing of the Uniform Civil Code earlier this year. Amidst instances of forced shuttering of Muslim-owned businesses, spectres of "love jihad" and "land jihad", official response has been absent and, in fact, enabling of divisive tendencies.

The incitements to hate and violence at a "dharma sansad" in Haridwar in December 2021 were met with state inattention and apathy. It was left to the Supreme Court to underline the seriousness of the issue, framing hate speech as a threat to harmony and as a violation of constitutional principle, and making it incumbent on the police to take suo motu action. To keep the fault lines from deepening further, the state must act — and must be seen to be doing so. Its duty is to the citizens of Uttarakhand and the constitutional values it is sworn to uphold, above all.

## WHAT HE MEANT TO SAY

Sanewashing of Donald Trump's speeches raises larger questions — about politics, reality and make-believe

WHEN DOES THE presentation of speeches that border on the illogical, inflammatory or simply incoherent, breach the journalistic ethic of accuracy and move into the disputed territory of sanitising? In early September, at the Economic Club of New York, Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump responded to a question on how he'd address the issue of childcare outpacing inflation in the US with a solution that was both off-centre and circumlocutory: Increasing tariffs on foreign imports to ensure the generation of adequate funds to meet the crisis. Instead of addressing the non sequitur, much of the mainstream media presented a parsed down interpretation of what might have been the 78-year-old's intended solution — that his economic policies would address childcare. Enter "sanewashing" — the persistent rationalisation of Trump's purported meanings by a section of the US media that has been called out for the distortional lens it creates for consumers of news.

From his constant references to the "late, great Hannibal Lecter" to his outlandish remarks on job creation and economic policies, there is much in Trump's rhetoric that could do with the ministrations of a fact checker. But does the job of smoothing out the jagged edges of his vitriol, the opacity of his policy proposals or the bizarreness of his conspiracy theories — in short, the task of making him credible to the electorate — become the responsibility of the traditional media? Especially since the courtesy is selectively afforded. As Parker Molloy of *The New Republic*, one of the early users of the term "sanewashing", says, "By continually reframing Trump's incoherent and often dangerous rhetoric as conventional political discourse, major news outlets are failing in their duty."

In a post-truth world, there are deeper implications of sanewashing politicians. It can make inconveniences of thought and action disappear with a coat of linguistic varnish. The question remains: Do electorates deserve this sanding down of facts with fiction?



SUMANA ROY

"WHY AREN'T YOU noisy? Why are you all so generically polite? Why don't you want to say anything to disturb us?" I find myself saying this to my students from time to time. My voice perhaps never forgetting to italicise the "us". It has taken me some time to understand that it might not be their fault. Our pedagogical practice, such as its invisible codes and modes, protects us from the dissent and disagreement that we celebrate in the classroom. We are like the teacher who stands beside an archer teaching them how to shoot at a faraway target; our proximity — being beside instead of, say, across, distant from the archer-student — protects us.

"Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating," writes John Cage in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (1961). We seek the obscure, we coordinate our pedagogy for the opposite, for harmony. In our rhetoric is the urge to free ourselves from what we have been conditioned to characterise as noise, in our idioms is a hankering for versions of silence — we dislike the idea of "noise" so much that we call the seemingly uninteresting "bakwas", as if the unimportant emits noise.

We do not want to acknowledge the fundamentalist character of agreement, the absence of necessary noisiness — our students write emails that are tailored to make their personalities seem agreeable, that make it seem that universities are finishing schools for teaching academic etiquette and corporatised politeness. Drugged by good intentions, compelled by our desire for a fairer world,

## THE AGREEMENTATIVE INDIAN

In the classroom, a culture of conformity that stifles dissent, promotes agreeability

and convinced that our belief in teaching particular knowledge systems is the only possible way to achieve this, we've structured the pedagogical form of our courses and syllabi around the *telos* of eventual agreement. In the process, we have failed to teach our students that the silence of agreement, whether it is achieved through bullying, bureaucracy or pedagogical faith, can be noisy, the kind of noise that they tutor themselves to avoid in their interactions with those in power. Such is its architecture that we sit with those who agree with us, whether in faculty meetings or Parliament.

We teach Plato's *Republic* and ask our students to be Socratic, we implore them to argue, debate, question, dissent, but our courses are structured like the Bhagavad Gita, where, after a conversation between two tributaries of thought, one must be integrated with the other and become one stream, as Arjun was persuaded by Krishna. From the "argumentative Indian" we are now coaxed, bullied and instructed to become the "agreementative Indian".

This idea of agreement that is emerging from our classrooms, where a common enemy — whether systemic or an individual — is fought with all the might of our theories and good practices, is gradually rendering us incapable of having conversations with those who do not share our intellectual and emotional histories. We're being led to think of "tradition" as having been built from consensus instead of disagreement. We've become academics who, in various subsets of affiliation, brought together by disciplines, re-

search areas or family and friend networks, perform what has been characterised as compulsive nobility. We view our discipline and its practitioners, those that share the same networks, with a kind of skill and verbal violence that is often damaging to the health and careers of those attacked. The battleground for this is various: The academic conference, the classroom, and, now quite often, social media.

"Agree" derives from "gratus" — to please. The kind of agreement that is being forged, besides revving up our stock of agreeability, is to please oneself — to feel safe that there is no other opinion besides ours. It is control by proxy, *jukti*, *tarka*, *galpo* — logic, debate, story — the trinity that produces philosophy, art and science, is gradually being bleached away by this compulsive expectation of agreement. This is why, irrespective of political ideology, we have all been turned into bhakts, into devotees and unpaid employees of those we must agree with, whether family, RWA or the nation. Like children who take it as a slight when an adult says that pink is not their favourite colour, we take everything as a personal affront. The Bhakti poets had rebelled against institutionalised agreement — bhakts today only agree with each other.

In a country where spouses can't often agree on where the wet towel should be kept, it is silly and strenuous to keep playing the Agreementative Indian.

*Roy, a poet and writer, is associate professor of creative writing, Ashoka University. Views are personal*

## SEPTEMBER 10, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### HYDERABAD VIOLENCE

THE ARMY WAS called out and shoot-at-sight orders were issued in the communal strife-torn Hyderabad city over mob violence and large-scale arson and looting during the Ganesh immersion procession. The entire city has been placed under curfew indefinitely. The police opened fire at three spots injuring 10 persons — two of them succumbed to injuries at the hospital.

### JANATA'S 'WHITE PAPER'

THE GOVERNMENT OF India's practice of toppling popularly elected governments in the

states run by non-Congress (I) parties is a clear and flagrant subversion of the Constitution of India declares the 40-page white paper of the Janata Party released by president Chandra Shekhar. The white paper describes it as being "as grave and dangerous in its consequences as the subversion of the Constitution by the abuse of emergency powers."

### AP ASSEMBLY AGENDA

THE AGENDA FOR the crucial Andhra Pradesh Assembly session has not been finalised so far. M Baga Reddy, pro-term speaker of the assembly, has not received any notice from the government for the vote of confidence motion

proposed to be taken up in the ensuing session. Baga Reddy told newsmen that vote of confidence motions in other state assemblies showed that they were discussed for three or four days before being disposed of.

### DU STUDENT ELECTION

THE JANATA VIDHYARTHII Morcha, student wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party, won the election to the Delhi University Students Union for the fifth consecutive year by defeating the National Students Union of India (I). Bal Ram Yadav of JYM has been declared elected president. He polled 15,484 against 8,862 polled by his nearest NSUI (I) rival.







# OPINION

The  
**Hindustan Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

[ OUR TAKE ]

## Manipur needs a political solution

The tensions between communities in the state can't be resolved with a securitised approach

**T**he rapid escalation of violence in Manipur is shocking on two counts—one because it appears to have caught local authorities completely unawares, and second, because of the sophisticated weaponry, including drones, being used by groups, which indicates that attempts by the security forces and the government to recover looted weapons has not succeeded. The fresh wave of clashes—which has killed at least ten people since September 6—now threatens to besiege the beleaguered state and rupture the fragile peace that held for close to three months. Worse, six of the ten victims hailed from Jiribam, a district that is home to Meiteis, Kukis, Bengalis, Nagas, and other communities and one that has been largely peaceful despite the state being roiled in clashes. Clearly, the fact that ethnic fault lines have not been bridged for close to 16 months—a clash that once pitted Meiteis and Kukis against each other now seems to engulf almost the entire state—should put the local administration in the dock. Instead, the Manipur government and chief minister (CM) N Biren Singh have made a push for the security apparatus to be brought under the state's control. Singh and several lawmakers, including members of the cabinet and the speaker, made the demand in a memorandum to governor Laxman Prasad Acharya.

This approach is unlikely to work. Since May 2023, the State has failed in Manipur—in establishing law-and-order, in assuaging the grievances of various communities, and in appearing as an impartial arbiter in a dispute with longstanding grudges. In fact, the appointment of a security adviser in the state was done precisely because a sizeable chunk of the population couldn't repose their trust in the CM. That situation has not changed on the ground. Instead, as the recent flare-up suggests, it has only intensified.

The original conundrum in Manipur—a lack of trust between communities, and between some communities and the administration—has not been addressed by the state government. This cannot be resolved with a securitised approach, as has been made clear over the last 16 months; it needs a political process that listens sensitively to the concerns of all sides, and leaders who have the confidence of every community. And it needs a clear and transparent process of accountability where every victim of violence gets their time in court, and impartial justice. A wounded state needs a salve, not force and political posturing.

## Act against green violations in Delhi

**T**he Central Empowered Committee (CEC), constituted by the Supreme Court to monitor compliance with its conservation-related orders, assessed 20 construction projects in Delhi's forests and Ridge area and found just five adhered to conditions set for such activity. The CEC has reported that there was non-compliance on multiple fronts, including on-site greening norms, compensatory afforestation for tree felling, and mandatory approvals under the Forest Conservation Act. Such non-compliance being rampant within the national Capital, where monitoring presents fewer challenges than in a remote part of the country, is quite telling of the impunity of those involved—including the DDA, PWD, JNU, and the erstwhile South Delhi Municipal Corporation.

Part of the blame for the brazen violations, of course, lies with the Delhi government's forest department and the Ridge Management Board (RMB), which have failed not only to record the lack of compliance but also to verify the track record of the project proponents and their earlier projects before giving their approval. But equally, it is a problem of enforcement, which the CEC delineates in its report. Most proponents comply with the conditions laid down only till the tree felling happens and construction activities start, and seldom beyond. With little in terms of punitive action, non-compliance is *de facto* tolerated. As a remedy, the CEC report recommends a centralised information system where compliance details at each stage of a project must be reported. While, on paper, this would ease monitoring, the authorities will still have to undertake authentication exercises for the portal to be effective. CEC recommends that the RMB deny permission to proponents with a history of non-compliance. The need, however, is also to provide for the imposition of costs on violators to achieve deterrence. Worsening environmental issues in the Capital make this an imperative.

## Vistara's promising run grooved at take-off

As brand Vistara is set to disappear, loyal fliers and some employees watch in dismay

**W**ere at a *deja vu* moment in India's aviation history. After Jet Airways ceased operations in April 2019, there was a steady torrent of dismay and sadness from passengers, commanders and staff of the airline as they lamented its demise. For loyal Jet fliers, it took many months to accept that the brand they had grown to love, trust and value would no longer exist. Although the almost ten-year-old Vistara from the Tata stable (founded in 2013, first flight 2015) never really achieved the status Jet did, it has slowly but steadily managed to build a loyal base of non-stop transits passengers in India. Given the same length of time (as Jet), Vistara could have occupied Jet's coveted slot in Indian airlines at some stage, but events overtook it.

As the merger announcement—a *fait accompli*—came on August 30 and specified that the bookings on Vistara would cease, many passengers expressed their dismay on social media and WhatsApp as Air India has not yet become their airline of choice. A large number of these fliers don't want to fly IndiGo either, which has seen its on-time performance nosedive and service standards fall ever since it grew to a certain size. As things stand, a lot of Vistara frequent fliers comprise those who dictate and

are in full command of their travel plans: date, time and fare.

The timing of the merger is even more poignant for Vistara employees and management since, recently, for the first time since inception, the airline earned a small profit, albeit in one quarter, which became EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortisation) positive and achieved a market share of just over 10%. Complaints were low, loads on aircraft high, and it boasted good on-time performance. Vistara had finally arrived on the Indian aviation scene, so to speak.

It hadn't been an easy arrival by any stretch. In the first phase, the airline managed to get many things wrong: the model, the aircraft configuration, its cost structure and the contracts entered into. Selling premium economy seats for shorter duration flights in the early days proved hard and the airline had to reconfigure its aircraft. Changes in aircraft configuration cost the airline dearly in terms of the consistency of the product. Fliers who flew and liked the premium economy offering were miffed when they flew on another route and found it missing. For many years, routes and frequency remained an issue. Many fliers who preferred Vistara were forced to fly IndiGo and other rivals due to Vistara's lower frequencies.

Despite bringing in two experts with a wealth of experience from its parent Singapore Airlines (SIA), the airline continued to struggle. The fact that the might of the Tata group in India and the expertise of SIA failed to

combine as a runaway success on the runway was a matter of deep disappointment to the sector as a whole.

It was only after the pandemic that things began to change for Vistara. Two or three external factors worked in its favour: the demise of Jet Airways, the collapse of Go and the weakening of rivals such as SpiceJet post-pandemic. From 2022, new chief executive officer (CEO) Vinod Kannan, chief commercial officer Deepak Rajawat and the team they built finally began to see some results in their efforts of course correction. In 2022 and 2023, the airline added new aircraft and redeployed less efficient ones. Its international network grew substantially with new destinations, routes and frequencies. It added the A321LR (with 12 lie-flat business seats and 24 premium economy seats) to its fleet, also deployed on Mumbai as a secondary hub with increased international and domestic operations. The domestic network in the last two years grew with a few new routes. Vistara consolidated its position as some rivals cut capacity to practically halt their pre-pandemic levels and others folded up.

But its success has come at a cost. The airline has accumulated significant losses (in excess of ₹9,000 crore), which will now be absorbed into Air India's already fairly large losses. Of the total losses, people familiar with the matter said that the amounts spent on building the brand would be like a "dead loss". In general, Vistara's costs have never been consistently close to 30% higher than rivals

although the fares charged do not reflect this. Moreover, after the pandemic, like all the other airlines, it has struggled with an unhappy employee pool. Complaints and allegations of transgression have risen, often targeted at the top management.

After the merger process began, April 2024 saw a series of protests and a spate of flight cancellations that threw its operations out of gear as the two airlines tried to bring the employment terms on par. Company insiders say that Vistara has its own culture, and ethos and is now a fairly respected brand, all of which this merger threatens to destroy. Many quote the disastrous merger of Air India and Indian Airlines to cite the challenges of mergers in aviation.

But top Air India management and some Vistara executives maintain that a lot of preparatory work for the merger has been done at the back-end and fliers should not be unduly concerned. The Vistara fleet will function the way it does now and it's not as if the purple and mustard tail will disappear from the skies in a jiffy, they insist.

All assurances aside, uncertainty is the new headline at the carrier. While almost all the crew, commanders and technical staff of the 6,000-odd strong employee base need not be concerned



Will Air India up its game and operate more like Vistara or will Vistara lower its standards and end up more like Air India?

for its jobs, it still remains unclear what happens to some of the non-technical staff and top management, including its CEO and chief operating officer. Top Air India officials said that they did not see any role for many of the senior management members in Air India as these positions are already filled at the parent.

Uncertainty also plagues the minds of its loyal club members who remain sceptical of the abilities of the merged entity and what it will offer in terms of service standards, as well as on-time performance as Air India is yet to get a convincing grip on its own operations. The big question, therefore, is which will see the bigger rub-off on the other: Will Air India up its game and operate more like Vistara or will Vistara lower its standards and end up more like Air India?

No matter what the two companies say on record, for a section of the Indian flying public and many of the airline's existing employees, this much-dreaded moment of departure for brand Vistara has arrived too soon after its arrival. "Flying the new feeling" is poised to take on a new meaning altogether.

Anjali Bhargava is a senior journalist who writes on governance, infrastructure and the social sector. The views expressed are personal

## Need to treat suicide as a public health problem

**T**oday is World Suicide Prevention Day. Suicide is a deeply troubling issue that affects individuals, families, and communities across the world, with around 700,000 suicide deaths yearly. India has one of the highest numbers of suicide deaths in the world, with at least 170,000 deaths (12 per 100,000 persons) in 2022.

We now know that suicide is a complex health issue, driven by a combination of serious stress in life, mental health conditions, and other factors. By addressing the underlying causes of suicide and fostering a supportive environment, we can make a meaningful difference in preventing suicides.

For effective prevention, we must closely examine the risk factors. The focus so far has been on mental health issues like depression or anxiety, based on knowledge from western countries. However, it is now well-established that risk factors for suicide in developing countries, including India, encompass a range of social issues in addition to mental health disorders. Financial hardship, fractious family relationships, domestic violence, childhood trauma, bullying, negative peer pressure, substance abuse, and lack of access to health care are among the many challenges that increase the risk of suicide.

While mental health is a crucial aspect of suicide prevention, addressing broader social issues—such as poverty, social inequality, gender inequality, and intergenerational discord—is essential for effectively reducing suicide deaths. It is important to broaden the scope of suicide prevention in India from the National Mental Health Programme to a larger public health approach, with a whole-of-society engagement, to address the social and economic risk factors leading to suicide deaths in India.

Globally, more men die by suicide than women. While this is also true for India, suicide death rate among Indian women is estimated to be double the global average. It is the leading cause of death among women in the age group of 15-39 years. Suicides among young women often reflect oppressive societal pressures, unmet needs for support, and mental health issues. Women face unique challenges, including gender-based violence, body image issues, and academic or career pressures. These contribute to feelings of hopelessness. Rising rates of suicide in this demographic signal a failure to create supportive environments to address societal factors that disproportionately affect young women.

Media attention in India has highlighted suicides among farmers and students. Besides farmers and students, other groups are vulnerable too. Data suggest that the majority of suicide deaths are in the 15-39 years age group. This encompasses students, people who are working, people who are looking for work, and housewives. It is important to look at the risk factors among all such groups.

To truly understand the burden of suicide and develop effective prevention strategies, we need better data. Our understanding of suicide deaths in India mostly comes from

data collected by the police and reported by the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB), because suicide deaths are considered unusual deaths. Such data are not in a standardised format for use in research. However, these data can be improved, through effective collaboration between the police and health departments, to enhance our understanding of the dimensions, determinants and dynamics of suicide in the population. This can guide effective prevention efforts.

In addition to improved data collection, appropriate interpretation of the available data within its limitations is crucial. Reporting on just a few occupational groups provides only a limited understanding of what is happening in the community at large. Even among specific groups such as students, the estimated rates must be put in context. The problem is serious, disaggregated data analysis will then provide valuable insights into which sections among students are especially vulnerable. Anecdotal reports are not, as estimates.

The NCRB report does not allow a direct understanding of risk factors by occupation. It does not reveal if students are taking their lives because of exam pressure, bullying, stress, relationship issues, or something else but assumptions can be made based on the age of the person who died by suicide. Investment is needed for gathering relevant quantitative and qualitative data to help us identify trends and risk factors, evaluate impact of different interventions, and allocate resources where they are most needed. Without accurate data, we will be fighting this battle in the dark.

One of the most powerful tools in suicide prevention is conversation. Talking openly about suicide can break down the stigma that often surrounds the topic, making it easier for people to seek help. This is especially important within families, where open and honest communication can be lifesaving. Families play a crucial role in providing emotional support, recognising warning signs, and encouraging loved ones to seek help. Creating a supportive family environment where everyone feels safe to express their feelings can make a significant difference in preventing suicide.

Effective suicide prevention requires strong support systems at every level of society. This means improving access to mental health care, providing education and training to those who may be in a position to help (such as teachers, employers, and health care providers), and ensuring that crisis intervention resources are available and accessible to everyone. We also need to strengthen community connections, as social isolation is a significant risk factor for suicide. When people feel lonely and unsupported, they are more likely to reach out to help when they need it. Preventing suicide requires us to be aware of the signs, to reach out to those who may be struggling, and to advocate for better resources and support.

Rakhi Dandona is professor of public health, and K. Srinath Reddy is distinguished professor of public health at the Public Health Foundation of India. The views expressed are personal

[ NITIN GADKARI ] UNION ROAD TRANSPORT MINISTER

**We should make India the number one automobile manufacturing hub in the world. Factors such as advancement in tech, and availability of a talented workforce can work in the country's favour**

**R**ecent years have witnessed a range of watershed moments in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)-India bilateral relationship. Across all facets of the partnership, we have experienced not only growth and renewal but also a deepening of the historical bonds of friendship and cooperation we have long shared.

The official visit to India of Sheikh Khalid bin Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, this week is a testament to the strength and continuous enhancement of the relationship and attests to the importance of the UAE places upon its strategic partnership with India. The occasion of this visit also provides an opportunity to reflect upon the transformative impact our ties have had, and will continue to have in the years to come.

From growing strategic alignment to the UAE's emergence as India's second-largest export destination, third-largest trading partner, and fourth-largest investor, political, economic, and cultural ties between the UAE and India have never been as strong as they are today.

Fundamental to the continued expansion of our strategic partnership is the recognition of both governments that it is essential that our societies are able to obtain tangible benefits from the strong strategic foundations we have built. Across all areas of our relationship, Emiratis and Indians, on a daily basis, are reaping the rewards of the closer economic integration, cultural inclusivity, and political understanding we have consistently sought to foster.

These dynamics can be discerned in the positive impacts of the UAE-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Since the CEPA's implementation on May 1, 2022, the UAE and India have witnessed both a qualitative and quantitative shift in our strategic relationship.

In two years alone, total trade between our two countries has increased by nearly 18%, with the UAE's exports to India expanding by over 7% and Indian exports to the UAE rising by an impressive 27%. Significantly, the CEPA has contributed to a rapid change in the composition of our trade. We are witnessing a decreased reliance on hydrocarbons as the key commodity which has traditionally shaped trade ties. In fact, total non-oil trade between the UAE and India registered a 20% increase in 2023-24. This is a considerable achievement and underscores the

direct benefits of the CEPA to the UAE's and India's vital non-oil economic sectors.

I have been fortunate to observe the progressive and constructive effects of this agreement first-hand through the UAE-India CEPA Council—a platform that has been specifically designed to promote grassroots-level engagement and open dialogue between the governments and businesses of our two countries. Direct interactions with businesses across the length and breadth of India, including green mobility manufacturers in Andhra Pradesh, organic farmers in West Bengal, and biotechnology entrepreneurs in Maharashtra, have underscored that India's diversity is fundamental to its economic prosperity and future growth. It is this societal dynamism and cultural diversity that will be crucial in pushing the boundaries of possibilities beyond the CEPA into all other facets of our ties.

In nurturing these strengths to the mutual benefit of both countries, the UAE remains dedicated to the continued building of inclusive partnerships with India that stretch far beyond the critical power centres of New Delhi and Mumbai, to emerging cities such as Vijayawada, Bhubaneswar, Patna, and Jaipur. Not only that, we also wish to energise the development of new initiatives, such as the UAE-India Cultural Council, which will bring greater awareness to our shared historical bonds and rich cultural tapestries. We seek to further develop platforms like the UAE-India Start-up Bridge to ensure the entrepreneurial spirit of our two peoples is fully unlocked. And finally, we are committed to embracing a visionary approach to fields such as aviation, where we believe there is no limit to the benefits that can be achieved through the provision of greater connectivity and improved choice for our increasingly agile and internationally mobile societies.

The outlook for UAE-India bilateral ties is bright, with numerous opportunities for collaboration across various sectors. As both nations look to establish new avenues for cooperation in our partnership, fertile ground exists to further leverage our complementary economic strengths and shared cultural values to build a resilient, inclusive, and prosperous future together.

Abdulnasser Alshaali is the ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to India. The views expressed are personal



## Looking beyond Sanskrit

India commemorated Sanskrit Day on August 19 to highlight and promote the richness and antiquity of Sanskrit. At the same time, recognising the contributions of the nation's other languages is equally important. While Sanskrit has played a significant role in our cultural, religious, and intellectual history, focusing solely on this ancient language may overlook the rich literary traditions of other Indian tongues.

Sanskrit, one of the oldest languages in the world, holds a prestigious place in the liturgical and scholarly traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Its vast corpus of literature, including the Vedas, Upanishads, epics such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana, and numerous classical texts on philosophy, science, and arts, cements its importance in Indian culture. Historically, Sanskrit received patronage from religious institutions, royal dynasties such as the Guptas and Cholas, and colonial-era European scholars such as William Jones and Max Müller. Post-independence, efforts to promote Sanskrit have been seen as a means to reconnect with India's ancient heritage.

### Rich literary traditions

However, India's linguistic landscape is incredibly diverse, encompassing numerous ancient languages with rich literary traditions, including Tamil, Pali, Prakrit, Kannada, Telugu, and Malayalam. These languages have extensive literary, religious, and cultural histories. Tamil, for instance, boasts classical Sangam literature and ancient origins, with archaeological findings and epigraphic evidence supporting its antiquity. The discovery of Tamil-Brahmi script inscriptions from the 2nd century BCE in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka challenges the notion that Sanskrit predates Tamil. Scholars such as Kamil Zvevbeil have highlighted the richness and antiquity of Tamil literary tradition, arguing that it is



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While Sanskrit deserves its place in India's linguistic landscape, it is imperative that other languages also receive recognition and support

one of the oldest living languages with an unbroken literary history.

Despite this rich diversity, there is a perception, which is not entirely unfounded, that the Indian government privileges Sanskrit and Hindi over other languages. As per the 2011 Census, only 24,821 people reported Sanskrit as their mother tongue. While more individuals may study or use Sanskrit in religious or academic contexts, its status as a spoken language remains limited. Yet, the government spent ₹643.84 crore for promoting Sanskrit between 2017 and 2020 compared to just about ₹23 crore on Tamil. This disparity highlights an imbalance in funding that can affect the development of other regional languages, impacting research, publication, educational programmes, and cultural preservation efforts. In fact, neglecting these languages can lead to their endangerment, especially those spoken by smaller communities. Hence, ensuring the survival and vitality of these languages requires balanced support and promotion.

### Language supremacy

Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony helps explain how language supremacy is established through cultural and ideological means. In India, privileging Sanskrit and Hindi can be seen as a form of cultural hegemony, where these languages are positioned as superior, influencing the cultural and social framework. Despite their rich histories and literature, this dominance marginalises other languages. Promoting specific languages over others can be traced back to colonial and postcolonial state-building processes that aimed to unify and standardise the nation, often disregarding linguistic diversity. Robert Phillipson's concept of linguistic imperialism also applies here. Privileging Sanskrit and Hindi in educational institutions, governmental functions, and media reinforces their dominance.

This could erode linguistic diversity and marginalise speakers of other languages. Pierre Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital suggests that privileging certain languages provides social and economic advantages to their speakers, further marginalising other languages.

Addressing this biased approach requires comprehensive policy reforms, educational initiatives, cultural promotion, community engagement, and technological support. The government must implement policies promoting all languages equally, ensuring representation in educational curricula, governmental proceedings, and public media. The National Education Policy's focus on mother tongues is a step in the right direction. Cultural events and literary programmes celebrating linguistic diversity should be encouraged, and adequate support for publishing and disseminating literary works in all languages must be provided. Involving local communities in preserving and promoting their languages, creating platforms for speakers of marginalised languages to share their stories and cultural practices, and utilising technology to develop language learning tools and digital content in local languages are crucial steps. Equitable distribution of resources for promoting all Indian languages is essential. Language policies should promote inclusivity and accessibility, ensuring all communities can learn and use their native languages alongside Sanskrit. Educational reforms should emphasise multilingualism.

Language is not simply a tool for communication; it is a core part of one's identity. In a country as diverse as India, privileging specific languages over others can create significant cultural and political issues. By promoting linguistic diversity, India can celebrate its rich linguistic heritage while ensuring the development of all its languages.

## The cop who landed CPI(M) in a soup

A senior police officer's meeting with RSS leaders has put Pinarayi in a tight spot

### STATE OF PLAY

**S. Anandan**

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In his first term as Kerala Chief Minister from 2016 to 2021, Pinarayi Vijayan faced scrutiny for the way he helmed the Home Ministry. He drew sharp criticism for police excesses, extrajudicial killings, and the indiscriminate invocation of the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), 1967.

Under fire, the party's then State secretary, Kodyeri Balakrishnan, who served as the Kerala Home Minister in the V.S. Achuthanandan-led Cabinet in the 2006-II period, was at pains to explain that the arbitrary use of the UAPA by the police violated the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government's stated policy. There was bickering within the LDF that a section of the State police was getting 'safronised' and was working to create disaffection with the State government.

But Mr. Vijayan's focus in his first term was to keep the morale of the police force high, no matter the barrage of charges it faced for rights violations, custodial torture, and general misconduct.

The ghosts of the past have resurfaced now. Halfway through his second term, Mr. Vijayan is under scrutiny once again for a senior police officer's meeting with top leaders of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological fountainhead of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The controversy has put the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which is still smarting from the LDF's crushing defeat in the Lok Sabha elections, in a soup.

It couldn't have occurred at a more inopportune moment



for the party, which has kicked-started branch-level meetings in the run-up to its next State conference and party congress, where an organisational reshuffle is scheduled to take place. Worse, the panchayat elections are just around the corner.

The knives are out in the LDF. The Communist Party of India (CPI), the second-largest constituent of the alliance, has sought a thorough investigation into the 'secret' meeting between M.R. Ajith Kumar, additional director general of police law and order, who is believed to be a close confidant of Mr. Vijayan, and at least two senior RSS leaders.

The Congress alleged that the meetings were held at the behest of Mr. Vijayan to 'strike a deal with the RSS,' which resulted in the police 'deliberately mishandling' the Thiruvananthapuram temple festival, in April. The disruption of the Poomam, the Congress argues, helped the BJP capitalise on the hurt Hindu sentiments to post its first win in a Lok Sabha seat in Kerala.

But the first salvo against Mr. Ajith Kumar was fired by the Left-backed independent legislator, P.V. Anvar, who until recently enjoyed tremendous support from the CPI(M) cadres on social media. While the timing of Mr. Anvar's attack raised many eyebrows as it coincided with the CPI(M)'s organisational conferences,

the allegations, ranging from corruption to criminal deeds, were not just serious but alarming. While a team of officers supervised by the State Police chief was tasked with investigating the allegations, the fact that the Chief Minister allowed Mr. Ajith Kumar to continue to be in charge of law and order led to questions about the veracity of the inquiry and Mr. Vijayan's probity. The issue has made branch committee meetings of the CPI(M) noisy, with Mr. Vijayan's silence and perceived inaction coming under fire.

At stake for the party is its avowed posture as the sole credible political counterforce against a rising BJP. That claim has already weakened, as the CPI(M) was forced to sack its central committee member, E.P. Jayaraman, as the convenor of the Left Front after the party made the assessment that his political indiscretion had cost the Left dearly in the Lok Sabha polls. Mr. Jayaraman's polling day admission of a meeting with BJP Kerala in charge, Prakash Javadekar, and his family's controversial business ties with a firm run by a BJP leader, Rajeev Chandrasekhar, led to his removal.

In the present case, the moot question is whether the Chief Minister had any inkling about Mr. Ajith Kumar's meetings with senior RSS leaders such as Dattatreya Hosabale. How did he miss the Special Branch reports on these confabulations? Why would a senior police officer overseeing law and order in a State governed by a Left coalition have private meetings with RSS apparatchiks? These are some of the queries that have been raised by CPI(M) leaders in private, while other LDF constituents and the Opposition have raised them vocally. It is for Mr. Vijayan to clear the air.

## Over 70% child deaths in India are linked to malnutrition

Death rates from malnutrition are much higher in low-income countries, where children often don't get the diversity of nutrients

### DATA POINT

**Hannah Ritchie**  
The Hindu Data Team

In 2021, in India, 0.7 million children under the age of five died. Of these, 0.5 million of the deaths were attributed to child and maternal malnutrition. That means, over 70% of them were linked to nutritional deficiencies. In the same year, the world over, 4.7 million children under the age of five died; 2.4 million of those were attributed to child and maternal malnutrition. That means around 50% of child deaths – about 20% points less than India's figures – were linked to nutritional deficiencies.

In most cases, children don't die of malnutrition. They die from conditions that are exacerbated or are triggered by it. In most cases, it is a risk factor for premature death. In **Chart 1**, we can see how many child deaths are attributed to different nutritional risk factors in India.

By far, the biggest is low birth weight, which often happens because the mother is malnourished or has experienced infectious diseases during pregnancy. After the first few weeks or months of life, children are also more vulnerable to infection and disease when they are underweight or are malnourished and don't develop at a healthy rate. Hundreds of thousands die as a result of 'wasting', which means their weight is too low for their height, or 'stunting', which means they are too short for their age.

Death rates from malnutrition are much higher in low-income countries, where children often don't get the diversity of nutrients they need and where infectious diseases are much more common. In **Chart 2**, malnutrition deaths are plotted on the vertical axis and gross domestic product (GDP) per person on the horizontal axis. In rich countries – on the right of the

chart – rates are 20 to 50 times lower than in the poorest countries, on the left. Most malnutrition deaths occur in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. BRICS countries are highlighted in the chart.

Thankfully, fewer children are dying from malnutrition than a few decades ago. **Chart 3** shows the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation's estimates of the number of child deaths related to malnutrition since 1990 in India.

The world over, around 6.6 million deaths were linked to these risks in 1990. By 2021, this had fallen to around 2.4 million – a 63% drop. Improvements in nutrition have driven some of this decline. In India, the corresponding drop was from 2.4 million to 0.5 million – a 80% drop.

Progress in tackling infectious diseases has also been crucial. Disease and malnutrition have a bidirectional relationship. This means that if diseases are less common, the health risks from being malnourished are also lower. In the last few decades, deaths from diarrhoeal diseases have plummeted thanks to clean water, improvements in sanitation, handwashing, and better and more widespread treatments. Antimalarials and bednets have reduced malaria death rates. Most children are vaccinated against tuberculosis, and a growing number are against rotavirus.

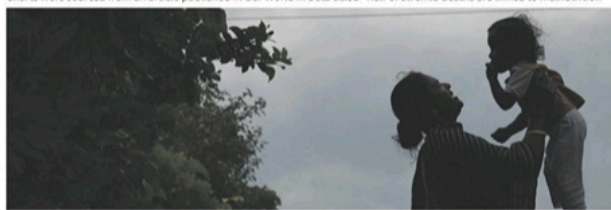
Support for mothers and babies during pregnancy and after birth has also improved. More births are attended by skilled health workers, which means that when babies are born with very low birth weights, professional medical workers are there to help and advise.

Tackling the diseases and health conditions that affect malnourished children is another way of reducing the poor health outcomes of malnutrition. But of course, improving the nutrition of children and mothers is crucial.

Hannah Ritchie is the deputy editor and Science outreach lead at Our World in Data

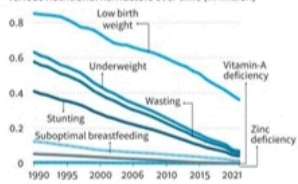
## Deaths from hunger

Charts were sourced from an article published in Our World in Data titled "Half of all child deaths are linked to malnutrition"

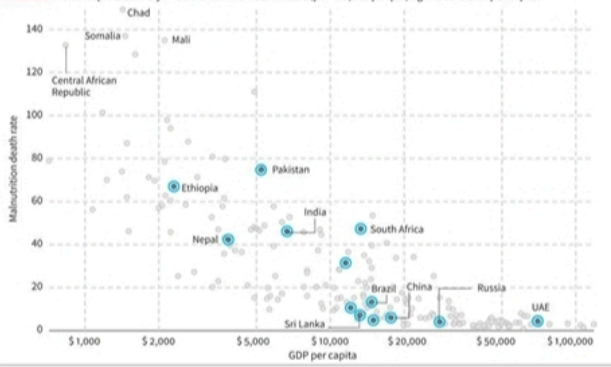


**Chart 1:** Number of child deaths in India attributed to various nutritional risk factors

**Chart 3:** Number of child deaths in India attributed to various nutritional risk factors over time (in million)



**Chart 2:** The chart plots country-wise malnutrition death rates (per 100,000 people) against the GDP per capita



### FROM THE ARCHIVES

The **Hindu**.

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 10, 1974

## Ford grants Nixon "full, free and absolute pardon"

Washington: The United States President, Mr. Gerald Ford, to-day granted former President, Mr. Richard Nixon, "a full, free and absolute pardon" for all "offences against the United States" during the period of his presidency. Speaking before newsmen and a single television camera in his Oval office, Mr. Ford said, "I feel that Richard Nixon and his loved ones have suffered enough." In a formal statement which he read, Mr. Ford declared: "My conscience tells me clearly and certainly that I cannot prolong the bad dreams that continue to reopen a chapter that is closed. My conscience tells me that only I, as President, have the constitutional power to firmly shut and seal this book." Mr. Ford departed from his prepared statement to say that the situation Mr. Nixon found himself in prior to the broad pardon "threatens his health." As he read the statement, Mr. Ford said: "It is common knowledge that serious allegations and accusations hang like a sword over our former President's head and threatens his health as he tries to reshape his life, a great part of which was spent in the service of this country and by the mandate of its people." In explaining the reasons for his action, which had not been anticipated at this time, the President said that months and perhaps years would pass before Mr. Nixon could get a fair court trial. The proclamation granting pardon to Mr. Nixon for the period from January 20, 1969 until Aug. 9, 1974 – the day Mr. Nixon resigned – was signed by Mr. Ford in the presence of newsmen and photographers. The action came almost one month to the day after Mr. Nixon resigned the presidency under the pressure of the Watergate scandal.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPT. 10, 1924

## Boycott propaganda in Bengal.

Calcutta, Sept. 8: In pursuance of a resolution adopted by the Bengal Congress Committee urging the boycott of British goods, some 50 volunteers headed by some Swarajist leaders today paraded the Barrah Bazaar section of the town in procession singing national songs and requesting the shopkeepers not to sell British clothes.





## Taking TB seriously

Early adoption of the new treatment regimen is welcome

**T**ime is of the essence in adopting advanced technology in medical care. When medical technology arrives dragging its feet, then its transformative effects are not that dramatic. The Union Health Ministry's decision to introduce the new treatment regimen for drug-resistant tuberculosis hardly a couple of years after it was recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO), is a step in the right direction. Last week, the government approved the BPaLM regimen comprising four drugs — Bedaquiline, Pretomanid, Linezolid and Moxifloxacin. This regimen has been proven to offer better outcomes, remarkably shortening the duration of treatment, and resulting in improvements in quality of life for persons living with multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB), which resists treatment by isoniazid and rifampicin, the two hitherto frontline drugs in TB treatment. The move makes tremendous sense for a country that voluntarily set itself an earlier target for TB elimination by 2025, five years ahead of the global target under the UN Sustainable Development Goals. TB elimination means there should be under one case of TB for a population of 10 lakh. Traditional treatments can last up to 20 months, and entail severe side effects for the patient. The BPaLM regimen is reputed to cure drug-resistant TB in just six months, with a high success rate. It is particularly significant in this country, because an estimated 75,000 people living with drug-resistant TB can now switch to this shorter, cheaper treatment regimen. This move, experts endorse, will undoubtedly improve treatment outcomes and help thousands of patients.

The government has, admirably, shown a commitment and political will to see the back of TB, and has, over the years, implemented several measures in aid of this. Shifting from conventional culture and drug sensitivity testing to rapid molecular tests for diagnosing MDR-TB has resulted in improved case detection, higher treatment coverage, better treatment success rates, and falling death rates. Extra support (financially, nutritionally and societally) in the form of the Niskhaya Mitra scheme has also yielded results. India's reduction of TB incidence by 16% from 2015 to 2022 is almost double the pace at which global TB incidence is declining, as per WHO's Global TB Report 2023. Mortality has also reduced by 18% during the same period in India. It was India which led the way earlier with its Directly Observed Therapy Short-course programme, revolutionising TB care back in the day with supervised administration of drugs. Centring its patients, the government should not merely follow, but be a pioneer in diagnosing and treating TB.

## Stolen vote

Macron's impulsive decisions are pushing France into political turmoil

**E**mmanuel Macron, France's centrist President, called a snap parliamentary election in June after the country's far-right National Rally (RN) finished first in the European elections. Mr. Macron wanted a fresh national mandate against the far right. But in the elections, held in two rounds in June and July, no party won a majority (289 seats) with the left New Popular Front (NFP) emerging as the biggest bloc, with 182 seats. Mr. Macron's Ensemble won 168 seats and the RN finished third with 143 seats. The NFP immediately staked claim to form the next government and even picked a prime ministerial candidate. But after two months of a political deadlock, Mr. Macron, last week, picked Michel Barnier, a veteran from the conservative Republican party, which finished fourth in the election with 46 seats, as the new Prime Minister. In effect, Mr. Macron called the snap election to defeat the far right, saw the victory of the left-wing bloc, but appointed a conservative as the Prime Minister. His decision has angered many French voters, with tens of thousands of them pouring into the streets on Saturday to protest against the "stolen vote". The NFP, especially its leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon, has slammed Mr. Macron's "betrayal" of the public mandate.

Mr. Macron's rationale was that he chose "institutional stability" as most other political blocs were to a leftist forming the government. In the current arrangement, Mr. Barnier would seek to form a minority government with support from Mr. Macron's party and independent support (through abstention) from the RN. So, if Mr. Macron called the snap elections to defeat the far-right RN, his pick for the post of the Prime Minister would be dependent on the far right's mercy to stay in power and push legislation through Parliament. Mr. Macron wants a leader who can form "a unity government to serve the French people", and Marine Le Pen, the far-right leader, wants a Prime Minister "who works for RN voters". Mr. Barnier, 73, has served in several conservative cabinets and was the EU's main Brexit negotiator from 2016-21. His job is to form a government that would take Mr. Macron's agenda forward without taking the far right. Whether he would succeed or not, Mr. Macron's move itself is a sledgehammer blow to democracy in France. His impulsive decisions to push the country into elections and then ignore the spirit of the people's mandate are not typical of leaders of mature democracies. By rejecting the winner of the election and picking a Prime Minister who is acceptable for the far right, Mr. Macron is making a mockery of the people's choice and also mainstreaming the far right with neo-Nazi roots. He has made a big mistake.

# Regulatory reform stuck in a loop in Health Ministry

**E**arlier this year, the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI), working under the direct control of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, announced policy initiatives on three issues: recall guidelines, guidelines on good distribution practices and the use of similar brand-names by pharmaceutical companies for their drugs.

All three measures have a direct impact on public health. Recall guidelines are meant to swiftly remove drugs that fail testing in government laboratories from the market. The guidelines on good distribution practices are meant to regulate how drugs are stored and distributed during transit and sale. The measure against confusing brand names is aimed at preventing prescription errors, wherein wrong drugs are dispensed to patients causing them harm.

Unfortunately, these measures either lack the force of law or are poorly thought through. For over a decade, we have seen this old wine of vague guidelines and cautionary letters sold in a new bottle, disguised as concrete measures of reform.

### The 59th report of the PSC

A good starting point for this discussion is the 59th report of the Department Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health & Family Welfare (PSC) which was tabled in 2012. In this report, which focused on how the national drug regulator, the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) functions, the PSC raised a host of issues including the lack of recall guidelines, the lack of standards for storage of drugs and the problem of confusing brand drug names.

These issues were flagged decades before the PSC examined them in its 59th report. The lack of recall guidelines was flagged during a meeting of the Drugs Consultative Committee (DCC) back in 1976 when State drug controllers realised that drugs ordered to be withdrawn in one State due to quality concerns were being sold in a neighbouring state. The lack of proper standards for storage of drugs, especially during transportation, was flagged by the Supreme Court in India in 1974, in *Sunraj & Ors vs State of Maharashtra*. Similarly, the issue of similar brand names for different drugs was flagged by the Court in 2001 in *Cadila Healthcare Limited vs Cadila Pharmaceuticals Limited*.

When the PSC raised these very issues in its 59th report, it created significant pressure on the Ministry of Health because it demanded follow-up action. The PSC even published a scathing "Action Taken Report" the following year indicating its unhappiness with the lack of effective reform by the Ministry of Health. Unfortunately, these issues raised by the PSC over a decade ago are yet to be tackled effectively and



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Prashant Reddy T.

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The policy initiatives of recall guidelines, good distribution practices and the use of similar brand-names either lack the force of law or are poorly thought through

have been stuck in a loop at the Ministry of Health, since the bureaucracy is either unable or unwilling to tackle these issues.

### Non-binding guidelines in a loop

For example, the most recent drug recall guidelines announced in August by the DCGI were in fact first announced in the year 2012 after the PSC report was tabled and then again in 2017. In all three instances, the initiative for drug recall guidelines came from the office of the DCGI, except that the DCGI lacks the legal power to make rules that are binding and have the force of law. Only the Ministry of Health has that power under the Constitution. As a result, 48 years after the lack of recall guidelines was first identified at the DCC, India continues to have these guidelines which cannot be legally enforced and the breach of which have no legal consequences. It is no wonder then that we never hear of action removing 'not of standard quality drugs' from the market.

The story with the guidelines to regulate the storage of drugs during transit and sale is even more depressing. After the PSC report, a proposal to adopt good distribution practices guidelines formulated by the World Health Organization (WHO) came up for discussion at the meeting of the DCC in 2013. The proposal at that time was to make good distribution practices guidelines legally binding. However, this proposal was opposed within the DCC because it was felt that it would be too "difficult to implement" across the estimated six lakh retail outlets in the country — the DCC likely anticipated pushback from trade associations of pharmacies since the good distribution practices guidelines would require investments in storage equipment. This reluctance to make good distribution practices guidelines mandatory was a dereliction of duty toward public health because India is a hot and humid country. In many parts of India, especially during summer, drugs are guaranteed to degrade without proper temperature and humidity controls. In 2019, the GDP guidelines were back on the DCC's agenda after a raid at the wholesale market for medicine at Bhagirath Palace, New Delhi revealed shockingly poor storage practices for drugs, including vaccines. This time though, the DCC resolved to make good distribution practices guidelines into binding law. The matter came up again at a meeting of the DCC earlier this year where the government has admitted that the lack of the binding nature of the GDP guidelines was a problem. However, instead of proceeding to declare the guidelines as binding law, the government has once again decided to conduct another round of consultation with stakeholders, thereby further delaying the implementation of WHO standards.

The story with confusing brand names follows a similar trajectory. Despite being flagged by the

top court in 2001 and the Parliamentary Standing Committee in 2012, the government did nothing to fix the problem. After receiving a rap on its knuckles from the Delhi High Court in 2019, the government introduced an entirely useless legal rule to address this issue. Instead of creating an obligation upon the regulator to vet the brand names before a drug could be marketed, the Ministry created a rule requiring pharmaceutical companies to provide a self-declaration that their proposed brand name was not similar to any of the existing brand names in the market. In most other countries, it is the duty of the regulator to vet the brand name, to ensure that it is not confusing or misleading from a public health perspective. It makes no sense to ask the pharmaceutical industry to self-regulate on this issue as evidenced by the large number of confusing pharma brand names in India even after these rules came into force. Earlier this year, after we wrote about the issue in this daily, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) intervened and issued notice to the Ministry of Health. In response, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) wrote a letter to the Registrar of Trademarks asking to ensure that confusing trademarks were not registered. The DGHS completely misses the point that trademark registration is voluntary. Many companies do not seek to register their brand names as a trademark. Even when trademark applications are filed, the Registrar of Trade Marks conducts a perfunctory "confusion analysis" that does not include a public health perspective. Brand names should ideally be scrutinised by the regulator for being misleading and fanciful from a health perspective.

### Breaking the loop

The three reform measures discussed here are reflective of a consistent leadership failure in the higher echelons of the Ministry of Health. Matters pertaining to drug regulation are meant to be guided by a joint secretary heading the Drug Regulation Section in the Ministry. This officer, who usually hails from the All India Services, holds the post for a few years before moving on to the next posting. She has little domain expertise in this area and lacks the institutional knowledge that policymaking requires. We suspect that with every newly appointed joint secretary, these files go through with repeated consultations with stakeholders in the pharmaceutical industry. In each of these consultations, the trade associations of pharmacies and pharmaceutical companies use every trick in the book to stall the necessary action and the bureaucracy uses a familiar playbook of repeat consultations to stall concrete action. We doubt that the loop will be broken without the direct intervention of the Prime Minister's Office.

# Next Census should be the last enumeration-based one

**A**ccording to media reports, India is likely to begin conducting the long-delayed Census exercise and complete the survey within 18 months. So, realistically, the final Census report might be available sometime in late 2026 or in 2027, with a roughly 16-year gap since the last Census of 2011. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, is cited as the primary reason for the delay in the census.

As per a United Nations report, in the interim, India surpassed China in population. There have been significant changes in the demographics too. Haaz Khas, a posh neighbourhood in southern Delhi with affluent urbanites, was partly designated as rural in 2011, for example.

While many people are worried that India has been operating without proper data for a long time, in today's world, there remains a significant discrepancy between reality and the data available, even for a decennial census. This discrepancy is especially noticeable as the decade-long gap draws to a close. In actuality, the decennial format of most censuses was merely a compulsion because conducting a census is a mammoth and prohibitively expensive undertaking.

It certainly makes sense that if census exercises were conducted more frequently, a number of policies and their execution as well as socioeconomic and health-related studies, might be dynamically adjusted by observing the findings.

### An idea to pursue

For the past few years, this writer has personally supported "register-based" and "dynamic" censuses, which could furnish up-to-date census data whenever needed. The database would be updated continuously in real-time during a "dynamic" census. Reportedly, a few years ago, India was preparing software by which the birth date of a child will come into the back end of the database of the Census Register, and after attaining the age of 18 years, this person would be



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There are strong reasons why India needs to have 'register-based' and 'dynamic' censuses

registered as a voter in the voter list from the Office of the Census Registrar. The name would be removed from the voter list upon death.

### Global trends

This could be a significant leap in the direction of a dynamic database. However, India's next Census, which will be the nation's first "digital census", may be a complete enumeration. On the other hand, a number of countries, including Austria, Bahrain, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greenland, the Netherlands, Singapore, Sweden and Switzerland, are currently moving towards register-based censuses, which produce useful statistics primarily from government sources using data from various administrative registers, which includes population, tax, employment, school, hospital records, and data from municipalities.

These may be complemented by some well-planned small-scale sample surveys such as those conducted in Switzerland with 5%-10% of the population. Even the United States and the United Kingdom are moving towards register-based censuses. Unsurprisingly, such a census exercise will be cost-effective too. For instance, the cost of the 2001 Census in Austria was €72 million. However when the register-based approach was implemented in 2011, the cost fell to €10 million.

The United Kingdom government declared in 2014 that statistics derived from more frequent and timely administrative data will take the place of the decennial census after 2021. In place of the customary questionnaire-based approach, the U.K. will harvest the data people leave behind in their everyday lives. At the time, the Royal Statistical Society's executive director said the U.K. government had "made the right call". It is actually a "dynamic register-based census", meaning that every pertinent social, economic, and demographic activity and event in people's lives is constantly added to the census database.

Further, in order to produce its official figures,

the Office for National Statistics in the U.K. has recently begun to gather more data — reliable data, of course — even from private companies. Examples of this include data collected from supermarket scanners and data on cars and trains from Auto Trader and the Rail Delivery Groups. Notably, India already has an Aadhaar-centric database, unlike the U.K. And, reportedly, a few years back, the Home Minister asked officials to devise a strategy to merge the voter card, Aadhaar card, and other databases into the Census database.

### Database integration

However, combining many registers is never a simple operation. Even though it has been increasingly customary in India recently to integrate databases such as Aadhaar, PAN, voter ID, bank accounts, and mobile numbers, it is still a mammoth task to solve the jigsaw puzzle and to build up the "elephant" by correctly assembling different types of "registers". However, I believe the nation has sufficient expertise to accomplish that. And, by using the administrative data of various available registers instead, thousands of crores of rupees can be saved.

A census serves as a valuable repository of data pertaining to various economic endeavours, educational attainment and literacy rates, housing and domestic facilities, urbanisation, migration, mortality, fertility, religion, language, and additional socio-economic, cultural, and demographic information. It is unclear if our intended method will be able to update data on the majority of these aspects in real time. Naturally, if any data is lacking, it can be updated on a regular basis by properly conducting surveys, perhaps on a small scale.

Overall, such an exercise might usher in an era of dynamic, continuous censuses. And the greatest legacy of digital India might be that, if it can be implemented. Let the upcoming Census be India's last complete enumeration-based census.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Tackling TB

It is reassuring that India has finally acted in the TB fight with the Health Ministry approving a new BPaLM treatment regime for multidrug-resistant TB. This combination is in use for the past two years or more the world over. India is among the top five nations with the highest disease

burden. In the past 40 years, there have been only three new drug introductions for TB and Pretomanid is one among them. Giant pharma companies do not seem to be earmarking budgets for discovering new antibiotics or chemical antimicrobial agents because of the intractable problem of antimicrobial resistance.

Drug giants are not interested in investing money unless they are sure of long-term harvesting. This data would have made the news report more comprehensive.

T.K. Prakash,  
Kochi, Kerala

Mpox case in India  
There should be

transparency in reporting the first case of mpox in the country, especially the country from which the affected person travelled recently. Though there is an 'assurance' that the case is not a matter of undue concern, its severity among children in countries such as Congo will be of concern among the general public.

Even allergic rashes may cause alarm. As this virus shares an antigenic relationship with the smallpox virus and a majority of the adults in India were vaccinated till 1975, it may possibly provide herd immunity by cross protection. Labs should be equipped with reagents for PCR diagnosis

for quick screening.  
Dr. V. Purushothaman,  
Chennai

### Manipur crisis

It is shocking that the government seems nonchalant about restoring peace in Manipur. How long will the region burn?  
P. Sriram,  
Chennai



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