



Public accounts

The PAC must assert its role as an instrument of parliamentary oversight

Over the last decade, the Central government, with a comfortable majority in Parliament, has evaded meaningful parliamentary accountability. Now, however, the BJP heads a coalition that is dependent on allies, and the Opposition is stronger. The changed situation is an opportunity for the renewal of parliamentary oversight over the executive's functioning. The proactive beginning of the newly constituted Public Accounts Committee (PAC) is a case in point. On September 2, it notified 161 subjects it had picked for deliberations during its term, most of them based on CAG reports. The panel has picked five subjects *suo motu* — reforms in the banking and insurance sectors; review of the implementation of centrally sponsored welfare schemes; policy measures underlying the transition in the energy sector; performance review of regulatory bodies established by Acts of Parliament, and the levy and regulation of fees, tariffs, user charges, on public infrastructure and other public utilities. The PAC, headed by Congress Member of Parliament K.C. Venugopal, has made use of the rule which clearly states that its functions can go "beyond the formality of expenditure to its wisdom, faithfulness, and economy". This rule has been used only rarely and to make a political point. Though the subjects picked by the PAC have political undertones, the overarching public interest involved is unmistakable.

The constitutional scheme envisages that Parliament controls the finances of the country. Any tax may be imposed only by passing legislation. All expenditure of the government needs prior sanction from Parliament through Appropriation Bills. The CAG is a constitutional office that examines and audits the financial functioning of all government departments. All its reports are sent to the PAC, one of the oldest and most significant parliamentary panels. Government measures that pick the winners of the economy have led to serious allegations of crony capitalism in recent years. The government has refused to investigate the serious charges against SEBI Chairperson Madhabi P. Buch and the Adani Group, which controls seven Indian airports. Public sector banks and regulatory bodies have a lot to answer for. The BJP has already opposed any PAC investigation into these questions. The 22-member PAC has 13 members from the BJP-led NDA and nine Opposition MPs, including four from the Congress. The committee's assertive posturing could be undermined by the ruling coalition's majority. The PAC, and the Department Related Standing Committees, many of which are yet to be constituted, should assert their role as instruments of parliamentary authority and the enforcer of the executive's accountability to the people.

One-man rule

Maduro must realise socialist rhetoric is no substitute for popular support

Venezuela's disputed July 28 presidential election and the subsequent crackdown on the Opposition by the regime of President Nicolás Maduro have deepened the political divisions in the oil-rich country. According to the National Electoral Council, Mr. Maduro, President since 2013 upon the death of Hugo Chávez, won 51%, while his main opponent Edmundo González secured 43%. But the Opposition claims that the tally sheets issued by electronic voting machines, suggested Mr. González's hands down victory. The Opposition claim was backed by the U.S. and other western countries, while Mr. Maduro got confirmation of his victory from his hand-picked Supreme Court. Rejecting calls to quit, he has unleashed the crackdown. At least 24 people have been killed and 2,400 arrested in relation to the protests since the results, according to the Human Rights Watch. Last week, police surrounded the Argentine embassy in Caracas where some Opposition figures had taken refuge. Mr. Maduro had already secured Argentina's diplomatic mission after its President, Javier Milei, supported Mr. González. Mr. González, a retired diplomat who faces charges for incitement of protests left for Spain on September 7.

The election has not been fair from the beginning. The Opposition's original pick to counter Mr. Maduro was María Corina Machado, a former lawmaker. After she was banned by the complicit general, a Maduro ally, from holding public office, Mr. González was chosen later. The election process itself was disputed, and three weeks after the vote was held, the authorities are yet to release results by individual polling stations. Mr. González's flight could be a temporary victory for Mr. Maduro, who has tightened his grip over every branch of the state, but his challenges are far from over. Venezuela, which is also under U.S. sanctions, has seen rapid economic decline and a rise in extreme poverty. About 7.7 million people have fled in recent years amid hyperinflation, economic contraction and scarcity for food and medicine. Mr. Maduro has also seen growing regional pressure, with even left-wing governments of Brazil, Chile and Colombia urging him to publish the full results. The tensions between Venezuela and Brazil came up in the open when the Maduro regime revoked Brasília's authorisation to manage and repair the Argentine embassy. With his legitimacy in question, Mr. Maduro, grappling with a sanctions-hit, mismanaged economy, a divided polity at home, and growing isolation abroad, is behaving like a dictator. He has turned Chávez's popular Bolivarian project into a one-man rule with socialist rhetoric. This allows him to cling on to power, for now, but at a great cost to the people of Venezuela.

Instability and uncertainty stalk Bangladesh

It is often mentioned that the fate of individuals and nations hang by a slender thread. On August 5 this year, even as Muhammad Yunus (the current head/chief adviser of the interim government in Bangladesh) was to be arraigned before a court of law for certain alleged actions against the State, the then Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, was compelled to resign and flee the country to neighbouring India. This was a sequel to several weeks of protests over a 'quota system', reserving a percentage of all government jobs to descendants of 'freedom' fighters involved in Bangladesh's 'war of independence'. The government's heavy-handed measures to suppress the student demonstrations had led to a groundswell of protest against the government, and Sheikh Hasina herself. Even after the proposal for the 'quota system' was withdrawn, massive protests continued, signalling the depth of anger against the government, and Sheikh Hasina personally, compelling her to flee.

Bangladesh currently has an interim government headed by Mr. Yunus, an economist, which has the backing of the Army, and with students functioning as the 'storm-troopers'. In quick succession, the Chief Justice, the central bank governor, a host of university vice-chancellors and other key personnel were compelled to step down. The main charge levelled against Sheikh Hasina is that she had become a virtual dictator, trampling on the civil liberties of citizens and embarking on high handed actions against her political opponents.

Still early days but much can happen

It would be invidious to characterise Sheikh Hasina's ouster as a victory for 'democratic forces'. No doubt, it has some of the characteristics of the 'Prague Spring' that rocked Czechoslovakia in the mid-20th century, but the world does not have to be reminded of how the revolt was snuffed out within a short time frame. There may be no equivalent of the 'Warsaw Pact Powers' (which ended the Prague students' revolt) on the horizon in Bangladesh as of now. Today's major powers, essentially the United States and China, however, have a huge stake in how matters turn out and are not averse to meddling in Bangladesh.

What happened in Bangladesh does not conform to a classical 'colour' revolution instigated by the U.S. or the West, but it has provided scope for the 'Big Powers' to meddle in the affairs of Bangladesh, anxious to secure a base for themselves in South Asia, as part of their larger designs.

Much will depend on the turn of events. In the first flush of exuberance and anger against Sheikh Hasina, vandalism seemed to reach its apogee, with images of Sheikh Hasina and even the statue



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The troubles in Bangladesh are by no means over and India may need new strategies to deal with the situation to its east

of the nation's founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, becoming targets of riotous mobs. The position of Mr. Yunus itself appears tenuous at this stage, and it is uncertain how long the Army would support the present arrangement. Pressure from political parties to hold early elections is already evident, and if and when elections are announced, it could shatter the surface calm.

Areas of danger

The real concern is whether the 'democracy deficit', which Sheikh Hasina helped perpetuate to overcome political obstacles, can be offset democratically, or whether it would lead to another round of violent events. A worrying aspect is the increasing role of Islamist parties in Bangladesh which, in recent years, has become a potent force. An India intent on maintaining a balance between religion and politics would find the growing presence of radical Islamist entities a potent danger.

What India can at present possibly hope for is that the people of Bangladesh would continue to remember India's role in the early 1970s, which led to the creation of an independent state of Bangladesh. Also that any and future governments would display the same degree of warmth as the outgoing Sheikh Hasina regime. While many in India have not forgotten the 'dark days' of the early 1970s — when India had to fight a war with Pakistan on the one hand and cope with a hostile U.S. at another level, intent on detaching India from Russia — so as to bring about the independence of East Pakistan (later to become Bangladesh), India can only hope that similar sentiments still prevail in Bangladesh, notwithstanding the degree of hostility towards Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League.

For its part, India must acknowledge, and be grateful for, the support extended by Bangladesh over the years in dealing with militant groups belonging to India's northeast, that had sought sanctuary there and become a scourge for India's security establishment. Under Sheikh Hasina these militants could no longer find sanctuary in Bangladesh. A prolonged period of uncertainty in Bangladesh following recent developments could well result in the regrouping of, and revival of militant activities in India by groups such as the United Liberation Front of Asom, the Mizo National Front and the NSCN.

Meanwhile, the West, which generally views events across the globe through the prism of geo-politics, is already putting out the idea that Bangladesh might well become the crucible for the next phase of conflict between India and China. Undoubtedly, both India and China have important stakes in Bangladesh. More recently, Bangladesh has begun to make certain overtures to China to accommodate its economic and

defence needs. It is quite possible that with the eclipse of Sheikh Hasina, the successor regime in Bangladesh might well seek to strengthen its China connection, even as Sheikh Hasina was seen to be manifestly pro-India. All this, however, in the realm of conjecture, and it may be too early to view Bangladesh through the prism of geo-politics — China, India, the U.S. *et al.*

Compounding problems for India

For an India, wrestling with the problem of having to deal with difficult and uncertain situations along much of its periphery, specially to the west and the northwest, the Bangladesh developments could not have come at a worse time. In the east, it now confronts a Bangladesh that appears set to shift from being a friendly neighbour to a problem state. The vexed issue of the Rohingya Muslims, which needed an early solution, will, in all likelihood, be put on the back burner for now.

Myanmar is currently controlled by a clutch of generals (who are not above being enticed by western military advisers), and while the generals may not be overtly hostile to India at present, they do not see themselves as being in step with it. Lurking in the background are again certain external forces — not only China and Pakistan — who are likely to fish in these troubled waters. This could exert a pincer-type stranglehold on India's ambition to achieve a peaceful and prosperous South Asia.

India may, hence, need to devise a new set of strategies to deal with the emerging situation. One myth that has already been exploded is that India had little to fear from developments to its east and south. Both regions have today become highly problematic, to say the least. The threat from China also looms larger than ever before, if, as is being anticipated, it could secure a beachhead in a post-Sheikh Hasina Bangladesh. A simultaneous strengthening of the China-Pakistan axis would thereafter pose a threat of a kind that had not existed for several years. More than anything else, it is the spectre of Islamist radicalism that could well haunt the entire region — more so in Bangladesh at this time alongside the threat of a possible link up between radical Islamist elements in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand and South Asia.

The troubles in Bangladesh are by no means over. Violent street protests are usually a precursor for events that seldom have a good ending. The experience of other countries is that students seldom achieve through protests what they seek. This has been the recent experience in Europe and elsewhere. Movements of this kind tend to be usually taken over by forces inimical to democracy. Consequently, India faces a moral and security dilemma in the wake of recent events in Bangladesh.

Perils of decentralisation with Chinese characteristics

In his Independence day speech this year, the Prime Minister urged States to compete with each other to attract investors. In sharp contrast, extreme subnational economic competition seems to have run its course in China. Here is why decentralisation, once celebrated as a reason for China's economic miracle, has turned counter-productive.

Unlike India, where city-level governments account for less than 3% of total government spending, a staggering 51% of government spending in China happens at sub-provincial levels. Local governments also have a much broader qualitative mandate. They are almost exclusively responsible for unemployment insurance and pensions, subjects Indians generally associate with the national government.

Yet, China's extreme decentralisation does not make it a federal country. A key feature of a federal system is that higher-level governments cannot extinguish the powers given to lower-level governments, as the Constitution protects them. No such provision exists in China's Party-state system. After Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour caused local governments to go on a spending spree, the central government severely and immediately restricted their ability to raise money through the Tax-Sharing Reform of 1994.

Overcapacity is structural

Local governments had to find a way out. Since economic growth was an important determinant of local leaders' political prospects, they started prioritising industrial construction over the provision of public services. They offered industrial land at deep discounts compared to residential land in the hope that industrial outputs would increase regional economic growth and also become a source for future local tax revenues. Local governments attracted investors with attractive land rights. Firms accepted the offer, churned out goods at low rates because of cost advantages, and exported to the world.

This investment-led model is structurally prone to overcapacity. This model of competitive sub-national growth is akin to a car having two



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accelerators and no brakes. The arrangement would well tilt the Hu Jintao period. The central leadership set broad priorities and targets while local governments experimented and competed. The process of crossing the river while feeling the stones created tremendous wealth, while also generating structural overcapacity, wasteful investment, and loss-making entities.

The overall trend remained net positive for two reasons. First, the directives were broad enough for local governments to try different ways to achieve growth or reform goals. For instance, Guangdong interpreted the central goal of economic opening by experimenting with special economic zones. Other regions were free to follow alternate models. Likewise, the central leadership permitted local innovations in the housing sector, rather than imposing a particular solution. This policy innovation process was locally determined and not micromanaged by the centre.

Second, a salubrious geopolitical climate was crucial. Foreign markets were willing and able to absorb China's ever-increasing capacity. China's steel sector's expansion is a case in point. Starting from the turn of the millennium, within six years, China went from being a net steel importer to the largest steel manufacturer and a net exporter. By the beginning of the 2010s, tackling overcapacity in the steel sector had become a prominent policy objective. While many Chinese companies failed along the way, several rode this wave, generating tremendous value for employees and the government.

The car encounters a slope

However, this model began to reach a tipping point around the time Xi Jinping came to power. Researchers at the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) in 2014 estimated that half of all investment between 2009 and 2013 was "ineffective", amounting to a waste of nearly \$6.9 trillion. Mr. Xi's solution to this predicament was to strengthen central control and establish traffic lights to direct state and private capital in desirable domains.

Since then, central directives have become

narrower. The desire for self-sufficiency has further resulted in them focusing on specific product lines. For example, the drive to localise the entire supply chain for semiconductors is divorced from market-based demand and the comparative advantages of the Chinese industry. The 'Big Fund' began in 2014 intending to build a self-sufficient semiconductor industry. Drawing on this, many local governments indiscriminately poured money into chip-making firms. Ten years later, China has not mastered the production of advanced chips. Nevertheless, many firms continue to milk local governments for funding. The Economist reports that 30% of all industrial firms were making losses at the end of June 2024, beating the previous worst performance during the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s.

Another reason is that other governments now see China's overcapacity as a national security threat. This is evident in the geopolitical wrangling underway over tech-enabled Chinese products such as electric vehicles and telecom equipment. Moreover, China's bad international conduct has exacerbated the negative perceptions of Chinese products and investments.

Shortcomings in the BRI approach

Mr. Xi planned to substitute western markets with increasing domestic demand and find new international markets through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Increasing domestic demand has not worked out because this is unfamiliar territory for a structure obsessed with supply-side stimuli. The BRI approach has not worked because the participating countries are not economically strong enough to generate huge demand.

In short, overcapacity and export orientation are baked into Chinese-style decentralisation. This model has now reached its limits due to China's arrogant approach to international relations and its drive towards self-reliance. Though we might see a jump in exports for some sectors, China faces an economic decline if it does not transform its political and economic relations with the world's major countries.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Unrest in Manipur

Over the past year, Manipur has experienced turmoil, with multiple instances of clashes between communities. The situation has now escalated to a point where students are demanding the removal of top public servants for their

failure in protecting the lives and the properties of citizens. The situation now has some resemblance with the unrest being experienced in Bangladesh. The current government must focus on the issues in Manipur. We have already witnessed the tragic loss of

lives due to these community clashes. Gaddam Yeshwanth, Hyderabad

U.S. speech

The Leader of the Opposition paying a visit to the United States is fine up to the point where his

public connect is friendly from the perspective of India as a whole. But criticising the government in a foreign land, or unfurling a political agenda does undermine the government. Rahul Gandhi's criticism of the government is totally acceptable but this

must be within India. He is now the Leader of the Opposition and must carefully calibrate his speeches while outside. Kirti Wadhawan, Kanpur

Peace and an Indian role It is good tidings that India

could be playing a global role in mediating peace between Russia and Ukraine (September 11). The 'four-point principle' mooted by India must succeed and ensure peace and tranquillity. Mani Natarajan, Chennai

India's sickle cell challenge

Last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the National Sickle Cell Anaemia Elimination Mission to eliminate sickle cell disease as a public health problem by 2047, from Shadhol, Madhya Pradesh. Mr. Modi has seen this debilitating condition from close quarters during his term as Chief Minister of Gujarat, where sickle cell disease is a major public health concern. In this article, we highlight the many opportunities to build on this momentum.

Challenges in India

With over a million people affected with sickle cell disease, India bears the world's second largest burden of this condition. A majority of the patients are concentrated in the tribal belt running across Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra.

Sickle cell disease is caused by a genetic abnormality: if both parents carry the sickle cell trait, the child has significant chances of being born with the disease. While healthy individuals have disc-shaped red blood cells, those with sickle cell disease have red blood cells that take on a crescent or sickle-like shape. The lifespan of these patients is significantly shortened (to about 40 years) and their quality of life is curtailed due to the range of health complications caused by sickle cells, including sickle cell anaemia, recurrent infections, pain, swelling, and damage to vital organs. In addition to health issues, patients also suffer from the social stigma that is attached to this disease. They can sometimes be deemed "genetically inferior" and ostracised. Some of them are told that this disease is "God's curse". In some areas, the condition is attributed to "black magic". Due to the hereditary nature of sickle cell disease, patients also face diminished marital and social prospects.

With the launch of the Mission in 2023, the Central government's attention to the disease is high.



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With over a million people affected with sickle cell disease, India bears the world's second largest burden of this condition

Among other efforts, a large-scale screening programme is underway nationwide. Hydroxyurea, a vital medicine for treating sickle cell disease, been included in the essential medicines list; this has increased access to it. While measures such as these will help detect and treat sickle cell disease, there are still many challenges.

Our estimates suggest that only 18% of the people affected by sickle cell disease in India are receiving consistent treatment. This is because patients drop out at all stages of treatment, while getting screened for the disease, while getting diagnosed, while starting treatment, and while trying to adhere to treatment.

The largest drops occur at the diagnosis and treatment adherence stages. Getting a correct diagnosis is a challenge as many people hesitate to seek support due to the stigma associated with the condition. They often consult traditional healers, who frequently misdiagnose the condition. While the public system has a stronger diagnostic capacity for sickle cell disease, there is a historic mistrust of it in tribal areas. As a result, few patients get tested.

The second big drop is around treatment adherence. No permanent cure is available for sickle cell disease. Ongoing research in gene therapy is promising, but will be unaffordable for most of the affected population even when it becomes available. At present, relatively inexpensive drugs such as hydroxyurea are effective for most patients if administered with the right dosage and frequency. However, there is seldom a regular and convenient supply of medicines, along with adherence support (such as that provided to TB patients). Key medicines sometimes go out of stock.

Patients have also said that they need to travel long distances to pick up their medicines. In a State in central India, a healthcare professional noted that patients travel for more than 200

kilometres to seek treatment. Further, coverage of several vaccinations, which reduce the frequency of infections and improve the quality of life for patients, remains poor.

The way ahead

The Mission can build on its initial successes by tackling some of these challenges. First, it is important to reduce the stigma related to the disease and build trust in public health institutions. Awareness should be raised through targeted media campaigns to bust specific myths (which vary by region and tribe). For this, India could draw from its experience in tackling polio and HIV. With reduced stigma, the chances of sickle cell trait carriers concealing their carrier status may also reduce, which would in turn lead to fewer women giving birth to children with the condition.

Second, given that cases are often missed and diagnosis delayed, there could be increasing screening for newborns. This strategy is low-cost with a high pay-off and would especially be effective in areas where the condition is endemic.

Third, drugs as well as adherence support must be available close to patients, in the nearest health and wellness centres. For complications, interdisciplinary centres of excellence at the district/division levels should be made operational.

Fourth, ensuring that all known patients receive approved vaccines will be crucial; this may require catch-up vaccination programmes.

Fifth, health in tribal areas should be operationally strengthened by factoring in conditions unique to these areas. Healthcare should also be adequately funded.

Finally, research should be conducted to better understand the disease and its pathways in India, and to develop new treatments. Philanthropists and members of civil society must play a catalytic role, and work with the Central and State governments.

The multi-agency war against corruption

The perception in Telangana is that the government is tackling graft head-on

STATE OF PLAY

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There is a perception in Telangana that the Congress government is doing its best to stamp out corruption.

In the aftermath of the 2023 Assembly elections that saw the end of the decade-long rule of the Bharat Rashtra Samiti (BRS), corruption was identified as a source of disenchantment among voters. A CSDS-Lokniti post-poll study indicated that corruption had emerged as a prominent source of dissatisfaction. Recognising this, the Congress government has shown that it is willing to act against it.

First, the Telangana Drugs Control Administration conducted raids on medical stores, manufacturing firms, and practitioners of fake medicine. The inspections showed fake medicines as well as the channels through which they are coming into the State. The department released a steady stream of information about the malpractices and highlighted how these medicines and practitioners pose threats to health. The government shut down factories and charged practitioners under relevant sections of the law.

Then, teams of the Commissioner of Food Safety started visiting restaurants, cafes, hostels, and cloud kitchens. The outcomes of the inspections were shared on social media with the names of well-known restaurants and their shortcomings.

Until now, these two departments had been accused of not doing their job or looking the other way. By cleaning up two key industries where trust is paramount, they have

created a shift in perception.

The Anti-Corruption Bureau, which is tasked with checking graft in the official machinery, also began nabbing officials who were taking bribes. The previous BRS government had a business-friendly air about it. The TS-IPASS (Telangana State Industrial Project Approval and Self-Certification System) assured time-bound clearances for projects, failing which they were deemed to be approved. The TG-bPASS (Telangana Building Permission Approval and Self-Certification System) provided instant approval for residential plots up to 75 square yards and buildings up to 7 metres in height. The approvals came quick and fast, and corruption crept in.

As a result of the Anti-Corruption Bureau's efforts, a bureaucrat who had assets of more than ₹100 crore was nabbed in January. Another was caught with ₹6 crore. An additional collector of Rangareddy district was caught taking a bribe of ₹8 lakh. The impact of the photos of cash on social media has helped shape the positive narrative about the government.

In July, the Revanth Reddy government constituted the Hyderabad Disaster Response and Asset Protection Agency (HYDRADA). Armed with a broad range of powers from demolitions on government land to relief and rescue operations, the organisation quick-

ly started using earthmovers to level encroachment on lake beds and buffer zones. It demolished a 30,000 sq ft convention hall that is partly owned by Telugu actor, Akkineni Nagarjuna, in the upscale Madhapur area. HYDRADA officials said that the hall was built in the buffer zone of a lake and proved it with a 2014 map showing the encroachment. They also razed properties belonging to a Congress leader, a Bharatiya Janata Party leader, and leaders of the All India Majlis Ittehadul-e-Muslimeen. Some of these leaders were detained for a short while while the demolitions were carried out.

Of these four agencies involved in the fight against corruption, three are headed by Indian Police Service officers and one by an Indian Administrative Service officer. While political parties and other stakeholders are searching for "an agenda" for this multi-agency, multi-pronged attack on corruption, the people are happy. Property owners and prospective buyers who did not think twice about the location are now circumspect. Government officials who believed that everything was business-as-usual are equally guarded as some of them have been booked in criminal cases for malfeasance.

The government's initiative, which affects people across parties and industries in Telangana, is a welcome change, especially since the fight against graft in India generally looks like a political witch-hunt, orchestrated for a select audience with a stated outcome. The hope is that this will become the norm and there is no agenda. But the question is: will the spectre of corruption go away while stodgy paperwork remains the norm in bureaucracy?

India's increasing competitiveness at the Chess Olympiad

The current team in the Open event in Budapest is India's strongest ever and second only to the U.S. in ELO ratings

DATA POINT

Srinivasan Raman
Vignesh Radhakrishnan

As the 45th Chess Olympiad is being held in Budapest, we look at historical performances in the Open section of the most prestigious event of team chess. India has been participating in the biennial event since 1956 and has played in every Olympiad since 1980. The Olympiad was dominated by the erstwhile Soviet Union, which won 18 gold medals, Russia and the U.S. have won six gold medals each, while India has got two bronze medals, in 2014 and 2022 (Table 1).

In Budapest, India's team comprising Grandmasters Arjun Erigaisi, D. Gukesh, R. Praggnanandhaa, Vidit Gujrathi, and P. Harikrishna is the strongest one ever fielded by the country (Table 2). The average ELO rating for India (2753) is just four points behind the U.S., rated the No. 1 team.

This squad also boasts the highest starting ELO rating for an Indian team. In 2018, the squad had an average of 2724 (Chart 3).

D. Gukesh won an individual gold in 2022, scoring 8 points in 11 games for a points per game (ppg) score of 0.82. Among all the players who played a substantive number, the Soviet great, Mikhail Tal, remains the best performer with 0.81 ppg in 101 games, followed by former world champion Anatoly Karpov (Table 4).

For India, GM Krishnan Sasikiran has been a warhorse, scoring 0.62 points per game in 113 games, while tallisman V. Anand played 87 games (0.66 ppg) (Chart 5). Ravi K. Ramesh scored 0.69 ppg in 29 games and won India's first medal, a silver, in the Malta Olympiad in 1980.

In terms of performance ELO rating that captures the level of competition, Vidit Gujrathi leads with 2698.7 ELO points among Indians who played at least 30 games in the Olympiad (Chart 6).

The gathering Indian storm

Data for Chess Olympiads were sourced from olimpbase.org

Table 1: Historical performance in the Chess Olympiad (Open)

Rank	Nation	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1	Soviet Union	18	1	0	19
2	U.S.	6	6	8	20
3	Russia	6	3	3	12
4	Hungary	3	7	2	12
5	Armenia	3	1	3	7
6	Ukraine	2	2	3	7
7	China	2	1	0	3
...					
20	India	0	0	2	2

Table 2: Average ELO ratings for teams in the Open section in the Budapest Olympiad being held currently

Country	Average ELO
U.S.	2757
India	2753
China	2724
Uzbekistan	2690
Netherlands	2682
Norway	2670
Germany	2667
England	2665
Hungary	2663
Iran	2659

Chart 3: India's performance in Chess Olympiads since 1980 (starting ELO rating in left axis, final position in right axis)

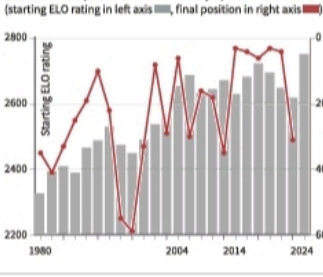


Table 4: Best individual performers across Olympiads (Open)

Rank	Player	Games	Points per game
1	Mikhail Tal (USSR)	101	0.81
2	Anatoly Karpov (Russia)	68	0.80
3	Tigran Petrosian (USSR)	129	0.80
4	Isaac Kashdan (U.S.)	79	0.80
5	Vasily Smyslov (USSR)	113	0.80
6	David Bronstein (USSR)	49	0.80
7	Garry Kasparov (Russia)	82	0.79
8	A. Mekhine (France)	72	0.78
9	Matulovic (Yugoslavia)	78	0.77
10	Pauli Keres (Estonia)	141	0.76

Chart 5: Indians who played in the Open section in Chess Olympiads (points per game: ppg versus games played)

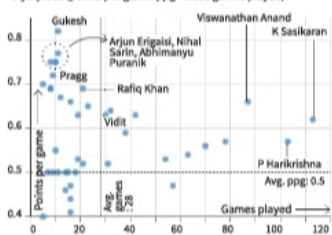
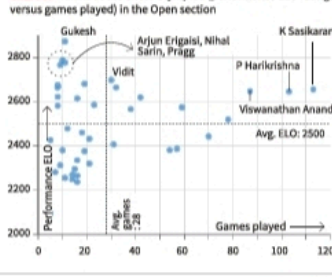


Chart 6: Indians at the Chess Olympiad (performance ELO ratings versus games played) in the Open section



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The **Hindu**

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 12, 1974

Bhutto cites Sikkim to get U.S. arms aid

Washington, Sept. 11: Prime Minister Bhutto of Pakistan apparently intends to cite India's "annexation" of Sikkim as yet another argument to persuade the United States to resume arms supplies to Pakistan, lifting the existing U.S. ban. In an interview given to the New Delhi correspondent of the Washington Post, Mr. Bhutto has said that by "swallowing up" Sikkim, India has given new credibility to Pakistan's demands for U.S. military assistance. He has indicated that the arms aid issue would be raised when the Secretary of State, Dr. Henry Kissinger, visits Islamabad late next month in the course of his tour of capitals in the subcontinent.

The Post correspondent writes that though Dr. Kissinger and other senior U.S. officials have disagreed with Mr. Bhutto's contention that the U.S. has a commitment to rearm Pakistan (as a fellow member of CENTO) "knowledgeable sources" have told him that Mr. Bhutto's appeals for U.S. arms are getting "serious consideration" in Washington. (This runs contrary to the assurances reportedly received by the Indian Ambassador here from Dr. Kissinger in recent conversations, to the effect that the U.S. has no intention of getting involved in an arms race in the subcontinent.)

Mr. Bhutto, who ever since May has been trying to use India's explosion of an underground nuclear device as an excuse to extract arms from the U.S., told his American interviewer: "Kissinger ought to consider Sikkim when he comes here. But this must be something he does on his own. I can't keep telling him what India's intentions are, showing him the maps. We stand vindicated by our analysis. Half of our country is gone. Half of Kashmir is gone. They (India) marched into Goa. They have gone nuclear. And now they have swallowed up Sikkim."

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPT. 12, 1924

Rains in East Rajputana

Bombay, Sept. 11: A communique from the General Traffic Manager, B.B. and C.I. Railway Bombay, states: "In consequence of the recent heavy rain in East Rajputana, the B.B. and C.I. Railway between Bayana and Pingora on the Nagda-Muttra section and between Bandikui and Bharatpur on the metre gauge section has been considerably ravaged by floods."

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Share of the Amazon rainforest which is left unprotected

40 In per cent. According to an analysis by the non-profit Amazon Conservation, the Amazon rainforest has not been granted special government protection.

The concession on bus fares for PWDs and BPL women in Sikkim

100 In per cent. On Wednesday, the Sikkim government announced a 100% concession on bus fares for persons with over 40% disability and women in the BPL category.

Anti-war protesters who clashed with the police in Melbourne

1,200 Protesters clashed with police in Melbourne outside the military convention that brings together arms industry figures from Australia, U.S., Asia and Europe.

Magnitude of the earthquake recorded in parts of Pakistan

5.7 The earthquake originated at 12:28 pm Pakistan Standard Time (PST) and was felt in several parts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab provinces, including the country's capital Islamabad.

The expansion in India's consumption loan portfolio

15 In per cent. According to the latest credit bureau report, the country's consumption loan portfolio grew to 790.3 lakh crore as of March 2024.

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Tackling right-wing resurgence in Germany

The victories registered in Thuringia and Saxony by the far-right AfD could prove the biggest test yet to the mainstream parties' notional firewall to preclude any collaboration with the party, especially when the governing coalition is fighting speculation that it might break up and trigger snap parliamentary election

WORLD INSIGHT

Garimella Subramaniam

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the far-left Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) have massively upended mainstream politics in two German regional elections on September 1. The AfD's victory in the stronghold state of Thuringia marks the first time in the country's post-war history that a radical right-wing party has come within touching distance of forming a government in a region. Similarly, in the regional polls in neighbouring Saxony, the AfD, sections of which Germany's domestic intelligence agency has designated as extremist, stood a close second behind the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

The recent surge follows a watershed moment last year, when it registered a significant presence in western Germany in the legislative elections in Bavaria and Hesse, as the three parties in the German chancellor Olaf Scholz's ruling coalition suffered a drubbing. Additionally, the BSW, launched in January, overtook all the constituents in the federal coalition in both regions. The AfD and BSW's inroads has come just a year before Germany's autumn 2025 elections.

Towards either extreme Polling over 30% of the votes both in Thuringia and Saxony, the AfD has capitalised the most on the internecine squabbling within chancellor Scholz's coalition, extreme xenophobia and disapproval of German arms supplies to Ukraine. The scars from the upheavals of transition following German reunification in the 1990s also appear to weigh heavily on voters in the eastern regions.

The political tide turned particularly hostile when the federal government last year sought to ban gas and oil-fired boilers from 2024 to replace them with heat pumps powered by renewable



New rise: Participants gather to demonstrate against the AfD in Weimar, Germany, on September 2.

energy. The potential burden on households from the measure sparked intense outrage, forcing the government to water down the legislation. The controversy, moreover, exposed deep divisions in the ruling coalition between the Greens, who spearheaded the environment-friendly shift, and the Free Democratic Party (FDP).

Right-wing resurgence and response Björn Hocke is the AfD's polarising ethno-nationalist leader from Thuringia who almost single-handedly moulded the AfD to an irretrievably ultra-nationalist hard-right movement. The former school teacher earned notoriety for his infamous denunciation in 2017 of Berlin's Holocaust Memorial to the Jews as a "monument of shame," calling for a "180 degree turnaround" in the country's attitude to

its Nazi past. Undeterred by fines imposed by two courts, Mr. Hocke continues to spout banned Nazi era slogans in his speeches. He has drawn fresh ammunition from the refugee influx from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which was well in excess of the one million inflows from the Syrian conflict in 2015. Mr. Hocke is one of the architects of the party's aggressive push for the repatriation of migrants, a euphemism for the mass deportation of German nationals with immigrant roots.

Even though Mr. Scholz has warned mainstream parties against forging alliances with the AfD, his own governing coalition is fighting speculation that it might break up and trigger snap parliamentary elections. While the main opposition CDU aims to exploit the slump in the popularity of the ruling coalition in

the 2025 general elections, its leader Friedrich Merz has so far proved ineffective in realising his pledge to halve the poll ratings of the AfD. The failure may have something to do with the CDU's controversial approach, in its new programme adopted in May, to return the party to its old conservative principles. The new programme requires immigrants to sign on to the country's dominant culture and knowledge of German history, besides recognising Israel's right to exist. Most controversial of them all is a plan to discourage refugees from seeking asylum in Germany, by transferring applicants to "safe" third countries.

Mr. Merz has been explicit that Germany could emulate the U.K.'s controversial policy to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda.

The way forward

The victory in Thuringia could prove the biggest test yet to the mainstream parties' notional firewall to preclude any collaboration with the AfD.

Sahra Wagenknecht, the BSW leader, has emerged kingmaker following the CDU's invitation to explore a coalition in Thuringia. While such a deal seems the only realistic option to isolate the AfD in the state, there are clear indications that talks are headed for a hard bargain. For a start, there are rumblings within both the CDU and BSW against working with an arch ideological opponent.

Some of the terms Ms. Wagenknecht has placed for discussion fall outside the purview of the regions. She has for instance insisted that her party's support for a government would be conditional upon the cancellation of plans Chancellor Schulz and U.S. President Joe Biden have finalised with respect to stationing medium-range missiles in Germany. Her other condition, to the discomfort of many in the CDU who regard her as an apologist for Russian President Vladimir Putin, is to explore a diplomatic resolution to the conflict in Ukraine.

The writer is Director, Strategic Initiatives, AgnoShin Technologies.

THE GIST

Polling over 30% of the votes both in Thuringia and Saxony, the AfD has capitalised the most on the internecine squabbling within chancellor Scholz's coalition, extreme xenophobia and disapproval of German arms supplies to Ukraine.

Björn Hocke is the AfD's polarising ethno-nationalist leader from Thuringia who almost single-handedly moulded the AfD to an irretrievably ultra-nationalist hard-right movement.

Sahra Wagenknecht, the BSW leader, has emerged kingmaker following the CDU's invitation to explore a coalition in Thuringia.

Why did Brazil's Supreme Court suspend X?

Why have Justice Alexandre de Moraes and Elon Musk been involved in a public dispute about X?

G. Sampath

The story so far:

Brazil's Supreme Court on August 30 ordered the "immediate, complete and total suspension of X's operations" in the country. Justice Alexandre de Moraes took the decision after X failed to appoint a legal representative in Brazil within the stipulated time. Mr. Moraes also ordered that anyone found accessing X using a VPN (Virtual Private Network) would have to pay a fine of 50,000 reais per day.

What is the background?

For nearly two years, Mr. Moraes has been probing what he calls "digital militias" — far-right groups and backers of Brazil's erstwhile President Jair Bolsonaro. When Mr. Bolsonaro lost the 2022 elections, these groups used X and other platforms to cast doubt on the integrity of the elections and incite violence, leading to the January 8, 2023 riots in the capital

Brasília when Bolsonaro's supporters attacked federal buildings, including the Supreme Court, with the aim of triggering a military coup. The Court viewed this as a direct attack on Brazilian democracy and asked Mr. Moraes to investigate it. As his probe progressed, Mr. Moraes ordered X to suspend scores of accounts for spreading disinformation and hand over information about them, including IP addresses, to aid in prosecution.

What was X's response?

Elon Musk, the billionaire owner of X, refused to comply with Mr. Moraes's demands, and even said that accounts suspended earlier would be reactivated. In April, Mr. Moraes responded by bringing Mr. Musk under the purview of his investigation, triggering a public arm wrestle with the billionaire tycoon. X also claimed that Mr. Moraes had threatened its legal representative in Brazil with arrest and ordered a daily fine of 20,000 reais (\$3,580) for non-compliance. On August 17, Musk

announced on X that rather than comply with the judicial orders, he had decided "to close our operation in Brazil, effective immediately." While X's offices were shut down, its services remained available in the country. In the face of X's continued defiance, and as the fines remained unpaid, Mr. Moraes gave an ultimatum of 24 hours for X to appoint a legal representative — a requirement for any company operating in Brazil. X ignored this demand, and once the deadline passed, Mr. Moraes ordered suspension of X until all court orders are complied.

What are the implications?

The refusal by X, a foreign company in Brazil, to obey local laws have raised important questions about regulatory sovereignty, the right mechanisms for curbing disinformation, free speech rights versus censorship, and cross-border internet governance. It has also flagged how social media can be weaponised for political purposes — with earlier Facebook in the U.S., and now X in Brazil coming

under investigations for promoting incendiary far-right disinformation. Analysts have pointed out the Brazilian case is more complicated by the fact that X's owner, Elon Musk, has not only aligned himself with one political faction and politician, Mr. Bolsonaro, but has also been posting vituperative remarks against one of the country's top judicial officers.

Within Brazil, one stream of thought, especially on the right, considers Mr. Moraes' orders as an instance of judicial overreach. Others have acknowledged that his actions stem from a broad interpretation of judicial powers rather than specific legal provisions. But they believe that his draconian measures were required at a time when other institutions have failed to counter the serious attacks on Brazilian democracy.

How has the order panned out so far?

Starlink, another Musk-owned company that provides satellite internet service in large parts of Brazil, initially refused to block X, but caved in subsequently after the Supreme Court ordered its bank accounts to be frozen. Clearing the air on whether the ban was an individualistic act of one radical judge, five justices of the Supreme Court have voted to endorse the ban. As for ordinary Brazilians, a great number of them migrated to Bluesky, which claimed that it had gained 2.6 million new users within five days of X going offline. Most users and analysts, however, consider the fine of 50,000 reais for accessing X via VPN excessive.

THE GIST

Brazil's Supreme Court on August 30 ordered the "immediate, complete and total suspension of X's operations" in the country. Justice Alexandre de Moraes took the decision after X failed to appoint a legal representative in Brazil within the stipulated time.

For nearly two years, Mr. Moraes has been probing what he calls "digital militias" — far-right groups and backers of Brazil's erstwhile President Jair Bolsonaro.

Elon Musk, the billionaire owner of X, refused to comply with Mr. Moraes's demands, and even said that accounts suspended earlier would be reactivated.

BIBLIOGRAPHY



Pakistan's former President Pervez Musharraf with A.G. Noorani.

A.G. Noorani's books are testimony to his eclectic interests in politics and history

The constitutionalist and scholar wrote with equal relish on the Constitution as he did on Kashmir, or the Babri Masjid, Islam, the RSS and Savarkar. Brave, fair and fearless, Noorani said what needed to be said, without equivocation

Ziva Us Salam

He demanded patience, tons of it, from his readers. He asked too, of elementary understanding of contemporary politics. And maybe a nodding acquaintance with history. But whenever you read A.G. Noorani, you were enriched – the author's rare ability to sift through seemingly endless piles of papers and reams of documents to craft an unbeatable argument left you in absolute awe. Reading Noorani was seldom a joy; it always was an education. His 16 books, and thousands of newspaper columns, dating back to the early 1960s and up to 2022, were a masterclass in understatement. He wrote long essays and books running into hundreds of pages. Yet, what was always critical was not what he said, but what he left unsaid. The best of Noorani, and he was among the very best in his stream, lay not in the lines he wrote, but between the lines. Add to that his eye for detail which would have made an architect proud, and patience which would not have been amiss with a jeweller, and you get a once-in-a-generation package answering to the name of Abdul Ghafoor Noorani, the colossus who breathed his last recently.

Unmasking India

For a man who wrote with equal relish on Kashmir as he did on Ayodhya, or Bhagat Singh and the Constitution, on Islam as well as diplomacy, it is well-nigh

impossible to say where exactly lay his strength. Was he a constitutional expert who stood up for the Fundamental Rights of our citizens, a scholar of history who ripped apart many assumptions about Bhagat Singh and Savarkar, and indeed about the Babri Masjid-Ramjanmaboomi imbroglio? Or was he at his best when it came to unmasking the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a non-governmental body with self-proclaimed non-political aspirations but one which has exercised unseemly control over at least a couple of Prime Ministers? Talking of the RSS, Noorani left nothing to the imagination in his book, *The RSS: A Menace to India*. With no claims to euphemisms, the book announced, "India is battling for its very soul. The RSS is the most powerful organisation in India today; complete with a private army of its own, unquestionably obeying its leader who functions on fascist lines on the Fuehrer principle...The RSS is at war with India's past. It belittles three of the greatest builders of the Indian state – Ashoka, the Buddhist; Akbar, the Muslim; and Nehru, a civilised Enlightened Hindu." The words had a ring of forecast to it, as the BJP's attempts to belittle Akbar's accomplishments and their constant mocking of Nehru have proved.

Brave, fair and fearless, Noorani said what needed to be said, without equivocation. For instance, take his views on the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) in the same book. On the ABVP, he

wrote, "In 2017, the ABVP had a young 49-year-old Sunil Ambedkar as its head...the ABVP, the VHP, the Bajrang Dal are all independent of the BJP. To bridge the BJP, the VHP hurls abuses at it, driving the BJP to seek Nagpur's protection. That is granted and the BJP begins to adhere to the RSS line." He talked about the BJP and the RSS in greater detail and with equal felicity in *The RSS and the BJP: A Division of Labour*.

As for the VHP, he wrote, "The VHP cut its teeth on the anti-cow slaughter movement in New Delhi in 1966 on the eve of the 1967 general election. In April 1984 it declared for the first time its resolve to 'liberate' the birthplace of Ram at Ayodhya." By the way, 1984 was also an election year as was 1989 when the Congress government allowed it to conduct shilaryas.

Unsparring to none

If Noorani was relentless in his criticism of the Hindutva politics, he did not spare the Congress either. In his painstakingly researched two-volume exercise, *The Babri Masjid Question*, he unmasked the party by highlighting how the socialist leader Acharya Narendra Deva was presented as a 'lesser' Hindu by the Congress, much the same way some BJP leaders seek to do to the Congress today. Noorani wrote, "In his speeches Gobind Ballabh Pant repeatedly declared that Narendra Deva does not believe in Lord Ramachandra and does not wear the chhot, or tuft of hair, worn by all devout Hindus." Pandit Pant, wrote Noorani, had

played politics with the Ayodhya issue back in 1948 itself. Not much changed even in the 1980s as, Noorani felt that Rajiv Gandhi was amenable to pressure, and that after a hue and cry, "he is known to renege his stand".

The Kashmir question

From the BJP and the Congress to bureaucrats, Noorani's ire visited them all. He hauled over the coals K.K.K. Nair, the district magistrate of Faizabad district, and Guru Datta Singh, the city magistrate, who cast a Nelson's eye to the smuggling of the idols of Ram, Lakshman and Sita inside the Babri Masjid on the night of December 22-23, 1949.

Noorani brought much the same acumen in understanding the knotty affairs of Kashmir. In his landmark work, *The Kashmir Dispute 1947-2012*, he talked not just of the intricate web of history of the long-festering issue, he opened a window to the discontent in the State, and exposed those behind it. Again, he played no favourites. In *Article 370: A Constitutional History of Jammu and Kashmir*, which came almost a decade before the Modi government annulled the Article, he wrote about the systematic dilution of the special status accorded to the erstwhile State through the years.

Every book of Noorani is a treasure. Little wonder then that in *The Muslims of India: A Documentary Record*, noted historian Mushirul Hasan commented on the writings as something that, "should be owned...not borrowed." One could say the same about all the works of Noorani.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Diacritical marks are uncommon in the English language but for many others that use the Latin alphabet, the marks help maintain the intended pronunciation

Vasudevan Mukuntth

QUESTION 1

These two diacritical marks are mirror images of each other. One is called the ogonek. What's the other called? In Spanish, it means "little Z". You usually find this mark used in a word that means the face of a structure, sometimes a false one.

QUESTION 2

Acute, grave, and caron are three types of diacritical marks belonging to a larger group called —. Fill in the blank with a word that had its origins in the fact that the three types were historically used to denote contrasting pitches when pronouncing a word.

QUESTION 3

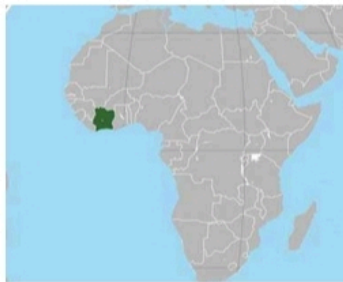
The official language of the smallest region of Finland is Swedish. Its capital is named for the Empress Maria Alexandrovna of Russia. Name the diacritical mark that appears on the first letter of this region's name.

QUESTION 4

The use of this diacritical mark denotes a long vowel in many languages — from French to Japanese letters converted to the Latin alphabet in the Nihon-shiki system. But in statistics, this symbol over a variable indicates the variable's value is an estimate. Name the mark.

QUESTION 5

This country is located off Central Africa, near the equator, and is an archipelago with two main islands. The country's name includes diacritical marks but the UN spells it on occasion without the marks. Name the country.



Visual question:

There are two countries whose names the UN spells with diacritical marks. One is Türkiye. Name the other, whose territory is visible (in green) on this map. MARTIN22320 [CC BY-SA 3.0]

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

1. On the morning of September 11, 19 terrorists hijacked these many commercial airliners. **Ans: Four**
 2. The place where the fourth plane crashed in rural Pennsylvania. **Ans: The fourth plane crashed in rural Pennsylvania**
 3. The term for the global counterterrorist military campaign initiated by the U.S following the September 11 attacks. **Ans: Global War on Terrorism/War of Terror**
 4. The U.S. invoked this article of the NATO to call upon allies to fight Al-Qaeda. **Ans: Article 5; the U.S. has only invoked it once to date**
 5. The site which is termed Ground Zero. **Ans: The World Trade Center site**
- Visual: The man who took the photo and the name of the photo. **Ans: The Falling Man by Richard Drew**
- Early Birds: Prashansa Lohumij K.N. Vismathanan [Dodo Jayaditya] Tito Shiladitya Barnali Biswas



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian Upendran

What's the matter? Got the blues?" "The blues? What are you talking about?" "When somebody has got the blues, he/she is sad and depressed." "Sad and depressed, eh? Well, in that case, I'm sad and depressed all right. And I'll tell you why." "Please do." "I scored a big zero in yesterday's cricket match. And it was my first match as captain." "That's too bad." "Too bad! It was terrible. The umpire gave me out when I hadn't even touched the ball. I was really angry." "You saw red, did you?" "Saw red?" "Yes, saw red. 'To see red' means to become very angry. I always see red whenever I read about political bandhs." "I don't see red when I read about bandhs or strikes. But I saw red yesterday when the umpire raised his finger. And to make matters worse, the vice-captain of my team hit a century. I saw red then too." "You were angry because the vice-captain scored a century?" "Well, not angry, but I was jealous." "Ah, so you were green with envy." "Does 'green with envy' mean jealous?" "Yes. Some turn green with envy when others prosper." "That's true. I certainly did turn green with envy yesterday." "Anyway, did you win the match?" "Oh yes. We won it quite comfortably. But I dropped two catches while fielding." "What did your coach say?" "I think he was too angry to speak." "That angry, eh?" "I've never seen him so angry. I don't know if I'll continue to be captain of the team. My future looks so..." "Rosy?" "Rosy! Are you joking! It is anything but rosy." "Oh come on! Cheer up! Remember every cloud has a silver lining." "What does that mean?" "It means there is always a bright side to any bad situation. In other words, something good will come out of your present situation." "I hope you're right." "You have explained some colourful idioms today." "Colourful?" "Yes." "Do you know the difference between 'colourful' and 'coloured'?" "No. Is there a difference?" "Yes." " 'Colourful' means 'full of interest, lively, vivid'. It is a colourful person. 'Coloured' means 'exaggerated'. It is a highly coloured version of what really happened last night." "So 'colourful' is a compliment and 'coloured' is not." "That's right."

Published in *The Hindu* on May 11, 1993.

Word of the day

Piffle:

trivial nonsense; speak (about unimportant matters) rapidly and incessantly

Synonyms: balderdash, fiddle-faddle, chatter, clack, gabble, gibber, blabber, tattle, twaddle, prattle

Usage: His story is complete piffle.

Pronunciation: bit.ly/pifflepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈpɪflə/

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

[OUR TAKE]

Welcome cover for gig workers

Social security for gig/platform workers is an idea that is worth implementing, and refining

This newspaper reported on Tuesday that the Union government is planning to bring a Bill which will offer social security benefits to India's gig workers. The Bill, the report also said, might ask companies in the gig economy to allocate part of their revenues (1-2%) to fund some of these. While details are yet to emerge, a policy intervention on social security for workers in the gig economy is an idea whose time has come and also one which must keep evolving.

The size of the workforce in the gig economy is still relatively small — about eight million in India's 550-million-plus labour force — but it is likely to keep growing and be one of the biggest sources of employment generation in the country. If more and more work is to be generated in the gig economy, it is necessary that it offers basic social security to workers. The labour market regulator must do what it can to ensure this.

There is also a question of fairness vis-à-vis workers in the gig economy, which is mostly in the start-up space. A lot of these firms get their seed capital from venture capitalist funds and are not necessarily tied to the traditional constraints of breaking even which hold for the representative firm in an economy. While the founders and senior executives manage to land on their feet (thanks to the very high salaries they draw) even if the business bombs or continues to make losses, the blue-collar workforce often faces a squeeze. This happens even when the business grows in scale, and the focus turns to profitability. This is an unjust distribution of risk and rewards between employers and employees.

Laudable as the objective of social security for gig economy workers is, such ideas are easier to celebrate in first principles than implement effectively. There are legal considerations such as gig employers defining their employees as partners/vendors rather than employees. One can also raise questions whether forcing mandatory social security contributions from employers will nudge them to question workers working for various platforms simultaneously, which is the very essence of the gig economy.

These are difficult questions to answer and, in many ways, represent the changing nature of capitalism itself. As the fifth-largest economy and the most populous country in the world, India must keep engaging with such questions to maintain a healthy balance between capital and labour.

Protecting children from social media ills

Australia is considering implementing a minimum-age requirement for social media use, potentially setting it between 14 and 16 years. The idea is to encourage children to engage more in physical activities and real-life interactions rather than spending excessive time on digital devices. The announcement is a reminder of the conversations that need to be had in India too. Scientific literature has shown how unrestricted social media exposure robs children of necessary physical activity and exacerbates psychosocial challenges typical for such ages: identity formation, self-esteem and body image, and social skill development. The consequences for cognitive development and academic performance, could leave young individuals with the baggage of wasted formative years. More serious outcomes often include depression, anxiety and extreme aggression.

Many countries have struggled with the question of how children interact with the virtual world. China, for instance, has a 10pm-6am legally mandated night curfew on the use of digital devices and social media by minors. Whether that is excessive requires scrutiny of contexts unique to the Chinese model of governance, but critics warn that age restrictions could push risky online behaviour into less visible, potentially dangerous spaces. Such limits could also rob children of accessing information that could be constructive to their understanding of the world.

The issue is not one of binaries — children cannot simply be banned or freely allowed online. Any rule making here will need to straddle various grey areas, especially in the Indian context where technology has been an enabler for the most impoverished, as well as a threat to the most vulnerable. To tackle these issues, earnest and extensive conversations must now be mainstreamed.

OPINION

Understanding Kamala Harris' foreign policy

Though often aligned with President Biden, her unique worldview, especially on Israel-Palestine relations, promises distinct leadership on the international stage

In the wake of President Joe Biden's withdrawal from the 2024 presidential race and vice president Kamala Harris' ascension into the role of Democratic nominee, a crucial question emerges: How would Harris' foreign policy depart from Biden's?

Biden assumed office as the most experienced foreign policy president of our generation. He was a long-time member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, having played a vocal role in national security debates for decades. As vice president, he spearheaded Joe Obama administration diplomatic initiatives. Harris' pre-White House resume — career prosecutor, state attorney general, and first-term senator — was decidedly sparse by comparison. She has been in the position of Biden's meetings with visiting heads of state, and been present in the Situation Room when critical national

security decisions were made. She has also travelled to more than 20 countries, met with over 150 foreign leaders, and led many key delegations herself — including the past three to the Munich Security Conference.

Through the pandemic, the Afghanistan withdrawal, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, intensifying great power competition with China, the West Asia war, and numerous smaller crises, the leaders of the US's allies have come to see her as a steady and capable hand. Perhaps not as much as Biden, whom they've known for decades and, in many cases, grown fond of, but certainly more than former president Donald Trump. But how does her worldview and policy preferences compare to Biden's? There is plenty of overlap but also significant daylight between them.

Biden, 81, came of age during the height of the Cold War, and his worldview reflects that. He is a strong believer in American exceptionalism and sees international relations in black-and-white terms, as a struggle between democracies and autocracies where the US is always a force for good. He is also a believer in the "great man" theory of politics, which posits that statesmen can alter the course of history through personal relationship-building and sheer force of will.

By contrast, the 59-year-old Harris grew up in a post-Cold War world where the greatest challenge to American hegemony was failure to uphold its ideals at home and abroad. Her inclination as a prosecutor is to judge coun-

tries by their adherence to the rule of law and international norms rather than their political system or leaders. She views Biden's "democracies vs autocracies" framework as reductive, acknowledging the necessity of US engagement with non-democratic nations as well as America's own democratic shortcomings. Though agreeing with Biden that the US is generally a force for good, she is wary of unintended consequences and favours insti-

tutionalist and multilateral approaches over unilateral interventions. Harris believes the most effective way for the US to exercise power in a more contested and multipolar world where it is still the hegemon but lacks the ability, the will, and the legitimacy to dictate outcomes in the way it once did is to lead by example. These contrasting worldviews manifest differently across policy areas.

On China, continuity is the order of the day. US national security adviser Jake Sullivan explicitly assured Chinese leader Xi Jinping in a rare meeting, Biden and Harris are fully aligned on engaging with Beijing wherever cooperation is possible while competing vigorously but in close coordination with allies on national security-related issues. Any differences in policy between them are likely to be just a matter of emphasis or tactics. As vice president, Harris expended considerable effort in shoring up America's Indo-Pacific relationships, travelling five times to Asia and meeting regularly with Philippine President Ferdi-



While Kamala Harris would continue to recognise Israel as the US's most important regional security partner and ensure its ability to defend itself, she would exert more pressure on it to uphold the rule of law



Ian Bremmer

nand Marcos Jr. Her administration would prioritise alliance-building over unilateral measures (such as tariffs, export controls, and sanctions), intensifying the "pivot to Asia" beyond Biden's and certainly Trump's approaches.

The Russia-Ukraine war is a different story. Harris and Biden align in supporting Kyiv, but their motivations differ. Whereas Biden sees the conflict in legal terms, emphasising Russia's violation of Ukrainian sovereignty, Biden views it through a moral lens, casting it as a struggle between democracy and autocracy. This underlying difference in perspective could lead to policy divergence under changing circumstances. While Harris would accept a bilateral ceasefire agreement, she would be less likely than Biden — who has a personal relationship with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy — to pressure Ukraine into unwanted negotiations, especially while Ukrainian territory remains under illegal occupation.

The Israel-Palestine issue marks their most significant foreign policy divide. Harris is more sensitive to alleged Israeli violations of interna-

tional law committed with US complicity. She's also generally more supportive of the Palestinian statehood claim than Biden, who normally favours a two-State solution but has been all too deferential to the far-right Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. While Harris would continue to recognise Israel as the US's most important regional security partner and ensure its ability to defend itself, she would exert more pressure on it to uphold the "special relationship" would represent a break from the past but align US policy more closely with most allies' stances.

As the election nears, Harris' potential to shape global affairs for the next many years becomes increasingly significant. Though often aligned with Biden, her unique worldview promises distinct leadership on the international stage. As we navigate an increasingly complex global landscape, understanding just how US foreign policy might shift under a Harris administration is not just important — it's imperative.

Ian Bremmer is the founder and board president of Eurasia Group Foundation. The views expressed are personal

Bengaluru development needs better planning

The Karnataka government's minister in charge of Bengaluru's development (also the deputy chief minister), DK Shivakumar or DKS, is a man in a hurry. Part of the hurry stems from the growing clamour for a big-city fix from its bourgeoisie, and some better services from its ordinary citizens. Far from resembling Singapore (if only "in strips"), as former chief minister, SM Krishna, had once modestly dreamed, Bengaluru resembles something of a battlefield — a war of all against all. The arrival of a public utility (say, new pipelines, or a flyover, or fresh underground cables) makes any area look like it was hit by a natural disaster, for months, and often for years. Meanwhile, citizens take chaotic, challenging deviations or resign themselves to traffic delays. And, unlike comedian and writer Trevor Noah, they don't have the option of "not performing".

The other part of the minister's hurry has to do with the brevity of his political power, the uncertain term within which all politicians long to leave their mark, make their money, or both. But, it should be clear that neither a statue nor another private educational institution will match Robert Moses' effect on New York, or, closer home, Edwin Lutyns' on Delhi.

Instead, the state government has opted, quite literally, for "tunnel vision, forcing the city's problems underground. You read that right: The city will soon have an 18 km tunnel with five exits. And, to announce that all is well on the ground, the government will build South Asia's tallest sky deck in the city. Between them, the twins will ensure a resolution of the city's surface wars, and give citizens a peg to hang their pride on.

This is in defiance of all that concerned citizens, planning experts, and most scholarly studies of the city's infrastructure have long and loudly warned against. We well know that placing the automobile at the centre of city planning may keep the smiles on the faces of motor majors, but spells doom for the city as a whole. Flyovers did not solve the city's traffic problems, only displaced them. With extreme weather events now becoming as regular as the city's *gumohur* blossoms, one shudders to think of how tunnelling will add to the existing perils of the city, above and below the ground.

To be a visionary urban leader, deputy CM DKS could begin by asserting an inter-generational responsibility that probably held true only of his city-founding 16th ancestor, Kempegowda (with whom caste kinship is some-

times claimed). The city needs new life and new, inclusive public spaces, not sky-decks for the rich. In a city that has seen no addition to the Lalbagh of Haider Ali and no park, and that has lost almost all of the British, the minister could work to vacate the status quo of the Supreme Court on Bangalore Palace (Acquisition and Transfer) Act, 1996. We urgently need another people's park. Rather than offering the high-ticket-price-paying public a "360-degree view" of the chaos on the ground from the sky deck, the government should consider opening up the Turahalli Forest and Jaraka Bande Forest to the general public in a regulated fashion.

There is no need to remind the new masters of the city that they should assert strict regulation of the encroachments on public spaces, ranging from footpaths to tank beds. This should be done in a humane but firm way: Can alternative sites be found for hawkers? Can buildings be enjoined to provide parking for up to half or 2/3 of its employees and clients? Building permits that encroach public facilities (storm water drains, roadsides, parks, grounds, and forest areas) must be revoked, through strict enforcement of building by-laws.

On the traffic-control side, can the state government try restraining the use of private vehicles on some days of the week, or, at least, restraints on vehicles entering some areas of the city? Can pedestrianism, commercial areas, and strictly prohibit non-emergency vehicles? Or introduce a sorely needed congestion tax?

This requires an alternative to the real estate imagination that has gripped the city's political masters. It calls for generating funds within an extremely wealthy city, by quadrupling the property tax, for instance. Why should real estate prices soar while property taxes remain poor? It is high time that the water subsidy, which has resulted in grotesque inequality of the poor paying too much for an intermittent and unreliable essential need, be removed for the well-heeled taxpayer while ensuring a steady supply to all residents.

Which major metropolis in the world offers "free parking" to nearly all lorry, bus, car, and two-wheeler owners? Can car owners be made to buy residence permits for parking on the roadside in residential areas? Can strict payment for street-side parking in a city divided into zones be introduced? Can at least some public sector grounds be put to public use (playgrounds, libraries in both Kannada and English, sports facilities, some parking, and museums)? Can the defunct Bengaluru Development Authority complexes be turned into innovative centres for art and culture, libraries in both Kannada and English, and some parking?

All this requires true foresight and political will. Other cities in the world have turned disaster into opportunity, for the benefit of all their citizens. There will no doubt be a temporary loss of income to the middle class and others who benefit from miseries that are inflicted on the general public. But it will be a historic first, and ensure DKS a place in the history books, as a visionary developer.



Better planning requires an alternative to the real estate imagination that has gripped the city's political masters

Janaki Nair is a historian and the author of *The Promise of the Metropolis: Bengaluru's Twentieth Century*. The views expressed are personal

HARDEEP SINGH PURI | UNION MINISTER OF PETROLEUM AND NATURAL GAS

With the available engineering talent in our country, India's transition to a greener economy will be a smooth one, helping the country to position itself as a pivotal market for green hydrogen

In J&K's purple revolution, a blooming of agri start-ups

India is now celebrated as the world's third-largest start-up ecosystem, and boasts of some of the fastest-growing unicorns. This impressive expansion can be traced back to Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's clarion call of "Start-up India, stand up India" that he gave in 2016. In a speech delivered from the Red Fort. Since then, the number of start-ups has skyrocketed from just over 350-400 in 2014 to more than 130,000 in 2024, with that of the over 110 unicorns being the landmarks of this journey of enterprise in the country.

Amidst this entrepreneurial boom, India's agricultural sector has also seen many transformative changes. Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), where agriculture employs close to 65% of the population and contributes around 27% to the state's GDP, has a storied history of entrepreneurship. The region's difficult terrain, monkey menace, and poor accessibility have limited extensive land utilisation, confining cultivation to traditional crops like rice, maize, wheat, and pulses — all of these being crops that often fail to provide sufficient revenue for farmers.

Under the Modi government, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), ministry of science and technology, launched the Jammu and Kashmir Aroma Arogya Gram (JAAG) project to address some of the agricultural challenges or offer a workaround through alternative crops. This ground-breaking initiative, popularly known as Aroma Mission, introduced the cultivation and processing of medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs) using advanced CSIR technologies. This, in turn, has paved the way for India's Purple Revolution.

The registered farmers were provided with free, high-quality planting material for half an acre of land and offered comprehensive training in cultivation, processing, and marketing MAPs. The initiative significantly boosted farmers' income and created new employment opportunities in the rural areas of the state.

The lavender cultivation aspect of this project, championed by young entrepreneurs, shattered the misconception that start-ups are largely, if not solely, confined to the areas of digital and information technology, with many youths leaving lucrative corporate jobs to engage in profitable lavender farming. This success story, originating from

the small town of Bhaderwah in the remote, hilly district of Doda has led to the adoption of cultivation of lavender, has been taken up in other districts of J&K as well. Indeed, many Himalayan states, such as Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, and Nagaland, have started similar cultivation to give their farmers better incomes.

Every kind of support, including the appropriate technological support at every stage — right from cultivation to distillation at dedicated facilities for developing a wide range of lavender products to arranging market linkages with industry — was provided by CSIR. Today, over 1,300 hectares in J&K are under lavender cultivation, with notable progress in Ramnagar tehsil of Udhampur district. Awareness campaigns on the plant's prospects for farm profitability have also been conducted in Mendhar, Poonch, and Rajouri.

The impact of this initiative has garnered national recognition. Bhaderwah's lavender farms were prominently featured in this year's Republic Day tableau at Kartavya Path, and these fields have become popular tourist attractions, further boosting the local economy.

In the 95th edition of his Mann Ki Baat address to the nation, PM Modi mentioned CSIR-Indian Institute of Integrative Medicine's role in supporting lavender cultivation. This year, Doda district alone extracted 100 kg of fresh lavender oil, with farmers harvesting nearly 10 quintals of dry flowers, valued at ₹800-1,000 per kg. One kanal (roughly equivalent to 506 square metres) of land produces 80-90 kg of flowers, and farmers have sold high-quality planting material worth ₹45 lakh.

This initiative has not only enhanced the income of Jammu and Kashmir farmers but has also opened up a new vista for agri start-ups. It creates several opportunities in value-added medicinal and cosmetic products. The lavender success story is a textbook example of the powerful synergy between research, academia, industry, and local youth entrepreneurship, more of which is needed to take the country forward on the path to developed nation status.

Dr Jitendra Singh is the minister of State (Independent Charge) for science and technology. The views expressed are personal



Opinion

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2024



INDIA AND SEMICONDUCTORS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

India's semiconductor sector is on the brink of a revolution, with breakthrough advancements set to transform the industry

Apple's next move

After the success in production, iPhone maker must look at bringing its component partners to India

THAT APPLE BEST signifies the success of the government's production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes in general, and for large-scale electronics manufacturing in particular, is well established by now. The long-term fruits of the initiative are also visible now, with analysts estimating that by 2026, Apple would have shifted 26% of its global iPhone capacity to India, from the current 14%. The backward linkages of the move is also getting clearer as it is estimated that by then its requirement of chips for the iPhones it produces in the country would be around \$12 billion. This presents an excellent opportunity for companies like Micron and Tata Group who are setting up semiconductor units in the country, which would come on stream by 2026. The benefits which could accrue to Micron, Tata Group, and other such firms can be gauged from the fact that Apple alone consumes over 26% of Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company's global sales. It's also the world's third largest consumer of chips.

News on the iPhone exports continue to be encouraging at \$5 billion during the first five months of the current fiscal, up 54% compared to the same period last year. This five-month number equals the company's full-year export figures for FY22. The forward linkages have also been established with the company having opened its two exclusive company-owned showrooms, one each in Mumbai and Delhi. Projections by analysts show that the launch of the new series of iPhone 16 is expected to see it register 20% growth in sales during the upcoming festival season, which could help it in achieving the mark of \$15 billion worth from India in FY25. Apple's India sales have been on the rise, touching \$7.5 billion in FY24 from around \$1.5 billion in FY21.

There are two lessons to be drawn from the success of Apple in India. One, it pays when the government involves the beneficiaries before coming out with a scheme; and second, removing the shortcomings the country has with regard to business expenses compared to China or Taiwan, in the form of incentive payout, as the PLI does. Such an approach pays in the long term. Many erroneously think that the incentive scheme is some kind of a tax subsidy. It is not. The scheme basically takes care of the obstacles the country poses to companies vis à vis China or Taiwan. It's a no-brainer that these need to be removed if production needs to be relocated from there. Further, the payout happens only after the company achieves incremental sales and production targets.

Having come this far, it's time for the government and Apple to prepare for the next steps. The smartphone PLI scheme comes to an end in 2026. Whether it should be extended or not depends on careful analysis of the remaining obstacles. An exhaustive government-industry study for assessing this should be commissioned on priority basis. Apple also has a role to play. Having demonstrated success in producing iPhones in the country, it should now look at repeating the same success in bringing its component partners to India. While iPhone exports rise, the trade deficit is also rising due to higher import of components. Producing iPads and Macbooks in India should also figure in the company's list. Perhaps the best way forward is for the government and industry to sit together and work out a composite incentive scheme which takes care of products as well as components.

Why India's market watchdog needs stricter controls

IGNORING THE CREDIBILITY crisis at the very top of the Securities and Exchange Board of India won't make it go away. Nor will chief Madhavi Puri Buch's decision to stop answering questions about her potential conflict of interest prevent the opposition Congress Party or Hindenburg Research from asking them.

Buch, the first Sebi chief from the private sector, is yet to respond to the opposition party's repeated questioning of her income sources, though she was quick to deny the short seller's criticism of her past investments.

It will be a pity if the media glare on Buch prompts New Delhi to revert to reserving top regulatory jobs for retired or retiring civil servants. They cover these positions because, by restricting the field could deprive institutions of talented outsiders who are genuinely interested in public service. Besides, government insiders don't have a lock on perceptions of probity. Past Sebi chiefs have also attracted criticism, though usually for the directorships they accepted after leaving office. What needs an update is the code of service. With adequate financial controls, it may be possible for the right candidate to avoid being in the limelight for the wrong reason.

Buch's silence after her response to Hindenburg's allegations has added to the confusion. A media mogul, who's been investigated by the market watchdog for allegedly siphoning funds from his company, has joined the melee and accused her of thwarting the sale of his beleaguered business. Some disgruntled officers have complained of a "toxic work culture" under Buch's leadership. After the regulator denied those allegations in a five-page press release, some 200 employees staged a silent protest in Sebi's Mumbai campus last week.

After the Hindenburg report, Buch said that she disclosed all her interests, and followed a strict recusal policy. But the government that gave her the job may have needed to do more. At the minimum, she should have been asked to pour her financial assets into a blind trust, where there's minimal communication between her and the temporary overseer of her wealth.

There is no such rule. Sebi's policy on conflict of interest for board members does not ban trading, except on the basis of unpublished price-sensitive information. The terms of service merely state that the chairman will not have any financial interests that are "likely to affect prejudicially his functions".

To see how a blind trust might have helped operationalise this, consider a specific allegation. The Congress party has asked Buch to explain how she kept receiving income from ICICI Bank Ltd., her past employer, even after becoming a full-time member of the regulatory body in 2017 and its chair in 2022. Although Buch didn't reply, ICICI said the income consisted of superannuation benefits following her 2013 retirement from the bank and gains from stock options awarded to her while she was employed.

Since Buch had a 10-year-long period in which she could convert the options, the government needed to ask itself what would be appropriate for the top market regulator: a "qualified" blind trust or a stricter version? In the former, Buch would exercise her options and place her ICICI stock in the trust, then reinvesting Sebi in the latter, she would also sell the shares and park the proceeds with the manager. Still, even qualified blind trusts have been hard to enforce among lawmakers in Washington.

The Supreme Court had appointed a committee after Hindenburg's original short-seller report on the Adani Group cratered the conglomerate's market value and kept it depressed for most of 2023. The panel said it lacked the evidence to return a finding of regulatory failure on Sebi's part. Any inquiry must be more than a post-mortem. India needs concrete suggestions on how situations of potential conflict can be prevented from arising in the first place.

By hunting allegations in dribs and drabs, lawmakers opposed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi might keep this issue alive until parliament reconvenes in late November or early December. Its resolution in a way that will restore Sebi's credibility will be a welcome change for the Indian markets. But I'm not holding my breath.



ANDY MUKHERJEE

Bloomberg

INDIA MUST SHORE UP ECONOMIC TIES IN THE REGION, SETTLE DIFFERENCES WITH QUAD PARTNERS

Ups and downs in Indo-Pacific

PRIME MINISTER MODI'S recent visits to Singapore and Brunei and his first coming meeting with other leaders of the Quad in America later this month highlight the role of the Indo-Pacific in India's strategic outlook and Sino-Indian competition in the region as geopolitical circumstances change. Modi's call for development, not expansionism, in Brunei was aimed at China's aggressive moves in the South China Sea.

In the Indo-Pacific, India is more "Indo" than "Pacific", regardless of whether one uses the US definition of the region or India's. Washington's definition has omitted some of India's most vital interests, including the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. For India, the Indian Ocean extends till the coast of East Africa, and is India's gateway to trade with West Asia, Southeast Asia, Japan, and South Korea.

That difference in itself identifies differences between American and Indian interests in the Indo-Pacific. The Persian Gulf is also significant for India as a major source of energy imports as well as trade with Europe and Africa.

Pacific China's growing economic and military influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean prompted Delhi to adopt the Indo-Pacific concept. India therefore supports the idea of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" with its Quad partners — the US, Japan, and Australia.

Since its launch in 1992, India's "Look East" policy has aimed to strengthen economic and cultural ties with Southeast Asia. In 2014, the policy became known as "Act East". It broadened its horizons to include East Asia and to increase maritime security in the region. But India's top priority is to strengthen ties with neighbouring Indian Ocean states in South Asia.

India wants the Indo-Pacific to

ANITA INDER SINGH
Founding professor at Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution, New Delhi



retain its openness by adhering to international law and the principle of freedom of navigation. Unlike its Quad partners, India does not want a strategy aimed at containing China or annoying Beijing's comprehensive strategic partner Russia which has been a long-standing arms supplier.

Moreover, as one of China's partners in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, India avoids diplomatic confrontation with Beijing.

While hoping to accommodate countries which favour multipolarity and multilateralism, India, unlike China and Russia, is not anti-West. Simultaneously it does not wish to compromise its strategic autonomy by joining forces with America and its allies.

China stayed out of Delhi's G20 summit, it has blocked India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and refused to support its bid for a UN Security Council seat. But India's own tardy progress is the biggest obstacle to its limited regional and international clout.

Chinese economic and political engagement with Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Maldives through the Belt and Road Initiative since 2013 has raised concerns that India's influ-

ence in South Asia is being undermined. Meanwhile, Chinese transgressions of the disputed border with India led to clashes in June 2021, and January and November 2022.

With the Quad partners, economic collaboration is inspired by the group's concern about China's strong position in the global manufacturing supply chain. And joint military drills enhance the collective military capabilities of Quad members.

Opposition from Russia — a key arms and technology provider — to the Indo-Pacific concept also requires diplomatic manoeuvring to dissuade Moscow from moving closer to Beijing. But Moscow is already closer to Beijing than Delhi because both are united by opposition to the West.

and because China can give Russia stronger economic and diplomatic support than India.

Japan, Singapore, Australia, and Brunei also differ strongly from India on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. So trust between India and these countries develops slowly. Prioritising South Asia strategically, India will not be able to help them to repel a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

India's economic ties with its Quad partners are not as strong as they could be. Japan and Southeast Asian countries put the onus for this on India. But

Australia and India have signed a free trade agreement.

Economically, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) is a keystone of India's "Act East" policy. Delhi's focus is on enhancing physical and digital connectivity — including the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway — to foster economic integration. Asean-India trade topped \$131 billion in 2023. But trade between Asean and China touched a new high of \$702 billion.

India's importance in the Pacific is reduced by its refusal to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership multilateral trade agreement. Also, while India is strengthening ties with Singapore, its bilateral ties with other Asean countries are poorly developed. Delhi therefore hopes that Singapore becomes the bridge between other Asean countries and India.

At another level, the western Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf are greater priorities for India than Southeast Asia. As much as 61% of its crude oil imports traverse the Gulf and trade with the Arab world amounted to more than \$240 billion in 2023. Additionally, the estimated 10 million Indians working in the Gulf present Delhi with annual remittances of some \$36 billion.

Earlier this year, drone and missile attacks by Yemen's Houthis on commercial ships in the Red Sea area and the retaliatory Anglo-American strikes on Yemen led India to deploy more than 10 Indian warships in the Arabian Sea as its security and economic interests were at stake.

All told, the Indo-Pacific will remain a defining element of India's foreign policy. But India must cultivate stronger economic ties with countries in the region and sort out its differences with Quad partners to expand its influence and counter China in the region.

Cementing a sustainable future

**NEERAJ AKHOURY**
MD, Shree Cement Ltd. and President, Cement Manufacturers' Association of India

INDIA TODAY STANDS at a crucial juncture, as it needs to accelerate development activities while mitigating carbon emissions to achieve its net-zero target by 2070. As a result, various sectors, including cement, are focusing not only on production and meeting consumer demand but also on reducing emissions. The cement industry, which must meet a burgeoning construction demand and fulfil India's ambitious infrastructure targets, is integrating sustainability into every strategy.

But this is just the beginning. The industry must double down on its efforts and invest even more time and resources to further reduce its carbon footprint. It's time for the industry to intensify its emission reduction actions and lead the charge toward a sustainable future.

Advancing processes, mitigating emissions The cement industry has made significant strides in reducing emissions, driven by the dual imperatives of sustainable development and regulatory compliance. It has adopted a multi-faceted approach to minimise its environmental impact.

One of the primary steps that has been taken is the adoption of alternative raw materials. By utilising waste products such as fly ash and slag, the industry reduces its use of limestone, lowering greenhouse gas emissions. The industry is also moving

The cement industry has made significant strides in curbing emissions, driven by the dual imperatives of sustainable development and regulatory compliance

and promoting a circular economy. This shift is complemented by the increased use of blended cements which incorporate these alternative materials.

Another crucial step in reducing carbon emissions in the industry is transitioning from fossil fuels to alternative energy sources. Cement manufacturers are increasingly adopting solar and wind energy, biomass, municipal solid waste, and used tires. Advancements in technology and improved combustion processes have made using these alternative energy sources more efficient and cost-effective, significantly reducing the industry's carbon footprint and promoting sustainability.

Moreover, energy efficiency is a critical area of focus. Indian cement companies have implemented advanced technologies like waste heat recovery systems, which capture and reuse heat generated during manufacturing. This converts waste heat into usable electricity and hence reduces overall emissions. Additionally, the adoption of modern clinker production techniques, such as pre-calciners and pre-heaters, has significantly improved thermal efficiency, leading to lower carbon dioxide emissions per tonne of cement produced.

The industry is also moving towards eco-friendly transportation. Today, road transport is the primary mode of transportation, but efforts are being made to switch to more environment-friendly options such as trains and waterways, which emit fewer emissions than diesel-powered trucks.

In addition, cement producers are emphasising the use of environment-friendly fuels for their vehicles, such as compressed natural gas. This is meant to minimise environmental impact and help create a more sustainable and greener future.

Water conservation is another priority, with measures like air-cooled condensers, rainwater harvesting, sewage treatment, and recycled water usage being implemented. Most cement manufacturers have also established a robust environmental, social, and governance framework to ensure alignment with sustainability goals and regularly measure progress.

Notably, digitalisation and automation have attracted the industry's attention due to their potential to facilitate emission reduction. The integration of advanced data analytics and automation systems allows for real-time monitoring and optimisation of production processes. This ensures that operations run at peak efficiency,

minimising waste and reducing energy usage. Predictive maintenance powered by artificial intelligence helps in anticipating equipment failures, thereby avoiding unplanned downtimes and ensuring smoother, more efficient operations.

The manufacturers have also increased efforts to make their operations eco-friendly. For instance, the industry is producing blended cement varieties such as PPC, BSC, and CC while adhering to Bureau of Indian Standards norms. This approach reduces natural resource use and greenhouse gas emissions. Exploring limestone calcined clay cement as a sustainable alternative is also an option that manufacturers are considering. However, limited availability of alternative blending materials close to cement manufacturing locations is a bottleneck. Additionally, a policy push to promote the use of blended cement would be beneficial.

One of the sectors that India's ambition for sustainability hinges significantly on is the cement industry. With over 250 million people projected to join the urban population in the next 20 years and a slew of infrastructure projects on the horizon, the demand for cement will skyrocket. The industry is not just expected but also obligated to ramp up to meet these goals, and it is well-placed to play a vital role in tackling the colossal task of reducing India's environmental footprint.

requires a different set of logistics and greater support base. Byju's saw huge growth in user base and acceptance. Albeit its rapid acquisition of liabilities was in the public domain for long, it never sought to curb its appetite. It is surprising that viable start-ups are so mesmerised by their seed idea that they do not think of financial prudence. —R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

GST rejig needed

Apropos of "Choices before GST council" (FE, September 11), indeed the discomfiture of states with goods and services tax (GST) yielding lower revenue than mining taxes levied by them cannot be taken lightly. The GST Council is a fine mechanism to feel the pulse of member states on GST rates and other compliance measures. Low GST rates with a broadened base

will increase tax revenue. Structural infirmities must be avoided while expanding the base for imposing GST. The recent hefty GST notices to information technology firms for their remittances to overseas branches is a glaring example of misinterpreting "service". To get more transaction volume for a broader GST base, exemptions can be withdrawn and GST rejigged with moderate rates. —NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

Start-up impudence

Apropos of "Lessons from Dunzo" (FE, September 11), the plunge witnessed by ventures such as Paytm and Byju's ought to have been a wake-up call for a sunrise sector. Yet, Dunzo is down in the dumps, as hubs is prevailed over basics. It sought a niche in hyperlocal delivery, but realised too late that the matrix for quick commerce comes with extreme time compression that

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Digital agriculture

Agri Stack transformative; implementation a challenge

In a move that can expand the scope and effectiveness of farm sector schemes, the Cabinet recently cleared a 'Digital Agriculture Mission' plan with an outlay of ₹2,810 crore. The Centre and States will share the funding on a 2:1 basis. This follows a Budget announcement on creating an inclusive digital ecosystem for agriculture.



The thrust has two components, Agri Stack and Krishi Decision Support System — the former is based on aggregation of micro data, such as land records, family details and crops sown, and the latter on mapping macro attributes such as weather, soil, water availability and drought, and flood control systems. The goal is to cover 11 crore farmers in three years. The benefits can accrue at two levels. First, Agri Stack can empower farmers with easier access to credit, insurance and other direct benefit transfer schemes, reducing their reliance on the local bureaucracy. Second, integration of datasets can positively impact policy formulation. Computerised land records as well as geo-referenced cropping data, when linked to a unique farmer's ID (akin to Aadhaar) can be used to disburse Kisan Credit Card loans at the click of a mouse. Digital KCC is slowly gaining ground. But even as some public sector banks do provide integrated rural services and information, it is to be noted that a large number of tenant farmers are outside the banking network.

According to a 2023 NABARD study that explores the link between tenancy and credit in Andhra Pradesh, 60 per cent of tenant farmers borrowed from informal sources, against 41 per cent in the case of owner farmers. Wider digital outreach can enhance access to information, formal credit and other services. An assessment of crop loss and damage can be made at a micro-level, minimising fewer exclusions. It may become possible to transfer fertilizer subsidy directly to farmers. Extreme weather events can be better managed by providing information in advance on the farmer's phone. Likewise, damage on account of flood or drought can be objectively assessed, without its turning into a controversy.

But there are challenges in data integration. Land records remain contested, despite over 90 per cent digitisation. Concerns over data theft and cyber fraud cannot be disregarded, particularly as a number of Aadhaar-linked financial scams have been linked to property dealings. It is crucial to create awareness with regard to protecting biometrics. Amidst this digitisation drive, the need to enact data protection and privacy laws which have been hanging fire for very long cannot be overemphasised. Above all, it is important for the data gathering process to make a distinction between the owner and the cultivator, so that the digital drive benefits the right people. Here, digital solutions or tech fixes alone will not work. They must be accompanied by institutional and social processes.

POCKET



"Isn't it cheaper to rent a locker to keep our credit cards in than to keep those with us?"

LABANYA P. JENA
DHURBA PURKAYASTHA

The Reserve Bank of India's Monetary Policy Report released in April 2024 highlighted that climate change poses a serious challenge to the efficacy of monetary policy. It can slow economic growth, increase credit risk premiums, heighten inflation volatility and destabilise financial asset prices.

Climate-induced extreme weather events (example, storms, floods, droughts) can impair a bank's credit portfolio and constrain credit flow, thereby stifling economic growth and increasing credit risk. A sudden increase in systemic credit risk in the financial system can increase credit risk premiums abruptly, thereby negating the policy aiming to reduce interest rates to grow the economy.

The primary goal of monetary policy is to control inflation but balance the same with adequate liquidity in the financial system. This will become increasingly challenging as climate-induced extreme weather events could lead to supply shocks beyond monetary policy's control. There will be a trade-off between stabilising inflation and pushing for economic growth and financial stability. Climate-induced weather events can force productive resources to support climate adaptation measures and increase precautionary saving, which means lower investment. All these can increase nominal interest rates, nullifying the monetary policy targeting lower interest rates to grow the economy.

INCORPORATING CLIMATE RISKS Given the above context, there is a clear case for central banks incorporating climate change in monetary policy formulations. This can support the policy's primary objectives of delivering price stability, economic growth and financial stability. Monetary policy can also play a supportive role in mitigating climate change and enabling public finance for adaptation and resilience investments in addressing the adverse effects of climate change, manifesting as sudden shocks on the financial system.

Research papers published in the International Review of Financial Analysis and Bank for International Settlements (BIS) show that the risk premium related to the carbon intensity of loans is insignificant. Substantial investments in green technologies and climate adaptation require a more targeted and proactive approach. Higher investment in clean energy and energy efficiency can reduce inflation volatility as the energy source will move away from the volatile prices of fossil fuels and increase India's energy security.

Credit policy options to fund green projects



POLICY TOOLS. RBI can use selective credit controls and moral suasion to drive funding for low carbon initiatives

Reducing reliance on imported fossil fuels can help the RBI manage exchange rates better.

How can monetary policy tools help in meeting India's climate finance targets?

The existing set of monetary policy instruments deployed by financial regulators are neither designed for managing climate risks nor do they help increase climate finance in India.

The technique of selective credit control is one monetary policy tool to alter the volume of credit flows and the cost of credit to different sectors. The RBI can use the tool selectively to increase climate finance and enable a low-carbon transition for the Indian economy. It can increase the credit cost of carbon-intensive businesses and lower it for low-carbon businesses. For example, investment in climate-resilient crops can reduce the risk of hyperinflation of food prices during drought or flood events, which are likely to be more frequent and intense. These measures differentiate interest rates to offer lower rates to climate-resilient projects that can control inflation, particularly food prices. Central banks in Japan, Malaysia, and Thailand use

Low-carbon technologies are more capital-intensive and sensitive to interest rates than carbon-intensive businesses.

selective credit control to support green projects by offering subsidised loans or targeted refinancing lines.

Notably, low-carbon technologies are more capital-intensive and sensitive to interest rates than carbon-intensive businesses. Central banks can design their monetary policy to push for low interest rates for low-carbon technologies. Further, monetary policy can also direct credit to green investments by tilting the playing field with differential pricing for borrowers supported by green collaterals.

We suggest some means through which central banks can decrease the cost of credit and drive more capital flow to green sectors within the existing monetary policy instruments. **Statutory Liquidity Ratio (SLR)** and **Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR):** Monetary policy can differentiate credit costs between carbon-intensive and green projects through these reserve requirements. It can increase CRR and SLR requirements for carbon-intensive projects to decrease high-carbon lending capacity while reducing the reserve ratio for green investments, thereby increasing credit flows towards green projects. Bank Indonesia, the country's central bank, considers climate change when determining reserve requirements for banks.

Repo rate and reverse repo rate: As financed emission is expected to be mainstreamed in the banking sector in the near future, the RBI can determine the repo rate, reverse repo, and bank

rate based on the financed emission intensity of regulated entities. For example, the People's Bank of China (PBoC) pays a higher interest rate to banks on required reserves with a better green credit portfolio.

Open market operations: As sovereign green bonds have already been introduced, the RBI can incentivise sovereign green bonds compared to conventional green bonds. Commercial banks holding more sovereign green bonds can be incentivised — RBI can pay them higher interest rates in open market operations. Excess SLR invested by commercial banks could be directed to sovereign green bonds.

Selective credit control and moral suasion are the two monetary policy tools through which the RBI can drive funding for green projects. The central bank can reduce the margin money requirements of green projects while increasing the same for carbon-intensive projects. Since the RBI joined the Network for Greening the Financial System (NGFS), it has been using more moral suasion, or nudging commercial banks, to accelerate capital flows towards green sectors while striving to mitigate climate-related financial risk. The RBI can use moral suasion more often and vigorously to spread awareness of climate-related risks while encouraging capital flows towards green projects.

Jena is a Sustainable Finance Specialist at IEEFA, and Purkayastha is a Director at CEWE. Views are personal.

An aggressive Kamala Harris has her way

At the presidential debate, she cornered Trump on a host of issues. The former president had a bad outing

Sridhar Krishnaswami

At the end of the 90-minute period it did not look as if Donald Trump had been on a presidential debating stage seven times; and at different stages it looked as if Republicans were repenting for all they said about Joe Biden's June 27 performance. In Philadelphia, Vice Kamala Harris not only steadied her message but also made sure that she was a decent messenger as well.

Debates do not win a Presidential election, but Tuesday night showed that it could make a difference in a tight contest.

Whether it was on the economy, immigration, abortion, Ukraine, Israel or Afghanistan, Harris made it known where she is coming from, refusing to be pushed around but instead turning the tables on the former President. At one point Trump maintained that Harris was sent to "negotiate" with President Vladimir Putin prior to the invasion of Ukraine. Harris shot back, "... I said it at the beginning of this debate, you're going to hear a bunch of lies coming

from this fella. And that is another one".

Harris' toughest and best moments seemed to come when she was cornering the former President on abortion, the term limits, the significance of Roe v Wade and the notion that most Americans wanted the issue to be turned over to the states. The, at times, bizarre characterisation of abortions taking place in the eighth and ninth months or the "execution" of a baby after it is born brought forth a scornful retort from Harris: "It's insulting to the women of America".

FAILED RHETORIC

Trump and his team perhaps totally underestimated their opponent over and beyond the simplistic notions of a prosecutor vs a convicted felon characterisation. Right from the word go, Harris seemed ready with her version for America, a place of opportunity for "all" instead of for a chosen few. "Looking Forward" or "Turning a New Page" were themes that were floated by Harris and in what seemed to resonate as opposed to constantly harping on the failed rhetoric of the last four years.

Trump had different occasions to pin



VOICING. A vision for America

down Harris, especially on a perceived shifting policy perspectives on the economy. But the former President fell for the bait and trap set by the Democratic opponent and wandered off, at times, into the realm of nonsense like immigrants in Ohio killing their pets (dogs and cats) and consuming them. All this in spite of the moderator openly saying that it was false. Even Republicans who gleefully started this on social media backed out.

Perhaps the telling moment for Harris came when she was asked to respond to Trump still maintaining that he did not

lose in 2020. "... clearly, he is having a very difficult time processing that (2020 election). And when you then talk in this way in a presidential debate and deny what over and over again are court cases you have lost, because you did in fact lose that election, it leads one to believe that perhaps we do not have in the candidate... the temperament or the ability to not be confused about fact. That's deeply troubling. And the American people deserve better," Harris replied.

The Harris camp is clearly elated at the first debate to the extent that it is calling for a second. Trump and his campaign are saying that the call for a second is because the first was lost. Irrespective of whether this materialises, the fact remains that some senior Republicans are not convinced that it was Trump's good first outing. "Whoever did the debate prep for Donald Trump should be fired... Trump better get to work or he's going to lose this election," said former two-term New Jersey Governor, Chris Christie.

The writer is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North America and United Nations

✉ **LETTERS TO EDITOR** Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to "Letters to the Editor", The Hindu Business Line, Kasturji Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

A case for higher rating

This refers to India being rated BBB- and its potential for improving fiscal credibility, though with certain caveats that justify the rating. Fitch's ratings range from AAA to BBB within the investment grade category, with BBB- being the lowest investment grade rating, just one notch above junk status, currently assigned to India. The primary reasons for this rating include high fiscal deficits, a high interest-to-revenue ratio, and elevated debt levels.

While economic factors are just one component among others, such as political stability, external factors, fiscal health, and monetary policy,

India's economic performance is moderately rated based on a weighted average approach. Additionally, India's ability to address fiscal challenges has been acknowledged, as demonstrated by the central bank's dividend to the government. A recent survey ranked India's RBI Governor as the top central bank governor globally. India arguably deserves a higher rating than BBB-, which represents the lowest level within the investment grade category.

Srinivasan Velamuri

Chennai

Scaling up EV sector

This refers to India's EV market to

reach ₹20-lakh cr by 2030, create 5 crore jobs; Gadkari (September 11). With incentivised encouragement and other proactive policy measures of the government for the EV sector and battery manufacturing units, it is quite possible to scale up the number of EVs from the current 6.5 per cent to the targeted 30 per cent of total vehicles sales by 2030.

However, it is important that EV charging and battery swapping stations are also established commensurately. Ideally, for every 20 vehicles, one charging station is required. At present, there is one charging station for every 125-135 EVs in the country. The private sector should be encouraged not

only through enhanced incentives for speeding up the establishment of charging stations, but also to go for alternative renewable sources of energy.

Kosaraju Chandramouli

Hyderabad

Deposit mobilisation

This refers to "Banking system may face liquidity challenges: FICCI-BBA survey" (September 11). Even though the banking sector is confident that the gross non-performing asset will not rise beyond 3 per cent of gross advances, banks must not be complacent in ensuring discipline and proper governance in credit delivery,

monitoring and follow-up. CASA (current and savings) deposits are preferred by business entities and wage earners, but not for parking sizeable amounts of money. Given the paramount need of the banking system for deposits to satisfy the surging demand for credit, banks have to be aggressive in mobilising deposits, especially low-cost ones.

As deposit mobilisation is a highly competitive area, banks must not allow deterioration in the quality of their services to customers, and ensure their digital infrastructure is upgraded.

VSK Pillai

Changanacherry, Kerala

The EDITORIAL PAGE

The IndianEXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

FILL THE SKILL GAP

Pacts that facilitate labour mobility between countries need to be advanced, while addressing the reasons for mismatch

EARLY THIS YEAR, the first batch of workers from India left for Israel to plug the labour shortage in its construction sector that arose after a ban on Palestinian workers. Now, an investigation in this paper has revealed that this labour arrangement is under strain due to a glaring skill mismatch between the workers' abilities and the expectations of them. Some of these workers have now returned home, while others have been redeployed to other sectors considering the strengthening ties between the two countries. The evidence of the mismatch, however, does not take away from the benefits for Indian labour that stem from such work agreements. In fact, pacts that facilitate labour mobility between countries need to be advanced, while, at the same time, plugging the gaps such as those that the investigation has uncovered.

Indian labour, both unskilled and skilled, will be increasingly in demand across the world, especially in regions characterised by an aging workforce and labour shortages. In 2020, the Global Skill Gap report prepared by the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) had estimated the demand for labour in sectors across key regions such as the GCC countries (Gulf Cooperation Council) and the EU. The sectors it identified — construction, trade, health and social care, among others — are indicative of the sources of labour demand across the world. Some in the western world are now advocating for temporary work contracts to meet the labour shortages. But in order for Indian workers to productively engage in the global labour market, it is critical that they receive the necessary education and training in the skills that are needed. As per the labour force survey, only a small segment of those in the age group of 15-59 years have received formal vocational/technical training. The NSDC can play a critical role here. The focus should be on the entire ecosystem, encompassing the technical and training institutes, the trainers, and also the curriculum, among others, in order to ensure that the skills imparted are in line with what the market demands. Perhaps the Sri Lankan approach of ensuring that workers receive a few weeks of additional training before their departure can be considered, as well as exposing them to international processes and work practices.

The issue of skill mismatch, of shortage of skilled workers despite a huge labour force, has often been highlighted. In fact, several Indian firms have raised this matter in the past with regard to jobs across the entire skill spectrum. Considering that an educated and skilled work force is critical for reaping the demographic dividend, the focus should be on ensuring that those entering the labour market receive appropriate training, and that their skills are constantly upgraded to adapt to an ever changing work environment.

FACING OFF WITH TRUMP

Despite her late entry, Kamala Harris is rattling her opponent, and holding up her end of the debate

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BATTLE that was Tuesday night's US presidential debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris began the day before. The former mocked his Democratic opponent's height on his social media platform, saying that "cheating" tactics like standing on boxes or using artificial lifts won't be allowed at the event. At 6 foot 3 inches, the former president and Republican nominee has used his imposing figure in the past, most notably when he stalked his then-opponent Hillary Clinton on stage during a 2016 face-off. At the end of Tuesday's debate, however, it was the more diminutive Harris who emerged the taller figure, confidently cementing her position as a strong, credible candidate in the White House race. She expertly parried blows over her role in the current unpopular administration while landing more than a few jabs about her increasingly irate opponent's positions on some of the most important issues in the US today, such as abortion rights.

This was no easy task, considering her late entry into the race, in July, following Joe Biden's disastrous debate with Trump the previous month. Harris carried the double burden of having to underline her difference not only from the man she was running against, but also the one who is currently her boss. She left the job of distinguishing her candidature from Trump's mostly to him — goading him into incoherence, conspiracy theories and lies by bringing up his legal troubles, friendships with "dictators who would eat you for lunch" like Russian President Vladimir Putin, and the size of the crowd at his rallies. On Biden, Harris had trickier terrain to navigate. Despite his brief, ill-fated candidature this year, the US president remains a respected figure among Democrats. Without quite criticising his policies, and his handling of the economy in particular, Harris emphasised her plan for an "opportunity economy" and spoke of representing a new generation of leadership that would "turn the page" on the past. She deflected or maintained a strategic silence on issues, like climate policy, that could cause unease among some voters. It was a balancing act that would reassure existing Democratic voters, while opening up space for the undecided.

Harris's assured performance has turned what was a one-horse race six weeks ago into a more equal contest. For voters who might have hoped to glean more about each nominee's policies, the debate had little to offer. Harris promised to be tougher on immigration than in 2020, but that was in keeping with the present administration's stand. Trump vowed to continue pursuing an isolationist foreign policy and dismantling the Affordable Care Act. In a debate that was more about projection than plans, voters are likely to be persuaded by the personality of the nominees. After Tuesday, Harris cuts a compelling figure.

VOICE OF THE FATHER

For James Earl Jones, his voice became a signature that accompanied some great performances

A NOT-REPEATED INSULT, couched as wit, is telling someone "you have a face meant for the radio", James Earl Jones, who died on Monday at 93, truly had a voice meant for the big screen. Initially, Jones did not even take credit for his work in the first Star Wars film, *A New Hope* (1977). By then he had already been an Oscar-nominated actor (he was only the second Black actor to be nominated in 1970, after Sidney Poitier), and in the business for decades. As the voice of Darth Vader, he was both the menacing villain and, with one of the most iconic lines from a blockbuster ("Luke, I am your father") the missing, prodigal father figure. With Mufasa, the Atticus Finch-like paternal archetype in Disney's *The Lion King*, Jones became the voice of wisdom for children across the world.

In a lesser, less prolific actor, the wide resonance of Darth Vader and Mufasa, across generations, could have limited their artistic output. But for James Earl Jones, like Morgan Freeman and Amitabh Bachchan, the voice became a signature that accompanied some great performances. In *Field of Dreams* (1989), Jones's "the people will come" speech became, for many Americans, the metaphor for and symbol of that ethereal emotion that belies reason — hope. His powerful voice, along with the ability to inhabit characters, sometimes complex (as in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, the 1995 film set in Apartheid South Africa) at others, comic (*Coming to America*), lent gravitas to every role.

It might seem like Jones was given a natural advantage with his voice. But as a child, he had a pronounced stutter, which he found got better when he memorised poetry or prose to read out loud. What seemed like a "gift from god", then, owes to the actor's desire to overcome his weakness. That, perhaps, can be one more lesson — as resonant as any from Mufasa — from the man who was, for decades, the voice of the father.



SUHASH PALSHIKAR

FOR ANY GOVERNMENT, Manipur would have become an embarrassment long ago. Now that the festering wound has re-surfaced, it should be a matter of national concern, shame and outrage. Any Union government would have become shaky in its democratic pretence and moral foundation. Nothing of the sort seems to be happening. A government that was gloating over its "third term" stands exposed by what is happening in Manipur. However, this does not seem to matter for the government and the main ruling party. This insensitivity of the public, political parties and government alike, might be understood through three factors — the eclipse of governance, the distortion of state-ness and the failure of Hindu nationalism.

For over a year, the situation in Manipur has been practically out of control with ethnic clashes and defiance of police and armed forces. The Union government has done almost nothing even by way of formal efforts to restore law and order and broker peace. But this majestic neglect is not surprising. The government has followed a template of non-response and non-governance in the wake of almost every challenge or crisis.

In the pre-Covid phase, there were stirrings on the CAA-NRC issue. Subsequently, the farmers' protests became a major challenge. There have also been scandals such as the one surrounding the SEBI chairperson. Many gaps in routine administration have surfaced through infrastructure tragedies, power leaks, water leaks, train accidents. In each of these cases, the government's response has been marked by inaction, repression and a perception offensive.

In fact, the governance model sits on this tripod: Don't do anything, victimise the citizens if they complain and engage in perception warfare. Very helpfully for the government, the media has rarely followed up on these and other instances of (non) governance systematically and, instead, often concluded with it in its misinformation drive and/or perception offensive. Why should Manipur be an exception?

Similarly, the idea of state and state power has been distorted in response to such crises. One would imagine that a party and government that claim to be concerned with questions of national security, sovereignty and strength of the Indian state would have been

Its crisis is a reminder — dominant idea of state, nation is a hurdle in evolving trust among communities

For over a year, the situation in Manipur has been practically out of control with ethnic clashes and defiance of police and armed forces. The Union government has done almost nothing even by way of formal efforts to restore law and order and broker peace. But this majestic neglect is not surprising. The government has followed a template of non-response and non-governance in the wake of almost every challenge or crisis.

alert in their response to developments in Manipur. Instead, Manipur has come to represent the failure of the Indian state. Even otherwise, the idea of a (strong) state has only meant optical and verbal illusions. Flexing metaphorical muscles is all that state-ness seems to involve, and there is a cynical exploitation of such challenges for partisan mileage. Both these traits were evident when protestors in the anti-CAA agitation were branded as anti-national, agitating farmers labelled as Khalistanis and the Ladakh protests were simply ignored.

The current regime has strange ways of using the idea of state. It uses it as drapery in its presentation of India's international image — as Vishwaguru. This is done mainly for domestic audiences. Secondly, state is invoked as a weapon against citizens. Here, too, the state and its might are directed against and experienced by an internal audience. And third, state constitutes the outer justification of the regime's nationalist fantasies as was the case in Jammu & Kashmir with regard to Article 370.

Neither do citizens experience the benevolent prowess of the state nor does it might address core issues of internal order or external respect. In fact, through its lacklustre governance and flawed idea of "Hindu" nationalism, the current regime has only weakened the Indian state while simultaneously making it less democratic and more irresponsible.

So a state may be burning for more than a year, yet it does not qualify to be a concern in this discourse of a weak state pretending to be a strong one. The fact that two communities are unable to co-exist does not put pressure on the perception-centred state thinking. A border state being in turmoil does not worry the regime about security. Failure to quell violence does not disfigure the idea of a strong state.

But above all, the current regime's idea of the Indian nation is at the heart of its unwillingness to bring Manipur to the centre of national policy. Hinduist ideology conflates religion and nation. This intellectual position simultaneously makes the state weak and the idea of nation hollow — because, the nationalist imagination it upholds does not have a fair space for non-Hindus. Hinduism believes in the existence of a conspiracy to convert Hindus to other religions — in the case of many states of the "Northeast", to Christianity. Once

this conspiracy theory is adopted, an automatic schism emerges between Hindus and non-Hindus. Ideologues of Hindu nationalism tend to expect that a truly "nationalist" government should protect Hindus and restrain non-Hindus. Such a formulation of the nation as constituting Hindus and being threatened by non-Hindus brings Hinduism and its idea of Hindu nation in conflict with the co-existence of diverse religious communities.

In the case of the North-east, in addition to the Hindu-Christian dichotomy, Hinduism also faces the challenge of making sense of the diversity of ethnic communities, be it in Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya or Manipur. The claim that all indigenous communities are historically Hindus becomes a hindrance in fair governmental practices in treating different communities. Hinduism organisations have been working to Hinduise the inhabitants of various states of the region. This exercise brings forward two different kinds of tensions. In the first place, a "Hindu vs non-Hindu" angle overshadows the local competition among communities, and secondly, a sense of loss of identity and tradition marks the cultural existence of different communities. Both factors exacerbate the already complicated and competitive social sphere that is concerned with access to material resources and belongingness vis-à-vis tradition and culture.

Votaries of Hinduism might not agree, but such tensions, whether in the North-east or any other part of India, starkly represent the failure of their idea of nation and nationalism. When suspicion of an imagined other and fear of the majority mark social relations, the state becomes the handmaiden of the majority community. This larger ideological architecture forms the context that vitiates governance and statehood. The ruling party's identification with not just one community but also with a particular idea of the Indian nation has become a hurdle in evolving minimum trust among communities. Manipur is a cruel reminder of this.

When the entire country is being turned into a laboratory of community-based nationalism, it is only natural that Manipur does not remain an exception and that its continuing crisis ceases to matter.

The writer, based at Pune, taught political science



DEEPA MALIK AND SONI SANGWAN

WITHIN THREE PARALYMPIC Games, Indian women para-athletes have taken the tally of medals from one to 11. In the 2012 London Paralympics, the Indian contingent did not have a woman para-athlete. In 2016 in Rio, I (Malik) became the first to win a medal. But my joy was marred by a question: Why had it taken so long?

In 2021, when as a part of my responsibilities as President of the Paralympic Committee of India, we took the Indian team for the Tokyo Paralympics, our women won three of the total 19 medals. Now, they have done us proud in Paris. In India's largest-ever Paralympics contingent, we have 84 para-athletes of whom 32 are women. They competed in 11 of the 12 sports that India is participating in. The Paris Games will go down in history as when India's para-athletes proved that all we were waiting for was an opportunity. This is the result of a combination of changes — at the policy, parasports administration and societal level.

After Rio, people began to realise that being a woman with disabilities does not have to mean being bedridden. Sports started being perceived as empowering for girls and women with disabilities. Most importantly, it instilled confidence in caregivers, who began to appreciate their "ability beyond disability".

Until recently, para-sports were treated as charity. Our federation, the Paralympic

WITH OPPORTUNITY, NOT SYMPATHY

Women para-athletes' successes are due to mainstreaming of disabled sports

Committee of India, had the status of an NGO. It was only after para-sports were mainstreamed and became governed by the same policies as able-bodied sports that ad-hocism gave way to professionalism. Our federation leadership is now athlete-centric. We are now playing a crucial role in training athletes. The federation maintains data, analyses performance and helps enhance athletes' careers. From planning when to send them for international meets to getting their medical classification done — an environment of sporting excellence is being fostered.

These policy changes have given para-athletes much-needed access to government funding. I was able to train on the podium for Rio because of the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS), which allows full funding for the athletes in the excellence pool to customise their training. I had a conditioning coach, a nurse assistant, a mental strength trainer, and a physiotherapist, and I could get scientific injury management done. These factors helped me focus on training.

We have so much untapped talent in our country. They need opportunities — not sympathy. We need robust District Paralympic Committees to find talent from the grassroots. PM Narendra Modi's Khelo India is a step in this direction. Taking a cue from this, the PCI conducted the National Youth Para Games after a gap of 10 years and gave out

scholarships to promising athletes.

The performance of any nation at international events is not relative to its total population, but rather to its sporting population. If we want more medals, we need to have a larger number of people playing and for more women to win, we need to have more women in the field.

At Paris, we sent women in a larger number of sports and with different categories of disabilities. When Sheetal picks up her bow with her feet, cradles it against her chin and torso, aims and shoots, hitting the bullseye, I get goosebumps. Whether it is young women with paralysis, visual impairment, short stature, cerebral palsy, limb deficiencies or intellectual impairments, they have all raised the tricolour at Paris. I feel every step they take is a giant leap for women's empowerment.

A lot has been done and a lot needs to be done. I am looking forward to the day when women para-athletes represent India in every sport. Change is always incremental — in the global Paralympic Movement, we believe that 'changestartswithsport and the daughters of India have proven this to be true.

Malik is the first Indian woman Paralympic Medalist, former president of the Paralympics Committee of India and Padma Shri Khel Ratna recipient. Sangwan is a freelance journalist

SEPTEMBER 12, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

26 TAMILS KILLED

THE BULLET-RIDDLED BODIES of 26 Tamils were picked up from two places at Poovarasankuppam, near Sri Lanka's north Vavuniya town after a Colombo-Jaffna private passenger bus was hijacked by men in Army uniform, according to informed sources. The sources, who did not want to be identified, said the bus was carrying between 40 and 50 passengers.

ASSEMBLY ADJOURNED

THE ANDHRA PRADESH Legislative Assembly, which met in a surcharged atmos-

phere, was adjourned amidst the pandemonium without transacting even the lone item on the agenda — a condolence resolution. The session broke off in less than two minutes when shouts drowned the reading of the resolution by the pro tem Speaker M Baga Reddy.

HIJACKERS' PAK LINK

THE HIJACKERS of the Indian Airlines Boeing, which was hijacked to Dubai last month, have confessed that a pistol was handed over to them at the Lahore airport, according to Aik. Quoting a spokesman of the CBI, AIR said a tall man wearing a salwar

kameez gave the pistol to the leader of the hijackers. The investigations also indicated that a rich contractor in Punjab was behind the hijacking.

SHOW GONE WRONG

THE INDIAN TOUR of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra had a cacophonous beginning as scores of members of the troupe walked out of their rooms in Ashok Hotel complaining of bugs, cockroaches, flies and a foul smell. By evening, many had shifted to other hotels in the city. The press was denied photography of the troupe which had them screaming about emergency-like tactics.

Controversy over Mumbai's salt pans: why do these lands matter?

SRISHTI KAPOOR
MUMBAI, SEPTEMBER 11

EARLIER THIS month, the Centre approved the transfer of 256 acres of salt pan land in Mumbai to the Dharavi Redevelopment Project Pvt Ltd (DRPPL), a joint venture between Adani Realty Group and the Maharashtra government, for building rental housing for slum dwellers.

This invited criticism from opposition leaders and environmentalists, who said that the decision to "benefit Adani" would damage the fragile ecosystem. Shiv Sena leader Aaditya Thackeray accused the state government of "selling" Mumbai to the business tycoon.

EXPLAINED ENVIRONMENT

What are salt pan lands?

They comprise parcels of low-lying lands where seawater flows in at certain times, and leaves behind sand and other minerals. Along with Mumbai's mangroves (also at risk due

to development), this ecosystem is instrumental in protecting the city from flooding.

According to the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) notification of 2011, the ecologically sensitive salt pans fall under CRZ-1B category, where no economic activity is allowed with the exception of salt extraction and natural gas exploration.

In all, 5,378 acres of land in Mumbai have been designated as salt pan lands, approximately nine times the size of the Dharavi slums. About 31% of this land is located in residential and commercial belts, and roughly 480 acres are encroached upon, a 2014 study by the state government found. The same study found that about 1,672 acres of Mumbai's more than 5,000 acres of salt pan lands are "developable".

Nationally, some 60,000 acres have been demarcated as salt pan lands, spread across Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Gujarat, and Karnataka. Andhra Pradesh (20,716 acres) boasts the largest expanse of such land, followed by Tamil Nadu



Workers at a salt pan in Dadala, Mumbai. *Nirmal Harindran*.

(17,095 acres) and Maharashtra (12,662 acres).

Why are Mumbai's salt pan lands at risk?

Land is at a premium in Mumbai. Salt pans are among the last "undeveloped" parcels of land, thus far protected by the Ministry of Environment and Forests under the stringent CRZ norms. But this has not

stopped state governments from trying to acquire these lands from the Centre, for various development projects.

Chief among these has been the development of low-cost housing for Mumbai's slum-dwellers, a part of former Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis's plan to create a "slum-free Mumbai".

In 2015, Fadnis zeroed in on 400 acres of salt pan land along the Eastern Express highway in Mulund to relocate slums under the Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) scheme. The state government also planned to use much of the remaining 5,000 acres of salt pan land for affordable housing.

However, Fadnis's plans were put on hold after Uddhav Thackeray became chief minister in 2019. But the Thackeray government too set its eyes on a 102-acre salt pan land in Kanjurmag in 2020 as an alternative location for the metro car shed originally set to be built in the green belt of Aarey. This development is currently paused — the matter is pending before the Bombay High Court.

Current Chief Minister Eknath Shinde's rebellion in 2022 caused a split in the Shiv

Sena, threw Uddhav out of power, and brought Fadnis back to the driving seat in Maharashtra. The Mahayuti government proposed building affordable housing for Dharavi slum dwellers under the DRPPL on the Wadala salt pan land.

Why do salt pans matter?

Environmentalist Stalin D, director of NGO Vanashakti, said that construction over salt pan lands will result in flooding in Mumbai's eastern suburbs.

"Salt pans are situated in low-lying areas, and water received during heavy rain gets accumulated here. Water from Thane creek also flows in during high tide and gets collected in the salt pans, preventing flooding in the eastern suburbs. If the salt pans are covered over to construction, areas like Vikhroli, Kanjurmag, and Bhandup will definitely go underwater during heavy rain," Stalin said.

Environmentalist and Conservation Action Trust chief Debi Goenka said it is the salt pans that made things relatively better for the eastern suburbs (as compared to the western ones) during the July 2005 deluge, when 944mm of

rainfall in a single day caused widespread loss of lives and damage to infrastructure.

Goenka said: "On the one hand, the government's Mumbai Climate Action Plan acknowledges the threats of climate change in Mumbai, but on the other hand, the Centre and state governments are aiming to make buildings in an area which prevents flooding in the city."

Salt pans, which, along with the mangroves, stop the city from flooding, also host various species of birds and insects. Goenka said Mumbai's Development Plan 2034 ignores sustainability, but also exhibits complete disregard for the flora and fauna that will be impacted.

Goenka also questioned the quality of life for the relocated slum-dwellers who will be moved to these low-lying lands. "What quality of life will they have in an area that will submerge every year? How is this affordable housing? The cost of filling land, building a foundation, corrosion and water proofing, among many other measures to make the land suitable for habitation, in fact, makes this project extremely expensive," he said.

40% OF AMAZON RAINFOREST MOST VITAL TO CLIMATE IS UNPROTECTED

SCIENTISTS AGREE that preserving the Amazon rainforest is critical to combating global warming, but new data published on Wednesday indicate huge swathes of the jungles that are vital to the world's climate remain unprotected.

Nearly 40% of the areas of the Amazon rainforest most critical to curbing climate change have not been granted special government protection, as either nature or indigenous reserves, according to an analysis by nonprofit Amazon Conservation.

The areas lie in the far southwest of the Amazon in Peru and the far northeast in Brazil, French Guiana, and Suriname, the data show.

Those parts of the Amazon have the biggest, densest trees and the most continuous canopy cover, said Matt Finer, who leads Amazon Conservation's Monitoring of the Andean Amazon Project (MAAP). That means these areas hold the most carbon, which would be released into the atmosphere as climate-warming greenhouse gas if the jungle is destroyed by fire or logging.

What satellite data show

Amazon Conservation analysed new data from the satellite imaging company Planet that used lasers to get a three-dimensional picture of the forest and combined it with machine-learning models.

Only aboveground vegetation was considered, and not underground carbon in roots and soils.

MAAP's analysis shows that 61% of the peak carbon areas in the Amazon are protected as indigenous reserves or other protected lands, but the rest generally has no official designation.

In Brazil, Suriname and French Guiana, only 51% of peak carbon areas are labelled for preservation. Peru protects a higher proportion of its critical areas, but some of the areas that have been left unprotected have been earmarked for logging.

Why the Amazon matters

MAAP published an analysis last



The Amazon rainforest is critical for the planet. *Wikimedia Commons*

month showing that the Amazon contained 71.5 billion tonnes of carbon, roughly double the global carbon dioxide emissions for 2022. That analysis showed that the Amazon just barely absorbed more carbon than it released in the decade leading up to 2022, a positive sign for the world's climate.

But that remains an area of intense debate, with other studies showing the Amazon has flipped to become an emissions source.

As the effects of anthropogenic climate change become more stark with each passing day, the Amazon becomes one of the most valuable assets for the planet's health. Scientists say that if the Amazon becomes an emission source instead of a carbon sink — which absorbs carbon from the atmosphere — the impact on the planet may be cataclysmic.

That is why the data published by Amazon Conservation are important. "It really just gives this overall roadmap in terms of some of the highest carbon areas that are important to protect," Finer said. They really indicate the most pristine parts of the Amazon that still remain," he said.

REUTERS



SHUBHAJIT ROY

DEMOCRATIC candidate and Vice President Kamala Harris trumped former President Donald Trump in their presidential debate on Tuesday (Wednesday morning in India), burying the ghost of President Joe Biden's disastrous performance in the June debate. The debate, held with the race for the White House poised on a knife's edge, according to a number of opinion polls, could turn out to be a pivotal moment of the campaign. Interestingly, the assassination attempt on Trump, which was seen as the defining moment in the race at the time, barely figured in the debate.

Here are the 5 key takeaways.

1 Smiling Kamala Harris got under Donald Trump's skin

Harris brought out her prosecutorial skills to charge at Trump's past — his criminal convictions, the January 6 Capitol Hill attack on his watch, and the fact that world leaders laugh at him. Trump was provoked — he was angry, almost yelling, trying to counter her. When he failed to press the Vice President enough on her weaknesses, she succeeded in baiting him time and again.

At the beginning of the encounter, Harris moved towards Trump to shake his hand — this was their first meeting ever, and the first handshake between Trump and a rival presidential candidate since 2016.

The former President was fact-checked live by ABC news anchors and debate hosts David Muir and Lindsey Davis — a first for a presidential debate. In the Biden-Trump debate hosted by CNN in June, there was no live fact-checking.

When Trump spoke, Harris typically had a half-smile on her face, maybe a quarter-smile, and she then turned to the camera to speak to viewers. Trump barely looked at her, and instead addressed the hosts and viewers.

While there was much discussion over the debate rule on muting of microphones, ABC News allowed the candidates to just at times by keeping the mics on. Unsurprisingly, the debate went on for about 15 minutes beyond



Customers at a sports bar in New York watch the debate on TV. *The New York Times*

the scheduled 90 minutes.

2 Economy, abortion, and immigration dominated

The economy, abortion, immigration, and health care were among the top issues that featured in the debate.

When Trump criticised Biden's handling of the economy, Harris reminded him that the Biden-Harris administration had inherited the economy from the Trump administration. In his trademark style of calling his rivals names, Trump called Harris a "Marxist".

The debate on politics became heated as Harris referred to Trump's links with Project 2025, a conservative agenda for his possible second term, called him a convicted felon, and said that bored listeners leave his political rallies early.

This riled Trump, who has always cared about crowd sizes — a well-known weakness that was used by the Indian government to impress him through the Woody Modi rally in Houston in 2019 and the massive crowds in the streets of Ahmedabad and at the Namaste Trump event at the Narendra Modi stadium in February 2020.

Trump accused Harris of being responsible for illegal immigration. He referred to a conspiracy theory about immigrants eating people's pet dogs and cats. At one point, Harris responded, "Talk about extreme."

The exchanges were sharp, and Harris repeated a few times the line that she had been using to describe Trump's statements: the "same old and tired lies".

Trump denied having a role in the January 6 riot, but deflected when asked if he had any regrets about what happened.

Harris, who took the opportunity to question Trump's commitment to a peaceful transfer of power, went to her campaign theme: "let's turn the page".

3 On foreign policy, Trump bragged, Harris cautious

The candidates sparred on the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas wars, and the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan.

Harris sought to paint Trump in Vladimir Putin's corner, and said Putin will be in Kyiv if Trump becomes President. Trump accused Harris of failing to negotiate on behalf of the Biden administration — even though this was something she had never been tasked to do.

Trump said he would talk to both Presidents Putin and Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy, but refused to say that he backed Ukraine's victory. He only said he would bring the war to an end as President elect — that is, between November, when the election will take place, and January, when the new US President takes charge.

Harris said she backed Israel's right to defend itself, but also committed to a two-state solution and referred to the plight of the Palestinians — walking the fine line in a diplomatic minefield.

China was mentioned a few times — Harris accused Trump of being a sell-out; Trump said China, Russia, and North Korea were scared of him.

Harris said world leaders laughed at Trump; he countered that he had been endorsed by Viktor Orban. The Hungarian Prime Minister is known for his authoritarian ways, and Harris latched on to the statement as proof that Trump admired strongmen and dictators.

4 Harris backed Biden, but underlined she isn't him

Harris tried to distance herself from the unpopularity of Biden, saying she was different from not just Trump, but from Biden as well. She spent this out directly once, and throughout the debate, she kept saying "let's turn the page". She did spell out some of her policy positions, but did not flesh them out in detail.

The assassination attempt on Trump that created shock waves figured only once, when Trump himself brought it up. Trump also avoided doubling down on Harris's Indian-US-Black identity debate, and tried to steer clear of the derogatory "Black jobs" statement he had made earlier. "I don't care," he said.

Trump, who responded to attacks by Harris throughout the debate, tried hard to paint her as a Biden surrogate, and to link her to the failures of the Biden administration.

When Harris talked about her plans to create jobs and a future-focused "opportunity economy", Trump made his best comeback of the night: "Why didn't you do it in the last three-and-a-half years?"

5 For India, there was some relief in debate's silences

There was no mention of India during the debate — either in the positive or in a negative way. That was a relief to many in South Block tracking the debate.

The mostly negative tone about China was an important takeaway for many in India's foreign policy establishment. It seemed clear that both candidates viewed Beijing as a rival and a threat to the US.

There was no mention of high tariffs on goods and services from India, or a potential clampdown on legal and skilled immigration.

Terrorism was mentioned in the context of Hamas, but no big-picture strategic issues came up — such as the situation and commitment to the Indo-Pacific, terrorism in other parts of the world, and the threats to global energy and food security because of the two ongoing wars. This also reflected the innate domestic focus of the debate — it was primarily about America.

Do performances in debates matter? Here's when they apparently did

ARJUN SINGUPTA
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 11

PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES in the US are often seen as made-for-television spectacles, which have limited impact on election outcomes. Once in a while, however, they move the needle and genuinely change the course of the race. Here are five such instances.

1960: JFK won the looks battle

John F Kennedy took on Richard Nixon in the first ever televised debate on September 26, 1960. The iconic debate, which helped propel JFK to stardom and the presidency, established the dictum that "appearances matter".

As the popular narrative goes, those who watched the debate on TV believed that Kennedy, who wore makeup and looked young, swept the floor although those who

listened-in on the radio thought Nixon fared better. In the words of Frank Stanton, then the president of CBS, "Kennedy was bronzed beautifully. Nixon looked like death."

Modern assessments agree that the impact of the debate (and the three subsequent debates that election season) is likely overstated. That said, it was a transcendental moment for American politics, the first time the public got the chance to see the two presidential candidates together.

1976: Ford's fatal faux pas

An off-the-cuff comment made in the second televised debate between Jimmy Carter and Gerald R Ford on October 6, 1976 might have cost the latter the election. Heading into the debate, the fortunes of the incumbent Ford were trending upwards, with Carter's once 33-point lead down to single digits.

Then Ford made a famous gaffe. Responding to a question on the Helsinki

Accords, Ford said: "There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, and there never will be under a Ford administration." He doubled down by saying, "I don't believe that the Poles consider themselves dominated by the Soviet Union."

Ford's statements invited the ire of the media, and cost him support from voters whose families had crossed the iron curtain to escape communist rule. In a super-close election, this was pivotal to the outcome. Many trace Ford's loss in the electoral college to his defeat in Ohio by just 11,000 votes — a swing of 6,000 votes would have allowed him to remain in the White House. Families of Catholic immigrants from Eastern Europe formed a significant share of the vote in the state.

1992: Perot plays spoilsport

The 1992 debates took place over just

nine days, creating unprecedented public interest. They also experimented with formats. In the first ever town-hall style contest, with candidates sitting on stools surrounded on three sides by the audience, President George HW Bush was caught on camera looking at his watch while a voter asked him about the national debt.

But the highlight of the debates was that they featured three candidates — Republican Bush Sr, Democrat challenger Bill Clinton, and Reform Party nominee Ross Perot, who secured 18.9% of the popular vote, winning support from across the political spectrum.

Bush Sr's campaign believed that Perot cost the president a second term. "He got us off message. Every event that we wound ourselves in — particularly the debates with him — caused President Bush to underperform," Mary Matalin, Bush Sr's campaign

director later said.

2000: 'Know-it-all' Gore

George W Bush, the eldest son of Bush Sr, lost the popular vote to Vice President Al Gore, but won 271 votes in the electoral college, just one more than the required majority. Gore's performance in the closest US elections till date did not help.

In terms of substance, Gore did not fare too poorly. What put voters off was his demeanor. During the first debate, live mics caught Gore sighing loudly, rolling his eyes, and shaking his head in frustration as Bush spoke. During the third debate, in what was a poor attempt at intimidation, Gore walked up to his opponent's lectern as Bush spoke.

The TIME Magazine write in 2000: "Last week, George W Bush and Al Gore stood at podiums, and Gore, as befitting the furniture, gave what came across as a lecture: correcting his opponent, holding forth, sighing in exasperation at Bush's answers. The pundits and the polls agreed: Gore had won the debate. Then he lost: within a week, Bush had opened up a lead in several polls, as voters apparently decided they were tired of Professor Know-It-All."

2024: Biden appears senile

The political career of President Joe Biden effectively ended on the night of June 27, after what has been called by some of the most "embarrassing" debate performances of all time.

The 81-year-old came across as incoherent to the point of appearing senile. Biden's voice was weak, answers unintelligible, and retorts blunt, as he committed gaffe after gaffe.

"We finally beat Medicare!" he said at one point, referring to the popular national health insurance programme for the elderly that he has long championed.

THE IDEAS PAGE

The start-up nation

India must follow three Es model — education, entrepreneurship, employment — to build a robust ecosystem that can sustain economic growth



CHINTAN VAISHNAV,
SHASHANK SHAH,
ASHISH PANDEY AND
ROHIT GUPTA

IN THE LAST 10 years, the growth of the Indian economy has been fuelled by three once-in-a-generation events. One, from the government's side, the creation and roll-out of UPI expanded access to digital payments for crores of citizens. Two, from the industry side, the telecom revolution made affordable data accessible to crores. Three, the pandemic gave a huge fillip to e-commerce and startups. To sustain this growth, there is a need for solutions to create a long-term roadmap for a robust Indian economy. Integration of certain key sub-systems can play a major role.

Multilateral institutions have projected India as a "bright spot" on the global economic horizon. In 2024, India's estimated nominal GDP is \$3.9 trillion. India took 60 years after Independence to reach the \$1 trillion GDP mark. The second trillion took seven years, and the third, achieved in 2019, took five. In 2022, we surpassed the UK to become the fifth-largest economy.

India is now home to the third largest startup ecosystem with more than 1.4 lakh Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade-registered startups. It adds a greater number of startups per day than any other country and has witnessed the addition of one unicorn every 20 days over the last seven to eight years. This ecosystem has been fed by top-tier higher education institutions (HEIs) like the IITs and IIMs and those in Tier II/III cities.

The government's push towards capital expenditure coupled with telcos-led internet penetration and data accessibility has played a huge role in the development of the startup ecosystem. With one of the cheapest data rates in the world, India is home to over 80 crore internet users and 120 crore cell phone users. Every farmer added to the digital ecosystem presents an opportunity for application of new agri-based solutions, every student added for affordable e-learning, and every rural citizen for financial inclusion. For a startup, this expansion lowers the cost of acquiring customers dramatically. How can we build on this momentum to achieve the exponential growth that India envisages to become Viksit Bharat by 2047?

In 2023, India surpassed China to become the most populous country in the world. Estimates indicate that India will remain among the youngest countries till 2070. This has implications for our higher education system. Currently, over 4.3 crore students in India are enrolled in 1,168 universities and 45,473 colleges. As per AISHE reports, around 4 crore graduates join the workforce annually. This number is estimated to increase to 1.75 crore by 2035 and 2.4 crore by 2050. The rate of growth of employment opportunities based on students seeking jobs after graduation may not be adequate. With the advent of Industry 5.0 based technologies like AI and Machine



C R Sankar

Learning, Robotics and Mechatronics, the rate of recruitment for routine jobs may decrease, and the need for highly-skilled employees will rise.

Can innovation and entrepreneurship present a route through which India may amplify the rate of employment opportunities? India's startup data since 2017 presents a promising picture. DPIIT-recognised startups have created more than 15.5 lakh direct job opportunities. In 2023, these startups generated 3.9 lakh jobs, representing a 46.6 per cent year-on-year increase, and a 217.3 per cent increase over a five-year period. In the US, in 2022, nearly 37 lakh new jobs were created by its startup ecosystem. According to a 2024 CII Report, start-ups and their corporate counterparts injected an impressive \$140 billion into the Indian economy in FY23, that is, nearly 4 per cent of India's GDP. Compare this to the UK where startups annually contribute £196 billion. This amounted to 8.6 per cent of the UK's GDP in FY23. There is significant room for growth in India.

A success driver of the startup economies of the US and UK is the proportion of students opting for entrepreneurship post higher education. A 2021 global survey of 2.67 lakh undergraduate and graduate students from 58 countries revealed that around 11 per cent own and run businesses. In the US, 16 per cent of students plan to start their own businesses; about 5 per cent in the UK and 4 per cent in China choose to pursue an entrepreneurial career.

It is appropriate to benchmark ourselves with the entrepreneurship trends in leading economies. Today, as shown by the August 2024 survey of IIT Bombay graduates, in the best of Indian HEIs, less than 2 per cent of graduating students opt for entrepreneurship. What would be the impact if Indian graduates made choices like their peers in other leading economies?

If 5 per cent of Indian students opted for entrepreneurship, the country would have 5 lakh new entrepreneurs every year. Assuming a 90 per cent failure rate, nearly 50,000 startups would survive. Given the present averages, this would create 5.5 lakh direct jobs and nearly 55 lakh indirect and gig jobs annually. It would mean contributing an additional 1 per cent to the present labour force every year; or adding jobs equivalent to those created by five conglomerates of the size of the Tata group every year.

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glomerates of the size of the Tata group every year. This is a simplified perspective to convey the magnitude of the opportunities that can be created by intentionally integrating the three Es of education, entrepreneurship and employment to achieve rapid economic growth.

We need to rethink the success metrics of HEIs. A major metric for any HEI is limited to its ability to place students in high-paying jobs. To catalyse the 3E model, we need to add the creation of students- and researchers-led entrepreneurial ventures as an important metric to measure and rank HEIs. Further, achieving success in this new metric would not be possible without a systematic approach involving academia-industry linkage for nurturing, supporting, mentoring, and funding graduate, postgraduate, doctoral and faculty-level research ideas into successful ventures. The experience of leading economies indicates the potential of this linkage. Over a 20-year period, academic tech transfer in the US contributed over \$1 trillion to industry output, over half a trillion to GDP, and created over 40 lakh jobs. Inextricably linked to the success of such industry-academia osmosis is the US's global leadership in R&D expenditure at 3.4 per cent of the GDP. India's R&D investments stand at 0.7 per cent. Of this, R&D in HEIs is only about 10 per cent.

To compete with leading economies, India will need to transition from looking at higher education as a social sector, to developing it from a strategic perspective. Integrating higher education with entrepreneurship through a systematic approach in pedagogy and research, and building a robust academia-industry interface can have an impressive effect on economic growth while also creating employment. From a linear approach to growth with individual positive outcomes in education, entrepreneurship, and employment, India needs to transition to a synergistic paradigm where education, entrepreneurship and employment are integrated for achieving exponential economic growth through the Amrit Kaal.

Vaishnav is Mission Director Atal Innovation Mission (AIM), Shah is Senior Specialist, NITI Aayog, Ashish Pandey is Young Professional and Rohit Gupta is Programme Lead at AIM. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"She [Kamala Harris] should also continue to show that she takes seriously the power and responsibility of government to improve American life. Americans need and deserve a president committed to that work." — THE NEW YORK TIMES

When rich states get richer

From manufacturing to services, consumption, wealth and growth are skewed towards southern and western India. This is deepening inequalities



ISHAN BAKSHI

IN 2023-24, THE average income of a person residing in Andhra Pradesh was roughly four times that of someone in Bihar. While it is simplistic to assume that future growth rates will be exactly in line with past trends, let's assume that both states will continue to grow at the same pace they have over the past decade or so. In that case, the gap between an average person's income in the two states would only rise further — to around four-and-a-half times by the end of this decade. And Andhra has the lowest per capita income among the richer southern states.

Consider an alternate scenario. In the unlikely event that their growth trajectories reverse — Bihar grows at the pace that Andhra Pradesh has, while Andhra chugs along at the pace Bihar has — then even after 15 years of sustaining this growth trajectory, an even more unlikely event, an average person residing in Andhra would still be three times as rich as one in Bihar. The question is: is even this degree of convergence possible? And if so, what will drive Bihar's growth? Andhra and Bihar are just examples. One could replace Andhra with the other southern states, and Bihar with some of the northern, central and eastern states, but the question would still remain (Average income has been measured in terms of per capita net state domestic product at current prices).

Both policy interventions and market forces now seem to be reinforcing the manufacturing and services ecosystem in the southern and western states. Also, possibly, the underlying growth structure of the economy has led to this divergence in growth trajectories. Given this, will the chasm between the richer southern and western states and the poorer northern, central and eastern regions — where the bulk of the population resides — only get deeper? Is convergence over the medium term a possibility?

The southern region did benefit from what Paul Krugman calls historical accidents, as well as government policies and market forces. The skill-intensive IT sector emerged and is still largely concentrated in the southern states. These five states also account for 37 per cent of all factories as per the Annual Survey of Industries. Of the top 20 exporting districts in the country, all but two are located in western and southern states. The five southern states also account for 33 per cent of all formal sector employees (those contributing to EPFO). In the early '90s, these states accounted for less than a quarter of the Indian economy. By 2022-23, their share had risen to roughly a third. Comparisons with the rest of the country would be even starker when adjusted for their population. If we were to ever get the actual population numbers, and not projections, not only are these states richer, but the people living in these states are more likely to live longer, they are more likely to be bet-

ter educated, and their children are more likely to have better health.

While wages in UP and Bihar, as well as other parts of the country, may well be lower, they aren't enough of an incentive for companies to relocate. The advantages that the southern and western regions enjoy, the agglomeration effects that stem from an existing manufacturing and services base, a skilled workforce, financial networks and infrastructure, among others, have only allowed them to leverage their strengths, making them the centre of economic gravity at both the production and consumption ends of the spectrum. And the effects are visible. A significant share of the global capability centres that are being set up are located in the cities of Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Chennai, and in Mumbai and Pune. The new bursts of manufacturing activity, a consequence of policies like the production-linked incentive scheme, are also found to a larger extent in the southern and western states. Take a look at the Apple ecosystem — its contract manufacturers such as Foxconn are largely located in these regions. And of the five semiconductor projects approved by the Centre, four are in Gujarat.

Some cities like Noida and Ghaziabad benefit from their proximity to Delhi. These two cities account for 46 per cent of all formal jobs in Uttar Pradesh (those contributing to EPFO). The steady buildup of infrastructure — highways, airports — may also provide a burst of economic momentum to some parts of the state. But what happens beyond that?

The fallout from a continuing divergence in growth rates across these states will likely be along predictable lines. The impetus to migrate from poor to rich regions will only increase, especially as most of these low-income regions will witness higher population growth and fewer employment opportunities. This, in turn, implies that the pressure on the already creaking infrastructure of the few big cities in the north and the ones in the west and the south will grow further. The influx of migrants is likely to lead to even more vociferous calls for reservation, including in the private sector, from local communities in the richer regions. Similar demands may be made by various caste groups in the lower-income states because of lack of jobs.

Governments, irrespective of their ideological leanings, will respond by placing greater emphasis on populism, opting for more fiscally imprudent transfers to compensate for their inability to generate low-skilled jobs at the scale required, squeezing out allocations for more productive forms of spending. Such a growth trajectory also makes it more likely that the transfer of fiscal resources from the southern states to other parts of the country will continue.

The task of effecting structural transformation is harder than many appreciate. However, while 15 years may not be a long time in a country's history, it is a long enough period for governments to intervene to address the structural impediments to growth in the lesser developed parts of the country, especially, if the same party is in power, either directly or in alliance, at both the Centre and the state.

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RAJAN KUMAR

DEMOCRATS ARE BREATHING a sigh of relief after Kamala Harris' performance at the presidential debate in Philadelphia. She exuded confidence, communicated key messages effectively, and skillfully cornered Donald Trump on issues of abortion, the Russia-Ukraine war, and his love for global autocrats. She also managed to distance herself from President Joe Biden, thereby covering herself from the blame for the mismanagement of the economy and immigration.

In contrast, Trump stuck to his characteristic style of speaking in superlatives, clichéd one-liners, and disparaging the opponent's character. He frequently repeated his favourite slogans: Democrats are "destroying the country," "Biden was the worst president ever," and that he would "Make America Great Again." The American audience is familiar with Trump's vision and his working style. Therefore, his strategy was to treat Harris as an inheritor of Biden's poor legacy and belittle her as incompetent and unsuitable for the highest office.

However, his strategy did not work in the way it had with Biden. He did need Harris on a slowing economy, illegal immigration, border issues and failures in Afghanistan and West Asia. But she ducked those googlies by mirroring Trump's poor performance and by disassociating herself from Biden's bad legacy. In a smart move, she prepared the

Edge in the American story

Harris-Trump debate showed the depth of the political divide in the US

audience with warnings that they would likely witness a "bunch of lies" and a repeated mention of immigration from the other side. Further, she relied on Trumpian language in characterising her rival as a leader who created the "worst unemployment in history," provoked the "worst attack on democracy," recorded the "worst management of the pandemic" and "left a terrible trade deficit. Trump, on his part, failed to appear convincing when he was confronted with questions on Obamacare, his love for autocrats, disregard for the rule of law and intolerance for other races. In terms of style and manner, he appeared repetitive, exhausted, and angry and upset.

The presidential debate has become a defining feature of the American electoral process. It draws widespread media attention, and the stakes are high for the contestants. Biden's disastrous performance in the last presidential debate in June led to his exit, paving the way for Harris. However, the real impact of the debate on voting behaviour is not precisely known. For instance, Hillary Clinton won the debate against Trump in 2016 but lost the final election. Nonetheless, these play a vital role in building leaders' reputations, boosting their images, and potentially swaying undecided voters. Exciting moments of debates such as gaffes, awkward gestures or humorous retorts resonate

for years in media bytes. The Harris-Trump debate created much buzz because the contestants presented two contrasting narratives of the US political spectrum. Trump represents the conservative, White, rich, macho and cocky America. He has cultivated a hyper-masculine persona, frequently boasting about flouting rules and sexual escapades. Trump supporters believe that American society is degenerating because of the toxic influence of "wokes", liberalism and feminism. Therefore, Trump is on a mission to restore the American pre-eminence of the late 20th century, not realising that the world is now multipolar. His embrace of religious conservatism, racial supremacy and political populism will make things worse for America in the coming years.

In contrast, Harris stands for the ultra-liberal, non-White, working-class, feminine and rule-bound America. As a prosecutor, her inclination is to work within the legal framework and uphold the rule of law. Her modest background influences her worldview, and she has gained popularity among the youth, women, immigrants and educated voters. If not the winner, the debate has established her as a person who can confront a demagogue and navigate a tense and chaotic environment. Whether she defeats him in the elections remains to be seen, but she suc-

ceeded in measuring up to Trump in this race. On the issue of US foreign policy, Harris will continue with the policies of the Biden administration. She will prioritise Europe, support Ukraine through NATO, and follow the policy of cooperation and competition with China. Her views on Palestine, laid out clearly in the debate, are different from those of President Biden's. She favours the two-state solution and is vocal about the protection of Palestinian lives from Israeli attacks. Trump, on the other hand, unabashedly uses lines that incite Israel and blames the Biden administration for the Israel-Hamas war. Similarly, he holds Biden and his team responsible for the Russia-Ukraine war, which, according to him, may escalate into a world war. He pledges to end the Russia-Ukraine conflict within 24 hours of his presidency by withdrawing support for Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Finally, Washington's strong ties with New Delhi will persist in the hands of the new incumbent in the White House. While Trump will remain transactional in his dealings with New Delhi, Harris will prioritise US national interests and her commitment to liberal values over any familial lineage.

The writer teaches at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NOT LESSER THAN

THIS REFERS TO the article, "The books our children need" (IE, September 10). We were heartened to see Yogendra Yadav write so wonderfully about children's literature, and found ourselves nodding in agreement. There has been an evident improvement in quality and range of books in India. But there is a need for more to be done to turn the "gains into a much-needed cultural movement". It's critical that children's literature gets centrestage in our collective mindset and in the media. One point — the need to have "established writers write books for children" — really struck us. Writing books for children, as Yadav pointed out, is not simplistic or lesser than. Children's book makers spend decades on our craft, our editors and art directors are specialised, and writing and illustration are hard-earned skills.

Menaka Raman and Bijal Vachharajani, via email

A POET'S PROPHECY

THIS REFERS TO the article, "A poet of his time" — and in India. (IE, September 11). It is a fact that Gajanan Madhav Muktibodhi, the great poet and Marxist critic in the Hindi literary world did not get the recognition he deserved. One of the reasons was that there was nobody to carry his legacy forward in the space. Second, his writings were not easy to

understand and connect with contemporary social realities. It could certainly be more difficult for non-Hindi speaking people. One of his best criticisms was that of Kamayani by Jaishankar Prasad, an allegorical poem which depicted the complex interplay of human emotions and actions based on the culture and philosophy of India. He foretold that the future of the new culture would be at the hands of the lower class, and the rise of social justice politics testifies his prophecy.

L R Murmu, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the article, "A poet of his time" — and ours (IE, September 11). Apart from being a leading light of Pragayad, Nayi Kahani and Nayi Kavita movements of Hindi literature, Muktibodhi was a poet of the masses who spoke out against exploitation and for human dignity. He was a tireless crusader who fought tooth and nail against the forces of communalism, casteism and fascism, making him relevant to today's India. Belonging to a Maratha family settled in Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh, he breathed in an air where literature and idealism were highly valued. He got his baptism in writing at home. He distinguished himself as a wordsmith par excellence. Of all his extensive body of works, Chand Ka Muth Tedha Hai, endearing him to a wide Hindi audience, was hailed as a modern classic. His literary legacy continues to inspire many.

SH Quadri, Bikaner