

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The number of people dead in the Bihar hooch tragedy

24 Eighteen more people lost their lives after allegedly consuming illicit liquor in Bihar's Siwan and Saran districts. The suspected hooch tragedy triggered a blame game with opposition parties questioning the efficacy of the alcohol ban. **PH**

Complaints filed in the ICT against Sheikh Hasina and others

60 Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) issued arrest warrants against former prime minister Sheikh Hasina and 45 others including Awami League (AL) leaders for alleged crimes against humanity. **PH**

The student loans cancelled for public workers in the U.S.

1 In million. A student loan cancellation programme for public workers has granted relief to more than one million Americans — up from just 7,000 who were approved before it was updated by the Joe Biden administration two years ago. **PH**

Fine introduced in Russia for engaging in a 'childless lifestyle'

4,020 In S. Russian MPs approved the first reading of a draft legislation banning the "propaganda" of childless lifestyles, the latest measure targeting what Moscow depicts as Western liberal ideals. **PH**

The increase in cargo volume handled by major Indian ports

5.03 in per cent. The Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways said that cargo volume handled by 12 major ports rose to 413.747 million metric tonnes (MMT) in September. **PH**
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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On the exception to marital rape

What is the legal provision under challenge? What rights does it infringe upon and what are the contentions advanced by stakeholders? What is the 'doctrine of coverture' in English common law? What was the split verdict issued by the Delhi High Court in 2022 on the issue?

EXPLAINER

Aaratrika Bhaumik

The story so far:

A three-judge Bench headed by Chief Justice of India (CJI) D.Y. Chandrachud has begun hearing a batch of petitions challenging the constitutional validity of Exception 2 to Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (IPC). The challenge also extends, by implication, to Exception 2 of Section 63 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, which supersedes the former provision. These provisions grant legal immunity to Indian husbands by stipulating that "sexual intercourse or acts by a man with his wife, provided she is not under 18 years of age, do not constitute rape".

What do statistics say?

While data on marital rape remains limited due to stigma and legal barriers, available statistics are deeply concerning. Data from the National Family Health Survey-5, conducted between 2019 and 2021, indicates that nearly one-third of married women (18-49 years) in India have experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of their husbands. Additionally, global statistics reveal that approximately three-quarters of all sexual assaults transpire within intimate settings, often perpetrated by someone familiar to the survivor.

What is the genesis of the exception?

The MRE is a colonial relic, originating from the "doctrine of coverture" in English common law, which severely curtailed a married woman's legal autonomy. As elucidated by the Supreme Court in *Joseph Shine versus Union of India* in 2018, this doctrine assumed that the husband and wife became a single entity after marriage, that is, "the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband".

One of the earliest instances of codification of the MRE can be traced back to British jurist Matthew Hale, who wrote in a 1736 treatise that "the husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract: the wife has given up herself in this kind unto her husband, which she cannot retract." Hale's reasoning proved hugely influential and was subsequently adopted by several British colonies. However, in 1991, England outlawed the MRE in the landmark case of *R versus R* underscoring that the common law doctrine no longer represented the true position of a wife in present-day society.

What are challenges before the SC?

Section 375 of the IPC delineates seven conditions under which sexual intercourse is deemed rape, such as when it occurs without the woman's consent, or when consent is obtained through coercion. Those convicted are punished with a prison term of at least 10 years, which can be extended to a life sentence, along with a possible fine. However, the provision stipulates two "exceptions". The first exception pertains to medical procedures. As per the second exception, "sexual intercourse or sexual acts by a man with his own wife" do not constitute rape if the wife is over 18 years of age.

While the law initially granted immunity to husbands if their wives were under 15 years old, the Supreme Court revised this age limit to 18 years in *Independent Thought versus Union of India*



GETTY IMAGES

(2017). The MRE, therefore, creates a legal fiction whereby, even if all the elements constituting the offence of rape are met, a conviction cannot take place if the parties are married and the wife is over 18 years of age. However, a married woman can seek recourse to other criminal law provisions such as Section 85 of the BNS which criminalises subjecting a woman to "cruelty". Civil remedies can also be availed under laws such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) but they are limited to "protection orders, judicial separation and monetary compensation". The petitioners have argued that the exception is unconstitutional since it violates a host of fundamental rights. Foremost among them is Article 14 which guarantees the equal protection of laws to all persons. The MRE creates two distinct classes of victims of non-consensual sex by denying married women the protection of laws that are extended to unmarried women. This, according to the petitioners, also offends the principle of "substantive equality" by failing to address systemic barriers to ensure that all women regardless of their marital status receive equal protection against sexual violence. By specifically disadvantaging married women, the MRE violates their right to non-discrimination under Article 15(1).

Another important facet is the purported violation of the right to privacy and bodily integrity under Article 21. The Supreme Court's ruling in *K.S. Puttaswamy versus Union of India* (2017) not only clarified that privacy was a fundamental right, it also affirmed the concept of decisional autonomy — the right of each individual to determine how and for what purposes their body may be used. As noted by constitutional law expert Gautam Bhatia the true brilliance of *Puttaswamy* lies in clearly establishing that the right to privacy is not merely

anchored in physical spaces and institutions (such as marriage), but is fundamentally tied to individual self-determination. The right is, therefore, inseparable from the ability to make choices regarding the most integral aspects of one's body and life. In *Joseph Shine*, the top court built on this jurisprudence by observing that "familial structures cannot be regarded as private spaces where constitutional rights are violated" and that doing so is "to obstruct the unfolding vision of the Constitution."

What are the judicial precedents?

In March 2022, the Karnataka High Court in *Hrishikesh Sahoo versus State of Karnataka and Others* ruled that a married man can be prosecuted for raping his wife. Relying on a 2013 report authored by the Justice J.S. Verma Committee, which recommended the abolition of the MRE, Justice M. Nagaprassanna reasoned that no legal exception can be so absolute as to licence crimes against society. However, instead of striking it down, he made the exemption inapplicable in cases involving the commission of heinous sexual offences by husbands against their wives.

The case stemmed from a 2017 complaint by a woman against her husband, Hrishikesh Sahoo, accusing him of committing multiple sexual offences. He was also charged with sexual assault under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO) for abusing their daughter. An appeal was subsequently filed challenging the High Court's decision resulting in an interim stay being imposed by a Bench headed by former CJI N.V. Ramanna. In an affidavit filed before the top court, the Karnataka government, however, endorsed the High Court's ruling.

In May 2022, the Delhi High Court rendered a split verdict on this issue.

Justice Rajiv Shakdher deemed the MRE unconstitutional, asserting that it violates a woman's bodily autonomy and expression. He characterised the exception as "steeped in patriarchy and misogyny," adding that "the classification, in my opinion, is unreasonable and manifestly arbitrary as it implies that forced sex outside marriage constitutes 'real rape,' whereas the same act within marriage does not." Conversely, Justice C. Hari Shankar opined that within marriage, sexual relations are a "legitimate expectation" making the MRE legal. "Introducing, into the marital relationship, the possibility of the husband being regarded as the wife's rapist, if he has, on one or more occasions, sex with her without her consent would, in my view, be completely antithetical to the very institution of marriage, as understood in this country, both in fact and in law", he reasoned.

Following this split verdict, the petitioners moved the Supreme Court, which clubbed together all petitions related to the MRE in January last year. While an authoritative pronouncement is awaited, the top court in 2022 recognised for the first time that "sexual assault by a man against his wife can constitute rape" in a separate case concerning an unmarried woman's right to seek medical termination of pregnancy. A Bench led by Chief Justice Chandrachud underscored, "We would be remiss in not recognising that intimate partner violence is a reality and can take the form of rape. The misconception that strangers are exclusively or almost exclusively responsible for sex and gender-based violence is a deeply regrettable one".

What has the Centre stated?

The Union government's latest Supreme Court affidavit is the first time that it has on record opposed the striking down of the MRE. During the proceedings before the Delhi High Court, the government had said that the "issue needs wider consultations" and that a review of existing criminal laws was pending at that time. Drawing from Justice Shankar's opinion, the Centre has argued that marriage creates "a continuing expectation of reasonable sexual access" which is absent in the case of a stranger or of another intimate relationship. While acknowledging that a man has no fundamental right to violate his wife's consent, it has contended that classifying such acts as "rape" is "excessively harsh" and "disproportionate". It has also apprised the court that criminalising marital rape would affect the sanctity of the institution of marriage and potentially result in false allegations of marital rape.

Would a 'new' offence be created?

A pivotal question before the top court is whether striking down the MRE would result in the creation of a new offence, as it would allow for the prosecution of husbands who engage in non-consensual sex with their wives. Justice Shankar, in his opinion, responded in the affirmative and cautioned that there is an "absolute proscription" against this since such an authority rests exclusively with the legislature. However, senior advocate Rebecca John argued before the Delhi High Court that deeming the exception unconstitutional would not create any new offence, as the offence already exists — rather, it would simply revoke the legal immunity presently enjoyed by a specific class of individuals. In *Independent Thought*, while raising the age for the application of the MRE from 15 to 18 years, the top court noted that "by partly striking down Section 375 IPC, no new offence is being created".

THE GIST

The Marital Rape Exception (MRE) is a colonial relic, originating from the "doctrine of coverture" in English common law, which severely curtailed a married woman's legal autonomy.

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Has the Congress internalised its message of social justice?

PARLEY

The Congress' social justice platform, centred around the call for equal representation at the caste-level and a nationwide caste census, has been hailed after the Lok Sabha elections this year. But within four months of the general election results, the results of the Haryana Assembly polls have raised questions about how well this messaging has percolated to the lower rungs of the party organisation. Has the Congress internalised its message of social justice? Sudha Pai and Aditi Narayani Paswan discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Abhinay Lakshman. Edited excerpts:

Since the run-up to the Lok Sabha elections, the Congress has been talking about social justice, equal representation, and caste census. We just saw the results of the Haryana Assembly elections. To what extent do you think that messaging has actually gone down with voters, especially Dalits?

Sudha Pai: The sociopolitical context is different in general elections and Assembly elections. The Congress adopted a slightly different strategy this time. It spoke of social justice, Dalit votes, etc., but at the same time, it did not mobilise the Dalits as much as it should have. There were two reasons for this. First, the party depended on Bhupinder Singh Hooda, a Jat, a great deal, and the Dalits did not want to put up with Jat dominance. The second is the manner in which senior Dalit leader Selja Kumari was treated; that affected the Dalit vote.

There was a bit of overconfidence that the Dalit vote would go to the Congress. In the 2024 elections, the impact of the INDIA bloc was different in different States. In Uttar Pradesh, the Samajwadi Party did well. In Haryana, the Congress and the BJP got five seats each. But later, for the Assembly polls, the BJP was able to gear up, mobilise, and use a certain kind of strategy which got it more Dalit votes.

Aditi Narayani Paswan: During the Haryana Assembly elections, the BJP was micromanaging at the block level. In Haryana, there is the Braj belt, the Jat belt, etc. The BJP kept the social composition in mind. While it was working on social engineering, it also made sure that it fully catered to the local people and their representation in the organisation. This was missing in the Congress.

Also, people are now moving away from dominant representation. The Congress created disenchantment among the Dalits. It played the caste and Constitution card in national politics, which helped it. But at the ground level, Dalits



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi (centre) with former Haryana Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda and party MP Kumari Selja in Ambala. ANI

are more concerned about local issues.

The Congress chose to leverage certain movements to consolidate votes. How do you read those choices in Haryana?

ANP: There are 17 reserved seats in Haryana. Of them, the BJP won eight and the Congress won nine. Of the 17, 9-11 seats were given to non-Jatav and non-Chamar Scheduled Castes (SCs). The BJP consolidated the non-dominant Dalit vote by putting up non-dominant Dalit candidates in as many seats as possible. Voters chose the BJP because of this. They felt that they would have a better voice in the functioning of the state machinery. Second, even the Jat vote was split because within Jats, there are three-four fronts: the Chautala front, the Hooda front, etc.

Then there was the geographical factor. The BJP won 18 urban seats and also had a higher vote share in urban and semi-urban seats. Issues such as Agniveer, the farmers' agitation, the struggles of the wrestlers, etc. were centered around the rural parts of Haryana.

SP: I think the Congress made two mistakes: institutional and strategy-related. In terms of institutional, there was public infighting in the party. Apart from the Hooda and Selja Kumari groups, there were other groups within the Congress. This is not a united party. Whereas, in the BJP, we see unhappiness due to ticket distribution, but ultimately everybody settles down because there is very strong leadership.

In terms of strategy, the Congress did not realise that we cannot now look at Jats and SCs as blocks. Or even farmers, for that matter. There are differences and categories within them; all Jats don't vote the same way. The BJP mobilised all the non-Jats against the Jats. And the party did this quietly. The Congress did not realise that depending on the Jats is not going to help it because Mr. Hooda has now become



With the Congress preaching about caste, Kumari Selja should have been given more respect, right? For two weeks, she could not even campaign.

ADITI NARAYANI PASWAN

unpopular. The BJP targeted the non-Jats and the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). It made Nayab Singh Saini the Chief minister. So, it had a broad strategy of getting support from Dalits, Brahmins, and OBCs, which enabled it to win more seats, whereas the Congress narrowed down on Jats and Dalits alone.

Just ahead of the elections, the Supreme Court cleared the decks for SC sub-categorisation. The Nayab Singh Saini government acted fast, set up a commission, and promised sub-categorisation within a week. On the other hand, Congress was not decisive enough on this. To what extent do you think this allowed for the SC vote to swing towards the BJP?

SP: Sub-categorisation has become important. There are a lot of difficulties in doing this. You need data, a caste census, etc. But on the ground, there are two reasons why it appeals to the poorer Dalits. The first is rising aspirations – better education and better jobs in better-paying sectors. The second is rising poverty.

This was a missed opportunity for the Congress because it has been talking about a caste census. It should have noticed that in Haryana, the SCs are very unhappy because not only is there high unemployment in general, but there is high unemployment among the SCs. The BJP was very quick on the uptake. Although having said that, the BJP has publicly not said anywhere at the national level that it agrees with what the Supreme Court said or that there should be sub-categorisation.

Why then do you think the BJP went hard on this knowing that it could possibly play into the hands of the Congress' messaging of a caste census?

ANP: First, principally I do not agree with sub-categorisation because in the absence of empirical evidence, it is difficult to define who is a privileged Dalit and who isn't. Without any data, this is further going to just weaken the national Dalit discourse. Only now people from my community are gearing up to be a part of this national imagination/discourse. Mere tokenism was always there, since 1952.

Having said that, the politics of sub-classification played a very important role for the BJP's victory in Haryana. But the message, the non-Jatav and non-Brahmin (also a significant non-dominant community) voted for the BJP. So, it could not understand this. The Congress spoke about the Constitution, which went on the ground and did it [set up a committee for sub-categorisation].

As you both said, the heterogeneous groups was key in strategising. There was messaging about equal representation from top Congress leaders such as Mallikarjun Kharge, Rahul Gandhi, and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra. So, wrong in internalising this social justice messaging that seemed to have won the Congress in the Lok Sabha?

SP: I don't think it has been internalised. State units and definitely not in Haryana. Congress gave a free hand to Mr. Kharge. The same thing happened in Madhya Pradesh. Kamal Nath. You see, then it becomes a unit that is run by a smaller group. If the leadership had been more active in strategy and ticket distribution, things might have been more successful. Yes, Rahul Gandhi did try in the last few days along with Priyanka Gandhi Vadra. But I think it was too late. It should have been consistently from the beginning and the party might have had a more broad strategy than just depending on the caste strategy of the Congress from Jats and the Dalits, but the party really worked out how it would be able to support and what the messaging would be.

ANP: The Congress preaches about social justice, but it is great to see Rahul Gandhi have a social consciousness. It built narratives at the national level, but in practice it was missing. During the Lok Sabha elections, the regional parties were the flag bearers of the Constitution. The Congress, that is why we saw the BJP do quite well. With the Congress preaching about caste, Ms. Selja should have been given more respect, right? For two weeks, she could not even campaign. This clearly sends a message that the Congress was sidelining a bigger narrative then came about the Congress had ignored the Dalit leadership in Haryana, which led to the party's



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NOTEBOOK

The fading allure of media endorsements

Media houses in the U.S. endorsing political candidates? The trend is gaining more traction with every election cycle

human

With the editorial board of the New York Times endorsing Democratic presidential nominee, keeping with the tradition of endorsements of political candidates, for that newspaper, endorsement was unequivocal. Few of The Times that there is clarity about "the only path to president."

And, it is hard to disagree with the endorsement of the newspaper of Harris's Republican rival, which has degraded the quality of democracy by challenging the election result and playing a role in insurrection against the government in Washington, DC; undermined the U.S.'s standing in the world through his reckless foreign policy; and reprehensible for who has racked up Congressional impeach-

candidates, and parties?

These questions are gaining greater salience with each election cycle. While it will continue to endorse presidential candidates, The Times had earlier announced that it will no longer endorse candidates in Senate, congressional, and state legislative contests. In doing so, the newspaper joins peers such as the Miami Herald, the Chicago Tribune, the New York Daily News, and The Denver Post, which are moving away from the tradition of endorsement, seen in some quarters as archaic.

The media endorsement that stood out most during my tenure as U.S. correspondent of this newspaper was of Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton by more than 50 publications in the run-up to the 2016 elections. While five media houses backed the "none of the above" option, only two endorsed Mr. Trump, who eventually went on to win the election.

Yet, the remarkable transformation of the media landscape for election campaigns had begun much earlier, with the 2008 presidential run of Barack Obama,

PICTURE OF THE WEEK

A bowl of warmth





Battle of wits

The Maharashtra and Jharkhand polls will witness intense political battles

Assembly elections in Maharashtra and Jharkhand in November will, yet again, test the mettle of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress, and the respective regional parties, just weeks after the elections in Haryana and Jammu and Kashmir. By-elections in three Lok Sabha constituencies and 48 Assembly segments across States have also been announced. The political landscape in Maharashtra has been reshaped thoroughly since the 2019 election. The Shiv Sena and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) have split, with one faction each in alliance with the BJP and the Congress. The ruling Mahayuti, which the BJP is a part of, ended up with 17 of 48 seats in the 2024 general election, while the Maha Vikas Aghadi, of the Congress, the Uddhav Thackeray faction of the Sena and the Sharad Pawar faction of the NCP, won 29. Since then, the ruling alliance has taken several measures to gain more ground. Following the latest decision by the outgoing Eknath Shinde-led government hours before the election schedule was announced, a complete toll waiver for light motor vehicles was announced. Chastened by the Haryana election results, the Congress has toned down its hype in Maharashtra. It has appointed senior leaders to oversee the campaign in various regions of the State. In Maharashtra and Jharkhand, the BJP has had its strategy in place well in time, overseen by veterans who command authority.

The JMD-led ruling alliance in Jharkhand, which the Congress is a part of, and the Mahayuti are betting on women voters to ensure another term. Both governments have introduced cash dole schemes for women. In Jharkhand, the BJP campaign is built on corruption allegations against State Chief Minister Hemant Soren as well as demographic shifts which the party attributes to the alleged entry of people from Bangladesh. Mr. Soren accuses the BJP of misusing central investigating agencies to implicate him. He is dependent on tribal consolidation, but that alone is not sufficient. Nearly three-fourths of the State's population are non-tribal, and the BJP's focus is on consolidating the Hindus among them. The tribal population is shrinking, but linking this to Bangladesh while overlooking the issue of inter-State migration is a classic BJP playbook tactic. The consolidation of the Other Backward Classes, a strategy that worked in its favour in Haryana, is what the BJP is aiming for in Jharkhand and Maharashtra. The Congress and its regional allies are at risk of being overdependent on Marathas in Maharashtra and tribespeople in Jharkhand.

The endgame

The U.S. district court injunction against Google could end its app dominance

The recent injunction issued by U.S. District Judge James Donato, which forces Google to open up its Android platform to third-party app stores and alternative payment options, marks a critical juncture in the ongoing legal dispute between Alphabet's subsidiary and Tencent-backed Epic Games. This antitrust lawsuit, which began in 2020, after Google removed Epic's popular game Fortnite from the Play Store for violating its payment terms, has far-reaching implications for how the Android ecosystem functions. Epic bypassed Google's rules by making users pay the publisher directly, triggering the battle. Judge Donato's ruling, set to take effect in November, orders Google to halt practices that have limited competition, such as paying companies to launch apps exclusively on its marketplace or preinstalling Google Play on new devices. It also mandates Google to allow rival app stores to be featured on its Play Store and for app developers to show alternative payment systems. For three years, this injunction will reshape how Google operates its marketplace, creating space for increased competition in the Android ecosystem. But Google argues that these changes pose risks to user privacy and security and could limit developers' ability to promote their apps. However, the injunction does allow Google to retain some control over security, but the ruling sends a clear message — it is time for Google to change how it governs the Android app marketplace.

At the core of the battle is the "Google tax," a 15%-30% commission the company charges app developers for transactions made through apps from Play Store, bringing in billions each year for Google. During the trial, it was revealed that Google had cut special deals with major developers, including Spotify and Tinder-owned Match Group, allowing them to pay lower commissions. This further fuelled claims of unfair practices in the app marketplace. Judge Donato's injunction is about much more than just commissions. It strikes at the heart of how tech giants use their platforms to maintain dominance. By enforcing its payment systems and restricting alternative options, Google has long held disproportionate power over app developers. The ruling, if upheld, could dismantle that dominance. By mandating that Google open its platform to third-party app stores and payment systems, the court seeks to introduce fairness to a market that has been controlled by a single player for too long. For end consumers, the real impact could be felt in the form of lower costs for paid apps and in-app purchases. When developers are no longer subject to Google's hefty commissions, those savings could be passed down to users. Ultimately, this ruling could signal a shift toward more transparent and fairer business practices in the tech industry, and push giants to reconsider how they operate in the global digital economy.

The idea of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) keeps surfacing from time to time. A recent report by the International Labour Organization talks about how jobs growth has been lagging globally due to automation and Artificial Intelligence, and notes the massive problem of youth unemployment in India. The phenomenon of jobless growth, where productivity rises but job creation lags and contributes to the alarming trend in inequality, has rekindled interest in a UBI as a component of a social safety net across the world.

There was a fair bit of discussion surrounding UBI in India a few years ago, with scholars and policymakers debating whether it is worth replacing some inefficient welfare schemes with direct income transfers to the poor. The idea gained significant attention after the 2016-17 Economic Survey of India recommended considering UBI as a potential policy. It was argued that investments in the JAM (Jan-Dhan, Aadhaar, Mobile) infrastructure have also made it feasible to implement direct benefit transfers (DBTs) to beneficiary bank accounts.

A UBI and modifications

Whether it is a tool to deal with unemployment or with poverty — and the two are not unrelated — a question that often comes up is this: should India adopt some version of UBI to deal with these challenges?

Now, a policy can be debated in terms of feasibility and desirability. Something that is feasible may not be the most desirable policy as one may have different policy priorities. The argument that we should have policies to boost employment growth or deal with the slack demand for mass consumption goods that comes with rising unemployment or that we need universal basic services are all valid points. But as critics of a UBI, they are misplaced, as at best, it is a policy to help people cope with the consequences of unemployment. Policies need to be evaluated with respect to the specific problems that they are designed to address, which in turn correspond to specific social objectives. For example, investing in better transportation is a great policy to improve productivity and mobility, but it is not fair to criticise it as it will not directly deal with poverty. So, a UBI should be evaluated as a safety net policy.

At the same time, something that is desirable may not be feasible from a budgetary point of view. Even if one were to agree that a UBI is indeed desirable as a social safety net policy, it may not be feasible given budgetary constraints. The real question is this: is a modified and less ambitious version of a UBI worth exploring?

In this context, some terminological confusion prevails. It might appear that some forms of a UBI already exist in India, such as cash transfer schemes for farmers and women. While these are



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cash transfer schemes, a UBI, by definition, must be universal, i.e., not targeted to any specific group. A comparison with other forms of safety net policies is fair, and indeed necessary. These could be policies that are targeted to specific demographic groups such as women or the elderly, or those that are contingent on certain socio-economic criteria being met (farmers, the unemployed, the poor), or those that are in-kind rather than cash (the Public Distribution System) or those that are conditional on being willing to work (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme or MGNREGS) or sending children to school (mid-day meals).

For a given budget devoted to direct transfer schemes or social safety net policies, the choices are determined by various considerations. Is the goal to provide a safety net or minimum consumption support or long-term poverty alleviation? Are certain groups more vulnerable and require more assistance? Is it a remote rural area where in-kind assistance would be more helpful to the poor? Does limited state capacity mean inclusion and exclusion errors make means-tested programmes not very effective to target the poor, or, in addition, be subject to bureaucratic delays, glitches and corruption?

State and central schemes

In recent years, India has already implemented income transfer schemes as part of its anti-poverty strategies, especially in the agriculture sector. In early 2018, Telangana launched the Rythu Bandhu Scheme (RBS), which gave farmers unconditional payments of ₹4,000 per acre. This approach was soon replicated at both the State level (the KALIA or Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation programme in Odisha), and at the national level (the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana, or PM-KISAN). The PM-KISAN, of 2018-19, initially provided ₹6,000 per year to small landholding farmers, but was later expanded to cover all farmers, excluding income-taxpayers and those not engaged in farming. By 2020-21, the scheme aimed to cover around 10 crore farming households, with an estimated cost of ₹75,000 crore, roughly 0.4% of GDP.

Despite the programme's scale and relative success, issues such as inclusion and exclusion errors persist, mainly due to logistical challenges such as Aadhaar verification and rejections by banks. It is to overcome limitations such as these that the proposal to make them universal, covering all citizens, has been proposed.

Universal income transfers offer several advantages. They reduce administrative costs associated with targeting and minimise exclusion errors. Since the transfers are universal, fewer intermediaries are involved, lowering the chances of leakage. Universal transfers also avoid work disincentives often associated with targeted programmes.

As a core issue is financial feasibility, what may work best in India is using a modified policy as a base to which other transfer policies can be added as and when appropriate

India's SDG focus and its human development issues

On September 9-10, 2023, New Delhi hosted the G-20 Summit, which resolved to accelerate the full and effective implementation of the UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. On September 18-19, 2023, an "SDG Summit" was convened at the United Nations headquarters to follow up and review the implementation of the Agenda and the progress of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A "Summit of the Future" took place on September 22-23, 2024, at the UN headquarters to build upon the SDG Summit 2023 and its commitments by member nations.

In this context, examining India's progress in human development since 1990, based on the UNDP's latest Human Development Report (HDR), is valid. As said by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen in his book, *Development as Freedom*, 'development is a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy'. In his 'capability approach', the basic concern of human development is 'our capability to lead the kind of lives we have reason to value'. Freedom from hunger and ill-health on the one hand and gender and income equality, and access to quality education on the other hand lead to the achievement of human development, and, consequently, to sustainable development.

Development and the SDGs

The Human Development Index (HDI) developed by the UNDP has three dimensions: long and healthy life (measured by life expectancy at birth); knowledge (expected years of schooling and mean years of schooling), and a decent standard of living (income per capita). All the three dimensions are much related to some of the key SDGs: SDG-3 (good health); SDG-4 (quality education); SDG-5 (gender equality); SDG-8 (decent work) and SDG-10 (reduced inequality). Clearly, countries aspiring to achieve sustainable



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Countries that aspire to achieve sustainable development need to take steps to boost human development

development need to take appropriate measures to boost human development.

The HDR 2023-24 places India in the 'medium human development category' with a human development index (HDI) value of 0.644. India ranks 134 out of 193 countries. The HDI value was stagnant in 2019-20, at 0.638, and fell to 0.633 in 2021. It improved to 0.644 in 2022. In this report, some of India's neighbouring countries have better HDI ranks — Malaysia (63); Thailand (66); China (75); Sri Lanka (78); Indonesia (112); Bhutan (125), and Bangladesh (129).

The HDR also presents interpolated consistent data which can be used to compare HDI values across years and countries. India saw its HDI value increase by 48.4%, from 0.434 in 1990 to 0.644 in 2022. As for HDI rankings, during 2015-2022, India improved by four ranks, while neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh and Bhutan improved by 12 and 10 ranks, respectively. China improved by 18 ranks. India's human development initiatives lagged behind during 2015-22. One of the reasons for the slow growth is the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on dimensions of human development such as education and income.

Gender gaps

The HDR also presents the Gender Development Index (GDI) for 193 countries. It measures disparities in human development by gender. The report contains HDI values estimated separately for women and men, the ratio of which is the GDI value. The closer the ratio is to one, the lesser the gap there is between women and men.

Among the 42 'medium human development countries' to which India belongs, there are only seven with low equality in HDI achievements between women and men. These countries, with absolute deviation from gender parity of more than 10%, are India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Uganda,

A common reaction to such a proposal is to question why the wealthy should also receive a basic income. However, this viewpoint misunderstands how tax and benefit systems operate. In any advanced economy, individuals pay taxes and receive some form of government support, such as child benefits, depending on their circumstances. What ultimately matters is their net income. Similarly, wealthier individuals would pay far more in taxes than the amount they would receive from a UBI.

A possible scheme

However, where the case against a UBI scheme in India has validity is financial feasibility. UBI proposals often suggest large transfers, amounting to 3.5%-11% of GDP, which would either require cutting other anti-poverty programmes or drastically raising taxes. A more feasible approach would be to adopt a limited universal income transfer scheme. This writer, with economist Karthik Murakalihan, has explored such a policy that pegged at 1% of GDP per capita. This would provide approximately ₹144 per month to every citizen (or roughly ₹500 a month a household), which works out to be similar to that of PM-KISAN. It can be implemented simply by roughly doubling the budget for PM-KISAN and making it universal, which means it would reach not only farmers but also landless labourers, who are often poorer. If one thinks the amount is too little, recall that the Tendulkar poverty line, at 2022-23 prices is around ₹1,500 a month in rural areas and ₹1,850 in urban areas — or an average of ₹1,600.

This approach could also simplify implementation by reducing eligibility verification costs. However, there are still logistical challenges such as ensuring access to cash-out points (COPs), minimising network and biometric authentication failures, and addressing issues with electronic payment devices. These last-mile delivery problems need to be addressed to ensure the success of universal income transfers in India.

Given the fiscal constraints that State and central governments face, it is natural to be sceptical of new policies when other policies that are somewhat similar are already in place. But in my view, having a modified UBI policy, as described above, as a base to which other transfer policies can be added, and as when appropriate (targeted at women), and feasible is a good model. For example, the MGNREGS provides 100 days of employment but may exclude those unable to work, such as the elderly or the disabled. Combining MGNREGS with a modified UBI scheme could ensure comprehensive coverage for different vulnerable groups. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the point that income and in-kind transfers are complementary. For example, income is critical during supply chain disruptions, and food access is essential when people lack purchasing power.

Morocco, the Syrian Arab Republic, and Kiribati.

India has one of the largest gender gaps in the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) at 47.8 percent points difference between women (28.3%) and men (76.1%). Female labour force participation rate in India is very low when compared to many countries, more so when one compares it with India's neighbouring countries where in China it is 53.6%, Bhutan 53.5%, and Bangladesh 39.2%.

In the latest Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022-23, published by the Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, around 37% females of working age (15 years and above) were in the labour force in 2022-23; it was 23.3% in 2017-18. However, there is a huge gap in female labour force participation in rural and urban areas. While the female labour force participation rate in rural areas increased from 24.6% in 2017-18 to 41.5% in 2022-23, there is only a marginal increase in urban areas (from 20.4% to 25.4%). This is a matter of concern that requires further research and in-depth study aimed at feasible policy initiatives.

Income inequality

In addition to the gender gap in income, inequality of income is also on the rise. India is one of the countries where income shares held by the richest 1% is very high (21.7%) compared to Bangladesh (11.6%), China (15.7%), Bhutan (8.1%), and Nepal (9.7%). Income inequality in India is also higher than the world average of 17.5% and the South Asia average of 19.6%. Most importantly, income inequality is also higher than other regional groups such as East Asia and the Pacific (16.5%) and Europe and Central Asia (15.7%).

India needs to address these gender development issues and increasing inequality in order to achieve the SDGs.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Row with Canada

With the four other partners in the Five Eyes 'Anglosphere' intelligence network rallying around Canada in its diplomatic row with New Delhi, India faces a sort of isolation in the comity of nations on the issue. That India and Canada have both recalled some of their core consulate staff signifies a total collapse of diplomacy. Both

sides need to lower their pitch. Our External Affairs Minister, a career diplomat-turned-politician, has to admit his own failure in preventing the situation from getting so ugly. Canada alone has not accused India of dark deeds. The U.S. too has levelled similar allegations. The Washington Post suggesting the involvement of some in the top Indian

leadership adds a new dimension to a very sensitive issue. S.K. Choudhury, Bengaluru

Before starting an international campaign to ensure accountability from Canada, India would have to first show its readiness to cooperate with Canada. Muralidhara Acharya, Bengaluru

Exit polls

One is in agreement with the Chief Election Commissioner of India and his views on exit polls "CEC slams exit polls, early trends on TV channels", October 16) — that they are being carried out unscientifically. After the fiasco in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the exit pollsters got it all wrong again in the Haryana Assembly elections. The

News Broadcasters & Digital Association and other stakeholders concerned need to take corrective measures as such poll exercises raise public expectations. This wasteful political exercise should perhaps make way for a more democratic and productive discourse on prime time television. Dr. Thomas Palocaren, Vellore, Tamil Nadu

Rains and the city

The scare over a 40 cm deluge in Chennai may have subsided, but the city has still not passed the test even in the 7 cm of rain that fell. Officials have again highlighted the 'plastic menace'. It is still not too late to use drones to map the flooded areas and take corrective measures. S. Subramanian, Chennai

SPOTLIGHT



(Clockwise from above) A girl sits on an abandoned boat in Gorai, where mangroves have been cut and wetlands filled with debris at a rapid pace over the past 10 years; axed mangroves in Uran taluka, Navi Mumbai; and plastic bags cling to the branches of mangroves in Uran, PUNIMA SAH

Development and its discontents

Residents and activists are protesting against infrastructure projects in Mumbai and its surrounding areas citing disregard for environmental regulations and lack of inclusive planning. Depletion of mangroves and dwindling fishing spots have sparked concerns among fisherfolk, who fear displacement and feel their livelihoods are being threatened, finds **Purnima Sah**

Signboards proclaiming 'Mumbai Upgrading' have become a ubiquitous sight at construction sites across the city and the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR), heralding the ambitious drive of India's financial capital towards world-class infrastructure.

For the city's fisherfolk though, this development comes at a cost. Hitesh Koli, a 35-year-old fisherman from Gavhan village in Ulwe taluka, Navi Mumbai, 35 km from Mumbai, laments, "We, the Kolis, are the original inhabitants of this region, yet no development project so far has prioritised our well-being." Concerns over dwindling fishing spots and destruction of mangroves to pave the way for infrastructure projects have ignited anger among members of his community.

Before the establishment of the Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT) 40 years ago, Koliwad (fishing communities) in Gavhan (9,000 residents), Hanuman (4,500), Uran (6,000), Belpada (4,000), and Sewa (5,000) could fish within a 4-km radius of Gavhan, Uran, or Nava Sheva creek. Now, they must travel 27 km to Thane creek. "JNPT initially destroyed mangroves and marine life, then came projects like the Mumbai Trans Harbour Link (MTHL) and the Navi Mumbai International Airport (NMIA). MTHL alone destroyed lakhs of mangroves, decimating marine life. Over the years, we've lost 90% of our fishing spots due to such projects," Hitesh says.

Generations of Kolis and tribal people have lived along Mumbai's coast, relying on fishing for survival. For them, mangroves are sacred as they provide protection from natural calamities and resources for sustenance. Parvati Hadal, a 32-year-old member of the Warli tribe, an indigenous community of about 6,000 people, exemplifies this legacy, with all 12 members of her family in Madh Island engaged in fishing.

In September, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) approved a ₹3,246-crore flyover connecting Madh Island and Versova and set to traverse above Madh creek. This long-awaited project — first proposed in 2015 — received environmental clearances in January this year. Hadal voices concerns about the flyover's impact on three villages: Kisanachpada, Dongarpada, and Dharvali, whose residents rely on mangroves for their livelihood. "Mangroves are being cleared daily for the flyover's construction. Portions of the project encroach on residential areas, threatening our homes and ancestral lands. Despite numerous letters to the BMC, our pleas have gone unheard," she says.

Uran Koliwada's struggle

The residents of Uran Koliwada are also bearing the brunt of development projects. On a serene afternoon in the fishing colony, Tukaram Janardhan Koli, 70, gazes contemplatively at the mangrove creek outside his home. Once pristine, the waterway now lies stagnant, reeking of chemicals and sewage. Plastic bags cling to the branches of mangroves, swaying gently in the breeze, a stark contrast to the lifeless water. Tukaram says none of the governments in Maharashtra considered bringing development to fishing communities.

Recounting the struggles of the fisherfolk, he says on February 7, 2023, the State-run City and Industrial Development Corporation (CIDCO) "falsely charged" 30 residents under Section 355

of the Indian Penal Code for expressing concerns over the construction of the Uran Bypass Road. The residents were kept in custody for 12 days, with 10 women sent to Kalyan's Adharwadi prison and 20 men to Talaja Jail, he says.

Following advocate Mihir Desai's intervention, the Bombay High Court ordered the release of the fisherfolk, citing concerns over their alleged manhandling. The court also pulled up the police and CIDCO over the grounds of arrest, and directed them not to file a chargesheet in the matter, although the probe could continue.

Earlier in August 2022, a Division Bench of the High Court, comprising Justices G.S. Patel and Gauri Godse, had reprimanded CIDCO over the project following a plea filed by 134 fishermen from Uran Koliwada. The Bench also criticised the government's approach towards planning, stating that it appeared "prima facie faulty".

The once-thriving Uran creek now reeks of decay, its waters devoid of fish and filled with debris. Feeling helpless, the Kolis took to the streets again on July 7, 2023, against the impact of such projects on their livelihoods, but their pleas continued to fall on deaf ears, Tukaram says.

'Eco-sensitive zones under threat'

Gorai and Manori villages face similar challenges, with destruction of mangroves and wetland reclamation over the last decade threatening the environment and livelihoods of East Indian Christians, Kolis, and tribal communities. Residents, including Swamy Henriques, president of the Gorai Villagers Welfare Association, have made appeals to civic bodies and approached the police. "Razing of mangroves and filling wetlands with debris take place late at night. Several resorts and commercial spaces have sprung up in the last few years in eco-sensitive zones," says Henriques. She alleges that amusement parks nearby have been dumping debris and garbage into the wetlands. "When we registered a police complaint, they accused us instead of engaging in such activities to extort money from them."

Vanita Shankar Kotal, a 45-year-old fisherwoman from Chota Dongri Pada, Gorai, expresses dire concerns about the future of her tribal hamlet, where fishing is the primary source of livelihood. For seven months, civic bodies have been conducting surveys without consulting the residents, she says, and have begun constructing con-

crete roads towards the Gorai creek. She fears under the cover of darkness, the mangroves will be cut or the creek filled with debris. "We are living in fear. If this happens, we will lose everything."

Fisher communities unite

Nandakumar W. Pawar, a 63-year-old environmentalist and president of the Maharashtra Small-Scale Traditional Fish Workers Union, highlights the risks posed by the NMIA. Pawar began working towards taking the concerns of environmental loss and the struggles of the fishing community to various global platforms after Bhandup, a fishing hub, began losing its fishing habitats to infrastructure projects in 2005. "The union was formed to give a voice to small-scale fishermen who are often overlooked by policymakers as they don't fish in the ocean, but in backwaters, creeks, or water tanks," he says.

Pawar points out that the NMIA poses a significant threat to coastal ecology due to its location in an ecologically sensitive zone. "For reclaiming marshland, natural low-lying areas here require up to 10 to 12 feet of filling material. It is estimated that about 26% of the total area (9,000 hectares) comprises ecologically sensitive zones. This project also encompasses 400 acres of mangrove land. The concern is that over a thousand acres of mudflats that are habitats for at least five lakh migratory birds will be lost forever."

Pawar also raises concerns over the diversion of the Ulwe and Gadhi rivers and flattening of the Ulwe hill to make the NMIA site accessible. "This is nothing but an invitation to disaster by CIDCO and the government."

He says siltation — caused by constant drilling and excavation work from coastal development projects like ports, bridges, and oil exploration — is a major threat to coastal biodiversity. This process suspends large particles, creating sludge that settles on the coast due to waves and tides, fostering unnatural mangrove growth. This impacts fishing beds and breeding and spawning grounds as mangroves cover the water and leave no place for marine organisms to breed, explains Pawar.

In 2021, a reply to a Right to Information query by environmentalists showed that JNPT had 913.6 hectares of mangroves at Nava Sheva under its jurisdiction. Earlier this year, JNPT handed over 800 hectares to the Forest Department after Vanashakti, an NGO, filed a contempt petition against JNPT, CIDCO, Revenue and Forest Departments, Maharashtra Coastal Zone Management Authority, Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority, and the District Collectors of Mumbai Suburban, Thane, Palghar, Raigad, Ratnagiri, and Sindhudurg. "For 20 years, none of these agencies complied with orders. When we moved the High Court in 2022, JNPT complied," says Stalin Dayanand, director of Vanashakti.

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Around 248 hectares of mangroves had been destroyed without permission for the NMIA, revealed data submitted to the High Court in August this year by the Additional Principal Chief Conservator, Mangrove Cell, S.V. Ramarao, says, "CIDCO had taken permission from the Government of India and the Forest Department for diversion of 248 hectares of forest land, of which part of it was mangrove land and the rest forest land."

The Panje-Dongri wetlands in Uran have been a contentious issue, with Pawar and the fisherfolk fighting to save this 289-hectare ecosystem. Recognised by the Bombay Natural History Society as a highly bio-diverse coastal wetland in Maharashtra, it boasts rich traditional fishing zones and habitats for about five lakh migratory birds.

According to Pawar, CIDCO has designated the Panje-Dongri wetlands as flood mitigation areas for the upcoming Drongri node, spanning 2,740 hectares. It is one of 14 nodes planned in Navi Mumbai to alleviate pressure on Mumbai as part of a new town development project.

To protect and conserve these wetlands, Pawar filed a petition in the High Court in 2018. In 2021, another petition was filed in the National Green Tribunal and later a caveat was filed in the Supreme Court. On January 24 this year, the High Court ruled in favour of the petitioner and said these pristine pieces of coastal wetlands must be protected and conserved. JNPT and CIDCO officials were unavailable for comment.

Government response

In response, government officials cite an increase in mangrove cover in the State. As per the 2013 Forest Survey of India (FSI) report, there was 186 square kilometres of mangrove land in Maharashtra. Eight years later, in 2021, the count went up to 324 square kilometres, says Ramarao. "There has been a significant increase in mangrove cover. The 2023 FSI report is yet to be released."

The Mangrove Cell has initiated conservation measures such as floating a tender in September this year for installing CCTV cameras at 195 sensitive locations across the MMR to prevent garbage dumping and encroachment, according to the Chief Conservator of Forests, Mangrove Cell.

"We've maintained satellite data from 2005 to 2018 and are planning to procure high-resolution satellite maps for better land analysis and to determine if a particular area is mangrove land or not. Our Mangrove Suraksha app allows citizens to lodge complaints about wrongdoings in mangrove zones and swift action will be taken based on them. We've also deployed 184 security personnel and established a three-tier committee at the district, division, and State levels for monitoring mangrove zones," he says.

For addressing violations in such zones, Ramarao says, a two-pronged approach is being followed. "Violations within forest jurisdictions are addressed under the Indian Forest Act. The other violations fall under the Environment (Protection) Act and the respective District Collectors are tasked with taking action in such cases."

However, for fishing communities in the city, the struggle for survival continues. "Who is Mumbai upgrading for?" says Hitesh in Gavhan village, seeking development that prioritises the well-being of the city's original inhabitants.



Vanita Shankar Kotal, a fisherwoman from Gorai, says civic bodies have been conducting surveys in the area without consulting the residents. PUNIMA SAH

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

ABOUT FRATERNITY

SC verdict upholding Section 6A shifts the citizenship debate to a broader, more spacious ground

IN UPHOLDING THE constitutional validity of Section 6A of the Citizenship Act through a 4-1 verdict, the Supreme Court has answered a question that has long sparked passions, and even violence, in Assam: Who is a foreigner in this border state in India's North-east? The issue touched the Assam agitation in the 1970s and early 1980s. The 1985 agreement between the Rajiv Gandhi government at the Centre and the All Assam Students' Union tried to arrive at a resolution by setting a cut-off date for citizenship. Section 6A of the Citizenship Act that was inserted in the statute books after the agreement allows foreign migrants of Indian origin, who came to Assam after January 1, 1966 but before March 25, 1971, to seek Indian citizenship. However, in a state where the scars of Partition are still raw, migration remains a fraught issue. Section 6A was contested on the grounds that it violates constitutional provisions on citizenship and goes against the Right to Equality by setting a different yardstick for Assam compared to the rest of the country. The petitioners had also alleged that by allowing migration, the clause hurts the ability of Assam's indigenous communities to protect their culture — and that it, therefore, violates Article 29 of the Constitution. In its over 400-page long verdict, the SC has engaged with all these arguments.

The verdict takes a liberal and expansive view of citizenship. CJI Chandrachud sets the tone by observing that "challenges regarding the constitutionality of a statute require the Court to take a flexible approach". Section 6A, as he and three of his colleagues on the bench note, was the legislative corollary to the Assam Accord. The task before the lawmakers was to balance "the humanitarian needs of migrants of Indian origin and its impact on economic and cultural needs of Indian states". The SC has endorsed the cut-off date for meeting this imperative. It held the March 25, 1971 cut-off rational on two grounds. One, The Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983 sets this cut-off. Moreover, the Pakistani Army launched Operation Search Light to curb the nationalist movement in East Pakistan on this day. "The migrants before the operation," CJI Chandrachud says, "were considered to be migrants of Partition towards which India had a liberal policy".

The petitioners argued that the Constitution "upholds national fraternity, not global fraternity". In an important section of the verdict, Justice Surya Kant goes into Constitutional Assembly debates to arrive at a broader view of this principle. "In the Indian constitutional context, fraternity assumes an inclusive role, aligning with the broader goals of social justice," he points out. He terms the petitioner's view "restrictive" — "it allows them to choose their neighbour" — and says its runs "contrary to the ethos envisaged by the Constituent Assembly". The Court's "dynamic" reading of citizenship that is sensitive to the imperatives of "equality and upliftment" is significant at a time when debates over setting the parameters of Indian nationalism continue to rage. The Court is hearing other petitions on the issue — including on the fate of people who migrated to Assam after 1971. Its expansive view of citizenship should resonate in the discussions of the future.

TWO CHEERS

It is early days, but Delhi and Islamabad are trying to create diplomatic space for renewed bilateral engagement

EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER S Jaishankar's visit to Pakistan this week, the first in nearly a decade, has produced a small but unexpected step towards a long overdue thaw in bilateral relations. Small, because there will be obstacles to overcome before even a limited engagement is put in place in an accident-prone relationship. Unexpected, because both sides had downplayed the prospect for a bilateral dialogue on the margins of a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Islamabad. It was probably a deliberate attempt at reducing the high expectations that accompany any encounter between Indian and Pakistani leaders. There were signals that an effort was on to unfreeze the relationship. In Delhi, Jaishankar had signalled that India was willing to respond positively to any productive changes in Pakistan's approach. After all, it was Pakistan that withdrew its high commissioner from Delhi and expelled the Indian counterpart five years ago, when India changed the constitutional status of J&K. Islamabad had also cut off trade links with India. It had insisted that a reversal of the constitutional changes in Kashmir must precede any resumption of bilateral dialogue. Before traveling to Islamabad, Jaishankar promised to be "civil and courteous", and just before his arrival in Islamabad, the former Pakistan PM, Nawaz Sharif, had reaffirmed the desire for normal ties with India and did not mention Kashmir.

At the SCO summit, Jaishankar kept his word on being civil, and PM Shehbaz Sharif departed from his recent tendency to rake up Kashmir at every occasion. Jaishankar was also measured in his comments on the question of terrorism. While pointing to the essence of the SCO Charter — to combat terrorism, separatism and extremism — Jaishankar asked Pakistan to reflect honestly on how the encouragement to these forces has undermined peace between the two countries. Jaishankar apparently had a "pull aside" conversation with PM Sharif and a lengthier conversation with the deputy PM and foreign minister of Pakistan, Ishaq Dar, at a formal SCO dinner.

Even these limited steps are likely to come under severe criticism in both countries. In Pakistan, the government will be accused of diluting the position on Kashmir's constitutional status. In Delhi, there will be questions about Pakistan's support for cross-border terrorism. The coming weeks will show if there is enough give and take on Kashmir and terror to insulate cooperation in other domains. While it is early days, Delhi and Islamabad deserve two cheers for trying to create diplomatic space for renewed engagement.

JUST A BOY

Liam Payne will be remembered for the music — it touched many as they grappled with love, lust and life

AFTER THE SHOCKING death of 31-year-old One Direction singer Liam Payne, who fell from his hotel balcony in Buenos Aires, millions of fans mourn the loss of a singer who was a significant part of their teenage years. Payne was in Argentina to attend the concert of former bandmate Niall Horan. The knotty mix of nostalgia and anguish, including over Payne's struggle with substance abuse, has a common thread — Payne, along with Horan, Harry Styles, Louis Tomlinson and Zayn Malik as One Direction, touched their audiences when they were making sense of the coming-of-age pangs. This, besides sending hearts aflutter with their boyish charm.

Payne's life story is greatly about the cultural impact that the band — born of the talent pool in Fox Television's *X Factor* since they didn't make the cut as individual singers on the show — had on teen girls and boys all over the world. From being picked up from obscurity to becoming one of the most popular bands in the world, One Direction had its own Beatlemania moments. They debuted with the single "What makes you beautiful", which turned them into stars overnight. But what was unique here is that they made teens feel they were singing only for them. "I know they love me. Even though they don't know me," a teenage girl says in *One Direction: This is Us*, the 2013 documentary.

While the music of One Direction, just like the wonderful pieces that came from Backstreet Boys once and from BTS now, fell victim to being viewed as too bubblegum and lyrically clichéd (which they often were), their songs will be remembered. Payne and his partners provided succor to an entire generation of young adults in a precarious space, as they figured out the meanings of life, love and lust.



SHADAN FARASAT

THE JUDGMENT of the Supreme Court in *In Re: Section 6A Citizenship Act 1955* delivered yesterday by a five-judge Constitution Bench has many firsts. It is the first time that the SC has carried out an in-depth examination of the meaning of citizenship under the Constitution and the first time it has examined the content of the right to culture under Article 29 of the Constitution. It is also the first time the intersection between the right to vote and citizenship has been examined in some detail. And, finally, it is the first time that the principle of temporal unreasonableness has been espoused in the recent past to strike down a statutory provision, albeit by a dissenting judge.

Section 6A of the Citizenship Act was introduced on December 9, 1985, and was meant to legally crystallise the understanding of the Assam Accord 1985 between the Congress government of Rajiv Gandhi and the protesting student groups of Assam. The Accord was a compromise, which sought to legalise those migrants from Bangladesh who came to Assam on or before March 25, 1971. At the same time, partly agreeing with the demands of the protesting groups, the Accord envisaged that all those who entered Assam post the cut-off date would be treated as foreigners and deported in accordance with law. Section 6A legally entrenched both these aspects of the Accord through a deeming fiction.

The case before the SC arose from a challenge by certain Assamese indigenous groups, who, somewhat belatedly, in 2009, sought to challenge that part of Section 6A which sought to grant Indian citizenship to all those who arrived in Assam on or before the cut-off date. The Court, by a majority of 4:1, repelled this challenge.

The opinion of the Court was authored by Justice Surya Kant, speaking for himself and Justices M M Sundresh and Manoj Mishra. In what is quite a beautifully written judgment, the Court begins by addressing the meaning of citizenship under the Constitution. Citizenship defines who is an insider and who is an outsider. Thus, the approach on what citizenship means under the Constitution is also determinative of the kind of country we imagine ourselves to be. By pegging the concept of citizenship under our Constitution to the concept of fraternity, which is respect for and en-



ANUBHA YADAV

TWENTY YEARS AGO, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (ESSM) gave us a visceral visual language for the erasure of our romantic past. Clementine Kruzymski (Kate Winslet) undergoes a procedure to erase memories of her ex, Joel Barish (Jim Carrey). She chooses to do so as an act of clinical moving on, with none of the messiness typical of romantic love. When Joel finds out about this, he decides to do the same, as an act of revenge. Clementine broke the cardinal pact, the organic journey of a break-up — living with the memories, waiting for time to dull the pain. ESSM became a cult classic about the violence of forgetting.

Vikramaditya Motwane's *CTRL* is based in today's world. Nella (Ananya Pandey) and Joe (Vihan Samant) are an "influencer" couple. After her public break-up with Joe, Nella's pain of being betrayed is subsumed by her fear of losing followers. The hope of a new life is in Joe's total digital erasure from her social media. So, much like Joe's brain is cleaned of Clementine as he sleeps, Nella's life is cleaned of Joe every night. Joe and Clementine had Dr Howard's procedure; Nella has an AI assistant. In *CTRL*, forgetting starts by removing the digital trail, regaining followers and creating new digital memories. In short, a spotless digital life leads to a spotless mind.

CTRL makes you wonder about the nature of memory and its relationship with romantic love and forgetting. It makes you question whether the embodiment of memory itself

In its judgment, SC adopts a liberal, expansive view that is certain to resonate in debates to come

One of the main grounds of the challenge before the SC was that the presence of Section 6A violates the right to conserve the culture of the indigenous people of Assam and is, therefore, unconstitutional. The majority rejects this argument by adopting a multi-cultural and pluralist interpretation of Article 29 and rejecting an interpretation that could be used to entrench cultural exclusivity. It notes that the Article aims to "conserve" the culture of any group of citizens, but does not prevent the simultaneous existence of any other culture.

gagement with fellow beings, irrespective of the various differences between the groups of people that inhabit this country, the Court has quite emphatically accepted a liberal and broad-based view of the meaning of citizenship. The majority opinion, even without stating so, adopts a Tagorian worldview, and rejects an idea of citizenship based on "narrow domestic walls". At the same time, recognising that uncontrolled illegal migration will lead to eventual loss of the very purpose of citizenship, it draws a balance by seeking action in terms of the law for those who entered Assam post the cut-off date.

One of the main grounds of the challenge before the SC was that the presence of Section 6A violates the right to conserve the culture of the indigenous people of Assam and is, therefore, unconstitutional. The majority rejects this argument by adopting a multi-cultural and pluralist interpretation of Article 29 and rejecting an interpretation that could be used to entrench cultural exclusivity. It notes that the Article aims to "conserve" the culture of any group of citizens, but does not prevent the simultaneous existence of any other culture. The Court also notes that Article 29(1) is primarily a limited — and not absolute — right against intervention by the state with respect to cultural practices of any section of citizens. Based on this analysis, it concludes that the existence of Section 6A, insofar as it grants citizenship to those who entered Assam before the cut-off date, does not prevent the indigenous Assamese people from conserving their distinct culture. The majority opinion, in fact, concludes that it is the non-implementation of the other leg of Section 6A — which is the removal of those who migrated to Assam post the cut-off date — that is the potential cause for the grievances of the indigenous Assamese groups.

Crucially, the petitioners had also pegged their challenge to Section 6A on the violation of Article 326 of the Constitution that provided that elections to the Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies should take place on the basis of adult suffrage. The argument was that the accommodation of additional citizens pursuant to Section 6A diluted the right of the original inhabitants to exercise their adult franchise. Rejecting this argument, the majority held that Article 326 does not provide for any group of citizens to seek exclusion of another group

A CRISIS OF INTIMACY

'CTRL' reveals the complexities of memory, romance, and forgetting in the age of AI

has changed today and if Charlie Kaufman's spotless script for the 2004 film was, in fact, prescient. In ESSM, the process of erasure triggered the memory of the actual event and revealed more about Joel and Clementine's relationship, whereas in *CTRL*, the captured moment's memory is just an isolated rupture, a digital ghost which reveals little about Joe and Nella's relationship to the audience.

Over time, the act of forgetting has changed. It used to be sad songs; then it took the form of burnt journals, broken Archies mugs and torn photographs. Today, forgetting means password-locked digital folders of past loves never to be revisited again. Perhaps we are living in an age where forgetting is most unreal and yet easily accessible — so accessible that it has become a convenience store. Unlike ESSM in which forgetting was still sensory, in *CTRL*, its visualisation is largely linear and intellectual. Perhaps, it is no more forgetting. Psychotherapist and relationship expert Esther Perel warns us against another "AI" on the rise — "Artificial Intimacy," she says, is robbing generations of the capacity to build and experience real connections.

that the erasure of the photographs and videos will mean the erasure of Joe from her life.

As soon as I finished watching *CTRL* on Netflix, I opened another app for my evening walk. Armed with my AirPods, I disconnected from my surroundings again as I dove into my favourite podcast, shifting from one mode of technology to another. Just as I left home, my mother, who had been watching the film in short snatches, asked me, "So, did the two meet in the end?" I sighed and wondered if questions reveal the generation we are born in.

Is analogue love more real than Nella's choice to return to the AI version of Joe? Just as entered the park, I saw a young couple holding their smartphones. They started making videos of empty swings without a word. Real life Nella and Joe, I thought. The young man pushed the empty swings and then moved away so his girlfriend could shoot them. I was determined to rupture our digital silos. I walked up to them and said I am taking you to inspire by the film, I'm breaking "the spell". They told me they had been walking around the city, trying to document how children don't come to parks now. Their project is to get children to parks again. Suddenly, my Nella and Joe have a new avatar. They are activists working against the moment we are caught in, looking to find something real.

Yadav is an academic, writer and filmmaker

OCTOBER 18, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

US ASSURES INDIA

INDIA HAS RECEIVED limited assurances from the United States on recent developments vis-a-vis Pakistan's search for US arms, following talks between the Indian ambassador K S Bajpai, the US Assistant Secretary of State, Richard Murphy, and other officials at various levels. The US has reiterated that it is not giving any nuclear umbrella to Pakistan, nor does it seek a NATO-type relationship with Pakistan.

PM ON OPPOSITION

PRIME MINISTER INDIRA Gandhi lambasted opposition parties for accusing her of raising

the "bogey" of external dangers to divert the people's attention from problems facing the country. Addressing the fourth national rally of the Congress-1 Seva Dal in the uniform of a 'sevika', Mr Gandhi explained that at no time had she said there would be a war.

GAVASKAR'S 100TH TEST

PAKISTAN PRESIDENT GEN Zia-ul-Haq kept his promise to India's captain Sunil Gavaskar that he would be here to watch the latter's 100th Test. The two teams and officials were introduced to the President. But Zia made it pretty obvious that he had come especially for Gavaskar. He presented the master batsman

with a silver sash on behalf of the Board of Control for Cricket in Pakistan.

JANATA-LOK DAL MERGER

THREE JANAPATA Party leaders — Karpoori Thakur from Bihar, Devi Lal from Haryana and Kumbha Ram Arya from Rajasthan — launched an attack on opponents of their move for merger of the Janata Party and the Lok Dal and branded them as Congress (I) agents. Lauding Lok Dal president Charan Singh's constitutional approach towards their merger efforts, the leaders said "some elements of the Congress (I) within the Janata Party and outside are sabotaging unity efforts."

THE ASIAN AGE

18 OCTOBER 2024

Don't read too much into Jaishankar optics in Pak

The optics of India's foreign minister S. Jaishankar's visit to Islamabad may have been the nicest thing to happen against a backdrop of strained ties between India and Pakistan as the warmth in personal meetings outside the formal conference of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), especially those that Mr Jaishankar had with his counterpart Ishaq Dar and their interior minister Mohsin Naqvi, was noticeable.

To interpret the cordiality of the first Indian foreign minister's visit to Pakistan in nine years as a breakthrough leading to a possible thaw in national ties is to read too much into the civility and the etiquette of diplomacy in the complex dynamics of the region's geopolitics. Of course, it would be a very good development if there it is to be a shift away from India's regular abrasiveness in its dealings with Pakistan and China.

In any case, it is far above the foreign minister's pay grade to order a resetting of ties when any such change of direction can come only from the very top and we know the chances of that happening any time soon are remote. Mr Jaishankar may have kept to the SCO charter of not raking up bilateral issues, which he, however, did attempt in veiled references to "activities across borders characterised by terrorism, extremism and separatism", meaning Pakistan and China.

There have been rugged signals of late from India with the home minister and others ruling out any top-level bilateral talks with Pakistan while the defence minister has often spoken of Pakistan needing to create the right conditions for such talks to resume. Once again, the message was that the neighbour had to do something about putting a stop to sponsoring cross-border terror, which has always been suspected to come from the Pakistan Army's playbook.

The play of cricket diplomacy in Islamabad could not, however, be missed as Pakistan's Mohsin Naqvi is also the chairman of the Pakistan Cricket Board, which is hosting the Champions Trophy, its first big ICC event after having co-hosted the 1996 World Cup with India. Pakistan is extra keen to see India play in Lahore where it has been promised security befitting the visit of a head of state. Team India's participation — India has not played in Pakistan since 2008 — would be key to the success of the event.

The government has denied that any talk of cricket took place, which is hard to believe in any meeting of India and Pakistan. Considering that as head of the International Cricket Council (ICC), the home minister's son Jay Shah would have a higher responsibility towards the game's welfare, it might be a significant development if India does overcome its misgivings and agrees to play cricket in Pakistan, much as Pakistan did in coming to India for the ODI World Cup in 2023. Cricketing ties used to have a momentum of their own, sometimes in inverse proportion to the national relationship that used to have its sabbatic years and downs. But then the 2008 shooting incident in Lahore in 2009 changed everything since when teams have toured Pakistan with great trepidation.

If the foreign minister's SCO trip has managed to change anything at all, it might have to do with the thinking about Team India playing in Pakistan in February-March 2025. It is a major call that would, however, hinge on thorough study of the security angle and whether India's top leadership would like to take the responsibility of putting at risk the country's iconic cricket stars.

Crack down on threats to flights

In the last four days, more than 20 flights of various Indian airlines, including international flights, received bomb threats. Some of them went into emergency mode and landed at the closest airport and re-scrambled all passengers. While all threat calls turned out to be hoaxes, passengers suffered the inconvenience of having to undergo security checks and lost their precious time while airlines operated on tight margins incurred heavy losses.

An Air India direct flight from New Delhi to Chicago was diverted to a remote airport at Igliut in Canada, while the Singapore Armed Forces scrambled fighter jets for the Air India Express flight to land safely after a bomb threat. Apart from short-term inconvenience to the airlines, the perception of lower air safety would cause long-term imaging issues.

According to preliminary information, a 17-year-old boy, a school dropout from Rajnandgaon in Chhattisgarh, allegedly created a handle on X in the name of the friend with whom he had a dispute and posted bomb threats from it. The Mumbai police took the matter into custody.

The Central government is planning to double the deployment of air marshals on sensitive routes. Air marshals are highly trained counter-terror operatives who are covertly placed on civilian flights to deal with possible hijacking attempts. The government is also planning to increase the penalty imposed on the accused.

The government is also considering placing individuals responsible for bomb threat actions on the no-fly list. The Bureau of Civil Aviation Security proposed this idea to the Union aviation ministry in June 2024, and the proposal is being seriously considered following the rising threats received in the past week.

Nevertheless, the government should be mindful of its impact on bona fide informers, who wanted to help the authorities by tipping them off. While the fear of law is good, authorities should not make informing them prohibitively costly. The airlines must keep a fine balance between costs and security.

THE ASIAN AGE

KARISHM MEHTA

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[OUR TAKE]

A beginning in Islamabad

S Jaishankar's visit to SCO meet is an ice-breaker for India-Pak ties. It could lead to substantial talks and tangible gains

It comes as no surprise that there was no breakthrough between India and Pakistan at the meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Council of Heads of Government in Islamabad. External affairs minister S Jaishankar had made it eminently clear that his visit across the border, the first by an Indian foreign minister in nine years, was more about the multilateral meeting and had less to do with taking forward the bilateral relationship.

However, it has to be noted that Jaishankar has also said in recent weeks that India will respond to every Pakistan-related development, whether positive or negative. In that context, there were no fireworks of the sort witnessed at the SCO foreign ministers' meeting in Goa last year. India's was a dignified presence, where Jaishankar outlined what New Delhi expects of the Eurasian bloc and how it has not measured up to the SCO Charter, especially in terms of its original objectives of combating terrorism and separatism. Chinese Premier Li Qiang, in his address, highlighted the need to strengthen joint actions to fight terror. The Indian side also got across its point regarding the need to safeguard sovereignty and territorial integrity, something that needs to be seen in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had held up as a project for establishing a SCO connectivity framework.

The India-Pakistan interaction, whatever little could be witnessed in video footage, was cordial and minimal. There were exchange of pleasantries and brief conversations between Jaishankar and his Pakistani counterpart Ishaq Dar, in informal surroundings though nothing substantial appears to have emerged. This breaking of ice could be seen as a beginning. That this happened at a time when a newly elected government was sworn in Srinagar, purely coincidental though, should prompt Pakistan to look beyond its stated position on Jammu and Kashmir and accept the new paradigm. There are areas where India and Pakistan can quietly make a fresh start, trade and cricket being among them. There are reports of the revival of cricket tests featuring Jaishankar's informal conversations in Islamabad. This is surely the least contentious of issues, and combined with trade, could well become the start of a calibrated approach towards reviving bilateral ties. It is too much to harbour expectations of normalcy in relations, but this is a beginning that could lead to more substantial conversations and tangible gains.

Breaking impasse in Manipur's civil strife

The Centre-mediated talks in Delhi involving legislators from conflict-torn Manipur on Tuesday didn't yield a breakthrough but the initiative is a good beginning. Since ethnic violence broke out in Manipur in May 2023, at least 220 persons have died and over 50,000 people have been left homeless. Violence has since become sporadic but the healing process is nowhere to be seen. In fact, the Delhi meet revealed the deep chasm that exists among communities when the Kuki MLAs declined to engage their colleagues from the Meitei community. A statement was issued on behalf of the Kuki legislators, which said that peace discussions are feasible only after a separate administration is set up for the hill districts that are home to Kuki-Zo-Hmar communities.

This impasse is the outcome of the hill districts perceiving the administration in Imphal as partisan to the Meiteis. Chief minister (CM) N Biren Singh, a Meitei himself, has done little to remove this perception. The BJP has backed his leadership despite the collapse of the administration and the electoral reverses faced in the general election — the party lost both the Lok Sabha seats in Manipur to the Congress. The state needs leadership that can rise above the divisions in the society and present itself as a neutral arbitrator.

Interestingly, CM Singh was not invited to the legislators' meeting in Delhi, where it appeared that the Centre intended to use the good offices of the MLAs from the Naga community to broker peace. The plan may not have worked out this time but the Centre needs to persist with talks, and perhaps, get credible civil society voices from outside Manipur to start a conversation. Politics in Manipur is communitarian and the elected representatives are beholden to influential grassroots groups that dictate the terms and conditions of talks. The polarisation is so stark that few in Manipur are willing to intervene in a scenario presumably controlled by armed groups.

Delhi must speak up for UN peacekeepers

India has invested money, effort and time to make peacekeeping safer. It should not stay quiet when the safety of UN personnel is under threat

While Israel's targeting of the United Nations (UN) and its agencies and of secretary-general Antonio Guterres has not received the attention it should, with even the West, covertly and overtly, supporting Israel on this matter, the UN is finally receiving some attention because Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) attacked the UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon, which also has a sizeable contingent from some western countries. Nothing like western interests being hurt for a matter to receive attention! Israel's ongoing ground operations in Lebanon have seen the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) coming under direct fire from the IDF. Over five days, its Naqura headquarters and other posts were fired at by IDF tanks and soldiers, injuring five UN peacekeepers, causing skin irritation in 15 of them from smoke bombs, and wilfully causing damage to several UNIFIL assets such as vehicles, communication equipment, and perimeter walls. It is

to the credit of UNIFIL that they have stood their ground and not given in to Israel's call to evacuate ranks from Lebanon or to the vilification campaign that has started.

Israel targeting UN peacekeepers has predictably provoked outrage, including in the West. Since outrage among troop-contributing countries from the Global South usually does not add up to much. Condemning these attacks, 34 of the 50 UNIFIL troop-contributing countries issued a joint statement calling on parties to stop such actions immediately and investigate. Though India had expressed concern separately, surprisingly, it did not join in, despite being the third-largest current contributor to UNIFIL, with more than 900 troops. Indonesia is the top contributor, followed by Italy. There are nearly 10,500 peacekeepers stationed there under the UN flag from 50 troop-contributing countries, including France and Spain. But, immediately after the joint statement was issued, India tweeted that it "aligns itself fully" with that statement.

India's subdued and almost reluctant reaction is all the more disturbing because it has been no stranger to its peacekeepers shedding blood for the UN, right since it first got involved in UN peacekeeping in the 1950s. India has suffered the largest number of casualties in UN peacekeeping operations — 177. India has also contributed the historically largest number of troops — more than 250,000 so far.

In fact, India has always stood at the forefront of condemning any attack on UN peacekeepers and has invested money, effort and time in making peacekeeping safer. During India's stint in the UN Security Council 2021-22, it prioritised the safety of UN peacekeepers under the slogan "protecting the protectors". The United Nations Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 2589, piloted by India, was adopted during the country's presidency of the Council in August 2021. Unanimously adopting this resolution, the Council called for promoting accountability for the killing of — and acts of violence against — UN peacekeeping personnel and to address the impunity of aggressors for investigating such acts, and arresting and prosecuting perpetrators.

Indian diplomats worked on this draft for several months to plug this glaring gap in the UN peacekeeping mandate — the lack of accountability of those who commit crimes against UN peacekeepers and mechanisms to bring them to justice. For example, it is estimated that between January 1, 1948, and May 13, 2022, 10,399 UN peacekeepers were killed and at least 3,037 injured "as a result of malicious acts". Hardly anyone responsible for these crimes has been brought to justice. Launching the "Group of Friends" in the UN to implement UNSCR 2589, India's external affairs minister pointed out that "this Group represents the politi-



TS Tirumurti



India has been a votary of the UN system. It must not lose sight of its larger objective now, more so with Pakistan poised to enter the UNSC 2025-26 elections

cal will of Member States, particularly of the troop- and police-contributing countries, to champion the implementation of UNSCR 2589". Even though India has close ties with Israel — given the mutually beneficial relations and our stake in that region — it simply cannot be that our proximity to that country (or, for that matter, any other) makes us less than unequivocal about the safety and security of UN peacekeeping forces, of which our own troops are a part.

Israel's antagonism towards the UN has only become worse since the Gaza war broke out in October last year. UN agencies have been targeted by Israel. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which is the lifeline for several million Palestinian refugees, has been obstructed in performing its critical humanitarian duties not just by Israel but also by the West. Israel is bringing in draft legislation to ban UNRWA in the occupied Palestinian territories at a time when 42,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, two million have been displaced, and are facing hunger and disease. Another instance of Israel's hostility towards the UN system is its dec-

laration of the UN secretary-general Guterres as *persona non grata* (an unwelcome person) — a misguided step to penalise the secretary-general for what is really a failing of 193 UN member States. In the midst of all this, the advisory ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has been drowned out — a ruling that once again underlined the legal basis for a Palestinian State by declaring Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as unlawful.

Israel has traditionally perceived the UN as acting against it. India, on the other hand, has been a strong votary of the UN and the UN system. That is why we remain engaged and continue to demand reform of the UN Security Council to make the UN more relevant and credible. While there may have been a few blips in India's relations with the UN, we should be careful not to lose sight of our larger objective, especially when Pakistan is poised to enter the Council for 2025-26.

TS Tirumurti is a former Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations.
The views expressed are personal

A Benninger model in Indian architecture

Histories are most accurately written by travellers. It takes a fresh perspective, an outsider's eye to see something for what it is. It's partly the reason why visitors are fascinated with India's culture, the hubbub, the colours and the landscape, while the locals bemoan and fret about the daily nitty-gritty.

India's architectural history of the past century is inextricably intertwined with architects who had no roots in the continent, but once they made their way here, became firm sons of the soil. Their best work was often realised here as they distilled modernist predilections in the new climate they found themselves in.

Ostensibly, it all started with the Gaskwad family hiring Charles Mant for the Laxmi Vilas Palace in Baroda in 1880. Robert Chisholm, Edwin Lutyens and HV Lanchester followed suit, building a variety of schools and commissions. By the time governor-general Lord Mountbatten handed over the keys, the foreign architect had become the ultimate symbol of the Edifice Complex, as described by Deyan Sudrajat.

Till this time, the visiting architects had seen little of India, believing nothing of value really existed in the local craft. The British-born gentleman architects, sweltering in their suits upon elephants during site visits, weren't too inclined to learn about local practices — resources were seen as unlimited, as was imperial power, and being dismissive of the locals was in their best interest as other commissions would follow.

In the post-independence era, the fabulously wealthy princes, both Indian and otherwise, were replaced with the business magnates building institutions alongside the government-making cities. Louis Kahn and Le Corbusier both saw their most impressive works come to life in India, grooming the first generation of truly Indian architects that would come to then dominate the profession — BV Doshi, Charles Correa, Hansraj Patel were all foreign-trained and learned their craft under visiting architects. The outcomes have shaped the Indian city, as the rapidly multiplying local practices looked to emulate their western heroes.

The next generation of visiting architects to the subcontinent didn't come as established masters of their craft. Laurie Baker, Joseph Stein and Geoffrey Bawa built up their oeuvres slowly. Smaller commissions were met with inventive forms and unique methods of tackling the climate.

Within this milieu, it is important to examine the work of Christopher Charles Benninger. Born in the United States in 1942, although Benninger's life and career took a path similar to many of his predecessors who were drawn to the subcontinent, his

work profoundly shaped its architectural landscape with a sensitivity to local culture, climate, and history.

Benninger, who died on October 2, 2024, immersed the realm of institutional architecture through his deep understanding of place and his ability to integrate modernist principles with the unique vernacular traditions of India. His life and practice exemplified the power of architecture to shape not just buildings, but the communities and institutions that inhabit them.

Benninger's move to India was inspired by his early involvement in developmental issues and his participation in a Ford Foundation fellowship. In the early 1970s, Benninger settled in Pune, founding the Centre for Development Studies and Activities (CDSA) alongside Bernard D'Mello. This institute became a hub for research on urban development, rural planning, and the intersection of architecture with human development.

The establishment of his own practice, Christopher Charles Benninger Architects, allowed him to bring his ideals of human-centric, climate-responsive, and contextually grounded design to fruition. Benninger believed that buildings, particularly public institutions, should be designed as flexible, open, and inspiring spaces that reflect the ethos of the society they serve.

His buildings often exhibited a simplicity in form but a complexity in spatial organisation, always with an eye to creating human-scale environments that encourage interaction and community. The Cervantes building, the Suzlon campus, and the Mahindra campus showcase that complexity, weaving courtyards and shaded open spaces around buildings that hold them together. Benninger's work was a physical link with the work of Joseph Stein and Geoffrey Bawa — modernism tempered by the knowledge of local climate and materials — that makes it feel incredibly rooted.

It is tempting to see Benninger's death as the end of an era, where the wide-eyed young architect visiting India made it his home and changed the landscape. As with all predictions, one only needs to make a prophecy to have it immediately undone by the inherent volatility of nature. The theory is certainly not supported by the flurry of contemporary young practices that feature at least one international spouse, having been acquired during further studies and work abroad, by the growing pool of young Indian architects choosing to return to India to practise.

It is also not helped by the fact that India is once again rising to be a global power, attracting talent from around the world as we build the next 50 billion square feet over the next few decades. Contemporary architects are riding the boom in Indian real estate, sourcing materials from around the world to produce luxurious buildings for an ever-expanding pool of wealthy patrons. As such, Benninger's passing does mark the end of a kind of modernism that only a visitor with limited resources might practise — a compassionate modernism — a modernism that we might look back on as the best of both worlds.

Amit Khanna is design principal, AKDA, and his research focus is the transformation of cities.
The views expressed are personal



Amit Khanna

MARK RUTTE | SECRETARY-GENERAL OF NATO

I am absolutely confident that Ukraine will join Nato. That doesn't mean that I can say I support the victory plan because there are many issues that we have to understand better



Plug gender gap in labour to boost GDP

Achieving gender equality in India could boost the GDP by \$700 billion by 2025, representing a 36% increase over the current contribution. At present, women contribute about 18% of India's GDP, significantly below the global average of 37%. This indicates a vast potential for growth if gender gaps in employment are addressed. According to UNICEF (2007), a 10% permanent increase in female labour force participation would lead to a 0.3% rise in the GDP growth rate. Research from the International Monetary Fund suggests that bridging the female employment gap on par with the rate for males could boost India's GDP by 27%. Increasing women's participation in the workforce also leads to broader social benefits, such as improved family health and education outcomes, and reduced poverty levels. This makes a strong case for targeted policies and investments.

Between 2017 to 2023, the Periodic Labour Force Survey data shows that the labour force participation rate (LFPR) increased by five percentage points for urban women. National flagship programmes have contributed to a large extent to improving the female LFPR in urban India. Take, for instance, Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana — National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM), the flagship mission of the ministry of housing and urban affairs. DAY-NULM seeks to alleviate poverty and vulnerability among urban households by creating paid jobs, providing skill training and access to credit, a crucial tool for economic empowerment. DAY-NULM is fostering a sense of agency and enabling them to build a better future. During 2024-2025, 4.56 lakh of 6.78 lakh SHGs in urban India, received revolving funds, under different components of DAY-NULM. Over the period, about 1.57 lakh SHG candidates received training in different skills, of which 6.20 lakh got placements. By 2024, 6.72 lakh of 9.85 lakh SHGs in urban India had received revolving funds, primarily accessed by women. Additionally, the mission facilitated skill training for about 15.42 lakh individuals, 10.09 lakh of them being women — 8.72 lakh trained candidates secured

placements, of whom 6.07 lakh were women. Women SHGs have gained access to education, health care, and other essential services, not just for themselves but also for their families, leading to improved well-being and greater participation in community life. As of September 2024, 2.45 lakh women beneficiaries were linked to POSHAN 1.70 lakh SHG members and their families attended health camps across urban areas of the country. Crucially, the formation and strengthening of these SHGs have been instrumental in building social capital among women. These groups provided a safe and supportive space for interaction, fostering trust, solidarity, and mutual support. This enhanced social capital has not only boosted confidence and decision-making but also fostered a sense of collective agency, enabling women to challenge traditional gender norms, increase their mobility, and engage in activities and work traditionally reserved for men.

In many cities, women SHGs have taken on the operation and maintenance of water and sanitation facilities, becoming entrepreneurs, owning assets, and running sanitation businesses. This shatters gender stereotypes and demonstrates the power of economic empowerment to transform lives. The convergence of NULM with the Swachh Bharat Mission and Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation exemplifies the commitment to women's empowerment. Women's SHGs in urban areas have become crucial conduits of information, and support marginalised communities with government programmes related to health care, education, pensions, and other social services. Their peer-to-peer presence within communities and understanding of local needs enable them to effectively disseminate information and facilitate access to these vital services.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, women SHGs provided community support and helped to bridge the gap between vulnerable populations and government relief efforts. Given India's current demographic trends, DAY-NULM assumes great importance in harnessing the demographic dividend, especially among poor households. It is important to increase its coverage across all towns and cities.

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The views expressed are personal



Debolina Kundu



Anju Dwivedi



OUR VIEW



Europa: Off to peer into drops of Jupiter's moon

Nasa's mission to a Galilean moon of Jupiter in a shell of ice will let us know if its bulky ocean has signs of life. The lure is water—what we've failed so starkly to secure on Earth

Nasa's Europa Clipper mission took off on 14 October to study Europa, one of Jupiter's four moons discovered by Galileo Galilei in 1610. The Italian's discovery came at great personal cost, but also spun off modern astronomy. What we are about to find out in a few years will tell us whether there are any practical uses of Galileo's 17th century discovery. It's a tip of the hat, if you will, to not only the spirit of scientific enquiry, but also to, well, *spirit* itself—the need for gutsy dissent and debate. In *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, the astronomer, when accused of heresy, says, "The truth is the truth. Is the Mother Church so fearful of science? Our Earth behaves as do all the wandering stars. I have observed that there are four moons that circle Jupiter in orbits of their own. So does our Moon the Earth as the Earth describes her orbit around the sun." To which, his Vatican interrogator replies, without a shred of evidence: "No. You are deranged." This, for challenging the time's orthodoxy that all heavenly motion was around the Earth.

Evidence gathering is the aim of the US space agency's Europa mission, which will work in tandem with Europe's Jupiter Icy Moons Explorer (or Juice), launched last year to study all four moons. Europa is encrusted in thick ice, as we have known since *Voyager 1* and 2 sent us close-ups in 1979 revealing a gleaming white sphere. Scientists now expect to find a 100km-thick layer of water and/or ice covering its rocky interior. It is reckoned to hold three times the quantity of all water on Earth. Does this oceanic moon also have vital elements that support life here—carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorous and

sulphur? Probes will look for signs. Could it, perchance, also be swarming with organisms of the kind found—and studied—living under Lake Vostok's sheets of ice in Antarctica? What else do we know? Europa has very few impact craters. Its surface is probably still forming. It has mysterious dark fractures which may be cracks in its ice shell that open and close perhaps twice during its orbit of 3.6 Earth days. The Europa Clipper will travel 2.9 billion kilometres and is expected to enter Jupiter's orbit in April 2030. Its findings from dozens of flybys will be awaited with bated breath. As Europa Clipper programme scientist Curt Niebur told CNN, "It's a chance for us to explore not a world that might have been habitable billions of years ago, but a world that might be habitable today."

This mission has all the hallmarks of humans trying to flee a chaotic globe for a new one. We have messed up our blue planet, a name rendered ironic by the havoc we have wreaked on our water resources with man-made climate change. Today, only 0.5% of Earth's water is usable and available freshwater, and a rapidly warming world is reducing that supply, according to the UN. Over the past 20 years, terrestrial water storage—including soil moisture, snow and ice—has dropped at a rate of 1cm per year. The Arctic cap is shrinking fast. Our water security is at threat, with the poor set to bear the brunt of its scarcity. In a 1961 novel, Polish sci-fi writer Stanislaw Lem gave us the portrait of an oceanic planet called Solaris. His ocean, though, was sentient, capable of playing tricks on our minds. If it were on Europa, it might welcome us to peer into drops of Jupiter's moon—and urge us to take better care of the great blue globe we inhabit.

GUEST VIEW

Don't underestimate the risk of over-financialization

M. SURESH BABU



is director, Madras Institute of Development Studies.

India's financial sector has grown rapidly in recent years. According to a ministry of finance press release dated 22 July, India's market-capitalization-to-GDP ratio ranks fifth globally and primary markets facilitated capital formation of ₹10.9 trillion in 2023-24, up from ₹9.3 trillion in 2022-23. The number of initial public offerings (IPOs) increased by 60% to 272 in 2023-24, a year in which the Nifty-50 index rose by 26.8%, as against an 8.2% decline the previous year. The National Stock Exchange (NSE) investor base nearly tripled to 92 million in March 2024 from March 2020.

Financial sector development is crucial for economic growth, as it lowers the cost of financial intermediation and raises the efficiency of capital allocation. Efficient financial intermediaries provide the economy with risk-return combinations for borrowing or investing capital to augment its production potential. While the speedy development of this sector in India has yielded multiple benefits, there exist some concerns on its

unbridled expansion—which could work counterproductively in the long run. A disproportionate dilation of the sector, called 'over-financialization,' could cast a shadow on economic growth as it runs the risk of a lurking financial crisis.

Signs of over-financialization: Manifestations of this phenomenon are visible in financial-market activity. First, there has been an IPO rush. India topped the global IPO market with 227 of them, totalling \$12.2 billion, in the first eight months of 2024, while the number of IPOs globally declined during this period (the US and China had 133 and 69 respectively). Along with this, the Indian stock market achieved a significant milestone in August 2024 as the total number of registered investors in India crossed the 100 million mark, according to an NSE report, which noted that it took just five months to rise from 90 million. New investors continue to enter the market at a torrid pace. Since 2021, the count of retail investors across the country has gone up dramatically, with much of this growth coming from under-penetrated regions.

Second, the IPO boom reveals some discomforting trends. While new-age technology firms raised substantial capital, less known entities have also received an over-

enthusiastic response. A Delhi-based bike dealer's IPO was over-subscribed nearly 400 times; it wanted to raise ₹12 crore, but received bids worth a mind-blowing ₹4,800 crore. This dealership, which operates two showrooms, has very few employees, and despite its disclosures highlighting several business risks, its IPO was swamped. Manifold oversubscription has been the story of many other IPOs too. Exuberant investors appear to be dismissing expert analysis in their zeal to get share allotments. Kotak Institutional Equities has repeatedly warned of over-exuberance, describing the Indian market as a mix of "rightful optimism and mistaken euphoria."

Third, the Buffett Indicator, which measures the stock market's overall valuation relative to the country's GDP, has been increasing steadily. India's Buffett indicator is hovering above 1.4, indicating that the market is significantly overvalued. In this frame of analysis, if the stock mar-

ket's value is growing much faster than the actual economy, then it may be in a bubble. The 2023-24 *Economic Survey* cautions us against overconfidence in markets: "The market capitalisation to GDP ratio is not necessarily a sign of economic advancement or sophistication... If equity market claims on the real economy are excessively high, it is a harbinger of market instability rather than market resilience."

Impending perils: Current tendencies in Indian financial markets point towards over-financialization. "Financialization is a process whereby financial

institutions and financial elites gain greater influence over economic policy and economic outcomes," according to economist Thomas Palley. This process transforms the functioning of economic systems at both macro and micro levels. There are three principal outcomes of financialization: First, it elevates the significance of the financial sector relative to the

production sector; second, it transfers income from the latter to the former; and third, it increases income inequality and contributes to wage stagnation. As financialization gains momentum, total debts tend to rise, with financial-sector debt growing faster than non-financial-sector debt. To complicate matters, gross investment spending as a share of GDP would register a downward trend, delivering a business cycle marked by weak investment in production capacity and a likely surge in residential purchases.

Large sums of money chasing IPOs suggests that investors do not see other liquid investment opportunities available to them. The big question here is that the net worth of households has risen along with their debt. According to a Motilal Oswal report, the net worth of Indian households reached record 157% of GDP in the first quarter of 2024-25, thanks to a significant increase in financial assets such as shares and mutual funds. But household debt is also at a record 42% of GDP. This trend looks likely to continue.

As financial markets are at the heart of financialization, we need to rein them in without inflicting serious collateral damage on the real economy.

These are the author's personal views.

QUICK READ

India's swelling base of investors, IPO exuberance and soaring market capitalization as a ratio of GDP all suggest a phenomenon of over-financialization that may result in financial instability.

Financial sector development lowers intermediation costs and drives capital efficiency, but it's time to rein in over-extended markets now without letting the real economy take a blow.

QUICK READ

Knee-jerk reactions to price spikes have included export curbs and stock limits but short-term actions to tame prices have often meant farmers had little incentive to raise production.

We need public investment in creating well-regulated markets and setting up storage facilities and distribution networks, apart from research efforts to develop climate-resilient crop varieties.

There has been much discussion on the seasonal nature of food inflation, but this is at best a partial explanation of why it has been so stubborn. While vegetable inflation in September was reported at 36%, much of it's on account of tomato, onion and potato prices, which make up almost a third of the weight of vegetables in the CPI consumption basket. In September, their prices were 42%, 66% and 65% above 2023 levels, respectively, despite government efforts to hold them in check.

However, two other weighty food items that continue to report high inflation are cereals at 7% and pulses at 10%. Together these account for a fourth of the food basket. Unlike perishable vegetables, these can be stored and official estimates have been claiming record production; cereal output has outpaced population growth over the last five years, suggesting an increase in per capita availability. Yet, inflation in pulses has remained 10% or more for the last 16 months and cereal inflation has averaged 1% in the last two years.

Even the Wholesale Price Index (WPI) confirms an inflationary spike in these commodities. Even though overall WPI inflation was just 1.82% last month, food inflation jumped to 11.5%, with cereal inflation at 8% and pulses at 13%. For both rice and wheat, WPI infla-

tion was 8%, while vegetable inflation was 49%, with tomatoes, onions and potatoes at 73%, 79% and 78% respectively. Clearly, food inflation is broader based than what seasonality would suggest. What should also worry policymakers is the outlook for inflation in the near future. Globally, the Food and Agriculture Organisation highlights a rising trend in overall prices in recent months. Cereals, particularly wheat, are likely to face price pressures, as also vegetable oils.

But why are food prices so stubborn? Part blame can be assigned to uneven supply arising out of crop failures or losses due to extreme weather events. These have now become more frequent even though we have not had a wide drought in recent years. But some of it has also been due to ad-hoc signalling by the government. The past three years have seen frequent interventions in Indian markets for cereals and vegetables. Knee-jerk reactions to price spikes have included trade restrictions, stock limits and surveillance. While the purpose has been to tame retail prices, in most cases they worked as perverse incentives to producers, who found little reason to raise production.

Finally, more so for perishables but also for other crops, supply-chain efficiency requires large public investments in creating well-regulated markets and setting up storage facilities and distribution networks.

Food inflation remains a problem not just for inflation targeting, but also for most of the Indian population, with food still accounting for almost half the country's consumption basket and two-thirds of it for the poorest. Excluding food inflation from RBI's policy framework will not solve this problem. We need ways to contain it. This requires large investments not just in supply chains but also in research to develop climate-resilient crop varieties. Above all, it requires government policy to be producer-centric rather than consumer-focused for it to be effective.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

It suddenly struck me that that tiny pea, pretty and blue, was the Earth. I put up my thumb and shut one eye, and my thumb blotted out the planet Earth. I didn't feel like a giant. I felt very, very small.

NEIL ARMSTRONG

THEIR VIEW

Indian venture capitalists invest in moonshot ideas

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November 2020. The covid pandemic is raging around the world. In India, where we are confined to our homes in a complete lockdown, two teenagers ask a simple question: Why does it take a full 24 hours to get groceries delivered at home? Can we combine the service levels of the local *kirana* (or neighbourhood) store with the range and convenience of e-commerce to deliver everything *now*?

Fast-forward to October 2024. The business they started has become a household name: Zepto. Today, the company not only operates on a scale best described as massive—it fulfils an estimated 1 million orders a day and operates in 12 cities across India—it has begun to transform our very consumption habits.

Was Zepto a 'moonshot' idea? Some dismiss it as a simple logistics operation that thrives on labour-cost arbitrage. They couldn't be more wrong. The company delivers products in near real-time, fulfilling almost every order perfectly, with packages sent across to homes from hundreds of dark stores set up in customer neighbourhoods. For this, it gets thousands of delivery executives to use technology and follow standard operating protocols. And it does it a million times a day. This is a feat only a handful of businesses can pull off. That a 4-year-old company started by teenagers is doing this is nothing short of a miracle.

Venture capital (VC) firms have invested \$1.6 billion (₹13,400 crore) in Zepto so far. Is that moonshot enough?

The example is illustrative of a larger point—that the technologies that deliver the greatest impact could differ depending on the economy they are applied in. In highly efficient markets, a moonshot idea may promise full automation: the American or European equivalent of quick-commerce might, for instance, be autonomous delivery by drones or robots. In India, there is enormous value to be created through productivity and efficiency gains.

For example, last month I encountered a shopkeeper in Gundlupet, a tiny place in Karnataka. He runs a small shop, but a full 70% of his monthly cash flow is now through digital payments. For his financial life, this figure is transformative: It provides him access to credit and financial investments for the first time.



Vcs have indeed made daring bets in India. As for deep-tech risk appetite, think of all the space-tech startups funded. That's literally rocket science.

Replicated across the country, digital adoption increases the level of formalization and thus tax compliance in the economy. The firms that enabled this, VC-funded ones like Paytm and PhonePe, did not invent new technology, but instead used existing tech to deliver massive efficiency gains.

My submission, therefore, is that impact is the ultimate measure of the quality of a VC investment, not the technology it's built on. Even if we restrict the discussion to the 'deep tech' industry, India's venture capitalists are funding these startups in increasing numbers. Take space startups as an example—literally an arena of rocket science. India is home to at least 140 'space-tech' startups that have garnered hundreds of millions in venture funding. Indian VCs are funding rocket launches (Agnikul got \$60 million in funding and Skyroot \$100 million), satellite constellations (Pixxel raised \$71 million and Dhruva \$16 million) and satellite data analysis (Satsure got \$25 million). Similar investments are being made across other core technology sectors like artificial intelligence (AI), hardware, robotics and autonomous vehicles. My own firm has funded a company that automatically writes software from a drawing (Kombai), another that creates comic strips from text (Dashtoon), and voice bots to automate everything from call centres to physics coaching.

There are challenges, of course. Perhaps the biggest of them is talent availability. India produces far more engineers than scientists and researchers. Any company that requires even a dozen PhDs to deliver its product will face a serious hiring challenge.

India's public university system doesn't help by creating roadblocks to academic-industry collaboration. Granting professors and academic researchers sabbaticals from work to pursue startups, allowing them to take personal equity in these companies and providing them the security of being able to return to their academic jobs if the startup doesn't work will go a long way towards alleviating the talent crunch.

Capital availability is another significant barrier to investment in the deep-tech sector. Such investments have a longer gestation period than most commercial investments, and require large capital outlays before the product even hits the market.

Unlike other major economies, India doesn't have a substantial government programme to provide patient capital to such startups, either directly or through venture funds. A deep-tech funding scheme with a multi-decade tenure would provide the capital required to get such startups off the ground.

The venture business model relies on the portfolio effect: In a high-risk sector, you need to fund several companies to generate one large winner. A fund will only find it viable to invest in a new sector when it sees an opportunity to invest in at least 15-20 such startups over a 3-4 year period. Only then will a VC fund invest in the expertise required to develop them.

A new space attains a critical mass of fundable opportunities when at least 100-200 credible new companies are created in it every year. When this starts to happen in deep technology areas, we will likely see VC money rush into them. Hopefully, we will finally be able to put the moonshot debate to rest then.

VC firms are yet to bet big on high-risk tech startups

T.N. HARI
is executive chairman, STEER World.

Venture capital (VC), by definition, has a higher risk appetite than conventional sources of capital, and many VC enthusiasts would argue that venture investing is a moonshot game. The universal VC playbook for mitigating risk is based on an 'investment thesis' at the intersection of external opportunity and internal core competence, and real 'deep tech' businesses are not a part of the investment thesis of most Indian VCs. This is as much a reflection of the infancy of the 'deep tech' ecosystem in India as it is of the high uncertainty and long gestation involved in finding the appropriate product-market fit for a deep-tech idea.

To understand why VCs in India have yet to enthusiastically embrace deep tech, it is helpful to understand the history of VC investing in India. India's trust with new-age technology began in a small way, when, for the first time, first-generation entrepreneurs with no family background of business grabbed opportunities that showed up through a chance confluence of events and past decisions to create a global technology services industry on an unprecedented scale.

While the nature of work was nothing to write home about, it slowly but surely created a large talent pool of engineers that would provide the capability to steadily move up the value chain. While VC did play a role in creating what would prove to be India's identity on the world stage as a startup hotbed, it was limited, largely because the global tech services business model was profitable from day one and could be scaled through internal accruals.

Another chance confluence of events sometime in 2008 would offer Indian startups an opportunity to solve some of India's biggest problems around payments, e-commerce, mobility and financial inclusion, among others. Solving these problems needed boatloads of VC money because these business models mostly involved creating markets by altering consumer behaviour. Scaling was rapid because the problems being addressed were real and the talent pool created in the previous phase was in place to make the best of this new revolution. Additionally, rapid scaling was enabled by high conviction



Vcs have largely stuck to relatively low-risk areas despite falling returns, as the deep tech ecosystem is still in infancy. In time, we can expect VCs to start funding bolder ventures

tion among global VCs in the India Story. Their optimism proved to be justified, and this new wave of startups created a string of huge success stories. This spawned an altogether different kind of engineering talent that could potentially power the next wave of deep-tech startups.

However, startups in India working on deep-tech ideas have had much more uncertainty and scaling risk than those solving problems that were more immediate and well-defined, which could be addressed simply by enhancing 'discoverability', 'accessibility', 'connectivity' and 'transactability'. It is therefore not surprising that VCs have continued to chase startups that are solving problems through 'not-so-deep-tech' solutions, even if it meant having to go deeper into less attractive customer segments (serving less well-off Indians, i.e.) and markets, rather than investing in deep-tech ideas.

For deep tech to take off and bloom in any country, there needs to be a commitment to pursuing new ideas in science and technology at multiple levels, including building and nurturing institutions of excellence like Stanford or MIT. While some of the knowledge uncovered in the process results in merely pushing the frontiers of knowledge with no guarantee of any immediate or near-term application, the role this plays in uncovering

the next set of big ideas is immense. Industry commitment to investing in research and development (R&D), another critical component of an ecosystem conducive for deep-tech success, is missing. Industry expenditure on R&D in India has been notoriously low. The outcome of these missing pieces is an ecosystem that is inadequately prepared for supporting and scaling deep-tech startups.

Another unintended outcome of Indian successes in leveraging internet technologies to address large problems has been that the idea of 'engineering' was subconsciously defined in our collective psyche very narrowly to mean 'coding', while deep tech is all about artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML). The excessive hype around AI has not helped the cause of furthering progress in other technologies.

Human progress continues to depend on breakthroughs in manufacturing technologies, materials science, biology and green technologies, among others. However, it is heartening to see some passionate and audacious startups attempting to solve difficult problems in domains as varied as space technologies, sustainability, manufacturing, new materials, green energy and many more. Hopefully, this will trigger relevant capability creation in academia as well as within corporates.

The speed with which India Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has embraced and supported startups working on space technologies is a sign of things to come. Large companies in several sectors, both domestic firms and multinational corporations, have created venture arms to incubate ideas that would prepare them for the future.

And finally, as the ecosystem evolves, it's just a matter of time before VCs in India realize that deep-tech bets are no longer as risky, and that they are probably better off with deep tech than going after less risky ideas on a path of diminishing returns.

A new generation of VCs, whose partners come from deep science or tech backgrounds, is likely to emerge and help set off the next wave of tech entrepreneurship in India.

THE mint DEBATE

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Gutfeel: Intuition still matters in a data-driven world

SRINATH SRIDHARAN



is a policy researcher and corporate advisor.

I am often confronted by my data-loving friends with the question: "How can you trust just a feeling or a hunch over a demonstration of an idea?" They are experts in their respective fields, trained to analyse data with precision, and use it as the bedrock of their decision-making processes. As a statistician myself, I understand their reliance on data. Yet, I find myself wondering: Where do we, as data enthusiasts, get it wrong? Is it the quality of data, its insufficiency, or various data points collected failing to offer a meaningful picture?

In today's world, data is produced at an unprecedented scale. Humanity generates around 2.5 quintillion bytes of data every day. A quintillion, to put it into perspective, is one followed by 18 zeroes. Despite this overwhelming ocean of information, many decisions still go wrong. Why? Are we relying on the wrong data-sets, misinterpreting correlations, or erroneously assuming that more data equals better decisions?

Sometimes, I try to step into the shoes of my friends who have fully embraced data as the essential basis of every decision. From their work decisions and daily meals to calorie intake, travel plans, exercise routines and sleep cycles. They meticulously track every aspect of their lives with gadgets designed to measure things, count stuff and deliver data points. But then I wonder: What would they do if they took a data detox? No gadgets, no numbers. Would they lose their sense of direction?

How does one quantify or even qualify the smile of a child on the street, the joy of eating a wonderfully made *paneer puri*, or the calm that comes from walking through a lush green garden? These experiences do not fit neatly into rows and columns. They elude classification. Yet, they are just as real, just as impactful. So, back to the fundamental question: How can someone hold a valid opinion or make a decision without sufficient data? Why do some experts insist that without numbers, it's down to one's instinct or gutfeel, which is less reliable?

Effective data gathering and analysis help decision-makers quantify, verify and understand complex issues that demand rational and insightful solutions. There is no denying

the importance of data. It can dissect problems, identify patterns and provide clarity in a way that intuition cannot. But what happens when the issues at hand are abstract, or when the data is simply incomplete or irrelevant? That's when intuition steps in. Our finely honed instincts, built on years of experience and understanding, provide a different form of insight that data cannot always capture.

Intuition is often treated as the opposite of reason. We tend to think in binaries, and in doing so, we define intuition as a vague and unreliable yardstick with no place in the age of science and data. But to rely solely on data as the final arbiter is to ignore the complexity of human experience.

The truth is, intuition is not the enemy of rationality; it is a loyal companion. It is not a sudden, baseless judgement, but the culmination of countless experiences that we have pro-

cessed subconsciously over a span of time.

For data purists, anything outside the zone of data feels like a betrayal of logic. They view a decision made on gut instinct as a gamble, an irrational leap. Cynicism colours their view of those who, as they see it, make decisions blindly, without data to back them up. Yet, intuition is far from blind. It is simply a different way of knowing. When we make decisions that seem instinctual, we are often drawing from a deep well of past experiences, knowledge and emotions—factors that cannot always be distilled into numbers.

Marvin Minsky, a pioneer of artificial intelligence, argued that emotions are not separate from rational thinking. In his book *The Emotion Machine*, he makes the case that emotions are not irrational interruptions to thought, but one of the ways in which we think. They are essential to our decision-making processes, often guiding us when the data is insufficient.

Sometimes, the best choice is the one that feels right. This is not because it defies reason, but because it comes from a place that transcends numbers and isn't any less valuable for it.

efficient, contradictory or simply unable to address the nuances of a situation.

There is elegance in recognizing the value of both data and intuition. The best decisions often emerge not from one or the other, but from their interplay between them. Data provides the scaffolding—the framework that supports our understanding of the world. But intuition adds the human element—the ability to sense what the numbers do not show and to interpret inputs from beyond a spreadsheet.

In a world awash with data, it is tempting to believe that every decision can be calculated and every outcome predicted. But data alone cannot capture the full richness of the human experience. Sometimes, it is the unquantifiable, the deeply felt, that provides the clearest insight. As we continue to generate vast quantities of data each day, we must remember that not every question has a numerical answer, and not every decision needs a data-set. Sometimes, the best choice is the one that feels right—not because it defies reason, but because it comes from a place that transcends numbers.

True wisdom lies not in the precision of data, but in knowing when to trust the silent truths that numbers cannot speak.

E. EXPLAINED

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WHAT IS THE NEW 'CLICK-TO-CANCEL' RULE ANNOUNCED BY US FTC?

THE US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) will soon implement a "click-to-cancel" rule, which will make it significantly easier for consumers to cancel their subscriptions and memberships, and make companies liable to face civil penalties for complicating the cancellation process.

"Too often, businesses make people jump through endless hoops just to cancel a subscription. The FTC rule will end these tricks and traps... Nobody should be stuck paying for a service they no longer want," FTC Commission Chair Lina M Khan said. The FTC voted 3-2 to approve the new rule on Wednesday.

What does the new rule say?

According to the FTC press release, sellers will be required to "make it as easy for consumers to cancel their enrollment as it was to sign up." Some crucial guidelines are as follows:

- Companies cannot require people to talk to a live or virtual representative to cancel if they did not have to do that to sign up;
- Companies cannot charge extra for phone cancellation, and must answer the phone or take a message during normal business hours. If they take a message, companies have to respond promptly, and for subscriptions that were originally offered in person, companies cannot mandate an in-person cancellation.

To whom will the rule be applicable?

It will apply to "almost all negative option programs in any media" including "prenotification and continuity plans, automatic renewals, and free trial offers, whether the offer appears online, on the phone, or in person."

The FTC defines "negative option" programmes as "companies assuming a customer accepted a service unless they specifically rejected it." This would include



Commission Chair Khan said the rule will save "time and money". Reuters

something like a consumer agreeing to a one-week trial, and not cancelling it before being billed for regular membership.

Why was this rule brought in?

The rule is part of the FTC's ongoing review of its 1973 Negative Option Rule, which the agency is modernising to "to combat unfair or deceptive practices related to subscriptions, memberships, and other recurring-payment programs in an increasingly digital economy where it's easier than ever for businesses to sign up consumers for their products and services."

In 2024, daily complaints regarding negative option features and recurring subscriptions have risen to nearly 70 from 42 in 2021. This comes amidst a growing subscription economy, and a spike in subscription prices. A study conducted in 2022 by Michigan-based C.R. Research found that 42% of consumers had forgotten they were paying for services they did not use.

In the past, the FTC has gone after companies like Adobe, Amazon, Bright and Planet Fitness for allegedly making consumers' subscriptions hard to cancel. India does not currently have a comparable regulation in place.

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE



... Mere presence of different ethnic groups in a State is not sufficient to infringe the right guaranteed by Article 29(1)... to 'conserve' culture and language...

C.J. D.Y. CHANDRACHUD

Accepting... that a mere change in demographics is... evidence of erosion of [cultural] rights... would undermine the idea of fraternity envisaged by our Constitutional drafters... [There may be attempts] to undermine Article 19(1)(e) rights and inter-state migration under the guise of protecting... indigenous culture...

JUSTICE SURYA KANT



... The open-ended nature of Section 6A has, with the passage time, become more prone to abuse due to the advent of forged documents to establish, inter-alia, wrong date of entry into Assam, inaccurate lineage, [etc.]... so as to aid illegal immigrants who are otherwise not eligible under Section 6A

JUSTICE J.B. PARDIWALA

EXPLAINED LAW

Four issues in Assam verdict

SC's majority verdict upholding Section 6A of The Citizenship Act has importance beyond the state of Assam — for wider issues of citizenship and powers of Parliament. Here's what the court ruled

JOY SINHA KARPURAM
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 17

A FIVE-JUDGE Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court on Thursday upheld by a 4-1 majority the unique process for granting citizenship to migrants who entered Assam until March 24, 1971.

The verdict has importance not just for Assam, where politics has long been shaped by issues of migration and demography, but also for wider issues of citizenship and Parliament's powers in this regard.

The majority comprising Chief Justice of India (CJI) D.Y. Chandrachud, and Justices Surya Kant, M.M. Sundresh and Manoj Misra, upheld Section 6A of The Citizenship Act, 1955, which codified the political consensus of the 1985 Assam Accord. Justice J.B. Pardiwala dissented.

The tripartite Assam Accord signed among the central and Assam governments and the leaders of the Assam Movement set January 1, 1966 as the base cut-off date for the detection of "foreigners" and their deletion from electoral rolls. It also provided a process for the grant of citizenship to those who arrived in the state after that date, until March 24, 1971.

These aspects were codified in Section 6A of The Citizenship Act. In 2014, a two-judge Bench reversed the challenge to Section 6A to a Constitution Bench, highlighting some key questions of law.

Does Parliament have the power to make law regulating citizenship?

The legal scheme for granting citizenship for those who migrated from Pakistan is in Articles 6 and 7 of the Constitution. The petitioners argued that Section 6A, which deals with migrants from East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) amends this provision — a change that can only be made through a constitutional amendment.

CJI Chandrachud held that Articles 6 and 7 are only meant to determine citizenship at the commencement of the Constitution on January 26, 1950. Section 6A, on the other hand, "deals with those who are not covered by the constitutional provisions".

Justice Kant in his majority opinion (for himself and Justices Sundresh and Misra) wrote that "Section 6A aligns with the fundamental purpose of Articles 6 and 7, which was to extend citizenship rights to those affected by the country's partition".

Both CJI Chandrachud and Justice Kant referred to Entry 17 of the Union List, which gives Parliament the power to make laws to address "Citizenship, naturalisation and aliens".

They also referred to Article 11 of the Constitution, under which Parliament can make "any provision with respect to the acquisition and termination of citizenship and all other matters relating to citizenship". None of the other Articles in this Part of the Constitution (including Articles 6 and 7) will "derogate" or take away from this power, they said.



The Assam Accord was signed under the premiership of Rajiv Gandhi (second from left) on August 15, 1985. Archive

ASSAM ACCORD CLAUSE 5 & CITIZENSHIP

IN 1979, All Assam Students Union (AASU) began an agitation demanding the identification and deportation of "illegal foreigners", predominantly from Bangladesh. The agitation went on for six years, culminating with the historic Assam Accord between the Central and state governments, and the leaders of the Assam Movement.

CLAUSE 5 of the Accord, which discussed the "Foreigners Issue", set January 1, 1966 as the "base date and year" for the "purposes of detection and deletion [from electoral rolls] of foreigners". Those who arrived after this date but up to March 24, 1971, would "have their names deleted

from electoral rolls" for 10 years, after which their names would be restored.

IN 1985, in order to give effect to the Assam Accord, Section 6A was introduced in The Citizenship Act, 1955. The petitioners argued that this section was arbitrary and discriminatory, as it applied only to Assam.

THE CAA, 2019, introduced another group-specific section, Section 6B, in The Citizenship Act, which set December 31, 2014 as the cutoff date for Hindu, Christian, Sikh, Parsi, Buddhist, and Jain migrants from the Muslim majority countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan.

That Parliament can amend the law relating to citizenship is the most significant takeaway from the ruling — since this could have ramifications for other cases, including the challenge to the 2019 Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

Does Section 6A violate the Right to Equality?

The petitioners argued that Section 6A, which was specifically drafted for Assam, violated the principle of equality because (i) it confers citizenship only to migrants to Assam, and (ii) by curbing Bangladesh migrants is the issue, then other border states are also excluded. They also argued that the March 24, 1971 cut-off date is arbitrary.

The SC held that the events leading up to the signing of the Assam Accord placed the state in a unique position, even when compared to other border states.

"... The magnitude of influx to Assam and its impact on the cultural and political rights of the Assamese and Tribal populations is higher [than elsewhere]," CJI Chandrachud

said, Justice Kant held that "since a piquant situation such as that in Assam [because of the Movement] did not exist in any of the other states, Section 6A's objective did not extend to allowing such citizenship in these other States".

Does Section 6A facilitate "external aggression" by allowing illegal migration?

The petitioners argued that extending the cut-off date to include migrants as citizens went against the SC's ruling in *Sarbananda Sonowal vs Union of India* (2005), in which the court held that "illegal immigration" falls under the definition of "external aggression".

Both CJI Chandrachud and Justice Kant expressed reservations in applying *Sonowal* in the challenge to Section 6A.

Justice Kant said Section 6A does not allow "unabated migration", and instead offers a "practical solution" in the form of a "controlled and regulated form of immigration", which doesn't amount to "external aggression".

CJI Chandrachud said a law cannot be challenged for "violating" Article 355, which is an Emergency Provision under the Constitution.

JUSTICE PARDIWALA'S OPINION

THE DISSENT flagged the lack of a proper mechanism to grant citizenship to those who migrated between January 1, 1966 and March 25, 1971.

IT IS "illogically unique" that the procedure does not allow someone to voluntarily submit themselves to the process under Section 6A of The Citizenship Act, and that they must wait for the government to identify them as a "suspicious immigrant".

ALSO, even if Section 6A was constitutional at the time of its enactment, over time it has proven to be ineffective. Without a proper timeline, Section 6A "counter-serves the very purpose of its enactment, which is the speedy and effective identification of foreigners of the 1966-71 stream".

LACK of a timeframe would "relieve" the government of its burden to identify immigrants belonging to the "1966-71 stream" and delete them from the electoral rolls.

"THE OBJECT of removal of the immigrants belonging to the 1966-71 stream from the electoral rolls could only be meaningful if it was given effect through an exercise of en masse detection and deletion (from electoral rolls)..."

Does granting citizenship to migrants violate the rights of Assamese people to conserve their culture?

Article 29(1) of the Constitution guarantees citizens the fundamental right to conserve the "distinct language, script or culture of their own". The petitioners argued that Section 6A is violative of Article 29, since conferring citizenship to migrants from Bangladesh increases the Bengali population and affects the "culture of the Assamese population".

The majority verdict rejected the argument that change in the demography of Assam erodes the rights of indigenous Assamese.

Accepting this contention "would undermine the idea of fraternity envisaged by our Constitutional drafters, and bring to life their fears by threatening the cohesion of our diverse nation", Justice Kant held. CJI Chandrachud held that "the mere presence of different ethnic groups in a State is not sufficient to infringe the right guaranteed by Article 29(1)".

LONGER VERSION ON

Indianexpress.com/explained

WHY RESEARCHERS STUDIED MARINE TEMPERATURES IN THE TWILIGHT ZONE

MARINE HEAT Waves (MHWs) refer to unusual warming of ocean waters, typically measured by observing temperatures at the ocean surface. Innate challenges associated with deep-sea exploration — including the lack of sunlight at great depths and high sea pressures — generally limit observations to the surface.

In recent years, global warming has made MHWs more frequent and intense. A new study published in the journal *Nature* has found that these heat waves can also be observed in the "twilight zone", between the depths of 200 and 1,000 metres.

Researchers found that heat waves deep in oceans may be "significantly under-reported". Ming Feng, the Senior Principal Research Scientist at the Australian government agency CSIRO, was one of the study authors. In an article in *The Conversation*, he said some long-term moorings — measurement buoys suspended at depth — were deployed across the world's oceans for the study. Argo floats, which are robotic divers that can

go 2,000 metres deep and resurface, were used to sample temperature and salinity.

Their major finding was that in the deep ocean, eddy currents rather than atmospheric factors largely influence temperature. Feng described these as "huge loops of swirling current, sometimes hundreds of kilometres across and reaching down over 1,000 metres". Eddies carry warm or cold water across long distances.

The study found that global warming is impacting eddies. Feng wrote, "eddy currents are acting to magnify the warming rates of marine heatwaves and the cooling rate of the cold spells. Warmer oceans overall are leading to stronger eddy currents".

Extreme temperature changes in the temperature of the twilight zone also raise concerns, since many important fish species and plankton reside here. Plankton form the base of the oceanic food chain.

"Marine heatwaves can lead to low oxygen levels in the water and reduced nutrients," Feng wrote. **ENS**



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India, Pakistan and cricket: State of play and what could happen in Feb

SANDEEP DWIVEDI
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 17

IF SIGNALS emerging from India-Pakistan meetings held on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Islamabad remain steady, India will travel to Pakistan for the ICC Champions Trophy in February next year.

The last Indian team to cross the border for cricket was M.S. Dhoni's side that played the Asia Cup in June-July 2008. So, if things were to ultimately work out, it would have taken 16 long years to untangle cricket from the complexities of India-Pakistan politics.

In the winter of thaw, a peace drill from an earlier era could play out again — doves could be released, gates long shut could open, Indian politicians could be seen in Pakistani stadiums, and taxi drivers in Lahore could refuse to take money from visitors from Delhi.

India & Pak, then and now

Much water has flowed down the Indus

over the last two decades. The countries and their cricket have changed beyond recognition. Indian cricket's phenomenal rise has coincided with Pakistan's dramatic decline. While Indian cricketers enjoy a cult following everywhere, the stock of Pakistani players has plummeted even at home.

Indian cricketers have always had fans in Pakistan, but now they are seen with awe. Disillusioned with their own team, Pakistanis unabashedly anathematise India these days. The Champions Trophy could see an accurate calibration of the popularity of Indian cricketers in Pakistan, as also the depth of that country's cricketing distress.

Pakistan have of late seen so many decades across formats that it is tough to imagine which one hurts the most. They lost to Afghanistan in the ODI World Cup last year, and were humiliated by participants from the US at the T20 World Cup a few months ago. And they have lost 7 of their last 11 home Tests.

India, meanwhile, narrowly missed

winning the 50-over World Cup before losing the T20 World Cup. In red-ball cricket, they are near invincible at home, having lost just 4 Tests in 11 years.

Game, players besieged

The collapse of Pakistan's cricket can be blamed on a crippling administrative mess. The last four years have seen as many chairmen of the Pakistan Cricket Board, and 27 — yes, you read that right — selectors.

Such is the cynicism of fans that they heaved a collective sigh of relief after mega stars Babar Azam and Shaheen Afridi were rested for the second Test of the ongoing series against England. Criticism of players often takes the form of toxic trolling and abuse. At a press conference recently, the Pak media manager had to remind reporters to be civil when addressing the captain.

It is perhaps symptomatic of the change in the country that once wor-

shipped its cricketers that its greatest hero, the World Cup-winning Kaptaan Imran Khan, is today behind bars — languishing, as his ex-wife Jemima Goldsmith reported, alone in a dark, damp cell disconnected entirely from the outside world.

Virat, the new obsession

Pakistanis fans long for that lost Imran era, their cricket's golden age. They miss those gutsy men who would never give up — the cornered tigers who won the 1992 World Cup after the world had written them off. As if on rebound, many Pakistanis have fallen for the aggressive Punjab boy next door — Virat Kohli reminds them of —

yet another hero, the Javed Miandads, Wasim Akrams, and Waqar Younis whom the world could not intimidate.

Ajay Bisaria, who served as India's last High Commissioner to Islamabad from 2019, recalls Imran, who was then Prime

Minister, telling him that he hated Kohli higher than even the great Sachin Tendulkar. And Wasim Akram keeps advising Pakistan's chronic underperformers to learn from Virat's commitment to the game and his fitness.

Indeed, Virat is expected to get a Beates-scale welcome in Pakistan next year. In an interview with *The Indian Express* in June, former Pakistan captain Azhar Ali had said: "The day Virat plays in Lahore, Karachi, Rawalpindi or in Multan, only then you guys will understand his craze in Pakistan... The stadium will be filled with green jerseys, but he will receive the same amount of support as Babar Azam and Shaheen Shah Afridi..." It would be a goosebumps moment for both nations, the most impactful of peace initiatives.

Cricketers, ambassadors

Cricketers have helped build bridges between the two sides earlier too.

Back in 1978, Bishan Singh Bedi had developed, by the end of the tour, a life-long friendship with General Zia ul Haq.

Pakistan's ruler at the time. Bedi read in a newspaper about a patient with a rare blood group who needed a transfusion urgently. The Indian captain had the same blood group, and he ended up donating blood. Zia got to know, and a bond was formed. When the General visited India, he sent out a message, "I want to meet the Sardar again".

In 2004, at tea with the players in the Prime Minister's residence ahead of the Indian team's departure for Pakistan, Atal Bihari Vajpayee handed captain Sourav Ganguly a bat with the message, "*Khel hi nahin, dil bhi jeevit* (Win not just games, but hearts, too)".

Of course, the burden of being ambassadors of the country and messengers of peace can be distracting for professional sportspeople. Kohli and Rohit Sharma would do well to remember Ganguly's famous pep talk in the dressing room during the series-deciding one-dayer: "*Dil toh theek hai, game jitna hai humko*."



'One Nation, One Election' is undemocratic



SHASHI THAROOR
CONGRESS MP,
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

ONE saving grace of Indian democracy — though some call it one of India's troubling flaws — is that there is practically always an election happening. So, just as the echoes of the last General Election — which kept Prime Minister Narendra Modi in office, but without a majority and leading a coalition government — died down, the state of Haryana and the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir went to the polls to elect their legislatures. The results, announced last week, surprised politicians and pollsters alike.

Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) pulled off an unexpected victory in Haryana, where it was expected to lose. And the opposition Congress party, together with its regional ally, the National Conference, claimed victory in Jammu and Kashmir, where polls had forecast a hung Assembly with no party or alliance securing a majority. With pollsters also having gotten

the June Lok Sabha election wrong — they had projected a sweeping BJP victory — India's electorate certainly cannot be called predictable. Indian voters will soon have more chances to defy expectations. Before the year is out, two more states, Maharashtra and Jharkhand, will go to the polls. They could easily be followed by Delhi, where its beleaguered Chief Minister recently resigned, demanding early elections (which are due by next March in any case). In other words, beyond being packed — each of India's 28 states and seven union territories elect their own governments — India's electoral calendar is subject to change.

For Modi's government, all this election-related uncertainty has gone too far. He wants India to establish a fixed election schedule, with the Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament), state Assemblies, and local bodies all being elected on the same date every five years. A high-level committee, headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind, recently produced a voluminous report backing this approach, which Modi calls "One Nation, One Election".

The frequency of elections can indeed be a challenge for the national government. For one thing, while state/local elections largely concern local issues, these are often seen as a sort of rolling referendum on the national government. For another, govern-



PROBLEM: Political leaders get busy in campaigning, leaving them with little time for their official duties. PTI

nance comes to a halt during elections since the independent Election Commission's Model Code of Conduct prohibits incumbents from making policy announcements that might induce electorate to vote for them.

In addition, national leaders get busy in campaigning in the states holding elections, each of which has its own political history and, often, its own parties. Modi and his Home Minister Amit Shah have been fixtures on this endless campaign trail throughout their decade in office, leaving them with little time for their official duties.

Modi argues that frequent

Indian democracy needs more elections, the only mechanism whereby we, the public, can assert ourselves against government overreach.

elections waste both money and time. It may have also occurred to him that simultaneous elections might give national parties and issues a boost in state elections, which may be less likely to turn the focus onto local leaders and problems amid a national election campaign.

The Opposition rejects the proposed reform, pointing out that whatever trivial cost savings might be gained by holding all elections simultaneously would be dwarfed by the losses associated with depriving the economy of the frequent stimulus that free-spending campaigns provide. More important, the proposal betrays a sinister

intent to ride roughshod over India's federalism and diversity, reflecting Modi's fondness for unitarianism dressed up as efficiency.

The most glaring problem with "One Nation, One Election," however, is that it is impractical, which we know from experience. After Independence, India established a single Election Day. But that arrangement lasted just fifteen years, from 1952 to 1967. The reason lies at the root of India's parliamentary system: governments must maintain a legislative majority. If a government loses its majority before its term is up, fresh elections must be held. A government might also call early elections in the hope of increasing its majority.

This has happened at different times in different states, and several times at the national level. And it will continue to happen, particularly given the coalition rule in many states. Indian states move to their own rhythms, very different from that of the Union drummers in Delhi. A national coalition government, such as the one Modi currently heads, could also fall apart. What then? It would, surely, be undemocratic for a government to remain in power without a renewed electoral mandate.

The "One Nation, One Election" approach would make sense only if chief executives were directly elected, so that their mandate is not based on

a legislative majority — in other words, a presidential system. And, in fact, a case could be made for such a system in India, at the state and even the federal level, but Modi is not making it.

India's democrats have long convinced themselves that a presidential system would enable dictatorship, and so must be resisted. But the parliamentary system has brought its own kind of tyranny, as overweening executives have wielded their legislative majorities like weapons. In a presidential system, the executive would be accountable to an independent legislature. It could not use the legislature as a notice board and a rubber stamp, as the BJP has done for a decade.

But that idea is not on the anvil, and within India's parliamentary system, "One Nation, One Election" simply does not work. In any case, the last thing the Indian democracy needs is fewer elections, which are the only mechanism whereby we, the Indian public, can assert ourselves against government overreach. This makes "One Nation, One Election" a fundamentally undemocratic proposal.

For now, we should welcome the two or three state elections that will be held in the coming months. Perhaps, Indian voters will again give their political masters a few more surprises.

COURTESY: PROJECT SINDHATE 2024

Polluted by industry, Buddha Dariya faces tipping point



COL JASJIT SINGH GILL (RETD)
EX-MEMBER, STATE TASK FORCE,
BUDDHA DARIYA
REJUVENATION PROJECT

ONE vexed problem of the pollution of the Buddha Dariya, a tributary of the Sutlej, has reached a decisive phase with the Punjab Pollution Control Board (PPCB) ordering dyeing units to stop discharging their untreated water into the dariya.

Thousands of people from Ludhiana, South Punjab and Rajasthan have gathered under the banner of "Kaale Paani Da Morcha", a group protesting against severe pollution of the drinking and irrigation water by the industry be stopped.

Unfortunately, the problem has persisted due to lack of political will by successive governments as well as most political parties, due to the fear of losing industry funding for elections, even though the polluted water affects over two crore people.

Every day, millions of litres

of untreated raw sewage is flowing into the Buddha Dariya directly.

Earlier, the Municipal Corporation of Ludhiana had started the construction of an intermediate pumping station (IPS) — one of the biggest of its kind in capacity — for water treatment, but the construction had to be stopped due to a land dispute. Land on both banks of the dariya has been heavily encroached upon. The case is pending in the Supreme Court.

The municipal corporation needs to find another plot to set up the pumping station and complete its construction on a war footing so that raw sewage can be stopped from being discharged into the Buddha Dariya at the earliest.

The dyeing industry, despite having common effluent treatment plants (CETP), is polluting the dariya both indirectly and directly. The treated water discharged by the industry does not meet the parameters, as per the reports by the Central and Punjab pollution control boards. This has led to the present crisis. Many units are still connected to the municipal sewerage as officials have turned a blind eye to this indirect pollution.

The only possible solution is that CETPs of the dyeing industry must opt for Zero Liquid Discharge (ZLD) technology and reuse their water, as is being done by the



KILLER WATER: The Buddha Dariya pollution crisis has persisted due to lack of political will by successive governments as well as most political parties. TREASURY PHOTO

dyeing industry of Tirupur, Tamil Nadu, following an order by the Madras High Court. On January 28, 2011, the Madras HC had ordered the closure of more than 700 bleaching and dyeing units and effluent treatment plants in Tirupur. It had also directed the industry to adopt the ZLD technology.

For the Buddha Dariya too, the industry and government should work out a way to switching to the ZLD technology, with some support from the Central government.

There are around 2,800 electroplating units in Ludhiana. Of them, 1,700 are registered, 300 are awaiting registration and the remaining are illegal. The registered units are supposed to get their wastewater treated at a CETP by paying Rs 1.25 per litre. However, the

Every day, millions of litres of untreated raw sewage is flowing into the Buddha Dariya directly.

owners of these units allege that almost 90 per cent of the polluted water is being discharged directly into the sewerage or by reverse-boring it into the ground aquifers, like the Zim distillery.

Apart from the dyeing industry, there is sheet metal industry that has not yet come under the public glare for polluting the dariya. The dyeing industry blames the sheet metal industry for causing this pollution as it uses hydrochloric (HCL) acid, and there is no treatment plant in Ludhiana to treat HCL acid-laden water. The sheet metal industry is directly disposing of around two lakh litres of acid-laden water in the sewerage.

Making matters complicated are allegations of corruption by PPCB officials. The

industries cannot afford to stop production and, at the same time, they do not want to adhere to the pollution board norms because they claim that they still have to bribe PPCB officials. The presence of heavy metals like chromium, nickel, lead and copper in the sludge of the sewage treatment plants (STPs) detected by lab tests points to some wrongdoing. Most industries are disposing of their polluted water into the sewerage. The crisis has intensified as the Buddha Dariya STP can only treat sewage, but not the chemicals.

The only solution is to shift the present and upcoming units and other such clusters to a separate area, away from the city, where they can be directly connected to the treatment plants. Modern industrial clusters with ZLD technology and more treatment plants are needed. Otherwise, more Giaspora-like tragedies are waiting to happen. In this tragedy, 11 persons had died from the sewage gas leak in the area.

Besides industrial units, dairies in the Halibowal, Tajpur and other areas located upstream and downstream of the Buddha Dariya municipal limits are also directly throwing animal dung into the dariya or indirectly into the sewage system. As a result, the STPs may soon stop functioning. Even the new plants meant for treating dairy water might

soon become non-functional.

As per the Municipal Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016, dairies cannot exist within the municipal limits.

The solid waste — including domestic waste, plastics, slaughterhouse waste, textile waste and animal carcasses — from the areas around the dariya is choking the tributary.

The authorities need to rebuild the fence around the dariya. The earlier one, erected at an expenditure of Rs 9.34 crore, was damaged during the floods last year.

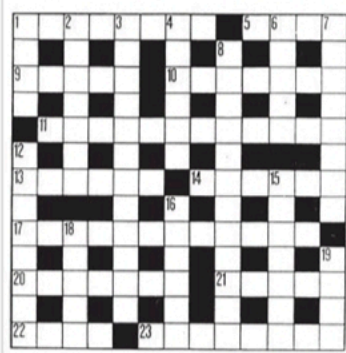
Also, deployment of manpower is needed to stop solid waste ingress into the dariya. At present, there is no solid waste enforcement force for issuing challans to the offenders. A similar force deployed by the MC along the Sidhwan Canal has reportedly earned Rs 26 lakh through challans even as only Rs 7 lakh was spent on the employees' salary.

Two or three floating garbage barriers-cum-conveyors are also needed for taking out the solid waste which enters the dariya.

The authorities cannot ignore the horrendous effects of pollution on public health, their economical and psychological suffering or, rather, the slow killing of people. The environment is also degraded by pollution.

The time has come for the Punjab Chief Minister to fulfil his promise of cleaning the Buddha Dariya.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- Administrative division of country (8)
- Axwinkle (4)
- Lack of foresight (12)
- Amusing play or film (6)
- Large stringed instrument (5)
- Eminently skilled (8)
- Take back what was said (3,4,5)
- Central American country (8)
- Japanese variety of tangerine (7)
- Line of travel (5)
- Walk in furive manner (5)
- Diplomatic envoy (8)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Trump card, 8 Acorn, 9 Affront, 10 Spruce, 11 Bright, 12 Approach, 15 Cup of tea, 18 Conrad, 20 Lethal, 21 Vintage, 22 Siren, 23 Take apart.

Down: 2 Refer, 3 Mirage, 4 Constant, 5 Dumpster, 6 Jocular, 7 Underhand, 11 Blacklist, 13 Practice, 14 Upstart, 16 Flout, 17 In step, 19 Augur.

DOWN

- An affected attitude (4)
- Ostentatiously rich (7)
- Lack of foresight (12)
- Amusing play or film (6)
- Large stringed instrument (5)
- Eminently skilled (8)
- Take back what was said (3,4,5)
- Central American country (8)
- Japanese variety of tangerine (7)
- Line of travel (5)
- Walk in furive manner (5)
- Diplomatic envoy (8)

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

- OCTOBER 18, 2024, FRIDAY
- Shaka Samvat 1946
 - Aashwin Shaka 26
 - Kartik Purnimashi 2
 - Hijri 1446
 - Krishna Paksha Tithi 1, up to 1.16 pm
 - Vajra Yoga up to 9.34 pm
 - Aashwin Nakshatra up to 1.26 pm
 - Moon in Aries sign
 - Gandmoola up to 1.26 pm

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	33	19
New Delhi	35	19
Amritsar	33	19
Bathinda	36	20
Jalandhar	33	19
Ludhiana	33	19
Bhivani	34	20
Hisar	36	17
Sirsa	37	20
Dharamsala	28	15
Manali	23	09
Shimla	22	12
Srinagar	26	08
Jammu	31	19
Kargil	26	08
Leh	13	01
Dehradun	31	18
Mussoorie	22	13

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Jaishankar in Pak

Ball now in Islamabad's court

THE go-ahead to the first visit by an Indian External Affairs Minister to Pakistan in almost nine years was indication enough that behind-the-scenes diplomacy had been productive. Before going to Islamabad to attend a conclave of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, S Jaishankar had declared that India's Pakistan policy was not passive. New Delhi, the message went, was willing to respond to any positive gestures. In the Pakistan capital, he said activities characterised by the three evils of terrorism, extremism and separatism would not encourage trade, energy flows, connectivity and people-to-people exchanges. Strong words, but minus the hostility that matter-of-factly manifests itself in any forum that includes India and Pakistan. The resumption of dialogue may not be on the cards, but Jaishankar's informal interaction with his Pakistani counterpart Ishaq Dar raises hopes of ending the deep freeze in bilateral relations.

Sustaining even a limited engagement with Pakistan has remained a challenge for successive Indian governments. Islamabad's, or rather Rawalpindi's, proclivity to betray trust adds to the scepticism. Having laid on the table its non-negotiable stance against terrorism, New Delhi must continue to explore options to engage with its rogue neighbour. Keeping the channels of communication open is critical. Cricket diplomacy may or may not come to Delhi's aid, as it has in the past, but in the larger scheme of things, it can serve as an ice-breaker.

The smooth completion of Jaishankar's visit is being viewed as a constructive take-away—a baby step, but forward movement, nevertheless. The ball is now in Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's court. The track record of his brother, former PM Nawaz Sharif, in fomenting ties does not inspire any confidence. Before India, there's the Pakistan military the Sharifs have to deal with. New Delhi will be keenly watching the outcome.

SC raps states

Punjab, Haryana fail to curb stubble burning

DESPITE repeated warnings from the Supreme Court, stubble burning in Punjab and Haryana continues to worsen northern India's air pollution every year. The court recently summoned the chief secretaries of both states, demanding explanations for their failure to curb this practice. It also criticised the air pollution control board for its ineffectiveness, calling it a 'toothless wonder' in its inability to enforce measures. Stubble burning has become a major environmental and public health crisis, contributing significantly to the toxic haze that blankets cities up to Delhi during the winter. This pollution leads to widespread respiratory illnesses, especially among children and the elderly. While the SC's intervention is necessary, the persistent inaction points to a deeper issue: the socio-economic challenges farmers face in managing crop residue. For many, burning the stubble is the cheapest and fastest way to clear fields between crop cycles. Though alternatives like straw management machinery exist, they are often too expensive for small-scale farmers, and government subsidies have been insufficient.

The solution requires a multifaceted approach. The state governments must enforce the laws more strictly while also offering greater financial aid and support to farmers for alternative methods of stubble disposal. Further, creating a market for agricultural waste, such as using crop residue for biofuels, could turn this environmental hazard into an economic asset.

The annual recurrence of this issue shows a lack of both political will and empathy for the millions of people who suffer from polluted air. Effective policies, technological innovation and better resource allocation are urgently needed. North India cannot afford to endure this public health disaster every year. A collective effort from the government, judiciary and civil society is essential to break the cycle of stubble burning and ensure cleaner air for future generations.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 18, 1924

Mr Jinnah's speech

WE have ventured to ask Mr. Jinnah how he proposes to reconcile his view that religion must be divorced from politics with his advocacy of special representation of his community from top to bottom not only in the Legislatures and local bodies but also in the Services. To ordinary minds, it is not at all clear how religion can be divorced from politics by a process the only tangible office of which is to make religion the very basis of politics. The nearest approximation to an answer to the question that one finds in Mr. Jinnah's recent speech is contained in his statement that before the conception of citizenship can be realised "the nation has to undergo, first, the process of education, training, experience, travail and suffering, and it is difficult to predict at the present moment as to how long it would take to achieve these conditions." Only a moment's reflection, however, suffices to show that this is not only a council of despair but an impossible counsel. It is not merely the case that no one can predict at the present moment how long the nation would take to achieve the conception of citizenship, but is as certain as anything can be in human affairs that on the plan advocated by Mr. Jinnah it never will, never can achieve these conditions. You cannot sow the seeds of disunity and then hope in the fullness of time to reap a harvest of unity. To divide a people into water tight compartments on the basis of the religions which its several components parts profess, and then expect that some day these parts will re-unite on the basis of 'religion divorced from politics,' through the operation of a *deus ex machina* is to look for a miracle.

Scene shifts to Maharashtra

'One Country, One Election' vision falters as ECI unable to hold even 4 Assembly polls together



TRYSTS AND TURNS
JULIO RIBEIRO

THE Modi government wants to follow its dream of 'One Country, One Election'. Future Lok Sabha elections in India will be held simultaneously with the state Assembly elections throughout the country. Yet, when elections to the four state Assemblies in Maharashtra, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir and Chhattisgarh were to be planned, the ECI could not manage to hold even these four simultaneously. It held the J&K and Haryana elections first and postponed Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh to the following month!

The dates for the polls in my state were announced on October 15, just as time was running out. Voting is scheduled for November 20 and the results will be out on November 23 as newly elected legislators have to take their seats on or before November 26, when the term of the present legislature expires. The Mahayuti government, being steered by the BJP's Devendra Fadnis, has emptied the state's coffers with tall promises that will be impossible, or at least, difficult to meet.

In the interregnum, strange things are happening in the state's capital, Mumbai, and its surroundings. The phenomenon of the 'encounter specialist', former Police Commissioner Anami Roy, who had been banished to the boondocks, suddenly reappeared on the scene. A wannabe specialist called Sanjay Shinde, who started out as an acolyte of an old-timer named Pradeep Sharma, was plucked out from his 'comfy' zone and entrusted with the pedestrian task of escorting a child molester from the prison, where he was lodged, for that crime to the Thane Com-



COPS BURDENED: The government needs to firm up its rules for sanctioning state funerals. M

missioner's Crime Branch office for an inquiry into his demanding unnatural sex from a previous wife.

The police 'encounter' that occurred in the police vehicle transporting the accused rekindled inspector Shinde's wish to become an 'encounter specialist'. It also re-established the Deputy Chief Minister's credentials as a tough administrator because posters appeared the very next day in Thane and Mumbai of Fadnis with a revolver or pistol in his hand! That was to restore the public's faith in the Mahayuti Home Minister's aura of strength and invincibility.

It also resurrected the public's thirst for instant justice that gives a dangerous carte blanche to police officers to investigate, prosecute, judge and punish the designated perpetrator. In judicial systems all over the world, the police cannot try and declare an accused guilty. And even more important, the police are not empowered to carry out death sentences.

Middle class citizens in particular are jubilant when what they consider quick justice is delivered. It also breeds criminality in law-enforcing agencies and encourages its members to turn lawless. The disease then spreads

The state government's decision to give Baba Siddique a state funeral will open the door for many more such requests.

among the fraternity of criminals because the two coexist.

The murder of a long-time Congress politician, who recently crossed over to the Ait-Pawar faction of the NCP (National Congress Party), a political aligned with the BJP, has sent the political class in Mumbai city into a tizzy. 'Baba' Siddique, the murdered man, was shot dead on Saturday evening in his own familiar hunting ground, Bandra. Two suspects, one hailing from Haryana and the other from UP, have been detained by the

police. It is reported that they belong to the Lawrence Bishnoi gang which originated in Punjab and came to the country's attention when the gang was accused of killing Sidhu Moosewala, at his own village in Punjab's Mansa district. Lawrence Bishnoi himself has been lodged in Sabarmati Central Jail in Gujarat, from where he orders the killings of intended victims.

One of his targets was the actor, Salman Khan, a flamboyant personality if ever there was one. Politician Siddique was known to be a regular visitor to Salman's home in Bandra. Some say that that could be one reason for Lawrence targeting Siddique. Whatever the reason, the early evening murder of a well-known political figure has stirred up curiosity and also fear among other politicians.

Many politicians in this city have an official security cover provided by the police. Many more will clamour for this largesse after Siddique's murder. The understaffed police force will be severely strained in performing its allotted role of preventing and detecting crime and keeping order on the streets. To add to their worries, the police were ordered to provide a state funeral to the slain politician. They had done so a job willingly when industrialist Ratan Tata was recently cremated. Soon thereafter,

they were told in a written order from the state government's Home Ministry to provide a ceremonial sendoff to a controversial politician, who had, at times, come into conflict with the law.

Ajit Pawar proclaimed that Siddique was to be one of his star campaigners in the coming elections. There is no doubt that Siddique was popular with Muslim voters in Bandra's slums. Yet, personally, I am not convinced that even a Baba Siddique would be able to persuade his co-religionists to switch over to a BJP-mentored Mahayuti. The regular lynchings of suspected cattle traders and beef-eaters and the pursuit of Muslim young men in love with Hindu girls (so-called love jihad) have consolidated the almost total Muslim vote against the BJP. It would not have been easy for Siddique to breach that wall, even though the community in Bandra owed much to him.

Incidentally, the state government's decision to give the slain leader a state funeral will open the door for many more such requests. The government needs to firm up its rules for sanctioning such requests. If it decides to be liberal, it will need to create many more jobs in the armed constabulary. The inevitable demand for personal security by politicians will also need to be re-evaluated, lest police stations in the city are further denuded of bodies required for essential duties, as is happening at present.

The elections to the state's legislative Assembly are going to be close. The Opposition, the MVA (Maha Vikas Aghadi), was ahead a couple of months ago. The 'Ladli Bahin' project of the Mahayuti, in which many poor women have received a four-months' lump-sum accretion of Rs 6,000 in their bank accounts this month, with a promise to double the amount if they vote for the Mahayuti, has turned the tide in favour of the ruling party. The gap that existed has now been bridged.

A final piece of advice: Do not bother to watch the exit polls. India's voters have learnt to bamboozle the pollsters.

Being a good police officer is one of the most difficult, dangerous, idealistic jobs in the world. — Thomas Hauser

Trials, tribes & triumph

on road to Kohima

NJ RAVI CHANDER

AFTER a family trip to the enchanting Kaziranga, the Rhinoceros habitat, we turned our gaze towards Kohima. This place is the vibrant home of the Kuki and the Naga tribe, known for their rich culture and fierce self-reliance. Our journey, winding through mesmerising tea estates, lush forests, rolling hills and stunning landscapes, sparked a deep sense of wonder and wanderlust in us. As the car cruised into Nagaland, tribal rituals welcomed us. A crowd followed a group of young, bare-chested men with ash-smeared bodies rolling on the streets, hands folded above their heads in prayer. This punishing ritual was a penance to appease the deities. To complete the ritual, the devotees immerse themselves in the nearby river and present a sacrificial bird to the deities.

As our car crawled through the traffic jam and up the hill towards Kohima, the poor state of the roads added an extra layer of difficulty. With its sharp twists and turns, the undulating terrain tested our resilience and the driver's skills. A misstep on the steep gradients could spell disaster. The accounts of tourists falling prey to armed criminals and bandits on these isolated hills added a nerve-racking edge to our trip.

Police patrols and armed constables are scarce in this area. As the sun sets early, a broken-down car's occupants are likely to be sitting ducks for criminals. The heavy mist created conditions that made driving difficult. The prolonged journey and the uneven curves and bends took a toll on the car. Before long, our carriage malfunctioned and became immobile. The driver attempted to cool down the engine with water, but it proved ineffective.

As darkness fell, there was a noticeable absence of people. Despite our pleas for help, the passing vehicles showed no concern and sped away. Our tour agent in Bengalaru was unreachable. Eventually, the driver embarked on a mission to seek help. Being a local and familiar with the terrain and the threats, he advised us to stay in the car.

The ill-lit road also compounded our fears. My son Sachin Kumar stood by the car, using his flashlight to signal approaching vehicles. Shobha, my significant other, seemed terrified and whispered prayers to every deity she knew. We felt trapped in an unfamiliar place, far away from our home. The sporadic noise of a passing vehicle shattered the quietness. We felt relieved when the driver, accompanied by a mechanic, finally appeared on the scene three hours later to fix the car.

After what felt like an eternity, the engine roared back to life. As the car glided forward, we couldn't help but feel relief and joy. Despite the odds, the wife's devoted prayers and the driver's unwavering determination had finally paid off. A sense of achievement and gratitude washed over me. What followed was a memorable journey, but this incident remains etched in our memories.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Priyanka a pragmatic choice

Refer to 'Priyanka's debut': both Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka have been working tirelessly to revitalise and rejuvenate the Congress, which had plummeted from its once-dominant position in the country to an ignominious low. The contribution of both siblings has been significant and the party is showing resilience. Its strong recovery in the 2024 LS elections has sparked new optimism. By fielding Priyanka as the candidate for the Wayanad bypoll, the Congress has made a pragmatic and prudent choice. It would have been hard to find another suitable candidate. Her direct entry into electoral politics will provide her the opportunity to demonstrate her latent talent and test her political mettle.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, LUDHIANA

Omar has administrative expertise

Refer to 'Omar takes charge': it is heartening to observe that the new government in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir has taken charge after a prolonged period of President's rule. One advantage that Omar has is his previous tenure as the Chief Minister of the erstwhile state of J&K—from 2009 to 2014. His experience in governing the state gives him the administrative expertise to lead effectively. The editorial rightly pointed out that the swearing-in ceremony fell short in conveying a message of unity and hope. It seems that the Congress has missed an opportunity to show magnanimity by declining to join Omar Abdullah's government. On the other hand, Omar has shown commendable maturity by appointing a Hindu legislator as Deputy Chief Minister, a move symbolising inclusivity.

RAVINDER KUMAR JAIN, LUDHIANA

Cong must accept reality

Refer to the 'Leader Speak' column: the comments reflect the mindset of the speakers. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge often speaks in terms of battles—whether it's fighting until Modi is ousted or, in this case, until J&K regains its statehood. However, these goals seem neither possible nor feasible under the current political circumstances. In contrast, NC president Parooq Abdullah's statements reflect the practical realities of the situation, while PM Narendra Modi's words embody the reconciliatory spirit that is much

needed at this time. For the Congress, the pressing need is to accept the harsh ground realities and adapt to a post-election normalcy.

DV SHARMA, MUKERIAN

New Lady Statue welcome

Apocryphal of 'Blindfold' and sword gone, new Lady Justice statue unveiled in SC; the change is a welcome gesture. The open eyes of the statue symbolise that the law is watchful, observing everything without being blindfolded. The physical balance held by the statue signifies impartial justice, applied equally to all, regardless of caste, creed, religion and status. This transformation will likely build greater faith in the justice system, shedding the negative perceptions held by the public. As time progresses, the positive effects of this change will become more evident.

COL. RS NARULA (RETD), PATIALA

Ram Lila instils values

Refer to 'My tryst with acting in Ram Lila': Ram Lila is undeniably an integral part of our cultural heritage, transcending caste, creed, and religion. It instils fundamental values and serves as an event with multiple facets—providing entertainment, fostering social camaraderie, upholding religious ethos and helping children develop acting skills. The lessons imparted through Ram Lila are deeply etched in the hearts and minds of the younger generation. As a school administrator, I treasure that Ram Lila is enacted every year, despite various challenges, because of its immense value in shaping young minds.

SUNIL KUMAR MAHAJAN, GHUMARWIN

Upskill schoolteachers

This is with reference to the news item about the Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister's intent to improve the quality of education in schools in the state. Technical input in education has grown to such an extent that many senior teachers, who had such training over 10 years ago, are not comfortable with the new pedagogy, such as the teaching techniques of 'differentiation', 'adaptive', and 'group'. The government should pay more attention to the teachers' professional growth and upskilling as it is essential for improving the standard of education.

S KUMAR, PANCHKULA

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribune.com

SCIENCE

Doctors' strike reveals how apathy to health pushes people into poverty

West Bengal's healthcare expenditure is 1% of its gross state domestic product, and 68% of healthcare expenses in the State come from the pockets of patients, the second worst figure in India after Uttar Pradesh. The State also spends less than 3% of GDP on education even as privatisation in the sector has been increasing since the 1990s

Anindya Sarkar

The rape and murder of a doctor at Kolkata's R.G. Kar Medical College on August 9 brought doctors all over the country onto the streets. As of now, junior doctors in Kolkata have been on a hunger strike for several days, and their peers in other parts of the State have expressed their support with symbolic strikes of their own. Several doctors on hunger strike have had to be hospitalised after their condition deteriorated. The State Government has thus far punished many police and administrative officials. Even through breaks in the agitation, the health workers have maintained that underlying issues are far from resolved. Their protest has sought, among other things, a complete overhaul of the healthcare system. They have reported working 36-hour shifts on meagre allowances, without proper rest rooms, and have been left vulnerable to violence at their workplace.

These working conditions are not restricted to West Bengal. A report by the Indian Medical Association in 2018 said 75% of doctors in India have at some point been exposed to harassment or physical violence inside health centres or hospitals, largely due to lack of infrastructure, medicines, long working hours, and excessive political interference. Yet successive governments, both at the Centre and in the States, have swept these pressing issues under the rug.

Issues with insurance coverage
India's declared expenditure on healthcare is only 2% of its GDP, compared to the 5-10% in China and Brazil. The success story of Cuba's healthcare system is rooted in its spending 14% of its GDP on health. In India, continued state-led apathy towards favourable government policies, plus long-standing low-quality healthcare infrastructure, has allowed the private sectors to flourish at the public sector's expense. From 8% in 1950, the private sector captured nearly 70% of India's total healthcare market in 2024.

According to the National Sample Survey, the cost of treatment in private hospitals is seven-times that in government hospitals, yet only 14% of the rural and 19% of the urban populations have health insurance to help cover the resulting costs.

Even as India's public sector per-capita expenditure on healthcare has steadily declined, out-of-pocket expenses for individuals have soared. According to official data, of every ₹100 an individual



Protesters at the site where junior doctors are sitting on a hunger strike in Kolkata. PTI

spends on healthcare in India, ₹52 is from savings, while the Central and the relevant State governments together contribute ₹35. To compare, Brazilian and Cuban citizens spend ₹22 and ₹8, respectively, out of their pockets.

A study by IIT Mandi published in December 2023 reported that much-touted government health schemes – including the Centre's Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana and West Bengal's 'Swasthya Sathi' – mostly cover treatment costs for inpatient admissions but provide almost no coverage for outpatient services, which account for up to 80% of the total healthcare expenses in India.

West Bengal second-worst

One consequence of this state of affairs has been a corrupt collusion between acquisitive doctors, corporate entities, pharmaceutical companies, and political traders taking advantage of patients desperate for timely and quality care.

In an October 2021 report, NITI Aayog estimated that the exorbitant cost of treatments had pushed nearly 7% of the national population into poverty every year. The situation in West Bengal is more dire considering the State Government's healthcare expenditure is only 1% of its gross state domestic product. According to the Union Ministry of Finance, 68% of healthcare expenses in the State are out-of-pocket – the second-highest in the country, after Uttar Pradesh.

Further, the World Health Organization has recommended that any country's health sector must have at least one doctor for every 1,000 patients. In the last 77 years, India has hardly ever met this goal. The doctor-patient ratio in West Bengal is similar, whereas Kerala has four

The doctors' issues are far from resolved. Their protest has sought a complete overhaul of the healthcare system. They have reported 36-hour shifts without proper rest rooms and unsafe workplaces that leave them vulnerable to violence

doctors per 1,000 patients. Then again, this ratio alone does not fully explain the healthcare crisis particular to Bengal.

Need for whistle-blowers

For one, the number of doctors and healthcare workers in rural primary and community health centres is lower than in urban areas. Junior doctors have complained that the State government's claim to have built super-specialty hospitals in different districts is meaningless because there are too few health workers to staff them and not enough essential medicines and equipment either. Where some equipment is available, their use is held back by the lack of skilled operators.

When freshly-minted doctors are deputed to work in these centres, they are exposed to patients' and their families' frustration over the poor facilities. This reality has persisted irrespective of the party in power. Again, this state of affairs is not unique to West Bengal.

According to the advocacy organisation Transparency International, corruption in healthcare is becoming increasingly severe. Of the \$7.5 trillion spent worldwide on healthcare every year, around \$500 billion is lost to corruption. It also estimated that one in five people is

forced to bribe workers and officials to avail medical care and that corruption is responsible for the deaths of 1.4 lakh children annually.

The healthcare syndicates operating in West Bengal's hospitals are a good example of such corruption. As part of its suggested solutions, the Transparency International report asks the sector's stakeholders and employees to come forward as whistleblowers to stem the rot. The junior doctors and others agitating in Kolkata and other cities are currently essaying this role.

Loss due to corruption

Some other West Bengal schemes have also fizzled out. Just as with 'Swasthya Sathi', Bengal was enthusiastic about the 'Kanyashree' scheme when the State mooted it in 2013 to increase the enrolment of girls in school using conditional cash transfers. But a June 2023 analysis by University of Pennsylvania and University of Kalyani (West Bengal) researchers revealed that although the scheme had prompted more girls to enrol, they were learning little because there were no proper classrooms or teachers. West Bengal, spends less than 3% of the GDP on education even as privatisation in the sector has been increasing since the 1990s.

In a paper published in 2023 in *The Lancet*, two social science researchers reported actual healthcare spending in India has come down to just 1.2% of GDP, even as the Central government has disputed this.

'Bread at the price of jewels'

In sum, this is why it is imperative for India's governments to listen to the junior doctors' complaints and demands. In line with the aspirations of a welfare state, the government must post-haste increase its healthcare spending and demonstrate its commitment to eliminating corruption.

Norman Bethune, a Canadian doctor who devoted his life to serving the poor, travelled around the world and attended to care-seekers during the Spanish Civil War as well as the Sino-Japanese conflict. He eventually died on the battlefield in 1939 when tending to Chinese soldiers. He was critical of the idea of health being treated as a market-commodity and said: "Medicine, as we are practising it, is a luxury trade. We are selling bread at the price of jewels. Let us take the profit, the private economic profit, out of medicine and purify our profession of rapacious individualism. Let us say to the people not 'how much have you got?'."

(Anindya Sarkar is professor, Department of Geology and Geophysics, IIT Kharagpur. sarkaranindya1959@gmail.com)

THE GIST

75% of doctors have been exposed to harassment or physical violence, largely due to lack of infrastructure, medicines, long working hours, and political interference. Yet successive governments have swept these issues under the rug

India's expenditure on healthcare is only 2% of its GDP. Cuba spends 14%. In India, state-led apathy has allowed the private sector to capture nearly 70% of India's total healthcare market in 2024

In October 2021, the NITI Aayog estimated that the cost of treatments had pushed nearly 7% of the national population into poverty every year. The situation in West Bengal is more dire

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HUMERUS



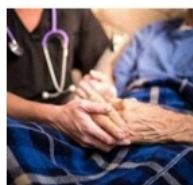
Gut-brain connection to Parkinson's revealed

Serena Ioesphine M.

Is there a gut-brain connection in Parkinson's Disease (PD)? Recent research suggests a "gut-first hypothesis" or a gut-brain connection in PD – a pathway that could mark a significant shift in how the neurodegenerative disorder is looked at, its diagnosis, its progression, and its treatment.

A recent study – Upper Gastrointestinal (GI) Mucosal Damage (MD) and Subsequent Risk of Parkinson Disease – published in the *JAMA Network Open* found that a history of upper GI MD was associated with an increased risk of developing PD. The cohort study of 9,350 patients with no prior history of PD found that mucosal damage on upper endoscopy was associated with a 76% greater risk of a PD diagnosis.

Prabash Prabhakaran, head of department and senior consultant, Neurology, Apollo Speciality Hospitals, Vanagaram, says, "PD is a progressive neurodegenerative disorder primarily characterised by motor symptoms such as tremors, rigidity, bradykinesia, or slow movement, and postural instability. As the disease progresses, non-motor symptoms like cognitive decline, sleep disturbances, mood disorders often emerge. However increasing evidence has pointed to an overlooked aspect of PD disease – the gut.



Studies suggest that gastrointestinal dysfunction may precede the onset of motor symptoms. GETTY IMAGES

Studies suggest that gastrointestinal dysfunction may precede the onset of motor symptoms, highlighting a complex interplay between the gut and brain in PD. There are multiple studies looking at the connection between PD and the enteric nervous system, appendix, gut microbiome, gastritis at an early age, and PD in later life."

Gastric warnings

One of the key indicators of a link between the gut and PD is gastrointestinal symptoms, particularly constipation, long before classic motor symptoms manifest. Many patients report experiencing constipation, reduced gut motility, and other GI disturbances up to 20 years prior to receiving a PD diagnosis. This suggests that Parkinson's may not only be a brain disorder but also involve dysfunction in the GI system, he added. "So the present

understanding is that PD pathology could probably start in the gut and move to the brain," Dr. Prabhakaran said.

R. Lakshmi Narasimhan, professor and head of department, Neurology, Sri Ramachandra Medical College, SRIHER, said the deficiency of an essential element like dopamine is associated with PD. High levels of dopaminergic neurons are present in the gut. "Now, several studies are looking at gut microbiota that play a crucial role in deciding your mood and have a great influence on the brain. Previously, research looked at the central and peripheral nervous systems for PD, while now, more research is looking at the enteric nervous system – gastrointestinal-related – to look at the relationship between gut and brain," he said.

A major breakthrough in understanding the gut's involvement came with the discovery of abnormal protein aggregates known as Lewy bodies in both the brain and the gut of PD patients, Dr. Prabhakaran said. "The gut microbiome is involved in numerous bodily processes, including immune function, metabolism, and regulation of gut-brain axis. Dysbiosis, or an imbalance in gut microbiota, has been implicated in neurological conditions, including PD," he said.

Gut hygiene

A. Ch�zhan, associate professor of gastroenterology, Government

Kilpauk Medical College Hospital, said that it was a long-known fact that GI problems could heighten the risk of PD. "This study has put the magnitude of the problem to be as high as 76%. There is a gut-brain axis in our body that is bidirectional. It is very much affected by the composition of our gut microbiota, which is the healthy gut microbes. Commonly, dietary habits such as increased intake of ultra processed food, antibiotic misuse, and frequent GI infections, affect the gut microbiota. That may set the precedence for so many diseases like PD and even many cancers," he explained.

"We need to maintain good gut hygiene by avoiding unnecessary antibiotics and less processed food options. Hand hygiene, safe water, and eating home cooked food also promote gut hygiene. Healthy habits such as an early dinner and more fibre from fruits and vegetables are also important," he said. He added that fecal microbiota transplantation is the way forward for many diseases, but as of now, this is still at the research stage.

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