



Good, but not enough

Free health coverage to all over 70 years is good, but more needs to be done

In a welcome move, the Union government's decision to extend the coverage of Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB PM-JAY) to senior citizens over 70 years, irrespective of their income, provides a modicum of free health coverage to nearly 60 million people. With out-of-pocket expenditure for health care in India among the highest in the world, the decision is indeed laudable. While the decision to provide free health coverage up to ₹2.5 million per year for a section of the population is noble, it will in no way fulfil the public health objectives that are much needed for the targeted beneficiaries. First and foremost, the health assurance scheme is limited to secondary and tertiary care hospitalisation. The absence of coverage for outpatient care, diagnostics and medicines is particularly concerning as chronic diseases have increased sharply in India in the last few decades. Increased life expectancy and an early onset of these diseases would mean that people over 70 may very often suffer from multiple chronic diseases. Most of the health-care expenditure by the elderly will, therefore, be through outpatient care (40%-80%), which will not be covered by the scheme. Since its launch in 2018, the penetration of PM-JAY into smaller cities and towns has been low in most States. Unlike in most of the southern States, primary and secondary health care in the public sector has been largely neglected and is inadequate and ill equipped to meet the demand in other parts. Robust primary and secondary public health care will sharply cut the load on tertiary health care and hence the need for curative care; a reduced curative care load at tertiary hospitals will make the PM-JAY scheme succeed.

Thailand focused and progressively strengthened its primary health-care system, and even diverted funds earmarked for urban hospitals to build rural hospitals and health centres to attain universal health coverage. In contrast, in the U.S., banking primarily on insurance-based schemes is what led to the surging costs of health care. India appears to be going the U.S. way. Though there is waning enthusiasm in the private sector due to low treatment rates and delayed payment, as per media reports, since its launch, two-thirds of the total money spent each year under the PM-JAY scheme went to private hospitals; it was 53% in the case of the southern States. Weakened primary and secondary health care will result in an overload in tertiary health care, which the private players will be well poised to take advantage of. This can lead to a further shrinking of the government's commitment to strengthen the public health-care system by over-relying on the insurance modality which is neither affordable nor will provide appropriate health care for the needy. In its present form, PM-JAY is a measure that is essential, but is incomplete.

Street power

The Kolkata protest must keep its focus and not be a free-for-all

It has been a tumultuous month in Kolkata with junior doctors and civil society leading protests against the brutal rape and murder of a woman doctor on duty on August 9. The rallying cry, "We demand justice", is being heard loud and clear by everyone, from the State administration right up to the Supreme Court. Doctors have defied the Court's appeal to return to work, and had set conditions to hold talks with the State administration, including an assurance that the meeting is centred around their five key demands and is televised. The Mamata Banerjee government rejected the pre-conditions, and urged the doctors to return to work. The breakdown of trust between the two sides is proving to be counter-productive. The doctors want the culprits identified and punished; disciplinary action against R.G. Kar's former principal, Sandip Ghosh, who is in custody; resignation of Kolkata Police Commissioner Vineet Goyal; increased security for health workers; and an end to the "threat culture" in hospitals and medical colleges across West Bengal. As protests continue, the list of wants has expanded, and includes a call for an overhaul of the government health departments, which have not been functioning at their best.

The State government has taken several steps for the protection of health workers, such as launching an initiative, 'Rattir Shaadi' (helps of the night). But these will not help stem the rot and are seen as tokenism at best. That the Court had to direct the State administration to provide separate duty rooms, toilets and install CCTVs indicates that the health infrastructure is creaking. The government needs to do more to break the logjam. The doctors and students too must take the movement for justice to another level. They can resort to relay strikes, thus ensuring that a majority can return to work. In the quest for justice, doctors cannot end up being unjust to a large section of the people dependent on government hospital care. West Bengal is a poor State and when a government hospital under-performs, it affects the vulnerable the most. The government has said over six lakh patients have been turned away from government hospitals this month. Doctors refute the number, saying they are holding telemedicine services and 'Abhaya Clinics' on Sundays; and that senior doctors are working harder to ensure that work goes on. With the festival season around the corner, which is the chief source of revenue for a large number of people, the onus is on the government and the doctors to resolve the crisis at the earliest.

The Supreme Court of India has invited suggestions from the parties concerned to frame appropriate pan-India guidelines on extra-legal demolitions. The order comes in the wake of multiple instances of demolitions where the houses and building establishments of persons accused of certain crimes have been razed without following due process. These demolitions have become commonplace over the last few years, targeting vulnerable groups and often leaving them without any legal recourse.

This selective, yet arbitrary, state action has rendered the right to housing meaningless since evictions are brazenly carried out by local authorities, often at odd hours, without any alternative facility or engagement for rehabilitation. The inequality, social conflict and segregation that follow such action run the risk of intensifying the marginalisation of certain communities and go against the spirit of the Constitution and due process enshrined in criminal procedure laws.

In light of overarching principles of human rights, constitutional values and social justice, there is a strong need to formulate guidelines and re-imagine the existing legal framework which bestows unbridled executive power on municipal authorities to order and execute such demolitions.

The legality of punitive demolitions

Large-scale demolition drives as a means of collective punishment for rioters are becoming rampant. What started with bulldozer action in Delhi's Jahangirpuri has now spilled over to different parts of the country. The violence that ensued in Nuh, Haryana, due to a clash between two religious groups in 2023, ended with the local administration demolishing a number of homes in the neighbourhood.

Communal riots in Madhya Pradesh's Khargone also resulted in the demolition of houses and businesses owned by Muslims who were deemed to be 'alleged rioters'. Quick instinctive action against those perceived to be at odds with the law has emerged as a dangerous pattern of state-driven oppression. In each of these cases, the demolition is justified under municipal laws either on account of action against encroachment or under the pretext of unauthorised construction. The due process envisaged under various judgments of the Supreme Court and High Courts, including *Sudama Singh & Ors vs Government of Delhi and Ajoy Masken & Ors vs Union of India* are completely bypassed.

This 'tough on crime' or 'eye for an eye' approach has escalated to become a political brand for several State governments. Treating demolitions as a fair response to the destruction of public infrastructure undermines existing processes envisaged under criminal laws and



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The threat in extra-legal demolitions carried out across different parts of India is a lack of due process and a blatant disregard for directives issued by the judiciary in the past

constitutes a gross violation of fundamental rights. In the course of devising guidelines for such extra-legal demolitions, the Supreme Court must impose a complete moratorium on the punitive demolition of establishments. In other legitimate instances of demolition, the guidelines should prescribe a strict tripartite procedure to ensure that those at the receiving end are not rendered helpless without any recourse.

Due process in legitimate demolitions

The issue of displacement of persons for varied reasons has for long been a cause of concern. While the United Nations Basic Principles and Guidelines on Development-based Evictions and Displacement, 2019, prescribe directives to address this issue from a humanitarian perspective, multiple court cases in the higher judiciary have dealt with demolition issues in a piecemeal manner over the years. Albeit helpful, these scattered efforts to address the issue have culminated in a myopic view of the problem, leading to temporary solutions. The current task of the Supreme Court – i.e., formulating pan-India guidelines – must look at the issue through a multidimensional lens.

The cardinal rule is that demolitions must be carried out only in exceptional circumstances, and according to the due process established under law. The law must then accurately classify not only the types of buildings or constructions that can be brought down by state actions but also the surrounding circumstances that need to be assessed before any action is taken. The assessment of the surrounding circumstances must strike a balance between state action and the right to adequate housing and resettlement while bearing in mind that such violations have come to be systemic. There is also a need to analyse data on demolitions that have taken place over the last few years to identify clear patterns and better understand the existing gaps and deficiencies in the process.

Once broader subject-matter-based issues have been addressed, an analysis should be done for procedural steps that can be incorporated into the relevant legislation and rules. The procedural guidelines should be structured in a phased manner, to add multiple checkboxes at each stage which need to be ticked before any adverse or irreversible step is taken.

In the first phase, i.e., pre-demolition, the burden of proof to show cause should be shifted from the affected person and placed on the authority to show why no other option other than demolition and displacement of affected persons is needed for public good and how the relevant human rights are being protected in the process. A reasoned notice for demolition, including information about land records and resettlement plans, should be widely publicised, giving ample time for those concerned to analyse the situation, seek legal advice and respond to the show-cause

notice. An independent committee, appointed by the State government, including judicial and civil society representatives, should review the proposed demolition (particularly when a large number of houses in a neighbourhood are proposed to be demolished) and provide technical assistance to the affected parties about their rights and options. Affected persons must be engaged in discussions about alternative housing options and compensation. During this phase, the needs of vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, and disabled persons should be addressed. A minimum period of a month should be provided between the intimation of notice to demolish and its execution, allowing affected individuals time to retrieve their belongings.

In the second phase, i.e., during the demolition, the use of physical force should be minimised in the eviction process and the use of heavy machinery such as bulldozers should be avoided. There should be a requirement for the presence of government officials who are not a part of the authority demolishing the construction. The time for the demolition should be pre-decided and surprise demolitions should be cause for punitive action against the authority.

As a part of the third phase, i.e., rehabilitation, adequate and proper temporary or permanent rehabilitation should be provided to the persons concerned to ensure that they are not left homeless. A speedy grievance redress mechanism needs to be established under every law that allows for demolition to afford the affected persons a chance to challenge the decisions that may have been taken at any stage. Remedies such as compensation, restitutions and return to the original home must be carved out within the law.

Affixing personal liability

While the demolitions carried out across different parts of India reflect varied patterns, the golden thread that runs through all such instances is the lack of due process and blatant disregard for directives issued by the judiciary in the past. Municipal laws, which empower authorities to carry out such demolitions, usually provide complete impunity to officials under the 'good faith' clauses housed under such laws. Such clauses prevent the initiation of judicial action against those who unscrupulously carry out demolitions. While laying down pan-India guidelines is most definitely a welcome step, sensitisation of law enforcement personnel to follow existing directives on the subject matter is the need of the hour. Simultaneously, avenues to affix personal liability on those who order such forced evictions and demolitions should be explored to ensure that there are checks and balances in the powers wielded by officials.

The views expressed are personal

Health care using AI is bold, but much caution first

News about the possibility of a "free AI powered primary-care physician for every Indian, available 24/7" within the next five years is ambitious. It raises critical questions about feasibility, sustainability, and the readiness of India to tackle such enormous undertakings. Primary health care (PHC) ensures the right to the highest attainable level of health by bringing integrated services closer to communities. It addresses health needs, tackles broader health determinants through multisectoral action, and empowers individuals to manage their health. We risk undermining this fundamental aspect of PHC by relying on Artificial Intelligence (AI) as it is impersonal, making people passive recipients of care rather than active participants.

AI excels in processing and automating repetitive tasks but lacks characteristics of human intelligence such as understanding the physical world, retrieving complex information, maintaining persistent memory, and engaging in reasoning and planning. These are all fundamental to medicine, where understanding the nuances of a patient's condition goes beyond pattern recognition.

Delivering health care demands a human-centric approach of empathy and cultural understanding. Consciousness – the awareness and understanding of the real-world environment – underpins human decision-making, distinguishing human intelligence from AI. AI cannot replicate the moral and ethical reasoning that comes from conscious experience. Unlike other domains, health-care data is scattered, incomplete and often inaccessible for AI training, making it difficult to train a model.

Data, models and issues

Naegele's rule from obstetrics, which has been in use for over 200 years, can be used to highlight the challenges in health care. It is based on 18th century reproductive habits of European women, which may not be applicable today. This method is used to predict the birth date of a child during pregnancy. It relies solely on the length of the last menstrual cycle and has a 4% accuracy. It fails to account for critical factors such as maternal age, parity, nutrition, height, race, and uterus type,



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India cannot jump into AI-driven health care without first addressing the foundational issues within its health system

which are essential for accurate prediction. Developing a better predictive model than Naegele's rule requires vast amounts of personal data, which belong rightfully to patients. This illustrates the inherent paradox in AI development in health care – the need for extensive data collection to improve accuracy is at odds with privacy and ethical concerns.

The costs involved in establishing infrastructure to capture, collect, and train this data are substantial. As reproductive health and fertility rates change over time, constant fine-tuning of AI models is necessary, leading to recurring expenses. Health-care data is complex and personal, making it difficult to standardise it across populations.

India's diversity complicates the issue further. This diversity means that data for AI models must be extensive and deeply contextualised, but generating such data requires access to personal and behavioural information.

AI's utility in health care

AI can play a crucial role in specific, well-defined tasks within health care, particularly through narrow intelligence, diffusion models and transformers. Narrow intelligence focuses on specialised tasks such as predicting hospital kitchen supply needs, managing biomedical waste, or optimising drug procurement. Diffusion models, which are adept at predicting patterns from complex datasets, can help screen histopathology slides or screen only a subset of the population using medical images.

Large Language Models (LLMs) and Large Multimodal Models (LMMs) are emerging as powerful tools in medical education and research writing. These can provide rapid access to medical knowledge, simulate patient interactions, and support the training of health-care professionals. By offering personalised learning experiences and simulating complex clinical scenarios, LLMs and LMMs can complement traditional medical education.

A significant issue with AI in health care is the "black box" problem, where the decision-making processes of AI algorithms are not transparent or easily understood. This poses risks in health care,

where understanding the rationale behind a diagnosis or treatment plan is critical. Health-care providers are left in the dark about how certain conclusions are reached, leading to a lack of trust and potential harm if the AI makes an incorrect or inappropriate recommendation.

Google DeepMind's AI mysterious algorithm defeating world-class players in the Go game (board game) can be celebrated. While such feats are acceptable for games, they raise concerns in real-life health-care decisions. The stakes are serious in human health, where the consequences of a mistake can be life-threatening.

India and the issue of AI governance

A recent petition in the Kenyan Parliament by content moderators against OpenAI's ChatGPT has highlighted the ethical complexities in AI development, revealing the exploitation of underpaid workers in training AI models. This raises concerns about the exploitation of vulnerable populations in AI training. It underscores the importance of safeguarding the interests of Indian patients because the data required to train the model legally belong to patients.

While population-level data generated by health systems can be useful, it is prone to ecological fallacy. India lacks comprehensive regulation or legislation addressing AI such as the European Union Artificial Intelligence Act, making it all the more critical. AI tools in health care must be developed and deployed with the core medical ethics of "Do No Harm".

AI-powered health care in India promises increased efficiency and reduced error rates. Advanced AI technologies require significant investments in research, data infrastructure, and continuous updates – costs that someone must bear. India cannot leapfrog into AI-driven health care without first addressing the foundational issues in its health system. The complexities of patient care, the need for high-quality data, and the ethical implications of AI demand a more measured approach.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Eye drops and 'claim'

The rescinding of the nod given to a pharmaceutical firm in Mumbai to produce and supply 'eye drops', which it claims would obviate the necessity of

using reading glasses, raises eyebrows (Page 1, "Drugs body recalls nod for eye drops over 'false' claims," September 12). The move by the Central Drugs Standard Control

Organisation establishes the fact that the permission seems to have been given in haste. It owes the public a thorough explanation. **C.V. Aravind,** Bengaluru

Sitaram Yechury

In the passing of Sitaram Yechury, India has lost a tall political leader. From a brilliant academic career to a political career spanning decades, he

epitomised the fundamental essence of communism. His speeches in Parliament shall go down as memorable events. As a student I did get an

opportunity to listen to one of his speeches at Palayam junction in then Trivandrum and the views he expressed still ring in my ears. **Dr. Biju C. Mathew,** Thiruvananthapuram

Is it time for India to introduce a Universal Basic Income?



Arun Kumar

Retired professor of economics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. He was Malcom Adisheshiah Chair Professor at the Institute of Social Sciences

PARLEY

Due to the phenomenon of jobless growth, i.e., the rise in output and labour productivity without the commensurate growth in employment generation, several countries have mooted the idea of a universal basic income (UBI). This idea has gained traction, especially since the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s most recent World Employment and Social Outlook links the decrease in jobs growth and the increase in inequality to a surge in automation and the use of artificial intelligence (AI). Among the several suggestions on the ways to address this is a UBI. Is it time for India to introduce a UBI? N.R. Bhanumurthy and Arun Kumar discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Kunal Shankar. Edited excerpts:

Professor Bhanumurthy, the ILO says 83% of the unemployed population in India are the youth. Given this grim scenario, it is time to introduce a UBI?

N.R. Bhanumurthy: We must understand the concept of UBI. It is universal and covers the basic needs of the people. In India, we actually have different forms of UBI. Perhaps we can call this a semi-UBI. In the last few years, various versions of a UBI have been implemented in India, such as cash transfer schemes for farmers and women. Many States have begun cash transfers even for unemployed youth. A type of basic income support need not be universal. So, in that context, I am not sure whether we can implement the pure concept of a UBI in India.

I think proponents of UBI make a distinction between social safety nets like the ones you point out and a basic income regardless of employment status. Professor Arun Kumar, your response?

Arun Kumar: People have been talking about UBI since 2015. There are several factors responsible for this, but primarily, it is the lack of demand in the market. Demand contraction stunts growth. There is unemployment and because of it, people don't have adequate incomes. As a result, demand in the market contracts and the rate of growth begins to decline.

So, how do we generate demand? How do we generate incomes in the hands of people who don't have employment? That is where the idea of a UBI comes in, I think. I agree with Bharu that goods or money is being given by the state to the people. That is semi-UBI. And that is where the problem lies. In capitalist philosophy, you pay for work done. You don't pay for work



Construction workers in Bengaluru. MURALI KUMAR K.

not done. So, in a sense, it is a failure of the capitalist system that it is unable to generate enough employment and incomes.

In the 1980s, the World Bank had warned that several Indians would fall behind and suggested the creation of safety nets. This was tried in the mid-2000s in India with the right to employment, food, education, and so on. But the problem is, if you give money for no work, that doesn't give the person dignity. So, providing work is essential. Otherwise it will lead to alienation in society, because those who have incomes and those who don't will be divided and those who don't have incomes will be labelled as 'good for nothing'. There will also be political and social implications. So, I think we must generate enough employment. We can do this provided our policies are structured right.

The ILO report suggests that the reasons for slow growth in jobs creation lie in the surge in digital industries where the assembly line is not the shop floor, but software and applications, and the use of technologies such as AI. India's Finance Minister and the Chief Economic Adviser have emphasised that private industry should invest more in labour-intensive sectors. Is that really enough to generate the kind of mass employment required in India?

AK: The government needs to do more. If you look at the Budget, capital investment has gone up, but it is going into capital-intensive sectors. There have been cuts in real terms in labour-intensive sectors such as education and health and in the rural employment guarantee



We need to focus more on universal basic social safety nets. We are not there. Social safety nets are very skewed between States or even within States. So, I suggest that both the Central and State governments focus more on social safety net universalisation.

N.R. BHANUMURTHY

scheme, which generates a lot of employment. We have similar problems in rural development and agriculture. So, the government has to be more sensitive to generating employment by focusing on employment-generating sectors. The capital items that are being funded include the railway freight corridor, highway projects, and the power sector. These do not give much direct employment. Earlier projects in construction would generate employment, but now people work with bulldozers and cranes, employing 10 people instead of hundreds. So, while the efficiency of construction may go up, employment generation doesn't take place.

You pointed out the ILO report. There is not only AI but a lot of automation taking place. Think about the banking sector, for instance. Its work has expanded enormously, but the staff strength has been cut to half because we don't need to go into the bank branch any longer. We can do all our banking work on our laptops and mobile phones.

If we look at the trade sector, too, which is the second biggest employer after agriculture in India, e-commerce has been growing exponentially in the last few years at the expense of neighbourhood stores.

Twenty years ago, people talked about jobless growth. Now, they talk about job-loss growth. People who are getting displaced are unable to find work elsewhere, so they have to generate work for themselves. And that is why there has been a growth in the self-employment sector at very low income levels.

The phenomenon that you just called as job-loss growth is what the proponents of UBI point to. Professor Bhanumurthy, your response?

NRB: As Professor Arun Kumar mentioned, the issue of unemployment in the recent period is a very serious issue, not only in Indian context, but globally. The government came up with the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana to provide housing. This will have a huge impact on the overall social safety net at the rural level. In fact, my study has shown that the rural housing scheme has had a huge multiplier impact on employment

opportunities not only directly but indirectly as well, seen in the rise in demand for core sectors such as steel, cement, and electrical components. I think the government was very clear that its policies would focus more on providing employment opportunities in addition to growth. So, it is aware of this issue.

Where I don't agree with Professor Arun Kumar is yes, there is uneven distribution of incomes because of the kind of growth he described, but there has been growth in wages, though this is much smaller than the growth in profits. That is what the Economic Survey graph suggests. So, in that sense, some of us have been suggesting a re-look at the production-linked incentives schemes that the government announced that is being given for some parts of the manufacturing sector post-COVID-19.

In terms of AI leading to job loss... I don't think the ILO says there is job-loss growth or jobless growth. I think what it says is that going forward, there could be an impact on employment opportunities because of this. I am sure the labour market will adjust to those innovations. Right now, I think there is a mismatch between the skills demanded and the skills supplied.

Right, so you're suggesting an intervention in education to upgrade skills. Even so, jobs created in the fourth industrial revolution, to use Klaus Schwab's phrase, are either extremely well paying, or highly precarious, like gig work, leading to massive income inequality. Do we not need a UBI to bridge this gap?

NRB: Well, I think we need to be clear about whether India is ready for UBI. In my opinion, we need to focus more on universal basic social safety nets. We are not there. Social safety nets are very skewed between States or even within States. So, I suggest that the Central and State governments focus more on social safety net universalisation.

AK: If the government raises more funds from direct taxes, it is possible to bridge this gap, because our direct tax to GDP ratio is only about 6.25%. Many developed countries have a much higher percentage. While we cannot compete with the developed countries, we can raise the direct tax to GDP ratio marginally at least. It is not that we can't do it, it is a question of the political will to do it.



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NOTEBOOK

Idyllic village, archaeological wonder, cesspool of inequality

A place can be many things at the same time

M. Kalyanaraman

My parents were raised in a village, so during my summer vacations, I would visit my ancestral village in the then undivided Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu. In the eyes of a schoolboy from Chennai, Karungulam village, with its lush green fields of paddy and bananas, fresh air, and simple folk, was a peaceful retreat by the Tamirabarani river. That perception did not change much even after I became a journalist.

Many years later, when Tamil Nadu was gripped by drought and all the rivers barring Tamirabarani were bone dry, I sought to go to the pristine origins of Tamirabarani and describe it as it flowed. My local contact took me to the Kani tribes folk inside the Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve. But the medicine man of the village who said he knew the place of origin refused to take me there since the monsoon had started. It was too dangerous a climb, he said. The story ended up being about the rest of the river. The saving of tigers had led to the forest being saved and, in turn, the river too.

My contact asked me where my ancestors came from. I said it was a village by the same river but there was nothing noteworthy about it. He asked me the name. When I said Karungulam, his eyes rolled up in a sign of contempt for me, the ignorant city slicker. He said it was perhaps the most important archaeological site in the State, likely more significant than Keeszhi that had made a splash in the media.

Called Adichanallur and with only a small, rusted Archaeological Survey of India signboard as a marker at that time, it had been excavated multiple times over more than 100 years. Carbon dating has since then proved that the Adichanallur site, which falls in Karungulam panchayat, is 3,000 years old.

Besides being an archaeological wonder, Adichanallur had figured in global scholarly discussions when the origins of

humanity were unresolved. Until the out-of-Africa thesis was proved, anthropologists in many countries felt that the skeletons dug up at Adichanallur could be that of the earliest of civilised human beings. The picture postcard village had been the site of an ancient civilisation, I realised.

During my visits to report for the two stories, I stayed at a room in a lodge in Karungulam since my ancestral house had become too old and was falling apart. A few months later, the same lodge amidst paddy fields flashed in front of my eyes in a darkened cinema hall in Chennai. It had become the location for a scene in the movie, *Pariyerum Perumal*. Some upper caste men sought to put a lower caste youth in his place by urinating upon him in that room.

Last year, during a visit to Karungulam, a villager told me that Mari Selvaraj, the director of *Pariyerum Perumal*, was shooting another film based on an accident that had happened many decades ago. A truck carrying the people of Puliyanallur, another village in Karungulam panchayat where Selvaraj was born and raised, had turned turtle and many had died, he said.

Newspapers had covered that tragedy in much detail. Going beyond the news, Selvaraj's *Vazhai* says the banana pickers of Puliyanallur had demanded double wages, which they got. Unwilling to cut down his profits, the contractor cut back on their transportation and was ferrying them, not in empty trucks but ones loaded with bananas.

On a fateful night, tragedy struck the overloaded truck. *Vazhai* portrays the accident as a climactic culmination of poverty and desperation that lies behind the apparent beauty of rural life.

From a simple idyllic village, Karungulam had become an archaeological wonder and later, a cesspool of inequality. But it was always all the three, and perhaps more.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Saving others, but first saving themselves



The staff of VPS Lakeshore Hospital in Kochi attend a karate training session at the premises of the hospital on Thursday. The hospital is offering training in martial arts to all its staff members to ensure their safety at the workplace in the wake of the rape and murder of a trainee doctor in Kolkata. More than 100 women are expected to take part in the training sessions. THULASI KAKKAT

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 13, 1974

Acute scarcity in seven Bengal districts

Calcutta, Sept. 12: Seven out of West Bengal's 16 districts are now undergoing conditions of distress which are said to be the worst since the notorious war-time Bengal famine of 1943. These seven districts cover more than 45,000 square kilometres out of the State's total area

of 87,600 square kilometres. The afflicted people of these districts number about 16 millions out of the State's population of 44 millions.

The affected districts are: Bankura, Midnapore, Purulia, Malda, West Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, and Cooch Behar. The worst hit are the three western districts of Midnapore, Bankura and Purulia.

Midnapore is the third biggest district in the country with more than 35 lakh population, and an area of nearly 14,000 square kilometres.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPT. 13, 1924

New hospital for Rangoon

Rangoon, Sept. 12: H.E. the Governor laid this evening the foundation stone of the new Dufferin Hospital, Rangoon. In doing so His Excellency said that to-day would mark an epoch in the history of Burma.

The old Hospital which had done useful essential work at great creditable voluntary effort was not equal to the demands upon the institution.

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A fortnightly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate



C R Sasikumar

Images of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud praying together have become controversial. Do they breach a line or is it just much ado?

It's personal, not political

Criticism of PM-CJI practising their faith together shows little understanding of Indian traditions — democratic, religious, cultural



BHUPENDER YADAV

NEW BEGINNINGS In life accompany hopes of positivity. In the Indian religious-cultural milieu, people offer prayers to Ganapati before they start new ventures, acquire new possessions, or embark on new journeys. Ganesh Chaturthi, or Vinayaka Chavithi, is celebrated with great gusto from the north to the south of India. It is as much a celebration of India in all its colours, as it is of faith itself.

Festivities are also occasions of coming together. They are opportunities to pray, eat and bond. A controversy over who celebrates the festival with whom is as unfortunate as it is frivolous.

Images of the prime minister of the world's largest democracy celebrating a festival with the chief justice of a country where the judiciary is not just respected, but also revered, sent out a message of positivity and bonding. PM Narendra Modi and CJI DY Chandrachud, two men who carry the expectations of 140 crore Indians to create a progressive, just society with an inclusive growth trajectory, partaking in Ganesh Pooja at the CJI's residence offered visuals that symbolise secularism in its truest nature. The visuals reflected the health of Indian institutions that don't work at cross-purposes, rather together, for one goal — taking India ahead.

The fact that the prime minister himself posted this video in the public domain demonstrates the kind of transparency, ethics and propriety followed by these two constitutional authorities steering India. It is the sinister which is hidden. It is the pure which is shared. The video was shared in the same spirit.

There are many who upon seeing the visuals waxed eloquent about how the CJI and his family welcoming the Prime Minister of India at their house and praying together spell trouble for Indian democratic traditions. Truth be told, these people have little knowledge or understanding of Indian traditions — democratic, religious, cultural or otherwise.

In one of his interactions, the late jurist, Fali Nariman, mentioned how former Bombay High Court Chief Justice MC Chagla and then Chief Minister Morarji Desai used to meet once a month over tea to discuss any issues they may have had.

Nobody objected to it. Even then CJI Balakrishnan attended an Iftar party hosted by former PM and Congress leader Manmohan Singh. Such examples are a dime a dozen. No hullabaloo broke out because decency in politics, which the BJP practised even as the principal Opposition, respected the fine line between the personal and political.

Institutional and personal interaction between the members of judiciary and executive is not alien to Indian democracy. In fact, this is essential for healthier functioning of democracy.

Councils who represent their clients before learned judges also socialise together. No motive is ascribed to the moments the two sides share on a personal level. Political opponents also come together both in hours of happiness and grief. To corner the PM and the CJI over their personal choice to come together for a pooja reflects petty politics and a deliberate will to paint Indian institutions as compromised. This has been an ongoing project of the Opposition.

The Indian government and the CJI have had differing views on more issues than one in the judicial arena. Both have heard out each other's views in keeping with the highest judicial practices of the country. In many cases, the government has been questioned. The same people casting aspersions on the motive of the "PM-CJI meet" had hailed the courts then. The government, on its part, has spelt out its views cogently before the Hon'ble Court in all such matters. Both sides have shown integrity and decency in handling such matters in furtherance of Indian traditions where ways to the most complex issues are found through discussions and debates, but not confrontations.

In the same spirit, the PM-CJI chose to practise their faith together. It is unfortunate that the incident is being used for politics. The precedent can be rather dangerous. Constantly trying to create doubts in the minds of the people with regards to the institutions that govern them is a dog-whistle for anarchy.

Personal life of judges or the head of government should not be used as a tool to cast aspersions on their competence or integrity.

Coming together is characteristic of Indian festivals. Even foreign leaders pose for photos and videos merrily on festivals like Holi and Diwali. This sharing is our strength. Let us celebrate this strength in the spirit it deserves. Politics can wait!

Bhupender Yadav is Union Cabinet Minister for Environment, Forest & Climate Change



INDIRA JAISING

THE CHIEF JUSTICE of India (CJI) and the judges of the Supreme Court (SC) on appointment, take an oath of office to the effect that they will bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India, and that they will duly and faithfully, perform their duties without fear or favour, affection or ill-will, and that they will uphold the Constitution and the law.

Photographs tweeted by the Prime Minister, show him at a Ganesh puja with CJI DY Chandrachud and his spouse. It is clear that the PM was an invited guest. This raises several questions. Primary amongst them is whether the CJI has been true to his oath of office.

The SC has held that secularism is a basic feature of the Constitution. Quoting Upendra Basu, the Supreme Court in *S R Bommai v Union of India* (1994), held that "secularism" in the Constitution connotes that "the state by itself, shall not espouse or establish or practise any religion." The Court, in the same judgment, also held that "every individual person will have, in that order, an equal right to freedom of conscience and religion".

Nobody can question the right of the CJI and the PM to enjoy the freedom of conscience and religion privately. The question, however, is whether the public display of their faith breaches their respective oaths of office. The answer, undoubtedly, is in the affirmative.

This is the first known case in India's judicial history, where a sitting CJI has invited a sitting PM to a public display of religiosity, with videographers and photographers to ensure that the event is made public. The CJI is in a saffron kurta while the PM is wearing a Maharashtrian topi (cap). One must also remember that the CJI has heard, and is due to hear shortly, the case relating to the disqualification of legislators from Maharashtra and the use of party symbols by the two factions of the Shiv Sena.

This is not the first time that we have seen this kind of display, but we let each instance pass, creating a new normal. In January, the CJI visited the Dwarkadhish Temple in Gujarat, and urged district

court lawyers to function in a manner that the "dhawaja of justice" keeps flying. "Dhawaja" is a Hindu symbol so how does this square with secularism and his oath of office?

The puja, in public view, by two constitutional functionaries raises the question of whether religion is being infused into the judiciary. India is a multi-faith society, so how does the public display of one religion by constitutional functionaries comply with their oath of office? In *S R Bommai*, the SC observed that "the Constitution does not recognise, it does not permit, mixing religion and State power. Both must be kept apart."

Assuming that this puja was constitutionally permissible, why invite the PM only? Why was the head of state, the President, not invited? Why were the CJI's brother and sister judges and the Leader of the Opposition not invited? As Supreme Court Bar Association President Kapil Sibal points out, there have been Maharashtrian judges before (including the CJI's illustrious father) who have never invited a PM to their residence for a Ganesh puja.

This brings us to the separation of powers between executive and judiciary. Montesquieu wrote, "...there is no liberty if the powers of judging are not separated from the legislative and executive." Justice must after all, not only be done, but also be seen to be done. This continues to be the law of the land. For the sake of institutional sanctity, the CJI needs to answer the following questions.

One, at whose invitation did the PM go to the CJI's residence? Two, why were other constitutional functionaries not present? Were they invited? Three, in the two-year tenure of the CJI, how many times has he met the PM for social and/or religious functions in private? Four, why was a private religious ritual used for a photo-op?

Five, was the symbolism of the Maharashtra topi lost on the CJI given that the Maharashtra elections are coming up? Six, given this overt display of Hindu symbols, hymns and rituals, can non-Hindu litigants expect impartial justice from the CJI?

The oath of office requires allegiance not only to the Constitution but also to one's conscience. Can the CJI honestly say he has been faithful to his? Have nothing to offer but a quote from Shakespeare: "O judgement, thou art fled to brutish beasts and men have lost their reason!"

The writer is a Senior Advocate, Supreme Court

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"In a contest that comes down to a tiny fraction of the electorate... everything matters, be it debate success or — yes — Taylor Swift's endorsement. Ms Harris's campaign knew they needed a clear victory on Tuesday. But even as they celebrate, they know it is only one step."

— THE GUARDIAN

What Centre can learn from states

By placing cash directly in the hands of women, direct benefit transfers offer financial autonomy, improve their position in the family



ZERO HOUR
BY DEREK O'BRIEN

LET ME BEGIN by sharing a few startling statistics. India's female labour force participation rate is just 28 per cent. One out of three young people is not engaged in education, employment or training, with women making up 95 per cent of this group. For every five men in managerial positions, only one is a woman. India ranked 127th out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2023. Three out of 10 women in the age group of 18-49 years have experienced violence from their spouses as per a survey by Niti Aayog.

In election manifestos, speeches in Parliament or internal resolutions, every political party will tell you that there is "a need for women to be empowered financially and socially". That is easier said than done. The challenge is: How do you provide financial autonomy, or even a small degree of financial autonomy, when the majority of women are outside the purview of the labour force? Enter, Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT).

All the data from ground research that your columnist has gleaned on this subject indicates one important trend: Much of the income that comes through DBT is spent by the woman at her own discretion. Targeting low-income households through these schemes is especially beneficial as these households allocate a larger proportion of their income to basic necessities like food and fuel. This is evident from the fact that the bottom 20 per cent of rural households spend 53 per cent of their income on food, while urban households in the same bracket allocate 49 per cent. Given these patterns of high consumption, much of the money provided through DBT circulates back into the economy.

Now to the politics of DBT, which is not so cut and dried. Rolling out the scheme does not guarantee an election win. VSPCP Jagananna Anna Vodi, launched in January 2020, did not do the magic for Jagan Mohan Reddy in Andhra Pradesh in June 2024. In Telangana, the story was different. KTR's BRS must be ruling the fact that they didn't have a similar DBT scheme in place. Congress' Mahalakshmi Scheme, adapted from their own Karmanna (Gruha Lakshti) model and swiftly introduced after the big Telangana Assembly win in 2023, paid rich

electoral dividends in the 18th Lok Sabha election.

Let's look at Maharashtra and the DBT play. The state government announced the Ladki Bahin scheme in the budget this June. The first tranche reached the bank accounts of women in August. The second tranche is likely to reach beneficiaries mid-October. This is the primary reason why the Maharashtra elections were not announced along with elections in Haryana, and Jammu & Kashmir. Will the Ladki Bahin scheme be enough to secure the NDA government? Or will the heinous sexual assault on two children in Badlapur be a flashpoint? Let your columnist stick his neck out and call a win for the Maha Vikas Aghadi coalition later this year.

Besides Maharashtra, NDA states like Assam and Madhya Pradesh run similar schemes. Opposition states running DBT schemes for women are Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Punjab. West Bengal has Lakshmi Bhandar. Amartya Sen's Pratichi Trust, analysing Bengal's Lakshmi Bhandar scheme, opined that cash incentives have enhanced women's ability to make financial decisions and improved their position within the family. The study stated that four out of five women spend the money at their will, and one out of 10 decide how to spend the money after chatting with their husbands. Also, the women themselves had reported that their position in the family improved, empowering them in reality.

All these schemes are fully sponsored by the states. Then there are 53 ministries under the Union government that run 315 DBT schemes. Of these, 13 are related to the Ministry of Women and Child Development. The ministry has an abysmal track record in implementing the schemes and ranks 31 in the DBT Performance Rankings. Intriguingly, there is no central scheme that directly transfers financial support universally to all women or specifically targets low-income women (the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana gives financial support to pregnant and lactating mothers).

In an election speech earlier this year, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said on record, "We [BJP] will not stop the DBT scheme [Lakshmi Bhandar]. In fact, we will raise the stakes by Rs 100." It isn't only Shah who is impressed. The IMF has called India's DBT schemes a "logistical marvel". So, should we wait for a national rollout? This will, in a small way, help change for the better the statistics mentioned in the opening of this column.

The writer is MP and leader, All India Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party (Raipur Sabha). Research by Dheemant Jain

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

LEARN FROM FAILURE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Fill the skill gap' (IE, September 12). The Israel job scheme was launched after the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, and workers were promised hefty salaries. Since these recruitments were done by both government and private businesses, the Government of India will have to take responsibility for not conducting adequate screenings. More than 500 such workers have come back from Israel and around 2,000 visas were cancelled due to this debacle. It is not difficult to impart construction work related skills to our youth and this experience must be a huge learning for the government and India's working age population.

Bal Govind, Noida

PATIENTS FIRST

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Month after rape and murder of a doctor, Kolkata is a city at the barricades' (IE, September 11). There's no doubt that the security and safety of doctors working in various hospitals across the country deserve full attention, urgency. At the same time, crippling the medical system with thousands of waiting patients does not bode well. While several factors increase the risk of violence for health workers, they could mean risk of much suffering or even death for patients. So, as directed by the Supreme Court and in the interest of public welfare, the doctors of West Bengal must resume their duties without any further delay. Human life is precious. It cannot be the price of protest, however justified the reasons for it may be.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

PEACE IN MANIPUR

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Why

Manipur is far away' (IE, September 12). It seems that the current government has taken a different meaning to "Gandhi's three monkeys". It is seeing, hearing and speaking nothing evil when it comes to Manipur. And it is no surprise. The government has for long taken the approach of closing its eyes when it comes to Manipur. The constructed narrative of "us vs them" has not been challenged by the state; CM Biren Singh did quite the opposite anyway. Events in Manipur are being ignored by the national media too. The state machinery has failed but it is not willing to let go of the chair. The fueling of ethnic tensions between the kokis and Meiteis through the years could not have gone unnoticed. It is unbefitting for a government to shy away from conflict. Adequate and swift action including fixing accountability and punishing the offenders is the need of the hour.

Ramanpreet, via email

NUANCING HEALTH

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Pulling back from edge' (IE, September 11). The number of suicides in India signal a bigger malaise. Focusing on family history, mental ill health, drug and alcohol use as causes is not sufficient effort. The government must shed its patriarchal perspective and view the problem from a more nuanced sociopolitical lens — one that recognises that many of those triggers crop up because of the failure of the governmental machinery. Trampled hopes, a hypocritical environment, discrimination, information imbalance, hunger, poverty, etc., can and many times do become factors behind mental ill health. Recognising these as symptoms is the first step towards course correction, in and out of the doctor's office.

Pratishtha Saini, Varanasi

The IndianEXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

COMRADE, FRIEND, ALLY

Sitaram Yechury's pragmatism was rooted in his understanding of Marxism. For Opposition, he will be hard to replace

EVER SINCE INDIA attained independence, a fundamental question has divided the country's communists, in terms of both ideology and tactic: How should a "revolutionary movement", keeping with Marxist principles, engage with the complex set of social factors and political actors of a country this layered and so diverse? This question became more pronounced, and the answers to it more nuanced, with the rise of the BJP as one of two major national parties since the late '80s. Sitaram Yechury, general secretary of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), who died at 72 on Thursday, was seen by many as a "pragmatic comrade" — unlike the "hardliners", who are opposed to working with the Congress, not just the BJP. Along with his predecessor Harkishan Singh Surjeet, Yechury was an alliance builder since the days of the United Front governments of the 1990s. In an era of renewed coalition politics post the 2024 general election, Yechury was not merely a comrade and guide for communists — he played that role for the INDIA bloc as a whole. It will be difficult for the Opposition to find another figure with his ideological and moral clarity, as well as political-tactical nimbleness.

Yechury, along with colleague, friend and sometimes rival Prakash Karat, began his political career in JNU, where he was thrice the student's union president. He was involved in the anti-Emergency movement and spent some time in prison. In 1992, Yechury and Karat entered the CPM politburo — among the youngest to be inducted — and were seen as the future of the party in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse. As one of the most articulate voices of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, Yechury soon became the face of the party and was seen to advocate close ties with the Congress. Like Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the former CM of West Bengal who died last month, Yechury recognised that a changing politics demanded that the dogmas of 20th-century communism were revisited. In 2008, delivering a lecture on EMS Namboodiripad's birth centenary, Yechury spoke of how the "concrete analysis of concrete conditions" (one of Lenin's descriptions of the Marxist dialectic) in India demanded an issue-based alliance with the Congress as well as an engagement with the social faultlines in India — including and especially, caste inequality. For decades, communist hardliners had barely engaged with caste. Even in his so-called pragmatism, Yechury was a staunch communist.

For Marxists, it is economic, social and historical forces that determine politics, not individuals. Nonetheless, Yechury's unique personality and charm — as leaders across the political spectrum testify to — helped soothe many egos and unnerve many feathery. "Comrade", in the popular imagination, is merely a term used by communists. Its broader meaning, however, is someone who is a friend and colleague. Most "serious comrades" in India, the cliché goes, are sombre men who do not smile. Yechury did indeed have a formidable strategic and political mind, but he could also smile and laugh, not just with friends but also with rivals. At a time when too many in public life seek to make their rivals their enemies, his affability, too, is a part of his legacy.

A WIDER NET

Extension of AB-PMJAY to senior citizens is welcome. It must be accompanied by ease of access, better quality of care

THE GOVERNMENT'S DECISION to extend the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) to senior citizens above the age of 70 is a significant step towards universalising healthcare in the country. The Rs 5 lakh annual health coverage will benefit about six crore people, roughly 5 per cent of the country's current population. But with lifespans increasing and an increasing number of people ageing in the next three decades, a fifth of India is likely to be over the age of 70 by 2050. Dealing with the challenges of this demographic transition will require far-reaching changes in welfare policies. Today, barely 20 per cent of the elderly are covered by safety nets such as the CGHS, Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana and employer-funded health schemes. Extending the ambit of the world's publicly-funded health assurance scheme could be a step towards ensuring a more fulfilling life for this section of the population.

Since 2018, the AB-PMJAY has covered 7.37 crore hospital admissions. This is a significant achievement in a country where out-of-pocket expenditure (OOPE) on health is often a reason for crushing poverty. Yet, the fact that OOPE constitutes 50 per cent of all health expenses, more than two-and-a-half times the global average, underlines unfinished tasks. Last year, an investigation by this newspaper revealed that doctors at a premier government hospital in Delhi denied poor patients and bypassed the government health insurance scheme. There is a substantial body of reportage to show that doctors misinform already stressed families of the grievously ill that availing benefits under AB-PMJAY could take months. Experts suggest that the overburdened staff at government institutions do not want to take on the additional task of filling up documents related to the insurance scheme. Several healthcare facilities do have *ayanganams* to counsel relatives of patients. But their role ends at registering claims. Empowering counsellors to handhold patients till their claims are settled could help iron out some of the glitches. To make the scheme more expansive, the government should tap into such lessons and narrow the doctor-patient asymmetry.

A Niti Aayog position paper, released in January, recognised that with families becoming increasingly nuclear, ease of access and quality of care will be a crucial determinant in the health-seeking behaviour of senior citizens. In other words, besides financial assurance, policymakers must urgently ensure that there are enough healthcare centres and adequate facilities to take care of the needs of the elderly.

RAYGUN'S DAY

The breaker's triumph shows that often success lies on the other side of failure

WIDELY MOCKED, MEME-IFIED and made viral in the worst possible way, B-Girl Raygun (Rachael Gunn), the breaker who was cruelly pilloried following her Olympics performance last month, seems to be having the last laugh. Improbably, given that she scored exactly zero points in her three rounds at Paris 2024, the 37-year-old Australian dancer and academic is the world's top woman breaker, according to the World DanceSport Federation.

It turns out that, over the past year, there was a much smaller pool of breakers to make up the rankings as most of the world's top breakers were busy preparing for the Olympics and did not have the time to compete in other events. Raygun, one of Australia's top breakers, topped the Oceania Continental Championships in Sydney last October, which propelled her to the number one position — a reign that ends next month. Her triumph might be brief, therefore, but it should offer Raygun some much-needed validation.

She might also take heart from the fact that success or failure often comes down not to talent, but to the merest technicality. One reason why Raygun's Olympics performance registered a nil on the scoreboard, as one of the judges of the competition explained, is that the format was simply not flexible enough to accommodate the breaker's experimental style. That Raygun now rules the breaking roost also comes down to another technicality, of her being one of the few dancers to participate in, and win, a non-Olympics-related event. The bigger lesson is about the ephemerality of success and failure, fame and infamy, particularly in the digital age, when one viral moment is quickly replaced by the next. After weeks of trolling, Raygun has finally had her day.



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

IT IS AN astonishing fact that for virtually 17 months, the republic of India has let the conflict in Manipur deepen and expand. The proximate cause of the conflict was a controversial court order in March 2023 recommending the inclusion of Meiteis in the list of Scheduled Tribes. In the immediate aftermath, more than 60,000 people were displaced, there were close to a 100 deaths, and scores of buildings were burnt. There has been more violence since. A horrific video of assault on women briefly provoked the Supreme Court into its episodically whimsical but ultimately meaningless acts of legal chivalry. It was not clear then whether what moved the Court and country was genuine moral outrage or merely embarrassment. Even in the face of that attention, the prime minister maintained a pusillanimous silence.

The scale of our indifference to Manipur bears more calling out. Just think about all that has transpired in the last 17 months. You would have thought that the firing of drones and now the deployment of anti-drone technology, the use of rockets, deepening military conflict, armed groups using terror against each other, brutal killings, journalists being fired at, internet and communication shutdowns, frequent confrontations between police and civilians, all in an area that is not just vital to India's security but also central to its approach to the east would command the nation's mind and attention. Students in Manipur have been protesting in large numbers, there have been torchlight processions, women's marches and demands for the resignation of MLAs. It is as if an active civil society is banging its head against a brick wall.

Suhās Palshikar ("Why Manipur is Far Away", IE, September 12) explained how the dominant ideas of state and nation that have gained currency under the BJP exacerbate both the conflict in Manipur and our indifference to it. But it is not just the BJP. While the Opposition Congress party has consistently raised the issue, the media has, for the most part, been complicit in this cloak of invisibility. Its ability to outrage over trivia is matched by its purr silences in the face of real conflict and atrocity. Manipur has a long history of ethnic conflict, between the Nagas

The scale of our indifference to Manipur bears calling out. BJP's behaviour over the crisis is shockingly bizarre

For one thing, let us look at the quotidian issue of chain of command. Who is actually in command in Manipur? There is something quite constitutionally astonishing about the fact that a sitting chief minister submits a representation to the governor of his own state demanding that the Unified Command be given back to the CM. At one level, it is amazing that the political and constitutional significance of this demand has not been noted. It is an indictment of the Centre, including the Union home minister.

and Kukis in the Nineties being just one example. The BJP gained a foothold in the Northeast by artfully creating a broad electoral coalition, including getting Kuki support. The contradictions between different ethnic groups over land, reservation, control of legal and illegal trade, were always going to be difficult to manage. It is also clear that these alliances of opportunism cannot withstand the weight of the BJP's majoritarianism. It eventually showed its true colours, exacerbating the conflict between Meiteis and Kukis.

But here is a deeper puzzle: Even in terms of the BJP's own majoritarian politics, its behaviour over Manipur is shockingly bizarre. For one thing, let us look at the quotidian issue of chain of command. Who is actually in command in Manipur? There is something quite constitutionally astonishing about the fact that a sitting chief minister submits a representation to the governor of his own state demanding that the Unified Command be given back to the CM. At one level, it is amazing that the political and constitutional significance of this demand has not been noted. It is an indictment of the Centre, including the Union home minister.

Chief Minister Biren Singh bears a great deal of responsibility for the current crisis. His demand that the NRC be implemented with a base year of 1961 is a recipe for disaster. It fits with the broader use of the NRC template that the BJP is perfecting in the Northeast. But the governance structure in Manipur seems curiously anomalous. There is formally no President's Rule, but Unified Command was given to officials apparently not answerable to the CM. Who are they answering to? Much of the protests in Manipur are directed against the security advisor. There has been confusion over practically everything, including the status of the Suspension of Operations Agreement, Article 355 was apparently, for weeks, secretly brought into force. This little episode tells us something about the governance dead-end that is Manipur. In normal circumstances, any state with this level of unrest might have been a plausible candidate for President's Rule. But we have a bizarre situation where

the Centre is already running things without claiming to. In effect, therefore, President's Rule will be the rule of the same incompetence that we have now. So, the puzzle is not just BJP's ideology. It is that the BJP cannot as much as create a simple chain of command that its own party can align with. The curious puzzle is whether this is weaponised incompetence, deliberate use of confusion in governance, or just plain incompetence?

Meanwhile, the situation on the ground is deteriorating unimaginably. At least judging by the English language Manipuri press and informed observers, the ethnic lines are hardening, not softening. The three cardinal mistakes of policy are being repeated. We know that any situation that is presented as a zero-sum conflict between unified ethnic groups, whether over land, jobs or political dominance, never ends well. Excessive securitisation of what are essentially political conflicts is a recipe for more violence and oppression. Civil society discourse where ethnic groups like Kukis and Meiteis, often with encouragement of the state, are dehumanising each other, exacerbates conflict. Manipuri civil society has been vocal in its protest against the government. But whether it now has the resilience to withstand the hardening of ethnic lines is very much an open question.

So back to the puzzle of the BJP's stakes in keeping the conflict simmering. It certainly has a stake in majoritarianism. But the BJP has got to know that, in Manipur, its strategy will also engulf its own core constituency amongst the Meiteis. A successful government in Manipur would have consolidated the BJP's own authority. Is the design more sinister then? Is it essentially to use disorder to buttress the argument of its ecosystem that all political conflicts in India are now products of a vast foreign conspiracy? It is the BJP that now needs instability to license more repression. Rather than admitting its failure, it will use the disorder to license more authoritarianism. Manipur will be used in national politics, but in the wrong way.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express



JOHN BRITTAS

FORA TWENTY-SOMETHING relocating from Kerala's Marxist heartland of Kannur to New Delhi in the late 1980s, there were many wonders to behold in the national capital. Sitaram Yechury, the firebrand SFI leader from JNU who had just made his way to the Central Committee of CPI(M), was one such wonder.

What began as a fanboy's admiration led to a four-decade-long comradeship. During these years, I watched him graduate from a fiery student leader to a party ideologue to a parliamentary superstar and one of the architects of two of India's prominent coalition governments. Four years ago, when this writer entered the Rajya Sabha as a CPI(M) nominee, Derek O'Brien of Trinamool Congress (TMC) walked up to me and said you may disagree with what I say but you will never be able to discount me. "Because, friend, I am now sitting in Sitaram Yechury's chair," Derek said, which was an indication of the high respect Sitaram enjoyed even in TMC, then a bitter rival of CPI(M) in Bengal.

Like many of the party brigade who landed in New Delhi from various parts of the country, I too ended up at the Vithal Bhai Patel House — or VP House as it is known — which was like a party commune then. My friendship with Sitaram was forged in that melting pot of cultures. We used to meet early in the mornings at the badminton court — Sitaram

THE MAN WHO SAW TOMORROW

Sitaram Yechury knew early on that Sangh must be fought culturally, not just politically

used to play badminton like he was playing lawn tennis. There were days when we ended up across the dinner table in some comrade's room. Kerala food — especially the controversial components of it — emerged as a great bonding agent.

By the early 1990s, it was evident that it would be the duo of Sitaram and Prakash Karat who would carry forward the baton of EMS Namboodiripad, BT Ranadive, M Basavapunniah, Jyoti Basu and Harkishan Singh Surjeet. Eventually, they became a storied duo: Sitaram with his political and parliamentary skills and Prakash with his theoretical and organisational rigour.

Sitaram could hold forth for hours on caste or class, and effortlessly switch to deep discussions on history or economics. But more importantly, Sitaram could speak the common tongue. Communist leaders are sometimes blamed for their gravitas and what is known as the stiff upper lip. With his sense of humour and disarming smile, Sitaram was the antithesis of this. In fact, his deftness with languages — English, Hindi, Telugu, Bengali, Urdu, Tamil and even a bit of Malayalam — made many of us wary of his presence. You couldn't be street-smart in any language because Sitaram would catch you.

Maybe it was these skills that made him popular, not only across the political spectrum

but also across segments. He was acceptable to everyone, a fact that made his genius inevitable in formulating the preamble of the Common Minimum Programme of the 1996 United Front and 2004 UPA I government.

Sitaram had taken "secularism" as a defining principle of his politics from very early on, and Delhi's secular circle — politicians, academics, journalists, artists — everyone coalesced around his leadership. Even before the RSS emerged as a ruling force in the Indian firmament, Sitaram managed to bring together all secular forces — from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, from Gandhinagar to Guwahati. He knew very early on the dangers of this "imposed singularity" and hence, took on RSS culturally not just politically. In fact, some of the top Congress leaders, in private conversations, complain to me that it is Sitaram's influence that has rubbed off on Rahul Gandhi who often uses communist/socialist terminology in his speeches.

When he retired from Rajya Sabha, Ghulam Nabi Azad referred to Sitaram as a national treasure. He may be gone from this world, but that treasure called Sitaram remains with us, inspiring generations with his life and legacy.

The writer is a Rajya Sabha member of CPI(M)

SEPTEMBER 13, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

AP ASSEMBLY CHAOS

FOR THE SECOND consecutive day, the Andhra Pradesh legislative assembly, slated to take up the vote of confidence motion after a condole resolution, was adjourned without transacting any business as the Chief Minister's supporters indulged in unruly behaviour. Mikes were wrenched and brandished freely and members were seen rushing to the podium 30 minutes before the House was adjourned by pro-tem Speaker, M Baga Reddy.

CONG-RAO COLLUSION

ANY FURTHER DELAY in the Andhra Pradesh

assembly expressing its verdict on who commands a majority in the House is fraught with dangerous consequences for the future of parliamentary institutions in the country, K P Unnikrishnan, general secretary of the Congress (S), said. Unnikrishnan said there was clear evidence of collusion between the central Congress (I) leadership and the pretender CM of Andhra Pradesh Bhaskara Rao.

20 SHOT IN PUNJAB

FOURTH FIVE suspected extremists waylaid a bus at Sekhwan near Batala in Gurdaspur district around 8 pm and shot dead 20 persons from a particular community. Two of

those injured had been admitted to hospital in serious condition. Reports in Chandigarh, however, put the number of passengers killed at six.

ZUBIN'S DAZZLING SHOW

ZUBIN MEHTA is a handsome man, his eyes are Van Dyke brown, his hair is still jet black, his figure athletic and above all he has a riveting presence on the podium. As he walked onto the stage of the Sri Fort auditorium to conduct the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, there was deafening applause from the packed hall. The evening opened with Leonard Bernstein's Overture to Candide.



EXPLAINED SCIENCE

COULD LIVE GERMS, 10,000 FT UP IN SKY, CAUSE DISEASES IN HUMANS?

BACK IN the 1920s, scientists flew planes across the United States and caught floating spores. A century on, researchers who flew as high as 10,000 feet above Japan have reported catching hundreds of different types of bacteria and fungi.

The team estimated that the microbes had flown more than 1,200 miles when they were captured. Most intriguingly, some of the species might be able to cause diseases in people.

"A third of the bacteria and slightly more of the fungi can be considered potential human pathogens," researcher Xavier Rodó, a computational ecologist at the Barcelona Institute for Global Health, said.



The researchers undertook multiple flights over Japan. *The NYT*

the Sea of Japan.

Up in the troposphere, an inlet was opened on the side of the plane, allowing air to flow into a tube that led to a filter where airborne particles were trapped.

Results of study

Examining the samples in their lab, Rodó and his colleagues found high levels of a rare mineral called hafnium, which probably came from mines in China, and fungal spores, along with bacteria sticking to tiny dust grains. Despite the organisms' long journey, some were still alive.

When Rodó and his colleagues extracted DNA from the microbes, they discovered at least 266 kinds of fungi and 305 types of bacteria. Many of the microbes belong to groups that grow on plants or in soil. Some are particularly good at growing in heavily polluted soil.

Rodó said that he and his colleagues were preparing experiments to expose air samples to human lung cells. The study does not solve the mystery of Kawasaki disease, he said. *THE NYT*

Wind & spread of disease

Rodó argued that it offered hints that winds helped spread diseases.

The idea for the flights originated from Rodó's research into a mysterious condition known as Kawasaki disease, which causes fevers, rashes and, sometimes, deadly heart attacks. Researchers have long debated whether the disease is caused by a pathogen, a faulty immune system, or a combination of the two.

Cases of Kawasaki disease come in surges. Rodó and his colleagues found that surges in Japan often occurred when winds blew in from northeast China. And when those same winds reached California, cases rose there as well.

The region of China where the winds came from has many massive farms and livestock operations, along with open-pit mines. Since the research suggests that something was travelling in the winds, Rodó and his team flew a Cessna airplane into air masses that blew from China over

ADDING YOGA TO LIFESTYLE CHANGES CAN CUT DIABETES RISK: STUDY

PRACTISING YOGA for 40 minutes every day can reduce the risk of type 2 diabetes by almost 40% — a more effective outcome than lifestyle interventions or drugs alone could achieve, a study from five centres in India has found.

An estimated 101 million people are living with diabetes in the country, and another 136 million with pre-diabetes (higher than normal blood sugar levels). Without substantial lifestyle changes, most individuals in the latter group are likely to progress to diabetes.

Dr Madhu, the lead author of the study and professor in the Department of Endocrinology at Delhi's GTB Hospital, said: "We were able to demonstrate that yoga is much more effective at reducing the risk of type 2 diabetes as compared to lifestyle changes alone. In fact, the gains are much more even when compared to lifestyle intervention and drugs shown in other studies."

"While determining the mechanism of action was not the purpose of the study, it is hypothesised that yoga has ad-

ditional benefits," Dr Madhu added.

Healthy adults who have a higher risk of developing diabetes — such as people with family history or those who are obese — are likely to benefit from yoga. "It is suggested that they practise yoga for 40 minutes every day to cut diabetes at bay," Dr Madhu said.

While the study does not demonstrate the effect of yoga on those who already have diabetes, Dr Madhu says this group will likely benefit as well. "Other short-term studies on the impact of yoga on diabetes have already shown reduction in blood glucose levels, so it is likely that yoga can help people with diabetes keep their sugar levels in check," he said.

A total 974 individuals were randomised (488 to the yoga + lifestyle group and 486 to the lifestyle alone group) in the study. Participants were followed up for a period of three years.

The study was published in the journal *Diabetes & Metabolic Syndrome* in July. *EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE*



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EXPLAINED HEALTH

Health cover for elderly

AB PM-JAY is already the world's largest public health insurance scheme. Expansion of cover to the country's entire elderly population irrespective of income levels is a significant leap. Here's why

ANONNA DUTT

NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 12

A DAY after the Union cabinet approved the expansion of the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB PM-JAY) health cover to all Indians of age 70 years and older irrespective of their income, officials on Thursday said registration for the expanded insurance scheme was likely to begin within a week. The scheme may be formally launched by the Prime Minister subsequently, they said.

AB PM-JAY is already the world's largest public health insurance scheme. It provides free cover upto Rs 5 lakh annually to all members of eligible families — estimated to comprise the bottom 40% of the population economically — irrespective of age.

Expansion of the cover to the country's entire elderly population was one of the BJP's key promises before the Lok Sabha polls. This is now the first complete age-cohort to receive coverage under the scheme.

Register for scheme

Those eligible for the expanded cover will have to register themselves and get the Ayushman Bharat card as soon as the new module is added to the existing portal.

Beneficiaries can register either through the government's Ayushman App or at the Ayushman Bharat counter at any government health facility. Anyone who has turned 70 as per their Aadhaar can register for the new health cover.

There will be no exclusions or waiting period of pre-existing conditions. Beneficiaries will be able to utilise their policy as soon as they complete their KYC. The portal will also be face-authentication-enabled, to ensure that elderly persons whose fingerprints are difficult to read or have changed over time can avail the benefits.

Cover, beneficiaries

Everyone of age 70 or more will be entitled to a cover of Rs 5 lakh annually, shared within the family. This means if there are two elderly beneficiaries in the household, the cover will be split among them.

Elderly members (age 70 and more) of



An event in Delhi marking five years of Ayushman Bharat last September. *Amit Mehra*

WHO WILL BE COVERED?

EVERYONE 70 years and older, regardless of their economic status, will receive Rs 5 lakh health cover per year free under the scheme.

HOWEVER, the cover is per household, so if there are two persons over the age of 70 in a family, they will share the Rs 5 lakh cover.

POOR FAMILIES who are already covered under the scheme will receive a top-up cover of Rs 5 lakh, to be used only for those 70 or older.

ALMOST 6 crore individuals from 4.5 crore families will benefit. Of these, 1.78 crore individuals are already covered by the scheme.

families that are already covered in accordance with their economic status will get a top-up cover of Rs 5 lakh — to be used only for the elderly. These elderly beneficiaries will have to re-register to receive the top-up cover.

The scheme will cover almost 6 crore individuals (from 4.5 crore families) of whom 1.78 crore are already covered by the scheme. "For the additional top-up amount, the financial implication is very little," a senior official said.

The Ayushman Bharat scheme already covers 1,670 procedures across 26 specialties, which includes 25 geriatric packages. More packages for the elderly are in the process of being added, officials said.

Those already covered

Some 80 lakh people are separately covered under various government health

schemes — the Central Government Health Scheme (CGHS), Ex-Servicemen Contributory Health Scheme, or cover provided to family members of defence and railway personnel, etc.

Those who are covered under these government health schemes will have the option of choosing either Ayushman Bharat or continuing with their existing coverage. People who are covered under the Employees State Insurance Corporation (ESIC), however, will be eligible to have both their existing cover and Ayushman Bharat. This is because premiums for ESIC are paid by the insured and their employer, not the government.

People who have their own privately purchased insurance cover will be eligible to have the Ayushman Bharat cover as well.

Recalling epic last stand of Saragarhi, 1897

MANRAJ GREWAL SHARMA

CHANDIGARH, SEPTEMBER 12

THURSDAY MARKED the 127th anniversary of the Battle of Saragarhi, regarded today as one of the most heroic last stands in global military history.

On this day in 1897, 21 soldiers of the 36th Sikhs (now 45 Sikh) regiment led by Havildar Ishar Singh held back more than 8,000 Afriidi and Orakzai tribal warriors for seven hours, killing 200 and injuring thrice that number. The Sikhs knew they faced certain death, but they chose to fight. "They could have surrendered, yet they didn't and displayed unparalleled bravery," former Punjab Chief Minister and military historian Capt Amarinder Singh wrote in his book, *Saragarhi and the Defence of the Samana Forts: The 36th Sikhs in the Tirah campaign 1897-98* (2017).

The British, who regained control over the fort after a few days, used the burnt bricks of Saragarhi to erect an obelisk for the fallen soldiers, and commissioned gurdwaras at Amritsar and Ferozepur in their honour. The heroism of the Sikhs is commemorated today in both India and Pakistan.

Saragarhi fortress

Saragarhi was the communication tower between two forts built by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, which the British had renamed as Fort Lockhart and Fort Gulsistan, in the rugged North West Frontier Province (NWFP), now in Pakistan.

These two forts housed large numbers of British troops: Fort Lockhart was also home to families of British officers. The wife of the commanding officer of 36th Sikh, Lt Col John Haughton, was at Fort Lockhart until May 1897, when she went home to deliver a baby.

The fateful day

Saragarhi was usually manned by a platoon of 40 soldiers, but on September 12, 1897, it was being held by only 21 soldiers and a non-combatant called Daad, a Pashtun who did odd jobs for the troops.

Around 9 am, the soldiers saw an approaching herd of dust, which they realised was caused by a marching tribal army of between 8,000 and 15,000 men who wanted

to isolate the two forts by cutting off communication between them.

Septh Singh Gurmukh Singh sent a message through Morse code to commanding officer Lt Col Haughton asking for reinforcements, who radioed back, "Unable to breakthrough, hold position." Havildar Ishar Singh knew the consequences of staying, but responded stoically, "Understood."

The 22 heroes

Ishar was a maverick among the British military historian Maj Gen James Luttrell described as a "somewhat turbulent character whose independent nature had brought him more than once into conflict with his military superiors". But Ishar, who was a "in camp a nuisance", was "in the field magnificent", Maj Gen Luttrell conceded.

Amarinder wrote about Ishar: "While he will always be remembered for his gallant conduct at Saragarhi, within the regiment they also rue the loss of their best illicit liquor producer, and a man who 'borrowed' meat on hoof for his men, went short of rations, from



a neighbouring unit without asking them."

Of the 22 men — including Daad — at Saragarhi, the Septhaler, Naik Lal Singh, 47, the oldest. Describing the last hour of the battle in his book, Amarinder wrote: "Naik Lal Singh, though severely injured, was lying on his bed. Although unable to move, he was conscious and able to fire his weapon, and is reported to have kept up a steady fire, killing more pathans, as did Gurmukh Singh and Sep/Swpr Daad."

Gurmukh continued to report the battle as it unfolded. And then finding the soldiers falling one by one, sent one final message: "Permission to join the battle, Sir." The response in the affirmative came almost immediately.

Queen Victoria awarded the 21 fallen soldiers the Indian Order of Merit (comparable with the Victoria Cross) along with two 'murabbs' (50 acres), and Rs 500 each.

Daad, a sweeper from Nowshera, Pakistan, was denied any honour, even though he too fought bravely, killing five men before being stabbed to death. Capt Amarinder called him the 22nd soldier.

From Ashokan times to now, Sanchi to Europe, story of the Great Stupa

ARJUN SENGUPTA

NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 12

EXTERNAL AFFAIRS Minister S Jaishankar on Wednesday stopped by the replica of the East Gate of Sanchi's Great Stupa standing in front of Humboldt Forum museum in Berlin.

The ornate red sandstone gateway, which was unveiled in December 2022, is a 1:1 reproduction of the original structure standing at almost 10 metres high and 6 metres wide, and weighing roughly 150 tonnes.

The Great Stupa of Sanchi

A stupa is a Buddhist commemorative monument usually containing sacred relics of the Buddha or other venerable saints. The archetypal stupa is a hemispherical structure, whose origins can be traced to pre-Buddhist burial mounds found in India.

The Great Stupa of Sanchi exemplifies this form. Commissioned in the third century BCE by Emperor Ashoka, it is the largest and oldest structure in a complex of Buddhist monuments comprising numerous other

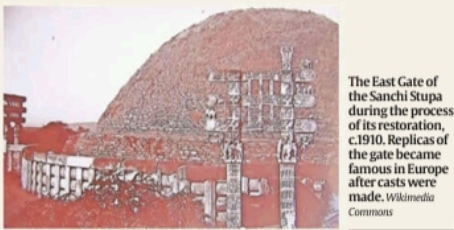
stupas, temples, and monasteries. The most recent construction in Sanchi can be dated to as late as the twelfth century CE.

"Sanchi is unique not only in its having the most perfect and well-preserved stupa but also in its offering a wide and educative field for the study of the genesis, efflorescence and decay of Buddhist art and architecture [in India]," Debala Mitra, the director-general of the Archaeological Survey of India from 1981 to 1983, wrote in Sanchi (1957).

The Great Stupa is one of the oldest standing stone structures in India, believed to have been built over the Buddha's relics. Its construction was overseen by Ashoka's wife Devi, who hailed from the nearby trading town of Vidisha. The development of the Sanchi complex was supported by patronage from Vidisha's mercantile community.

Gateways of the Great Stupa

While the original stupa itself is a rather plain hemispherical structure crowned by a *chhatra* (parasol), what makes it instantly recognisable are the ornamental gateways or *toranas* that stand in front of it.



The four *toranas*, oriented to the four cardinal directions, were constructed in the first century BCE, likely within a few decades of each other during the reign of the Satavahana dynasty.

These gateways are made of two square pillars which support a superstructure comprising three curved architraves (or beams) with spirally-rolled ends. The pillars and the architraves are adorned with beautiful bas-relief and sculptures depicting scenes from

the Buddha's life, stories from the Jataka Tales, and other Buddhist iconography.

"The art impresses greatly by its rhythm, symmetry, decorative beauty and perfect handling of the floral and plant motifs... They even admitted flagrantly amorous scenes on their sacred monuments, which did not fit in with Buddha's teachings," Mitra wrote. The gates do not, however, represent the Buddha in his human form, as was the norm in the period of their construction.

The East Gate of the Sanchi Stupa during the process of its restoration, c.1910. Replicas of the gate became famous in Europe after casts were made. *Wikimedia Commons*

The *toranas* and the balustrade surrounding the Great Stupa were once painted.

The East Gate and its replica

In Europe, the East Gate is the most famous of the Sanchi *toranas*. There is a historical reason behind this.

The Sanchi complex was in abject ruins when it was "discovered" by British officer Henry Taylor in 1818. Alexander Cunningham, who later founded the ASI, led the first survey and excavations at Sanchi in 1851. The site was restored to its present condition by ASI director-general John Marshall in the 1910s with funding from the *beguans* of nearby Bhopal.

Till restoration work began in the late nineteenth century, however, Sanchi was largely ravaged by treasure hunters and amateur archaeologists, some of whom wanted to take its gates to Europe. They were unable to do so, and had to make do with plaster casts instead.

The East Gate was cast in plaster by Lieutenant Henry Hardy Cole for the Victoria and Albert Museum in the late 1860s. Multiple copies of this cast were later made, and displayed across Europe.

The latest Berlin replica too traces its origin to this original cast.

According to the website of the Humboldt Forum, "A plaster cast of the original gate, purchased from London, was on display in the entrance hall of the *Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde* in Berlin from 1886. A cast of this preserved copy was made of artificial stone in 1970."

This is what was used for the Humboldt Forum replica, with 3D scanning, modern robots, skilled German and Indian sculptors, and enlarged photos of the original *torana* for aid.

The upper architrave of the gate represents the seven Manushi Buddhas (previous Buddhas, with the historical Buddha being the latest incarnation). The middle architrave depicts the scene of the Great Departure, when prince Siddhartha leaves Kapilavastu to live as an ascetic in search of enlightenment. The lower architrave depicts Emperor Ashoka visiting the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment.

Other decorative elements include the *shalabhanjika* (a fertility emblem represented by a *yakshi* grasping the branch of a tree), elephants, winged lions, and peacocks.

Opinion

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2024

100 and counting

Modi 3.0 has signalled policy continuity, while making tact shifts; deeper changes needed to meet the lofty goals

THE LAST 10 years and 100 days of its existence, never has the Narendra Modi regime at the Centre lacked in pace or articulation of its priorities. Even its harshest critics won't accuse it of a policy paralysis, or even presiding over an imbroglio, though there are, of course, divergent views, including sharply polarised ones, on its policy choices, approach to governance, and ideological persuasions. Modi had informed the country of a ready blueprint for the first 100 days of his third government, in the run-up to 2024 general elections, and convened a meeting of senior officials to firm up an action plan, even before the election results were out. It later turned out that this time his government would have to rely on a couple of allies for majority, and face a more emboldened Opposition in Parliament and outside. Still, the government hasn't openly talked about any course correction, instead it sought to send the message of policy continuity. It appeared single-minded and steadfast in the pursuit of its multiple avowed goals, including the ones that stretch much beyond its tenure, like the overarching vision of making India a developed nation by 2047.

As the first 100 days of Modi 3.0 are being celebrated on September 17, the prime minister's 74th birthday, going by the number and import of the policy decisions taken by it so far, what we have is a turbocharged government. Assorted large infrastructure projects, to be implemented over several years, are being approved by the Cabinet at a quickened pace, with patent green-economy and sustainability biases, and a resolve to boost high-end manufacturing, like semi-conductors. Even the Opposition would find it difficult to take exception to the concurrent set of policies that keep people at the centre, like the one to set up 20 million new rural houses over the next five years, or the latest decision to fund out of Budget a decent health cover of ₹5 lakh/annum for "all" aged above 70.

Beneath this display of conviction, however, there have been some significant policy reversals and rollbacks over the last three months, indicating political accommodation, if not rethink. Despite the official claim that job growth has been robust, the government tacitly acknowledged the issues of jobless growth, acute unemployment, which paradoxically co-existed with the lack of a skilled pool of people for potential employers to recruit from. The Budget FY25 unveiled three employment-linked incentive schemes. Political economy imperatives have also been evident in the decision to hold in abeyance a plan for lateral entry to top bureaucracy, withdrawal of the Budget decision to deny indexation benefits on long-term capital gains, and the shelving of the broadcast Bill that sought to impose additional controls on online content. The clamour for guaranteed pension among government staff has been adroitly addressed, with a new "funded" (defined contribution) scheme, with in-built cost mitigation.

The question is whether the Modi regime's growth model would produce the desired outcomes. Given the major shift in resource allocations the regime has engineered — between the Centre and state governments, the states inter se, among large and small companies, and larger sections of people and the super rich — there are valid fears that growth impulses may get constrained. Policy and budgetary focus must be sharper on health, as well as elementary/secondary education, while checking any real or perceived erosion of democratic spirit and institutional rectitude.

Big tech's easy ride is coming to an end

TECH COMPANIES OF A certain size have long expected an easy ride from authorities, and for good reason. They always got it. Apple Inc. for years abused loopholes to pay virtually zero tax in the European Union while generating record profits there, thanks to special treatment from Ireland, where it bases its European headquarters. Alphabet Inc.'s Google for years was able to entrench its dominance in search thanks to the special treatment the company gave its own shopping service over competitors.

Now Google and Apple are getting slapped for those blatantly unfair advantages. The EU is forcing Apple to pay €1.3 billion (\$1.4 billion) in back taxes to the Irish government, and Google to pay a €2.4 billion fine for rigging its platform. For both, it's the end of the line on appeals. Of course, the payments are just a cost of doing business — pocket change, really — and the companies can pat their lawyers on the back for dragging the cases out in court for years with endless appeals.

But the era of protracted cases is fading. The EU is transitioning to a period where its trust busters can be quicker and, as much as you can use the word to describe regulators, nimble, harnessing its own shopping service over competitors. anti-competitive behaviour from the likes of Alphabet, Apple, Meta Platforms Inc., Amazon.com Inc., Microsoft Corp., and Nvidia Corp.

Until now, regulators had to be clever about how they used old, outdated rules to pursue their court cases. It's why proceedings took so long to play out. The European Commission based Apple's Irish tax case on a violation of the EU State aid rules, which typically concern subsidies or grants. Legally, "it was a very creative approach," says Anne Witt, a professor at EDHEC Business School's Augmented Law Institute. At the heart of the case was figuring out how to prove Ireland was giving Apple selective aid, which was also technically challenging to calculate. Witt adds:

But from this year onward, Europe's authorities have a whizzy new tool, a regulatory innovation as meaningful to antitrust policy as ChatGPT was to generative artificial intelligence. It's the Digital Markets Act (DMA), a law that large tech platforms had to start complying with in March. With any luck, the EU won't be caught on the back foot quite as much, chasing after wrongdoing with investigations that run longer than it takes to put a child through school.

Now the big tech platforms have clear rules they must follow upfront. For instance, the DMA states that Apple and Google must allow their users to uninstall default apps on their devices like Apple Maps and Gmail, to promote competition. Google searches also don't highlight results on Google Maps as easily as they did before.

Instead of drawn-out legal battles and appeals, the DMA should also lead to swifter resolution: fines of as much as 10% of a company's worldwide earnings, for instance. And instead of narrow investigations like the Google shopping case, the law covers far more ground, applying to everything from app stores to social media.

Spokespeople for Apple and Google both said the companies were "disappointed" with the court decisions this week. But Margarete Vestager, the EU's outgoing competition chief for whom these cases are a validating swan song, said they showed even the most powerful tech companies can be held accountable.

That's a growing sentiment across the Atlantic, where a US judge ruled last month that Google had rigged the search engine market and was a monopolist — and where for the first time in history, the prospect of breaking up a big tech firm (Google) is looking possible. The goal is to eventually create some more room for smaller companies to innovate and enter markets dominated by the giants and reduce the pressure to sell to those firms.

The DMA is one of the most radical approaches yet for keeping monopolistic practices in check, giving Europeans more control than anyone else in the world over what apps they can put on their smartphones and how their data is shared.

How smoothly that transpires through the end of this year and into 2025 is still an open question, but it's clear that Apple, Google, and other big players will have to start waving goodbye to the advantages they've clung to for far too long.



PARMY OLSON

Bloomberg

● COURSE CORRECTION

EMBRACING A SHARED VALUE CONCEPT, WHICH GOES BEYOND CSR, IS NECESSARY

Remodel Indian capitalism



M MUNEER KM CHANDRASEKHAR
Respectively Fortune-500 advisor, start-up investor, and co-founder, Medici Institute for Innovation, & former Cabinet secretary

WHEN A FIRST-generation businessman beats legacy conglomerates to become the wealthiest individual in the country in a couple of years, questions will be raised about the nation's governance and its leadership's integrity — more so when 60% of the nation's population begs the government for sustenance.

Is capitalism as we know it failing in India, just as it is globally? Once celebrated for its ability to drive economic growth and innovation, capitalism is now increasingly criticised for its role in exacerbating inequality, environmental degradation, and social unrest. Despite impressive GDP growth, India faces significant challenges that highlight the shortcomings of its capitalist model.

One of the most glaring failures is the widening gap between the rich and the poor. According to the World Inequality Report, the top 1% of the Indian population holds over 40% of all wealth, while the bottom 50% owns just 6%. This stark inequality is visible in the juxtaposition of luxury high-rises and sprawling slums in most cities — it's not just a moral issue but also a threat to economic stability.

Capitalism's relentless pursuit of profit has also come at the expense of the environment. India is home to 22 of the world's 30 most polluted cities. The over-exploitation of natural resources, deforestation, and poor waste management are all consequences of a growth-at-all-costs mentality deeply rooted in capitalism.

With an ever-growing workforce, India has a huge unemployment issue. Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy reports peg the unemployment rate at 7.8% average over the past few years, with youth unemployment reaching as high as 23.1%. Furthermore, much of the workforce is in informal, low-paying jobs with little job security or benefits.

On top of it, there have been numerous corporate scandals in the last decade alone, driven by politically connected/greedy promoters. From

Lalit and Nirav Modi to Byju's and NSE, there are many examples of how corporate greed and a lack of regulatory oversight can lead to financial instability and loss of public wealth. Corporations are driven by the need to maximise shareholder value, and focus on short-term profits rather than long-term sustainability. This myopia has led to underinvestment in innovation, employee welfare, and environmental, social, and governance norms. Almost 87% of senior executives surveyed agree they are pressured to delivering financial performance within two years or less, mostly sacrificing long-term prospects.

Arguably, capitalistic policies led to thousands of farmer suicides and their revolt against oppression. The agriculture sector employs over half of India's workforce but their prosperity is eaten away by the nexus of politicians and intermediaries despite numerous efforts by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to eliminate this middle layer.

Capitalism's emphasis on cost-cutting and efficiency is responsible for the exploitation of workers in many states. The International Labour Organization estimates that 25 million people globally are trapped in forced labour, with many more working in precarious conditions for paltry wages — a source of social instability.

While Bibek Debroy has suggested inequality is good in India's case, there is growing outrage against that view, calling

ing to balance profitability with social responsibility. Many countries recognise concepts like stakeholder capitalism, shared value, and circular economy as the next phase of capitalism.

Stakeholder capitalism advances a business model that balances the needs of all stakeholders — employees, customers, communities, and the environment — rather than focusing solely on shareholders. The World Economic Forum championed this approach, arguing businesses are responsible for addressing global challenges like climate change and inequality.

The shared value model involves integrating social impact into core business strategies. Many large multinational companies including Mastercard, Nestlé, and Unilever have demonstrated that achieving economic and societal value is possible, offering a more sustainable path forward.

The circular economy model promotes the efficient use of resources by designing products for durability, reuse, and recycling. This approach contrasts with the traditional linear economy, where products are made, used, and discarded. The circular economy aims to decouple economic growth from resource consumption, addressing the environmental limitations of capitalism.

The "shared value" concept holds the most significant promise for India. By integrating social needs into the core business strategies, companies can create value for society while enhancing competitiveness. This dual focus represents

sents a significant departure from the more traditional approach of corporate social responsibility (CSR). The current CSR activities are forced on most companies, and they have found ways to get the money to CSR promoters' pockets while willing NGOs at a cut.

CSR initiatives typically involve spending funds on the areas where the government has mandated. These efforts are seen as separate from the core operations and are frequently viewed as non-essential. Shared value, on the other hand, goes beyond CSR by embedding social impact directly into the company's business model. It involves rethinking products, markets, and value chains to create economic value in a way that also benefits society. This is why it is key for India.

India Inc. could be persuaded to consider one of the following for embracing shared value concept:

- Develop new products or enter new markets that address societal needs. This opens up new revenue streams and helps solve pressing social issues.
- Reinvent value chains to be more sustainable and socially responsible. This involves reducing resource use, improving labour conditions, or enhancing product quality.
- Redesign the ecosystem. This includes investing in infrastructure, education, and healthcare in the communities where the company does business. Amul is a classic example for this.

■ On their part, policymakers should be willing to reconsider the assessment of growth. India's current policy is premised on achieving the \$5 trillion mark and an undefined concept of Viksit Bharat by 2047, which will have no value if poverty is increasing alarmingly. Alternatively, measure growth by per capita GDP at the lowest quartile of population, which will change the direction of economic policy.

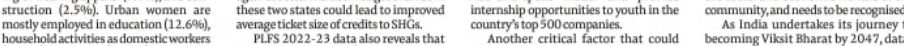
Martin Luther King's words are most appropriate for the new phase of capitalism: "I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to a few."

● HAND IN HAND
Defence minister Rajnath Singh

Today, there is a race in the world to get ahead of each other, wars are going on between countries at different places. In this changing situation, India's goal is to hold each other's hands and walk together

● COURSE CORRECTION
EMBRACING A SHARED VALUE CONCEPT, WHICH GOES BEYOND CSR, IS NECESSARY

Remodel Indian capitalism



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Is capitalism as we know it failing in India, just as it is globally? Once celebrated for its ability to drive economic growth and innovation, capitalism is now increasingly criticised for its role in exacerbating inequality, environmental degradation, and social unrest. Despite impressive GDP growth, India faces significant challenges that highlight the shortcomings of its capitalist model.

One of the most glaring failures is the widening gap between the rich and the poor. According to the World Inequality Report, the top 1% of the Indian population holds over 40% of all wealth, while the bottom 50% owns just 6%. This stark inequality is visible in the juxtaposition of luxury high-rises and sprawling slums in most cities — it's not just a moral issue but also a threat to economic stability.

Capitalism's relentless pursuit of profit has also come at the expense of the environment. India is home to 22 of the world's 30 most polluted cities. The over-exploitation of natural resources, deforestation, and poor waste management are all consequences of a growth-at-all-costs mentality deeply rooted in capitalism.

With an ever-growing workforce, India has a huge unemployment issue. Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy reports peg the unemployment rate at 7.8% average over the past few years, with youth unemployment reaching as high as 23.1%. Furthermore, much of the workforce is in informal, low-paying jobs with little job security or benefits.

On top of it, there have been numerous corporate scandals in the last decade alone, driven by politically connected/greedy promoters. From

Lalit and Nirav Modi to Byju's and NSE, there are many examples of how corporate greed and a lack of regulatory oversight can lead to financial instability and loss of public wealth. Corporations are driven by the need to maximise shareholder value, and focus on short-term profits rather than long-term sustainability. This myopia has led to underinvestment in innovation, employee welfare, and environmental, social, and governance norms. Almost 87% of senior executives surveyed agree they are pressured to delivering financial performance within two years or less, mostly sacrificing long-term prospects.

Arguably, capitalistic policies led to thousands of farmer suicides and their revolt against oppression. The agriculture sector employs over half of India's workforce but their prosperity is eaten away by the nexus of politicians and intermediaries despite numerous efforts by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to eliminate this middle layer.

Capitalism's emphasis on cost-cutting and efficiency is responsible for the exploitation of workers in many states. The International Labour Organization estimates that 25 million people globally are trapped in forced labour, with many more working in precarious conditions for paltry wages — a source of social instability.

While Bibek Debroy has suggested inequality is good in India's case, there is growing outrage against that view, calling

A new drive

Schemes should improve EV adoption

To promote the use of electric vehicles (EVs) in the country, which is crucial for reducing carbon emission, the Union Cabinet approved two schemes on Wednesday with an allocation of over ₹14,000 crore. The PM Electric Drive Revolution in Innovative Vehicle Enhancement (PM E-DRIVE) scheme with an allocation of ₹10,900 crore over two years will replace the earlier Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of (Hybrid &) Electric Vehicles (FAME) scheme, which started in 2015 with an initial allocation of ₹900 crore. The second version of the scheme, which ended last financial year, had a Budget allocation of ₹11,500 crore. The new schemes are expected to improve the adoption of EVs in the country and build on the success of the previous initiatives. Given that the initial cost of EVs is higher than those operating on internal combustion engines, fiscal support is seen as a necessity to improve adoption.

The PM E-DRIVE scheme is expected to support about 2.47 million electric two-wheelers, 316,000 electric three-wheelers, and other emerging EVs with incentives worth ₹2,679 crore. Under the scheme, ₹500 crore each has been allocated for the increased adoption of electric trucks and electric ambulances. Further, ₹4,391 crore has been assigned for procuring 14,028 electric buses in select cities. Besides, ₹2,000 crore has been allocated for over 74,000 public charging stations. In addition, the PM e-Bus Sewa-Payment Security Mechanism (PSM) scheme, with an outlay of ₹3,435.33 crore, will focus on procuring and operating e-buses by public transport authorities. The scheme is expected to deploy over 38,000 electric buses between the current year and 2028-29. The scheme will also support the operation of such buses for 12 years from the date of deployment.

Aside from supporting electric two-wheelers, the focus this time is on increasing adoption in the commercial vehicle space. There is no provision for electric cars, for instance. The focus on commercial vehicles makes sense and might give more value for fiscal support in terms of emission reduction because they tend to be more polluting. More electric trucks carrying goods in Delhi, for example, could provide significant relief. Similarly, electric buses in public transport will help reduce pollution in several Indian cities because they would be largely replacing diesel-run buses. Central budgetary support to the public transport authority is significant because most of them are in losses and not in a position to make significant investment. It is thus important that their contribution remains limited. The focus on charging stations should also help adoption. As reported by *Business Standard*, an EV-charging company has collaborated with the Indian postal service to launch an EV-charging station at a post office in Hyderabad. More such effort will need to be supported. Post offices mostly have a presence in prime locations and setting up EV-charging stations on available land can be a win-win proposition.

A new feature in the PM E-DRIVE scheme will be the Aadhaar-authenticated e-voucher for buyers. The voucher, to be issued to the buyer by the Ministry of Heavy Industries, will need to be signed by the buyer and submitted to the dealer, who will also have to sign and upload it to claim the demand incentive. While the initiative will help identify the ultimate beneficiary, it would be important to make sure that the platform works seamlessly and funds are transferred quickly. Disruption and delay could affect dealers, ultimately affecting EV sales. For a successful rollout, the government should carefully handle issues such as indigenisation and price ceilings, which affected the earlier scheme.

A safe place for women

Military needs greater gender sensitisation

Accusations of rape and sexual harassment by a wing commander posted at the Indian Air Force Station, Srinagar, underscore the urgent need for greater gender sensitisation in the security and armed forces, which have started admitting women in larger numbers. The Air Force admits women in combat roles, so the issue of integration is not merely a social necessity but a security imperative as well. The fact that the victim had to approach the Jammu and Kashmir Police for redress points to the multiple organisational deficiencies that led to this outcome. The victim's complaint reportedly showed that the base reflected all the infirmities of a male-dominated work environment. First, she stated, the sexual assault followed two years of harassment and mental torture by the authorities. The victim said her complaint of a sexual assault after a New Year's party at the Officers' Mess on January 1 this year was not taken seriously.

It took more than two months for the station to assemble an internal complaints committee and due process appeared to be seriously compromised. A medical examination was also conducted only at the victim's insistence, that too on the last day of the investigation. The committee's verdict that the complaint was inconclusive for lack of eyewitnesses is also astonishing; sexual encounters, especially non-consensual ones, are unlikely to be conducted openly. The victim is also reported to have claimed that one witness for the prosecution had been pressured to leave the base and other witnesses had been "tutored", again a common problem when the perpetrator happens to be a person in a position of power.

The lack of action by the hastily convened internal complaints committee compelled the victim to approach the police, which had booked the officer concerned. India now has a proud record of recruiting more women in its paramilitary and military forces. Over 9,000 women serve in the three branches of the defence services and both the Indian Army and Navy are required to follow gender-neutral career progression policies. Nevertheless, women are still a notable minority in these organisations. For instance, women account for just about 12 per cent of the police forces against a mandated 33 per cent, causing the home ministry to issue advisories to increase the representation of women. Even if the prevalence of women in these forces were to rise — some states like Bihar and Tamil Nadu have over a 20 per cent presence — the culture embedded in these hitherto all-male organisations is unlikely to diminish anytime soon.

This fact only underlines the urgent need to introduce more intensive gender-sensitisation programmes in these organisations and ensure that bases and stations are not only safe places for women to work in but senior staff members are responsive to complaints of sexual harassment and assault. Indeed, almost no military organisation in the world that has admitted women, especially in combat roles, has been immune to the problem of sexual harassment and it has taken considerable pushback from women to force their services to create gender-sensitive policies and environments. The US military, for instance, employs psychologists trained in preventing sexual assault and associated harmful behaviour in the ranks. Without such conducive policies, India's ambition to emulate the best-in-class military and paramilitary forces in terms of gender neutrality is likely to be a distant dream.



Tyranny of the status quo in GST reform

The reluctance to undertake comprehensive rate rationalisation, fearing revenue loss, is short-sighted

The GST Council meetings have become routine, tinkering with goods and services tax (GST) rates and making minor administrative changes as needed by the agencies, rather than transforming the tax structure towards the best practice approach.

The Council seems to take a short-term view that the system has stabilised, stakeholders are well-acquainted with and have accepted the system, and decisions are made merely to address immediate needs and introduce minor corrections. There is no attempt to take a long-term view to direct the structure towards minimising the three costs associated with taxes, namely, collection costs, compliance costs, and economic distortions. Implicit in this way of thinking is also the fear of losing revenue and the lack of basic research to support the improved tax structure without compromising revenue. Not surprisingly, the Council meeting held on September 9 made only incremental changes, such as exempting the import of services by foreign airlines, reducing rates on cancer drugs and helicopter rides, and setting up two groups of ministers to examine life and health insurance premiums and the compensation cess.

The prevailing GST structure is sub-optimal and needs major reforms if we want to make it competitive while ensuring revenue productivity. India's aspiration to become a developed country by the middle of this century requires having a competitive tax system with minimal cascading effect. It is important to reform the tax system to steer it towards international best practices to have a broad base, lower and less differentiated rates, a simple and transparent structure. In such a system, the three

costs associated with taxes — collection costs, compliance costs, and economic distortion — are minimised. This is the right time to embark on the directional change in the tax system because major reforms are best implemented when the economy is on an upswing to ensure revenue buoyancy.

Indeed, global experience with value added tax (VAT) reforms has shown that there is no "one-size-fits-all" model; each country adopts a structure and administration that best suits its unique conditions and is acceptable to its stakeholders. Nevertheless, most countries adhere to certain general principles to minimise the three costs mentioned above. The important general principles recommended by most experts are: (i) aim for a global tax with few exemptions and exclusions; (ii) focus the tax system primarily on revenue generation, rather than using it to achieve too many other goals; (iii) maintain a reasonably high threshold to target the "wholes" rather than the "minnows", as this will serve to minimise administrative costs and help to make the tax more equitable; (iv) avoid multiple rates to evolve a simple structure to minimise administrative, compliance, and distortion costs; (v) do not collect more information than is required and can be processed; (vi) actively encourage good record-keeping and aim for the long-term goal of self-assessment. The experience also shows that if some "bad" features such as too high or too low thresholds, overly extensive exemptions, or multiple rates are adopted as a political compromise or for reasons of acceptability in the first place, they may not be easy to remove later.

At the heart of the reform is the urgent need for rate rationalisation. Since 2009, of the 31 countries that have implemented VAT in one form or another,

POLICY PILLARS

M GOVINDA RAO

ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY

New smart cities: Packing more punch

Indian policymakers have been striving to attract investment in manufacturing over decades. However, the share of manufacturing in gross domestic product (GDP) at 16.18 per cent, is a far cry from expectations that it would touch 25 per cent around India@75. A few high-profile investment announcements recently in electronics, chip making, batteries, etc. have received attention. But overall, the requirements of a significant uptick in manufacturing investments remain an ongoing policy challenge.

Over the past few years, the government has tried a variety of interventions, such as the PLI (production-linked incentive) scheme, National Logistics Policy, Gati Shakti, Cluster Development, Industrial Corridors, ease of doing business, and capital subsidies for investment to come. Now, further to these attempts, the announcement about developing 12 industrial smart cities (ISCs) comes as a turbo-charger. The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs, on August 27, cleared public investment of ₹28,602 crore to develop 12 ISCs in six major industrial corridors across 10 states. The locations are: ● Five cities along the Amritsar-Kolkata Industrial Corridor: (Rajpura-Patiala in Punjab, Khurda in Uttarakhand, Agra and Prayagraj in Uttar Pradesh, and Gaya in Bihar). ● Two cities along the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial corridor: (Jodhpur-Pali in Rajasthan and Bhiwadi in Maharashtra). ● Four in the Industrial Corridors of Vizag-Chennai, Hyderabad-Bangalore, Hyderabad-Nagpur, and Chennai-Bangalore (Kopparthi and Orvakal in Andhra Pradesh, Zaheerabad in Telangana, and Palakkad in Kerala).

The name of one more city has not yet been revealed on account of the model code of conduct in force currently. There is no doubt that efforts of this nature provide a strong signal of the government's continuing and committed efforts to bolster manufacturing investment. But it needs emphasis that availability of industrial locations is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. And so, it is in the context of providing a far superior enabling ecosystem that these 12 new destinations should seek to pack in more punch than hitherto available destinations.

Here are seven suggestions that pack in more punch. **Plug and play:** A "plug and play" environment replete with all the procedural relaxations associated with "ease of doing business" would be essential. Each location must create facilitation centres, which demonstrate practically the reforms that keep getting announced from the power portals of New Delhi.

Social infrastructure: For too long, the "social" needs of employees and their families have been neglected in industrial estates. A parallel plan to incentivise setting up schools, hospitals, parks, retail, leisure and entertainment facilities should be an integral part of a holistically planned development agenda. **Smart utilities:** "Smart" industrial cities built in the middle of the 21st century must necessarily incorporate "smart utilities". These include circularity in liquid and solid waste management as well as the full complement of green energy, and ICT technologies available.

Integration and convergence: It will mean the existing policies for the National Single Window System, One District One Product, Sagarmala, AMRUT, Smart Cities, Swachh Bharat, Jal Shakti, Awas Yojana, Skill Development Centres, the revised SEZ (Special Economic Zone) scheme, Challenge Fund for Cities and other energy, and telecom and public transport schemes must all converge seamlessly. Multi-modal and inland container depots too need inclusion. **Learning from past initiatives:** The first generation of seven Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor Development Corporation (DMICDC) industrial destinations like Dholera and Shendra-Bidkar have yet to develop to their full potential. These projects have also faced issues related to land acquisition and rehabilitation, delays in infrastructure development, and lack of coordination among multiple stakeholders.

Attract private capital as co-developers: The ₹28,602 crore central allocation averages around

₹2,400 crore per location. It is understood that state governments are to provide land and also their share of capital expenditure (capex). But all this together will just about cover the capex of external development charges. So, creative PPP (public-private partnership) formats must be structured to draw in private capital in core, supporting and social infrastructure development, and even O&M (operations and maintenance).

The private sector must actively participate as co-developers should be seriously pursued. **Coastal economic zones (CEZs):** To boost India's manufacturing competitiveness with a view to exporting, the big unaddressed idea is still that of CEZs. Back in 2005, Arvind Panagariya, then heading the NITI Aayog, advocated the bold idea of setting up massive CEZs exemplified by Chinese examples, structured as free trade zones, much like what GIFT City in Ahmedabad is for the financial sector. These CEZs, with a hassle-free regulatory environment, were to be the springboard for India's massive leap into labour-intensive, value-added exports. It is still not too late to pursue this suggestion.

India has a long history of trying to attract manufacturing investment by creating specialised enclaves. The social and industrial estates sprouting in almost every state, many of them decrepit and fallow today. This was followed by cluster development efforts and smart cities. The private sector then was motivated to come in and the likes of Mahindra and Sricity industrial enclaves do stand out as notable successes. The DMICDC attempted seven new locations. The SEZ movement created a significant buzz, but unfortunately, many of them did not survive the still-born DESH (Development of Enterprise and Service Hubs) Bill, 2023. And now we have these 12 ISCs.

Overall, these 12 ISCs should be given priority by both the central and state governments. But they must be seen to be markedly different from earlier attempts. They must strive to pack more punch.

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25 have adopted a single rate of tax, and it is rare to find countries with more than two rates, aside from India. Multiple rates create classification disputes, introduce anomalies in terms of inverted duty structures, and induce unintended changes and resource allocations, besides increasing compliance and administrative complexity. Unfortunately, the GST Network does not provide rate-wise revenue collections, but the information collected from Karnataka shows that more than 75 per cent of GST revenue in 2023-24 accrued from the two rates — 12 per cent and 18 per cent. A back-of-the-envelope calculation shows that combining these two rates into a 15 per cent rate will be revenue-neutral. Similarly, limiting the 28 per cent rate to demerit goods would free the construction and passenger vehicles industry from the excessive burden, and can improve the labour-intensive construction sector and passenger car services sector. Even if some revenue is sacrificed on this account, this could be offset by pruning the large list of exempted items and increasing the 5 per cent rate to 6 per cent. Thus, effectively, the number of rates can be reduced to two with an additional rate on demerit or demerit goods without sacrificing revenue.

Another major reform needed to make the tax system comprehensive and competitive is the inclusion of petroleum products and electricity in the GST base. In 2019-20, excise duty on petroleum products accounted for 29 per cent of the Centre's consumption tax revenues. The sales tax on petroleum products in the non-special category states was almost 53 per cent, varying from 36 per cent in Bihar to 61 per cent in Telangana. The exclusion penalises exporters, as they cannot zero-rate the input taxes on transport used in the production and distribution processes. Besides, it renders the tax base narrow as the entire petroleum sector, except for air travel and self-contraction and first-class train travel, is exempted.

In general, there is resistance to change, and that is particularly true of the tax system. As stated by Paul Johnson and David Miles of the Institute of Fiscal Studies while reviewing the report on tax reform in the UK by a Committee chaired by James Mirrlees, "In the real world, the proposals for tax reform are constrained by politics. Those who lose from tax reforms tend to be vocal and those who gain, tend to be ungrateful. This can lead to tax policy, perhaps more than any other policy, to a tyranny of status quo". The GST Council has appointed a group of ministers to review the rate structure and recommend changes. However, very little progress has been made in this regard, partly because, in the absence of credible research, no one is willing to risk revenue. The argument that the people have come to accept the rate structure and, therefore, there is no need for any major change is short-sighted and does not consider the invisible economic damage caused by the distortions. Hopefully, rate rationalisation and measures to make the GST comprehensive will be taken up sooner.

The writer, a former director of NIPFP, was a member of the Fourteenth Finance Commission. The views are personal

Why Palestine dies



BOOK REVIEW

SAURABH SHARMA

At least 100,000 Palestinians have been forcibly displaced, many not for the first time, from Deir el-Balah in the past few days, with some not even able to find space to set up tents as the Israeli military keeps shrinking the tiny Gaza Strip, notes one of Al Jazeera's latest reports on the war that Israel has waged on Gaza. Alongside the theatrics of violence that Gaza has become, is the near-inaction of the international community.

There are any number of exceptional accounts explaining how the Israel-Palestine conflict reached this stage. But few people have been as argumentative as writer and lawyer Raja

Shehadeh. The winner of the 2008 Orwell Prize, Mr Shehadeh delivered two lectures titled "The Danger or Peace? What Does Israel Fear from Palestine?" and "Does Israel Fear Peace? Reflections on the Failures of International Law and Human Rights, and on Sources of Hope" in 2016 and 2017, respectively. The former was at Ritsumeikan University, Japan, and the latter was at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. The former is a primer of sorts — is a revised and extended version of the two talks.

The co-founder of a human rights organisation for Palestinians, Al-Haq, Mr Shehadeh offers "new ways to think about" the Israel-Palestine conflict in this book. Divided into two parts, this brief account not only serves as a record of gross violation of the human rights of Palestinian people but is also a befitting reminder that no other actor can effectively intervene to mediate peace between the two parties.

In the first part, titled "How Did We Get Here?", Mr Shehadeh begins by

pointing out that the "late 1980s and early 1990s were a time of hope in the world." The Berlin Wall had fallen. Apartheid in South Africa had ended. So why, he asks, did the resolution of long-standing endemic injustices elsewhere not inspire the Israeli government to end its occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, resolve outstanding issues between Palestinians and Israelis and usher in a lasting peace?

Principally, he says, there was either a lack of interest on the part of the international fraternity or it favoured Israel because doing so helped their strategic interests. Other than that, storytelling has played a crucial role in the persecution of Palestinians — a tactic that every settler-coloniser employs to hold sway over people and mobilise support.

Mr Shehadeh describes 1948, the year Israel was formed and which the Palestinians call the Nakba (catastrophe), as "year zero" in which not only did the ethnic cleansing and displacement of Palestinians take place but the "entire history of Palestine" was rewritten. Interestingly, Israel celebrates 1948 as "its war of independence" from

the British but it was the latter who helped create a Jewish state. The narrative that Israel propagates is two-pronged: First, the evidence of the Jewish land in the holy Bible; second, "The sympathy in the wake of one of the worst atrocities in modern history, the Holocaust" that it leveraged.

In the absence of a centralised voice against the oppression and violence that Israel was inflicting on the Palestinian population — until the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) was formed in the 1960s — the international community swallowed the fictions created by the Israelis. An example Mr Shehadeh highlights is the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), whose full name includes "for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East", was set up to provide relief to Palestinian refugees. Israel has always tried to attack it. It "accused ten UNRWA employees of participating in the

October 2023 killings, leading major donors to withhold their funding to UNRWA, which provides services to nearly 6 million Palestinian refugees in three countries and in the Occupied Territories, including eastern Jerusalem."

In the second part of the book, Mr Shehadeh weaves in his personal history. He writes, "I remember how my grandmother, who was forced out of Jaffa in April 1948, would look at the horizon across the hills from Ramallah and believe she was looking at the lights of Jaffa." Such references

rehumanise the Palestinian struggle. Mr Shehadeh, who has been studying "the development of Israeli legal language in the West Bank" for the last 25 years notes "how the Israeli state has been extended into the Occupied Territories through the acquisition of land and its registration in the Israel Land Authority. I have seen how large

areas were defined as Israeli Regional Councils and included within Israel. How in 2003 Israel began building the Separation Wall, which was used to divide Palestinian communities and inhibit freedom of movement. How the land planning schemes were amended to favour Israeli Jews, so that one after another became, to all intents and purposes, annexed to Israel, and our towns and villages were left as islands within the Israeli expanse, fulfilling Al Sharon's promise made in the early 1980s that Israel was going to create "an entirely different map of the country." Not only that, but the destruction of institutions such as universities, books, and monuments is also underway. Towards the end of the book, Mr Shehadeh invokes the Palestinian poet Refaat Alnawar to suggest that countering false propaganda requires people to continue to tell the truth, to preserve their map. "If I must die, you must live/to tell my story, if I must die, let it bring hope, let it be a tale."

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End compensation cess

States can benefit from GST rate rationalisation

The Group of Ministers constituted by the GST Council under Minister of State, Pankaj Chaudhary, should not find it too difficult to decide the future of the compensation cess. The compensation payments, included in the GST Act, 2017, was the carrot held out to States to make them transition to the new indirect tax regime. It promised States a generous 14 per cent growth in taxes subsumed under GST in the first five years and sought to meet the shortfalls in this promise through the cess levied on sin and luxury goods.

It is well that the compensation payments to States have ended in June 2022. The levy of the cess, which has been extended until March 2026, to meet the repayment obligations on loans taken to compensate States for the shortfall in revenue during Covid, should also come to an end once these obligations are fulfilled. With the GST regime quite firmly in place and most States having adapted to the new indirect tax regime fairly well, the idea of compensating the States should be put to rest. That said, the primary task before the GoM will be to recommend the way the levies under compensation cess can be assimilated into the GST rates. The collections from this cess averaged around ₹12,000 crore every month in 2023-24 and the Centre and the States can benefit from the continuation of this levy, albeit with more rational rates of taxes and in a different form. The GoM should keep the consumers in mind while suggesting the way forward. There is a strong case for retaining higher taxes on tobacco, pan masala and related products to deter the consumption of these products which have debilitating impact on health. Similarly, there is a case for higher levy on coal to attain our sustainability goals.

But the cess levied on motor vehicles needs to be rationalised. While the cess on small and medium sized cars is not too high, the compensation cess on larger cars ranges from 20 to 22 per cent, taking the overall GST levy to 50 per cent for these vehicles. Some of these cars cannot be classified as luxury vehicles and are used by the middle-class. Reducing the GST rates on such goods of mass consumption can increase demand, giving a boost to the automobile and ancillary industries. Besides reviewing these levies, the rate rationalisation committee should act quickly on readjusting the GST slabs and rationalising all the other GST rates too, to make the entire regime simpler.

If the GOM recommends higher levy on goods currently subject to compensation cess, it should be mindful not to classify it as cess. This is to ensure that the revenue earned from these goods are equitably shared between the Centre and the States. The sharing of revenue from these goods should be on lines similar to other goods and services under GST. This will ensure that States with a high consumption of luxury goods also enjoy commensurately high GST revenue.

POCKET



Estimating banks' liquidity needs, a tricky issue

MONEY MATTERS. RBI's draft guidelines on liquidity coverage ratio are useful, but internet banking complicates matters for banks



Liquidity risk arises when a bank is not able to meet payment obligations primarily from its depositors and give, simultaneously, enough loans to its existing or potential borrowers.

Thus, liquidity risk can impair a bank's intermediation function on daily basis. Liquidity risk became materially visible during the 2007-09 Global Financial Crisis.

Post-crisis, the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision introduced two measures to mitigate the liquidity risk: (a) Liquidity Coverage Ratio (LCR) to measure and limit a bank's liquidity risk over 30 calendar days and (b) Net Stable Funding Ratio (NSFR) as a longer-term liquidity metric to measure and limit banks' structural asset and liability mismatches. Both LCR and NSFR, albeit separate, complement each other to maintain a safe and sound banking system.

LCR = [Total Stock of High-Quality Liquid Assets (HQLAs) * 100] / [Total Net Cash Outflows over the next 30 calendar days]

LCR seeks to ensure that a bank has adequate stock of unencumbered HQLAs that can be converted into cash easily and quickly to meet its liquidity needs under a 30-day liquidity stress scenario.

LCR helps improve the banking sector's ability to absorb the financial or economic shocks and reduce the 'contagion risk', within and outside.

INDIAN LCR FRAMEWORK RBI issued the Indian framework for LCR requirements on June 9, 2014 for all scheduled commercial banks (excluding Regional Rural Banks (RRBs)).

Introduced in five phases starting January 1, 2015, the minimum LCR requirement stipulated by RBI is 100 per cent since January 1, 2019.

With their establishment, Small Finance Banks (SFBs) came under the framework. Currently, the LCR

framework excludes RRBs, Payments Banks and Local Area Banks.

DRAFT LCR GUIDELINES On July 25, 2024, RBI brought out Draft Guidelines (DGs) containing "Review of Haircuts on High Quality Liquid Assets (HQLAs) and Run-off Rates on Certain Categories of Deposits." DGs, which aim at further enhancing the liquidity resilience of banks, will be operational from April 1, 2025.

Two salient proposals in DGs are: (a) Banks to assign an additional 5 per cent run-off factor for retail deposits which are enabled with Internet and Mobile Banking (IMB) facilities, i.e., stable retail deposits enabled with IMB to have 10 per cent run-off factor and less stable deposits enabled with IMB to have 15 per cent run-off factor and (b) Unsecured wholesale funding provided by non-financial small business customers to be treated in accordance with the treatment of retail deposits as at (a).

With this, LCR perhaps covers nearly all bank accounts now.

COMMENTS Deposits are the key driver of LCR. We feel that the two proactive proposals are far-sighted against the backdrop of proliferating popularity of IMB, even for smaller transactions.

Banks can easily accommodate the additional run-off factors proposed, as most banks have their LCR much above the minimum requirement (Table 1). Nevertheless, banks have to accelerate their efforts to mobilise stable or non-callable deposits.

Unlike the 1980s and 1990s, banks now purely depend on walk-in deposits and canvassing via electronic means. Banks have to revive their special deposit mobilisation campaigns for stable deposits for longer maturity periods. Currently deposits growth is lagging credit growth which makes our proposal apt.

Today, banks are financially in a good position to offer higher interest rates on

Banks need to revive their special deposit mobilisation campaigns for stable deposits for longer maturity periods

Bank group-wise LCR and NIM

Bank group	LCR (Q4-ended 2024)			NIM (2023-24)		
	Median	Range		Median	Range	
PSBs (12)	133.46	125.36 - 205.09		3.26	2.45 - 3.92	
NPBs (9)	120.66	113.64 - 129.92		4.53	2.40 - 7.35	
OPBs (12)	160.64	117.03 - 268.84		3.79	3.20 - 5.49	
SFBs (11)	152.76	117.37 - 463.27		8.36	3.94 - 11.12	

Source: Our computation based on data collected from bank websites. PSBs - Public Sector Banks; NPBs - New/Old Private Banks; SFBs - Small Finance Banks; NIM - Net Interest Margin; Brackets: number of banks

deposits to calm financial disintermediation. First, banks are enjoying good NIM (Table 1) which, in our view, can accommodate 'up to 100 bps' increase in deposit rates without increasing lending rates.

Second, according to RBI, during May 2022 to March 2024 (Tightening Cycle), Repo Rate went up by 250 bps and Weighted Average Domestic Term Deposit Rate (WADTDR) (Fresh Deposits) by 259 bps, but WADTDR (Outstanding Deposits) by 185 bps.

Further, as an empirical study by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation demonstrated, even while a bank approached failure and tried to mobilise deposits at higher rates, there was significant run-in of deposits along with deposit run-off.

However, if regulators overestimate outflows in LCR, banks could be forced to hold too much liquidity, introducing inefficiencies into the financial system by way of reduced credit availability. In fact, this will be a double whammy for banks - slower deposit growth and higher liquidity which may impact their future profitability.

MISSING EXPLANATIONS

However, what isn't clear in the draft guidelines is that how much deposits accrue through IMB, and of these, how much is stable and how much less stable. It is presumed that RBI must have collected these data, and transparency requires their disclosure in the Final Guidelines.

Another question is whether IMB deposits are observed to be more volatile than the "bulk" deposits which

are characteristically observed to be less stable. Bulk depositors select their banks by analysing banks' financials rigorously, and they regularly monitor their banks' activities.

Therefore, they can detect the likelihood of a bank's fragility prior to retail depositors, and move their deposits to safer banks. And, to add fuel to the fire, they flaunt it in the social media which influences retail depositors to follow suit.

LCR tests a bank's readiness to meet outflows for 30 days. However, even after LCR was operationalised, liquidity imbroglio led to the crises in Silicon Valley Bank (US) and Credit Suisse, where withdrawals took no time. In India, the regulator is well prepared to deal with any serious drag on liquidity.

The document titled "Basel III: The Liquidity Coverage Ratio and liquidity risk monitoring tools (January 2013)" supports that deposit insurance bolsters funding stability.

In context, the Indian deposit insurance system needs to be overhauled in order to make it more conducive to well-run banks and quicker resolution of troubled banks.

In sum, the draft guidelines constitute a small sacrifice that banks should make today for a large gain, i.e., financial stability in future. Nevertheless, a basic question remains: even if maintaining the stipulated LCR logs Indian banking to the international benchmarks, in reality, are banks not considered as 'too-big-to-fail' in the country?

Das is a former senior economist, SBI, and Rath a former central banker. Views expressed are personal

Adding spice to the value of Indian turmeric

India can be a top turmeric supplier for global nutraceuticals. Standardised farming and post-harvest practices are a must

Arpita Mukherjee
Trishali Khanna

The world is moving towards nutraceutical products and many traditional Indian spices are now in global nutraceutical value chains. One such example is that of turmeric, scientifically known as *Curcuma longa*.

Turmeric has been integral part of India's culture, cuisine, and traditional medicine, like Ayurveda and Unani, for centuries due to its preventive, therapeutic and curative properties. As global consumers increasingly embrace holistic health practices, turmeric has gained prominence in the nutraceutical market.

Its main bioactive compound, curcumin, is widely used as a potent nutraceutical ingredient, in a variety of products, from curcumin capsules/tablets to golden milk or teas and functional smoothies. Major companies, both domestic as well as multinational, have incorporated turmeric into their product lines, further expanding its global reach.

Curcumin, known as the "wonder drug of life", has numerous health benefits, such as healing wounds, an anti-diabetic, anti-angiogenic, anti-thrombotic, anti-infective,

antibacterial, antifungal, anti-inflammatory, anticancer, antiseptic, antiallergic, and antiviral agent. India is the largest producer of turmeric, globally. In FY2023-24, around 3.08 lakh hectares of land was under turmeric cultivation, producing over 12.21 lakh tonnes and more than 75 per cent of global production. More than 30 varieties of turmeric are cultivated, each with different levels of curcumin.

Many varieties, like Salem, Armoor, Sudarshana, etc., have less than 4 per cent curcumin content, with the curcumin content varying across Geographic Indication (GI) products, ranging from 2.5-4.5 per cent in Erode Manjal (Tamil Nadu), 3.45 per cent in Sangli (Maharashtra), to 6.12 per cent in Lakadong (Meghalaya). Varieties like Blue Turmeric (*Curcuma alata*), grown in Andhra Pradesh, possesses significant medicinal properties, making it valuable for nutraceuticals companies.

THE CHALLENGES

Today, the production of high-curcumin content quality turmeric is limited, with India producing less than 10 per cent of the global need. We are unable to supply the quality required by global importers due to three key factors:

Lack of standardisation and



TURMERIC. Export potential enormous

implementation of good agriculture practices (GAP). The traditional farmers with small-scale farmers employing traditional methods, resulting in a lack of standardisation in cultivation practices, lack of implementation good practices. This has led to inconsistent quality and lower curcumin levels. High use of pesticides, insecticides and lead in soil, etc., can lead to product rejections by importers.

Gaps in access to inputs: Indian farmers are facing difficulties in accessing the right quality of seeds and inputs at competitive prices. There is a need for more R&D to develop region-specific high-curcumin content turmeric, improve cultivation practices and develop more efficient processing techniques.

Inadequate post-harvest processing: Post-harvest processes, including cleaning, drying, and curing, play a pivotal role in determining the final quality of turmeric. Inefficient practices during this stage can result in contamination, curcumin content loss, and product degradation.

To maintain leadership position in production and exports, India must transition from being a primary supplier of raw turmeric for food, dye, etc., to become a leader in high-value/high-curcumin content turmeric products. This strategic shift necessitates a focus on quality, innovation, branding, and the development of value-added products.

To capitalise on the growing nutraceutical market, the key initiatives needed include providing farmers with inputs, training and knowledge for high-curcumin varieties, investing in post-harvest infrastructure, R&D, certification and branding, sustainability and ethical practices, addressing bioavailability challenges, and leveraging GI tags for turmeric varieties. These measures can bolster India's position in the turmeric value chain.

Mukherjee is Professor and Khanna is Research Assistant, ICRIER.

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EV confusion

With reference to the news report "Cabinet clears new sop for EVs", the Cabinet's approval of measures boosting EVs is in contrast to the Road and Transport Minister's recent demand for the scrapping subsidies for EVs.

Such inconsistencies does not bode well for both OEMs and auto ancillaries. The new PM Electric Drive Revolution in Innovative vehicle enhancement does not cover electric cars but they also

need government support to reach a sustainable scale.

We know that electric cars are less than 10 per cent of total car sales and electric charging infrastructure has a long way to go.

Bal Govind
Noida

Rate cut needed

Apropos the news report "Retail inflation expected to remain below 4% in August" (September 12). One feels, the RBI can reduce the Legal

Reserve Ratio (that is, Cash Reserve Ratio and Statutory Liquidity Ratio) marginally, to release liquidity into the economy which in turn will boost aggregate demand and employment.

Needless to say, the deposit crunch which the commercial banks confront today can be salvaged to some extent by just relaxing one of the quantitative instruments of credit control — the LRR.

S Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

Health cover for elders

This is with reference to the news report "Cabinet nod for Ayushman health cover to senior citizens 70 and above" (September 12). In state developed countries, there are many schemes for the elderly. However, in India, it is sad to see or read about elders left to fend for themselves without any support from society or children. In this backdrop, Ayushman health coverage for senior citizens is a welcome move. The government

should introduce more such schemes, and give wide publicity to them, apart from making existing schemes more attractive.

The government should enact laws granting pensions, medical insurance, and other facilities to elders who are financially weak. There should be more government-run old-age homes where the elders should be looked after with love and care.

Veena Shenoy
Thane

On the research runway

The Prime Minister is leading from the front

S Vaidhyasubramanian

On the advice of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the issue regarding GST on research grants to universities has been sorted out. The Finance Ministry has decided to exempt GST on universities created by Central or State legislatures, and other universities exempted under Section 35 of the Income Tax Act. For the academia, this is a perfect gift on the eve of the first Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) meeting under the Chairmanship of the Prime Minister.

Also, the Prime Minister's efforts to leapfrog India's progress in high-tech and emerging technologies continues with the Semicon 2024 and Global Bio-India 2024 events — a cause for further cheer for Indian academia.

PATH-BREAKING REFORMS

The first governing body meeting of ANRF on September 10 saw the launch of path-breaking reforms, announcing the ushering in of world-class research in India's universities, colleges, research institutions and R&D laboratories for achieving global capabilities and competitiveness. The Partnerships for Accelerated Innovation and Research (PAIR) aim at building coherent synergy between top, middle and low rung institutions to create a ripple effect across the higher-end research ecosystem.

The Mission for Advancement in High-impact Areas (MAHA) has rightly identified electric vehicles, mobility and advanced materials for the initial priority-driven research, with much more areas in the pipeline.

The ANRF Centre of Excellence (ACE) was also announced to create a world-class research centre with cutting-edge infrastructure and funding to support globally competitive research. Interdisciplinary and fundamental research completes the comprehensive vision of ANRF in its first meeting, which also assured an ease of doing research mechanism to increase research output.

A tellingly visible manifestation of ANRF's vision could be seen during the Prime Minister's inaugural address at the Semicon 2024 event.

The Prime Minister spoke on behalf of not only the government but also the semiconductor industry with a deep sense of positivism, assuring the world of India's march towards global



COMMITTED. To foster research

semiconductor manufacturing excellence. To scale the workforce at all levels — R&D, engineers and technicians — the Prime Minister has committed ₹1 lakh crore funding under ANRF to enhance research capabilities, clearly aligning with ANRF's MAHA mission for semiconductor.

As the Prime Minister shared India's ambition to reach \$500 billion in electronics sector business and create six million jobs by the end of the decade, the ANRF + Semicon combo is a game changing tech formula.

Moving beyond chips to biotech, the Prime Minister's participation in the Global Bio-India 2024 summit is another research signal.

The BioE3 (Biotechnology for Economy, Environment and Employment) policy that was recently announced is India's transformational leap, to position itself as a global biotech powerhouse.

The policy aims to promote economic, environmental and employment enrichment with a focus on underserved geographies with a focus on bio-manufacturing. The policy will build a conducive environment that would foster innovation, support R&D and build India's strength in the global biotechnology market; India's biotechnology market is poised to touch \$300 billion by 2030. Global Bio-India will deliberate on the opportunities and key challenges in the areas of bio-manufacturing, for achieving a growth-oriented roadmap for the biotechnology sector.

Beginning with the GST exemption on research grants and continuing with ANRF, Semicon and Global Bio-India, the research runway signals are clear for a smooth take-off with no mid-air turbulence and for a smoother landing for India to reach its new research destination.

The writer is Vice-Chancellor & Tata Sons Chair Professor of Management, SAITRA University. Views are personal



SK SARKAR

More than 40 per cent of India is arid and semi-arid with erratic and scanty rainfall leading to water stress/scarcity situations that impact lives and livelihoods in these regions. With climate change, the rainfall pattern is changing and water shortage is visible in many parts of the country. Also, there are wide spatial and temporal variations in the distribution of water. Eighty per cent of rainfall occurs in nearly four months of the year.

A NITI Aayog study (2019) estimates that by 2050, water availability (supply) in India will reduce to half of the demand. Thus, demand side water management is extremely important.

For many years, water was considered a free or non-economic good such as air. However, due to exponential growth of population, increased food demand, lifestyle changes, and high economic growth, water is now considered an economic good in addition to being a social good in some cases. The UN Dublin Principle (1992) emphasised on the importance of economic value of water in general and irrigation water in particular.

If water is treated as an economic good, some price should be attached to it. Domestic water and water for industries are charged, but irrigation water is considered a non-merit good, often supported by government funds.

The National Water Policy (NWP) 1987 mandated that water rates should convey the scarcity value of the resource to users, foster motivation for economy in water use, and cover annual operation and maintenance (O&M) costs and a part of fixed cost for irrigation works.

The NWP 2002 suggested that water rates should cover at least O&M cost initially and part of capital costs subsequently. The rates should be linked to the quality of service provided. Subsidy on water rates should be well-targeted and transparent. The NWP 2012 suggested that in order to meet equity, efficiency and economic principles, water pricing should, as a rule, be determined on volumetric basis.

NORMS FOLLOWED BY STATES

Per NWP 2012, water pricing should be under the domain of the Water Regulatory Authority (WRA). There are no independent WRAs in many States and, as a result, the mechanism of fixing water charges is ad hoc, non-consultative and non-transparent. Revision of water rates by States is often outdated; in Kerala, for 47 years there were no changes in water rates. In Karnataka, there are water rates for 16



REUTERS

Water pricing should reflect its true value

MAKE IT COUNT. Every State must have a Water Regulatory Authority, which should ideally follow the volumetric system of pricing

crops with respect to flow irrigation and lift irrigation; for sugarcane, the rate for lift irrigation is ₹2,965.16 per hectare, and for flow irrigation it is ₹988.39 per hectare. For manual crops in Karnataka, for lift irrigation it is ₹74.13 per hectare and for flow irrigation, ₹37.06.

In the case of groundwater, while 20 States/UTs (Maharashtra, Rajasthan, etc) follow Central Ground Water Authority (CGWA) regulation, 16 States/UTs follow Ground Water Regulation set by States. In most cases, there is no coherence between State and Central guidelines. For groundwater, there is no pricing in both rural and urban areas for drinking and domestic purposes, for agriculture activities, and for micro and small enterprises drawing groundwater of less than 10 cum/day.

For others, groundwater rates are linked to the quantum of withdrawal and

The concept of water as an economic good should be adopted in all cases; the cost recovery in irrigation sector should cover O&M costs and at least 1 per cent interest on capital employed

criticality of aquifers. Groundwater rates are applicable to category of areas (i.e. safe, semi-critical, critical, over-exploited). For example, if the quantum of withdrawal is up to 50 m³/day, the abstraction charges for safe areas is ₹1 per m³, and for overexploited area (existing industries), ₹8 per m³. However, the largest consumer, agriculture, is not under the net of groundwater regulation.

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Many countries follow volumetric water pricing. It ensures economic efficiency if processes are kept at marginal cost of water. In the case of domestic, industrial and commercial use of water, OECD countries levy uniform volumetric charges. Many other countries follow the two-part tariff (fixed and volumetric components) norm. The volumetric pricing system is followed in the US, Jordan, the UK, Australia and France for irrigation water. In India, in contrast, there is only area- or crop-based pricing with flat rates.

In the case of groundwater, volumetric water pricing is adopted in China, South Africa, Australia, Israel, Chile. In South Africa, there is seasonal pricing based on groundwater availability, and incentive for adopting water saving practices. In Australia, market-based mechanism such as water

trading ensures water entitlement and flexibility for users to buy and sell water allocations.

FUTURE STEPS

First, the concept of water as an economic good should be adopted in all cases; the cost recovery in irrigation sector should cover O&M costs and at least 1 per cent interest on capital employed, as recommended by the erstwhile Planning Commission.

Second, a volumetric pricing system in irrigation sector should be implemented. Incentive should be given for using water-efficient technologies such as drip/sprinkler irrigation in agriculture. A National Irrigation Water Policy should be framed after extensive deliberations with States.

Third, more and more users of groundwater should be brought under the ambit of water pricing. Volumetric pricing should be introduced for all uses including irrigation. There should be incentive for adopting metering of infrastructure, for water conservation, and for introducing water audit-based credit.

And, finally, all States should have a WRA and their mandate on pricing for various water users should be ensured.

The writer is a Distinguished Fellow, TERI, New Delhi, and a former Secretary, Ministry of Water Resources

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

September 13, 2004

IDBI may not get go-ahead for PSU bank acquisition

According to senior officials of the Finance Ministry, IDBI might not be allowed to take over another bank since it could alter the unique character that it is committed to maintain. "The mandate of IDBI is to retain its development financial institution (DFI) characteristic as its core activity. The DFI character might alter if it takes over another commercial bank," a senior official said.

More steps soon to check inflation: Chidambaram

A day after the Reserve Bank of India raised the cash reserve ratio (CRR) to check excess liquidity, the Finance Minister, Mr P Chidambaram, said more measures would be taken to contain inflation from shooting up due to external factors — especially the unbridled surge in global crude oil prices.

Toyota plans to launch Indianised Innova next year

Toyota-Kirloskar is expected to launch Innova, the crossover passenger vehicle, in India early next year. The Innova, launched in Indonesia early this month, will be modified to suit Indian conditions. Innova is a part of the international multi-purpose vehicle platform (MPV), for which Toyota-Kirloskar Auto Parts is supplying transmission parts.

Arjun Goswami
Aditya Rathore
Vrinda Nargas

During the COP26 summit in Glasgow, India set an ambitious target to achieve net-zero by 2070. For faster phasing-in of renewable energy, there is a need of financing the climate transition. Green debt instruments are playing a crucial role in this endeavour. However, there is also a need to provide the capital necessary for industries to finance the shift from high-carbon to low-carbon operations. This will lead to cleaner industrial operations. In this regard, transition bonds merit attention. While there exists a wide variety of green debt instruments, they are all typically used to fund projects that are already environment-friendly or have identified environmental benefits.

Transition bonds, a sub-set of green bonds, are of particular significance as they can support the gradual shift of industries like steel, cement, and oil

and gas, which are traditionally heavy emitters of carbon dioxide, thereby facilitating businesses in making a smooth transition from their current high-carbon operation to their future low-carbon goals. The uses of the proceeds from these bonds can include funding improvements in existing energy infrastructure to make it compatible with renewable energy sources such as wind or solar energy as well as funding energy efficiency measures that reduce overall energy demand.

LACUNA IN FRAMEWORK

The Securities and Exchange Board of India, vide circular 'Additional requirements for the issuers of transition bonds', issued in May 2023, has set out regulations that govern the issuance and trading of transition bonds, disclosures regarding transition plans and progress in the implementation of such plans. However, there are still issues concerning the lack of a well-defined



TRANSITION FUNDS. Vital for net-zero

framework and terminology.

It is the need of the hour to create a standardised framework which will make it easier to identify, support, and invest in projects that align with national and global climate transition goals. This includes clearly defining what constitutes a transition project and the criteria for evaluating the environmental impact of projects. Additionally, the projects financed through these bonds must contribute to India's net-zero target.

Such a framework is essential for allaying concerns regarding green-washing and transparency. This will inspire greater confidence in the

green credentials of transition projects and encourage greater participation from private investors and consequently companies in climate transition-related initiatives. The announcement in the Budget this year regarding the development of a climate finance taxonomy is a vital step in this direction. It will provide a fillip to the green finance market in India.

At this juncture, it is apposite to point towards the Japanese example of transition bonds. The Japanese government issued its first tranche of climate transition bonds earlier this year in February, which are expected to bring in private sector investments in carbon-intensive industries and fund decarbonisation initiatives.

For transition bonds and transition finance to be successful, they must be supported by strong policy frameworks and adequate financial mechanisms.

Goswami is Director — Public Policy, Rathore is Senior Associate, and Nargas is Associate, Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2525



EASY

ACROSS

1. A contrivance (11)
8. Relating to sight (5)
9. Pushed with the bent arm (7)
10. Form of speech peculiar to district (7)
11. Two-footed creature (5)
12. Turkish robe; type of sleeve (6)
14. Makes fit or suitable (6)
18. Quilt (5)
19. Float used to support bridge (7)
21. Card game (7)
23. Large birds (5)
24. Can be stopped happening (11)

DOWN

1. Thronged (7)
2. Court game (7)
3. Pleated filling (5)
4. Pleasing, attractive (6)
5. Drank in, absorbed (7)
6. At present (3)
7. Lost colour (5)
13. Piece of valuable old furniture (7)
15. Saying, maxim (7)
16. Meaning what one says (7)
17. To each individually (6)
18. Exclude, don't allow in (5)
20. Darkness (5)
22. Strike, destroy, kill (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. Contrivance that might contain port (11)
8. With which publican measures tip company put out (5)
9. Nudged out below somehow by editor (7)
10. Local language form used by idle cat (7)
11. Being two-footed, one needs first patient in bed (5)
12. Kind of sleeve fashioned from almond (6)
14. Changes to fit pads at putting them out (6)
18. It may cover one lying in piece for two that involves five (5)
19. Bust over twenty-one in bridge? (7)
21. Quiz and bee in form two, three or four can play (7)
23. Brent birds come out of these eggs backwards (5)
24. It can be stopped happening with parking; a belt never alters (11)

DOWN

1. Cord we'd had to use with so many people there (7)
2. Game may be bent and everything (7)
3. Make her cut the end off and trim it with a frill (5)
4. Try pet out if it's so attractive (6)
5. Drank with me and used but I'd provided (7)
6. Having beaten up at this time (3)
7. Fellow dead wrong to have lost strength (5)
13. Something old and quaint about the East (7)
15. Saying it has a moral lesson for senior scout in non-u pub (7)
16. Unfeigned, from the time that it joined the Engineers (7)
17. A portion given to each individual (6)
18. Don't allow one in with ragged beard (5)
20. Sir abandoned by king as it got dark (5)
22. Use remote control in Monza perhaps (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2524

ACROSS 1. Application 8. Monastic 9. Kilo 10. Crepe 13. Dupe 16. Core 17. Past 18. Seer 20. Latch 24. Only 25. Strumpet 26. Malapropism

DOWN 2. Pint 3. Laser 4. Crimp 5. Irked 6. Imprecision 7. Domesticate 11. Equal 12. Exalt 14. Unau 15. Free 19. Royal 21. Alter 22. Chump 23. Epos

IN THE LIMELIGHT



Shadows to spotlight: Parvathy on the sets of 'Thangalaan'.

From the margins to the mainstream: how films are elevating marginalised voices

Dalit cinema is emerging as a powerful force, shifting the focus from elite-centric narratives to the stories of marginalised communities; they not only highlight the struggles and aspirations of oppressed groups but also offer mainstream appeal, paving the way for greater inclusivity in Indian cinema

Harish S. Wankhede

The recently released three mainstream films *Thangalaan*, *Vaazhai* (Tamil), and *Veda* (Hindi) are of historic significance. Away from the conventional trends of populist flicks, which often celebrate the cultural and political domination of the social elites, these films revolve around the concerns and dreams of socially marginalised groups. By introducing powerful Dalit protagonists, these films advance a nascent but impressive journey of Dalit cinema, registering a claim for greater democratisation in the Indian film industry.

A visible domination of a peculiar brand of films – often called the ‘masala entertainments’ – and filmmakers, mainly the rich social elites, have made Indian cinema a sphere that lacks democratic credentials. While entertainment-centric popular cinema is necessary for sustaining the film industry, its core centrality for profit and entertainment has marginalised the ethical concerns around which any art form shall be conceptualised. For example, fame, profits, and privileges are appropriated by the niche social elite junta, making the marginalised social groups a dormant spectators of cinematic magic. Ironically, the scant presence of artists and filmmakers from vulnerable social groups such as Dalits, Adivasis, and Other Backward Castes, is not seen as an unhealthy convention in the film fraternity.

In recent years, the Dalit cinema genre tried to bring some reforms to the

conventional routine of popular Indian cinema. The impetus for this change has been driven largely by the regional film industry, especially the Marathi and Tamil cinema, which offers exceptionally brilliant artwork that caters to the interests and concerns of marginalised social groups, and quality entertainment to the general audience. Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* (2013), *Sairat* (2016), and *Naal* (2018) set impressive examples of films that are both socially sensitive and commercially successful. Later Marathi films like *Uchalya* (2015), *Jayanti* (2020), *Kasturi* (2019), *Zollywood* (2022), *Aatmapamphir* (2023), etc. kept the momentum on, building a crucial dialogue on cinema's responsibility in offering socially responsible films.

More possibilities

Pa Ranjith's earlier successful films – *Madras, Kala*, and *Kabali* – have advanced the idea of a new Dalit hero. Big film stars like Rajinikanth are roped in to tell stories about the crises in Dalit lives, their resilience, and heroic attributes. This success was further cultivated creatively by brilliant filmmakers, especially Mari Selvaraj (*Karnan* 2021 and *Pariyerum Perumal*, 2018) and Vetrinaarasan (*Asuran*, 2019 and *Viduthala*, 2023), substantiating the arrival of ‘Dalit genre’ in Indian cinema. By offering nuanced Dalit characters, bestowed with mainstream heroic credentials (like Rajanikant's character in *Kabali*, Dhanush in *Karnan*, and Udhayanidhi in *Maamannan*), it breaks the conventional ‘victim’

stereotypes attached to the representation of Dalit characters on screen.

The Dalit genre in Tamil and Marathi cinema thus created a strong rupture, influencing the Hindi film industry to take its cognisance. As a response, Bollywood has also supplemented this churning by offering powerful Dalit characters in earlier films like *Masaan* (2015), *Manjhi-the Mountain Man* (2015), and recently *Jhund* (2022), *Shamsher* (2022), *Bheed* (2023), and now *Veda* (2024). Interestingly, while this emerging Dalit genre sensitively showcases the claims and desires of the marginalised communities, these films also ensure quality entertainment with the influx of dance, music, drama, and action sequences.

This genre thus offers a possibility that the Dalit character may also emerge as a ‘mainstream hero’, their stories can be inspirational tales and the artists belonging to the Dalit-Bahujan strata may gain mainstream fame. The recent success and critical acclaim of *Thangalaan* and *Vaazhai* suggest that this genre is here to stay.

Within the intellectual discussions on Indian cinema, the popular Hindi cinema has not received a respectable appreciation. It is often seen as a profit-seeking industry that creates hyper-sensational fiction to bewitch the audience, taking them away from engaging with crucial social and political concerns.

In the mid-1970s, the few aberrations that offered critical and socially sensitive narratives were marked as alternative genres or the art-house cinema,

restricting its celebration within the mainstream cinema culture. There is an apprehension that the recent arrival of a nascent but impressive Dalit cinema can be relegated with similar tags to retain the domination of conventional ideas and identities in the filmmaking enterprise.

Connect, promote

It is an appropriate time for the film fraternity to recognise and collaborate with the outstanding cinematic works of artists and producers from socially marginalised communities, elevating them as an inspiration for the new generation.

New cultural festivals, public institutions, and policy frameworks by the state are required that would promote the culture and talent of diverse social groups that are often marginalised in mainstream discourse on cinema, art, and festivity. It is essential to create new platforms and old institutions of popular culture to improvise in order to connect and promote the producers, artists, and technicians from Dalit, Adivasi, and Other Backward Caste communities.

It is also crucial for more Dalits to join the film industry as producers, technicians, and directors bringing their stories and talents. It is high time that the nascent Dalit genre shall be recognised as part of the reformist cinema track, guided by an inclusivist vision, showcasing that the film industry has a crucial responsibility towards promoting social diversity and the values of social justice. Harish S. Wankhede is Assistant Professor, Centre for Political Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
Uppendran

“Is this the season for flying kites?”
“Not as far as I know. Why do you ask?”
“Well, I was having an argument with my grandfather, and he told me to go fly a kite. ... Why are you laughing?”
“Sorry, I just couldn't help it. Don't you know what the expression ‘go fly a kite’ means?”
“I've heard my friends say ‘let's go fly a kite’ whenever they actually wanted to go out and fly a kite.”
“But nobody has ordered you to fly a kite in the middle of an argument, right?”
“Right. Whenever we disagree about something, my grandfather usually ends the conversation by telling me to get lost.”
“And that's how he ended the conversation this time as well. When somebody tells you to ‘go fly a kite’ he/she wants you to leave. In other words, you are asked to get lost. It's a colloquial expression used mainly in American English.”

“So ‘go fly a kite’ means ‘get lost.’ Interesting.”
“Tell me, why did your grandfather ask you to get lost?”
“Oh, that! You see, I wanted to be nice to my grandfather. So I called him a ‘busybody.’”
“You mean busybody. The ‘s’ is pronounced like the ‘z’ in words like ‘zoo’ and ‘zip.’”

“So it's a busybody.”
“Yes, I'm sure your grandfather didn't like it when you called him a ‘busybody.’”
“He didn't like it at all. One thing led to another and we ended up having a big argument.”

“But why did you call him a busybody of all things?”
“He always keeps himself busy doing something or the other.”

“Is that what you think ‘busybody’ means, someone who keeps himself busy?”

“Yes. Doesn't it mean that?”
“No, it doesn't. A ‘busybody’ is someone who keeps interfering in other people's affairs. My neighbour is a busybody, and I can tell you that she is not liked by many people.”

“I can well imagine. People don't like those who interfere in their affairs.”
“That's true. ‘Busybody’ is an informal word, and as you said, most people disapprove of busybodies.”

“And I thought I was complimenting my grandfather by calling him a ‘busybody.’ How could I make such a silly mistake?”

“It happens all the time. For example, some people think that a troublemaker and a troubleshooter mean the same thing.”

“They do mean the same thing, don't they?”

“No, they don't. A troublemaker is one who makes trouble. A troubleshooter shoots down trouble, removes it. In other words, a troubleshooter solves problems, and a troublemaker creates them.”

“Are our politicians troublemakers or troubleshooters?”

“Both actually.”

“But there are more troublemakers than troubleshooters, right?”
“That's the case everywhere. It's easy to create problems. But it's not easy to solve them.”

“I know. Will you be my troubleshooter?”
“Me? Your troubleshooter? What are you talking about?”

“Will you go to my grandfather and explain to him why I called him a busybody.”
“Certainly not. He'll probably tell me to go fly a kite!”

Published in *The Hindu* on May 18, 1993

Word of the day

Confutation:

The speech act of refuting conclusively

Synonyms: rebuttal, disagreement

Usage: Her argument was a clear confutation of his claims.

Pronunciation: /bɪt/hi/ˌkɒnfʊtəʃən/

International Phonetic Alphabet: /kɒnfjuːtʃən/

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

THE DAILY QUIZ

The British writer Roald Dahl was born on this day in 1916. How well do you know him?

Radhika Santhanam

QUESTION 1

Who was the Norwegian grandmamma in *Witches*, who Dahl “absolutely adored” and who was “a wonderful story-teller”, modelled on?

QUESTION 2

What connects Dr Seuss's *Great Day for Up!*, Sylvia Plath's *The Bed Book*, Joan Aiken's *Arabel's Raven*, and Roald Dahl's *Motilda*?

QUESTION 3

Dahl's first commissioned work was published anonymously and was based on how he crash landed a biplane. What was it called?

QUESTION 4

Dahl adapted six of his stories for a television series. Four of the episodes were directed by a man who once made his own film twice and who filmed a psychological thriller in a series of 10-minute takes to make it look like one shot. Name him.

QUESTION 5

The Royal Mint rejected the idea of a commemorative coin to mark the centenary of Dahl's birth. Why?



Visual Question:

This musical fantasy, for which Dahl wrote the screenplay, is based on a children's novel. Name it.

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

1. These two diacritical marks are mirror images of each other. One is called the ogonek. Name the other one. **Ans: Cedilla**

2. Acute, grave, and caron are three types of diacritical marks belonging to a larger group called. **Ans: Accent**

3. Name the diacritical mark that appears on the first letter of this region's name. **Ans: Overring**

4. The use of this diacritical mark denotes a long vowel in many languages. But in statistics, this symbol over a variable indicates the variable's value is an estimate. **Ans: Circumflex (hat operator)**

5. The country's name includes diacritical marks but the U.N. spells it on occasion without the marks. **Ans: São Tomé and Príncipe**

Visual: There are two countries whose names the U.N. spells with diacritical marks. One is Türkiye. Name the other. **Ans: Côte d'Ivoire**

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