



# OPINION

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[ OUR TAKE ]

## Fix failure on multiple fronts

Doctors' protest in the Kolkata rape-murder highlights the State's failures. But how society responds to such crimes needs addressing too

A multi-tiered failure of the State and society underpins the strike by doctors across the nation, though the immediate triggers are the rape and murder of a doctor in a government-run hospital in Kolkata and the cover-up attempted by the authorities in its aftermath. This failure is writ large in more ways than one in the matter.

It turns out that the accused's history of assault was overlooked while retaining him in a quasi-official capacity in the state police and letting him gain undue access and clearance in the hospital—if all this was deliberate, the rot in the system is indeed deep. Then, there was the initial distortion of the nature of the doctor's death communicated to her parents, a hurried cremation allegedly with prodding from the police, and efforts to rehabilitate the college principal who was forced to resign over his inaction. These failures suggest a desperation to deflect blame and show why the transfer of the probe to the Central Bureau of Investigation, as the Kolkata high court has directed, was merited. Against this backdrop came Thursday's vandalism at the medical college with the police as a bystander. Given the long work hours, crumbling infrastructure, and poor conditions at most public health facilities, which exacerbate the vulnerability of medical staff to violence by patients' families, the outpouring of rage at the Kolkata incident is not hard to comprehend.

However, society's failure in how it responds to rape and sexual violence is equally consequential, which is also why the stringent rape laws enacted after the 2012 Delhi gang rape and murder have led to little deterrence. Calls for justice are sufficiently loud only when a case seizes the public attention for its barbarity, more so in an urban setting. And once the public furore dies down, there is little attention paid to rapes elsewhere, involving victims marginalised by poverty, caste, and the many other markers of vulnerability. The outrage over the doctor's murder must serve as a reminder that there is no room for a systemic or societal blame game when it comes to crimes against women—failures across all fronts need to be acknowledged and stamped out urgently.

## Time for India to reset wrestling governance

Aman Sehrawat's bronze medal at Paris 2024 extended Indian wrestling's medal-winning streak at the Olympics to a fifth straight Games. Factor in Vinesh Phogat's heartbreaking disqualification on the cusp of another medal, and one would think that the country is in the middle of a wrestling boom. But that is only partly true, because the sport's administrators seem determined to undo all the good that the athletes have worked so hard to achieve over the years.

On Friday, the Delhi high court again put an ad hoc body in charge of wrestling in the country. This decision came close on the heels of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) president Sanjay Singh blaming the 2023 wrestlers' street protests against former president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh for the poor show at the Olympics. The high court's decision and the WFI president's statement are not related, but they together paint a sad picture of the way the sport is administered in the country.

Wrestling is one of India's traditional sports—one where our rich *akhada* culture has led to continued success at the international level against all odds. But the country's top stars sitting on the streets demanding action against autocratic and allegedly unlawful bosses is a poor reflection of the state of affairs. An administration that has no empathy for the athletes—some of whom had made grave charges against Brij Bhushan—is one that doesn't understand sport. WFI, whose current establishment is just another avatar of the previous one, needs to be professionalised urgently to keep the larger interest of the sport and athletes in mind. Now that an ad hoc panel is in place again, the time to act is here. Clean up the sport by taking along its main stakeholders who put in blood, sweat and tears even when no one is looking. Wrestlers, wrestling, and Indian sport, deserve better.

## Seeding farm growth in climate-crisis era

The 109 new varieties of seeds recently released by the government can bring down costs of production and improve harvest in water-scarce regions and in adverse weather conditions

Agricultural development and farmer welfare are among the top priorities for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. It is our resolve to bring joy and prosperity to the lives of food-givers, who are the architects of our sustenance. We have formed a six-point strategy to help increase the incomes of farmers. Augmenting production, reducing the cost of farm production, providing fair prices for products, appropriate financial assistance in the event of natural disasters, crop diversification, and promoting organic farming are the key aspects of this vision. The most important factor in increasing production and reducing costs is good seeds to boost production in water-scarce regions and in adverse weather conditions. To this end, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi has dedicated 109 new varieties of seeds to farmers and the nation.

The agricultural landscape has evolved rapidly over the last 10 years. The challenge now is to boost produc-

tion amid pressing issues such as the climate crisis and environmental imbalance. To tackle this, we will develop 1,500 new varieties of climate-friendly crops in the next five years. At this moment, only science can help determine the well-being of farmers. I'm proud of our agricultural scientists who are developing climate-friendly varieties of farm produce. Their innovations can indeed ensure the welfare of farmers.

As a farmer myself, I understand first-hand how important good seeds are. There will be an unprecedented increase in production if the seeds are good and suitable to the nature of the soil and weather of a region. PM Modi understood this and guided us to work with a broader vision in this direction. Diversity is the specialty of agriculture in India. Here, farming evolves after every short distance. For instance, farming in the plains is different from that in the hills and mountains. We have released the new varieties of seeds keeping all these differences and variations in mind. Of the 109 varieties, 69 are for regular farming, and 40 are for horticulture. The government is determined to promote healthy food and make India a global nutrition hub.

It is our resolve to ensure that the assessment of farmers' hard work is done properly and they get a fair price for their crops. For this, we are purchasing their produce at the mini-

mum support price (MSP). Along with increasing production, India is also concerned about ensuring that agricultural production is safe for its health as well as its soil. Today, the country is witnessing a new green revolution. Our food providers are also becoming energy providers and fuel providers. Sectors such as animal husbandry, beekeeping, medicinal farming and flowers and fruit farming are also being strengthened along with regular agriculture.

Previous governments never prioritised agriculture and farmers, whereas the farming sector has made unprecedented progress under the leadership of PM Modi. In 2013-14, the budget for the ministry of agriculture was ₹27,083 crore, while in 2024-25, it increased to ₹32,470 crore. This budgetary allocation is just for the agriculture department. There is a separate budget for other areas of agriculture and fertiliser subsidies. The government provides urea and diammonium phosphate (DAP) to farmers at cheaper rates. It gives farmers a subsidy of about ₹2,100 on urea, and ₹1,083 subsidy on one bag of DAP. Farmers have become self-reliant and empowered through the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme. The Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana provides a huge insurance cover in the event of crop losses.

The Modi government has strived to take decisions, from seeds to providing



Shriraj Singh Chouhan



Agricultural innovation has to be mindful of India's diverse farming contexts, where practices evolve after every short distance

a market, to empower farmers, to reduce their problems and increase their profits. In this direction, we are developing agriculture infrastructure through an Agriculture Infrastructure Fund of ₹1 lakh crores. More than 700 Krishi Vigyan Kendras are connecting farmers with science. Through the NAMO Drone Didi Scheme, women from faraway places are also being connected with technology. Through Krishi Siddhis, we have trained 35,000 agriculture personnel in the last five years.

PM Modi envisions making India self-reliant in agriculture, and we are working strategically in that direction. In the next five years, we will create 100 export-oriented horticulture clusters at a cost of ₹18,000 crore. PM Modi envisions making India self-reliant in agriculture, and we are working strategically in that direction. In the next five years, we will create 100 export-oriented horticulture clusters at a cost of ₹18,000 crore. PM Modi envisions making India self-reliant in agriculture, and we are working strategically in that direction. In the next five years, we will create 100 export-oriented horticulture clusters at a cost of ₹18,000 crore.

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In the Yajurveda, there is a verse that says, "annamam pataye namah, kshetramnam pataye namah", which means, "We bow before the producers of grains and the custodians of farms." It is also mentioned in *Krishna Parashar* that "Food is life, food is strength, and food is the means for all needs". The existence of our country is incomplete without farmers, which is why farmers have been revered even in our ancient scriptures. In our culture and tradition, service towards farmers is equivalent to worshipping God. Today, India and our agriculture sector are moving forward steadily in line with the Prime Minister's long-term, all-round, all-encompassing, inclusive, and holistic vision for development.

I have faith that our farmer brothers and sisters will also become self-reliant and prosperous in this golden age of independent India (Azadi Ka Amrit Kaal). And our country's granaries will continue to fill with affluence and prosperity.

Shriraj Singh Chouhan is the Union minister for agriculture and farmers' welfare. The views expressed are personal

## Harris's candidacy is a symbol of US progress

On August 22, at around 9pm Central Daylight Time, Kamala Devi Harris will make history when she accepts the Democratic Party's nomination for president of the United States. That moment, set to unfold in front of 5,000 delegates at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, will cap an extraordinary period in American politics.

At the beginning of summer, the stage was set for a rematch between President Joe Biden and his predecessor, Donald Trump, whom he defeated in the 2020 presidential election. However, Biden's disastrous debate performance against Trump on June 27 led to his announcing his withdrawal from the race and endorsing Harris, his vice president, for the past 42 months. Biden's decision—It marks only the seventh time a US president has opted not to seek re-election—upended the campaign just 104 days before the election. At the time, Biden was trailing Trump in most opinion polls, both nationally and in key swing states considered crucial for capturing the White House.

Remarkably, amidst this political upheaval, Harris has managed to reintroduce herself and rejuvenate her party's prospects in November. Given that she once faced significant scepticism from the electorate and within her party, this is a notable achievement. While the sequence of events that brought Harris to the forefront may be relegated to mere footnotes in history, the true significance of her candidacy—and her potential presidency—extends far beyond these recent developments.

Harris's nomination marks a pivotal moment in American history for several reasons. First, she is only the second woman ever to be nominated as a major party's presidential candidate. Former first lady and secretary of state Hillary Clinton broke the glass ceiling in 2016 by becoming the Democratic Party's nominee for president. Harris's emergence eight years later demonstrates the speed at which the political landscape in the US is evolving, especially in terms of gender representation among Democratic Party voters. Equally important, if elected, Harris would become the first woman and woman of colour to hold the office of President of the US. This is a milestone that carries immense significance in a country that has grappled with issues of race and gender since its founding. Harris's ascent to this position is a testament to the shifting demographics and values of the American electorate.

To date, Harris has run a remarkably competent campaign. The party machinery quickly coalesced around the vice president,

who smoothly inherited the campaign apparatus and fundraising networks established by Biden. The speed with which Harris secured the support of the party establishment, including endorsements from former Presidents Obama and Bill Clinton, former Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and Hillary Clinton, quelled any speculation about a contested convention in Chicago. In addition, the Democrats were motivated by the need to have a candidate who could defeat Trump. For the Democrats, Trump is an anathema and antithetical to democracy's future. Most of them believe that a second Trump presidency would be even more dangerous than the first.

But it is not just fear driving support for Harris's campaign. Her candidacy has unified the Democratic Party and energised its base, particularly young voters and minority communities. A senior campaign official recently noted at a closed-door fundraiser that Harris's voting record and her campaign has been overwhelmed by the enthusiastic response from young voters eager to join the campaign.

Harris has also sparked excitement and enthusiasm among African Americans and Indian Americans, two ethnic groups of which she is part. At her campaign rallies, she is drawing larger crowds than Trump has at his rallies in a surge of support not seen on the Democratic side since Obama's groundbreaking 2008 campaign.

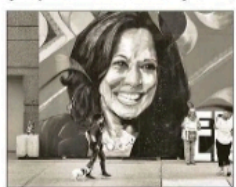
After ending a race, Harris achieved a huge fundraising milestone, securing more than a quarter billion dollars in July alone. This financial prowess underscores the strength and enthusiasm of her campaign, which has quickly gained momentum.

The impact of Harris's candidacy is being evidenced now in the polls. She has erased the lead Trump held over Biden, and now leads in most national polls, including in key swing states such as Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin—states Trump narrowly won in 2016 and Biden won back for the Democrats in 2020. The strength of Harris's candidacy is highlighted by Trump's decision to agree to debate her after previously indicating that he would not. Trump, who did not debate his Republican primary rivals due to his commanding lead, has recognised the seriousness of Harris's challenge.

Her candidacy has the potential to inspire millions of people—especially women and minorities—who have long felt underrepresented in America. It will serve as a profound symbol of how far the US has come and a powerful reminder of how much further it has to go and can go.

This week in Chicago, all eyes will be on Harris as she prepares to accept the Democratic Party's nomination. It will not be just her who will be "marching forward". Her candidacy has the potential to inspire millions of people—especially women and minorities—who have long felt underrepresented in America. It will serve as a profound symbol of how far the US has come and a powerful reminder of how much further it has to go and can go.

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Her candidacy will inspire millions who have felt underrepresented in the US

[ RAMIL WICKREMESINGHE | PRESIDENT, SRI LANKA ]

We have reached a point where the West can no longer dominate global leadership and ... has become part of the problem



[ STRAIGHTFORWARD ]

Shashi Shekhar



## Developing nations need to be helmsmen of their boats

You must have heard Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's Independence Day speech from the ramparts of the Red Fort. He claimed, "There are immense challenges, within and from outside. I am aware as we grow stronger challenges from outside will keep mounting. But I want to remind those powers, that India's development isn't meant to destabilise anyone. When we were rich, we didn't force wars on anyone. We are the nation of the Buddha, war is not our way." What's the message embedded in these words?

It was reminded of Sheikh Hasina Wajed and her counterpart in Pakistan, former PM Imran Khan—though India and her leaders are fearless. A few days after leaving her country, Sheikh Hasina in a letter claimed he had agreed to a United States (US) demand to hand over St Martin Island, her regime would have remained untouched. On May 27 she had claimed, "Like East Timor", they will carve out a Christian country taking parts of Bangladesh (Chattogram) and Myanmar with a base in the Bay of Bengal."

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the world has grown accustomed to seismic shifts in global power structure every few decades. The end of the two world wars led to a bitter Cold War between the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the US.

Now China and the US are sparring off. The US is determined to foil China's designs in the Red Sea region and needs strategic bases in India or Bangladesh. China's growing influence in Myanmar made it amply clear if urgent action wasn't taken it would be too late. It was against this backdrop that the Sheikh Hasina government's ouster became inevitable.

Now let's look at Imran Khan's predicament. He gained power after an intense political struggle. His initial years went off well. However, a political power struggle kept intensifying and so did pressure from external powers. Military headquarters at Rawalpindi didn't leave any stone unturned to destabilise him. They kept supporting Khan's rivals. The result, Khan is in jail and efforts are on to dilute his popular support.

Khan too accused the US of toppling his government. The Intercept published a report based on classified Pakistani government documents claiming the US was ruffed at the neutral stance Pakistan took when the Russia-Ukraine War broke out two years ago. Accord-

ing to the report, on March 7, 2022, the US State department in a meeting with Pakistani officials pressured them to remove Khan from power.

I would like to remind you of Indira Gandhi. A few months before her death she was publicly said that some foreign powers were plotting to get her out of their way.

During the 1980s, there were allegations that several Western countries (as also Pakistan) were helping fuel violent Khalistani extremism in India by sheltering extremists. Several Western nations included the US, the UK and Canada. Western conscience took a beating after India's assassination. But today, Canada continues to be a safe haven for many Khalistani activists.

Canada is a member of 'five eyes'—the coordination group of secret services of five nations (Canada, the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand) led by the US. These countries are convinced that India's intelligence agency RAW was behind the killing of Sikh separatists in Canada.

The US too made a similar allegation. They blamed India for hatching a conspiracy to kill Khalistani ideologue Gurbachan Singh Pannu, a US citizen. These are the same countries that have created mayhem in developing countries to serve their interests.

Western countries like to lecture the world about democracy. Let's look at the status. The US is in the grip of election fever. A few weeks earlier there was a sham of a debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Many US critics labelled it as one of the most shameful debates in their democratic history. The question that arises is: How can a country struggling with all kinds of integrity have the temerity to lecture others?

It's amply clear we will have to find our sweet spot in this emerging Cold War. We mean all the countries that have suffered at the hands of the developed world and are still gearing up to sprint on the path of development. During the 1950s and 1960s, countries of Asia and Africa established the Non-Aligned Movement. If the Indian PM desires, such a formal or informal platform can be initiated.

Instability in the neighbourhood gives us a clear message—in a changing world, developing nations need to be the helmsmen of their boats.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, *Hindustan*. The views expressed are personal





## Two States

Elections to Jammu and Kashmir and Haryana are of great import

Assembly elections for Haryana and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), to be held from September 18 to October 1, will test India's democratic institutions and, especially, the Election Commission of India (ECI), to the fullest extent. This will be the first election for J&K since it lost its statehood and Ladakh was carved out as a separate UT without an Assembly in 2019. After a three-phase poll in J&K and a single-phase one in Haryana, the counting of votes will be on October 4. Curiously, the ECI has said that elections that are due in Maharashtra and Jharkhand will be announced later. In 2019, Haryana and Maharashtra went to the polls together. Security concerns and festivals have been cited as the reason for holding these elections in batches of two each. Falling within the first year of the 2024 general election, these four Assembly elections, and then the one in Delhi, will be notable for the political signals that will emanate. Of import will be the J&K exercise, as a new elected government can be the first step to a durable political process after J&K's reorganisation five years ago. The enthusiasm that the electorate showed in the general election and the recurring incidents of violent insurgency are two aspects of the situation in Kashmir. Elections could open the possibility of the emergence of new political actors. An election process that is demonstrably fair and transparent is essential for a healthy democracy, and in Kashmir's case, no less so.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) went in for a changing of the guard in Haryana ahead of the general election to dilute the discontent against the party and its governments at the Centre and the State. The Agnipath short service scheme that was introduced by the Centre is a topic of intense interest in a State where many young people look to the military for a career option. The Congress is hoping to benefit from the double anti-incumbency and a disarray in the non-Jai social coalition that propelled the BJP to the top in 2014. The impact of the Assembly elections will not be limited to the two States/UTs. The general election has loosened the BJP's grip over the country's politics and given the Opposition a fresh lease of life. Whether that trend holds or there is a reversal is to be seen. Politics within the BJP, among the National Democratic Alliance partners, between the BJP and the larger Sangh Parivar, and between the BJP and the Opposition, could all be influenced by these elections. The BJP and the Congress both know that the stakes are high, giving this round of elections an added edge.

## Back from the brink

Sri Lanka has an opportunity to elect a truly representative government

Sri Lanka's ninth presidential election, scheduled for September 21, has attracted a record 39 candidates, signalling a return to "business as usual" despite the severe economic crisis of 2022. The number of contenders, four more than in 2019, suggests a robust democratic process. There are familiar faces and some surprises. Incumbent President Ranil Wickremesinghe, traditionally with the United National Party, is running as an independent. At 75, he aims to garner broad support by highlighting the political and economic stability achieved during his two-year tenure, made possible by backing from the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), led by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. In early 2022, Sri Lanka faced the full effect of an economic meltdown, brought on by, among other things, the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings. The central bank announced a debt repayment moratorium amid unsustainable debt and critically low reserves. The Russia-Ukraine conflict further worsened the situation. The Aragalaya movement resulted in the ousting of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2022. Since then, Sri Lanka has secured an extended fund facility with the IMF, supported initially by India and now with an "agreement in principle" with India and the Paris Club creditors on a debt treatment plan. During the early recovery phase, people faced price hikes. Recently, prices of electricity, fuel, and cooking gas have decreased, but people are still struggling. Earnings from tourism, a major contributor, amounted to around \$328 million in July against \$219 million a year ago. However, in a move seen as part of electioneering, the government announced a monthly cost of living allowance of LKR 25,000 for public service employees, effective January 2025.

Mr. Wickremesinghe faces Sajith Premadasa of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (United People's Front), Anura Kumara Dissanayake of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, and Mahinda Rajapaksa's son, Namal of the SLPP. Mr. Dissanayake, who visited India in February, hopes to capitalise on public frustration with traditional political parties, a sentiment that fuelled the Aragalaya movement. Other candidates include P. Ariyaratnam, a "common Tamil candidate", Sarah Fonseka, former Army Commander, and Nuwan Bopape, a nominee of the Aragalaya activists. The leading candidates should push for the restoration of provincial councils, which represent a measure of autonomy as envisaged in the 13th Amendment. It is a sad commentary on the Sri Lankan political leadership that the councils have been rendered non-functional for years. Whoever is elected by about 17 million voters as President should revive the provincial councils, which are not Tamil-centric but are intended to infuse an element of agency for the people in the running of their affairs. A functional democracy is the first step to fixing the economy.

In the context of the broader ramifications of Karnataka's local employment law, five State-level reports from the southern States — on the Editorial and Opinion Pages — on labour conditions on the ground

## New migrant realities in Karnataka's gig sector

**P**adma (name changed) has been working with a prominent home delivery services company in Bengaluru, as a beauty services provider for three years now. After migrating from her hometown in Sikkim to Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, to work in a salon, she then moved to Bengaluru after the COVID-19 pandemic to become a gig worker.

"The company charges a 30% commission, but I get paid every three days. That helps. After my husband met with an accident, it has not been easy for us. So, cash in hand and some amount of flexibility is useful," she says.

Padma's sister too has moved to Bengaluru and offers her services through the same company. The company offered a training programme for professionals for a facial treatment package that is to be launched, and she notes that there was a good mix of locals and migrants from Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and the northeastern States among them.

These women are among the many who have migrated to the Silicon Valley of India (Bengaluru). There is already a two-lakh-strong gig workforce in the city, facilitated by tech platforms such as Uber, Ola, Swiggy, Zomato and Dunzo among others.

The Karnataka government recently proposed a "quota-for-local" Bill, which has been put in cold storage following a pushback on the proposal by corporates in the State. Nevertheless, at a time when India witnesses huge migration, characterised by an influx of people from rural regions to cities and more prosperous economies, and driven by a declining agrarian economy and unprecedented unemployment rates, what could initiatives such as the quota-for-local Bill mean for the migrant gig workers of the State?

### The migration spectrum

While there is little data available on the strength of the migrant population among gig workers, the spectrum usually swings between autorickshaw drivers, very few of whom are inter-State migrants, and delivery personnel and home service providers, of whom a large portion are migrant workers.

Says Vinay Sarathy, president of the United Food Delivery Partners' Union, the migrant population among food delivery partners varies according to the locations within the city.



Shilpa Elizabeth

"If the location is around M.G. Road, Koramangala or HSR layout Bengaluru, there is a greater percentage of Hindi-speaking migrant workers. But if the location is Rajajinagar, the number comes down. Near Electronics City, you will find a large number of delivery personnel from other parts of Karnataka such as Mandya and a few from States such as Andhra Pradesh. There are also people from within Karnataka, such as Tumakuru and Ramnagara close to Bengaluru, and also faraway parts of North Karnataka."

According to Mr. Sarathy, after the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a significant increase in the inflow of migrants to the city's booming gig sector.

In the case of drivers associated with aggregators, the number of inter-State migrants is relatively low, says Mohamad Inayat Ali from the Karnataka App-based Drivers' Union.

"The share of migrants may be around 5%-10%. Usually, they are from Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh."

While that is the case with owner-drivers, schemes that allow drivers to rent a car from the platforms by depositing an amount seem to have more takers among the migrants.

"Such schemes as well as companies such as BluSmart which have their own fleet see more migrant workers as they require less investment and are relatively risk-free," Mr. Ali notes.

### A more exploited class

Pasha (name changed) from Bengaluru works as a delivery partner with a leading food ordering platform in the city. He moved from a full-time job to a part-time job recently after finding an additional job as a security agent.

"It (delivery) is a risky job given the traffic and pollution. Earlier at least the payment was good. Then the rate cards changed, and I had to find another job that provided a stable income," he says. "Locals often work part-time for these platforms. Whereas you will see mostly migrants working full time," Pasha adds.

As he is a local it was not very difficult for Pasha to find a second job. For a migrant who does not have connections in a city that speaks a language alien to him, things are often different and the chances of being exploited are higher.

Says a source who works close to the delivery

workers, "There is more exploitation when outsiders/migrants are hired because they have no local support. Even lower gig workers, if the companies offer a lower rate card, local workers will speak up and question them. But a migrant worker will not openly object and get into trouble. The companies/platforms have an edge over workers in such situations."



### Ramifications of the Bill

What could a local reservation Bill mean for migrant gig workers in this

context?

Not much in terms of a direct impact on gig workers, since they are not "employees" in a traditional sense. However, it could make the already precarious situation worse for the larger migrant population, many feel.

There could be demographic changes within the gig labour force, with more locals moving to the formal sector if reservation is implemented.

Says Mohan Mani, a visiting fellow with the Centre for Labour Studies at the National Law School of India University, Bengaluru, "Such a Bill will have an impact on those who can aspire for formal sector jobs. If there are reservations, migrant workers would have a lesser chance at such jobs."

While pitting the local against the migrant, such moves overlook the elephant in the room, namely, the exploitation of workers, and spin narratives such as "locals not available for work" or "not enough work for locals", which shifts the focus from the real issue.

Says Soujanya Sridhar, researcher and Senior Manager at Aapti Institute, Bengaluru, "I don't think Karnataka-origin workers don't want to do the work that migrants do. It's just that they have more options given their social networks here. So, they're less likely to want to do a low-value job."

She points out that social security schemes which demand domicile status are ignorant of the migrant realities of today.

"Reservation in jobs will not stop or reverse migration. Migrant workers will continue to come and seek work in the city. But, fundamentally, such a move increases the fragility associated with migrant life and they will have fewer avenues for protection or fair work."

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## Migrants toil in Tamil Nadu's Cauvery delta

**M**igrant workers from other parts of India are slowly making their presence felt in the agricultural fields in the Cauvery delta, in Tamil Nadu, often referred to as the granary of South India. The development comes amid there being a severe shortage of farmhands.

The gradual influx of migrant workers in agriculture has, however, not set alarm bells ringing as yet among trade unions or local labourers as the numbers in the farm sector are not as high when compared to the situation in the industrial and other sectors in Tamil Nadu.

The shortage of labour still remains a common complaint among farmers in the delta, as the younger generation has turned away from farming, leaving the elders to shoulder the burden.

"It's becoming really hard to find labourers to tend to the crops," says R. Anandan, a farmer from Parasanalur in Mayiladuthurai district.

### From India's east

Migrant labourers have been filling this gap in some places. They move across the State in groups during the agricultural seasons and are largely hired for the transplantation or the harvesting of paddy as far as the delta region is concerned. Many of them are from West Bengal and Bihar, and are skilled in paddy transplanting and other agriculture activities. They are sought after by farmers here for their swift work and at relatively lower costs.

"For the past three years, we have been working in different districts across Tamil Nadu," says Deva Mondal, a Bengali labourer, who was part of a group engaged in transplanting paddy seedlings in Mayiladuthurai district, recently.

Deva highlights the demanding nature of their work. The group, he says, works from dawn to dusk, transplanting paddy seedlings on four to five acres per day. "We charge ₹4,500 to ₹5,000 for planting an acre as a group (of 13 workers), whereas local labourers are paid ₹600 per day for the same work. By covering more area in a day, we earn more," he says.

"Farmers who hire us say that there is shortage of labourers locally and fulfil their requirement. However, this is not yet a widespread phenomenon in the delta," he adds.

Labour unions too agree. "The issue of engaging migrant workers for farm operations in the delta districts is not as alarming as [it is] in



V. Venkata-subramanian



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the northern districts of Tamil Nadu. Many farmers are going in for government-supported farm mechanisation. Besides, local youngsters are opting for jobs with a steady income. These factors are contributing to the decline in local labour in agricultural fields," observes V.

Jeevakumar, a CPI(M) cadre and Vice-President, All India Agriculture Labourers Union, Thanjavur.

Migrant labourers can be seen engaged in farm activities in some parts of the delta region, particularly in the urban or semi-urban pockets. This is because there are opportunities available for them during the off-season period, says G. Sethuraman, a progressive farmer with the sizeable landholding in Dharasuram near Kumbakonam.

"Workers from other States usually avoid areas with a significant labour population and focus on villages near urban/semi-urban areas where there is a shortage of labour," explains A. Baskar, General Secretary, Tamil Nadu Agriculture Workers' Union. "Although there haven't been any conflicts between workers from other States and locals, so far, possible disputes can be averted by ensuring equal pay for all labourers," he says.

### Socio-economic changes and MGNREGA

Ayalai Siva Suriyan, District Secretary, Tamil Nadu Vivasangiy Sangam, Tiruchi, attributes the shrinkage of the agricultural workforce to larger socio-economic changes. "Earlier, those who completed standard 8 or standard 10 took up agricultural work, but now they want jobs in cities. Middle aged and old people largely constitute the farm workforce in many parts of the State. Hiring workers from outside is inevitable," he says.

Though the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is blamed by a section of farmers for the shortage of labour and rising wages, not all agree. "Last year, most beneficiaries got only 40 days of work under the scheme in Tiruchi district, far from the promised 100 days and the decline has been consistent over the years," claims Mr. Siva Suriyan.

If the implementation of MGNREGA is confined to the non-cultivation season, there would be no need to scout for migrant labourers,

Mr. Sethuraman argues. The labour unions in the delta region, which are strong, had for long ensured that the local labourers got priority when it came to hiring. Farmers, irrespective of the size of their landholdings, were dependent on the local labour to carry out all cultivation activities,

right from aerating the soil to harvesting. There was stiff resistance from farm labour unions towards mechanisation and hiring outsiders. "Farmers had to run behind the local workforce, who called the shots," says L.N. Renganathan of Kamalapuram near Mannargudi.

But the advent of the MGNREGA changed the situation during the first decade of this century. As farmhands relished the advantages of being a "stakeholder" in the scheme aimed at enhancing their livelihood security, the grip of labour syndicates on local agricultural operations tapered off, paving the way for the gradual increase in the mechanisation of agriculture operations, he says.

### Decline in agricultural labour

Agricultural labourers in the delta continue to complain of unemployment and many, such as Indira Jeevanantham, struggle to make ends meet. The 68-year-old woman, from Parasanalur panchayat in Mayiladuthurai district, says that she could get jobs only for three months during the samba paddy cultivation season. For the rest of the year, her situation is precarious as she searches for small jobs to sustain herself and her husband who is ill. At the same time, Indira's plight is a reflection of the broader picture — of the decline in agricultural labour in Parasanalur panchayat, where the once robust workforce of 750 people has dwindled to a mere 75, most of whom are older women like Indira.

The relationship between farmers and labourers is intricately linked to the caste system, with landowners and agricultural workers typically belonging to different castes, at times leading to tension. Nevertheless, Tamil Nadu's impressive gross enrolment ratio of 47%, the highest in the country, indicates that almost half the population pursues higher education and is unlikely to return to agricultural labour.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Why this apathy?

It is a shame and inhuman that there is apathy towards the plight of the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is in the grip of mpox disease and in need of urgent supplies of a vaccine. Shockingly, the "apathy continues" even after the World Health Organization (WHO) had declared mpox

to be a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) under the International Health Regulations (2005). The situation should alarm the international community. GAVI, UNICEF, WHO and the international community should persuade vaccine manufacturers to expedite the availability of the mpox

vaccines before virulent strains spread to more countries and continents. The international community should pitch in with the necessary funding, if necessary.

Kosaraju Chandramouli,  
Hyderabad

### A stressful journey

The issue of the safety of

women is in the media glare and I wish to highlight my bitter experience while travelling by train in sleeper class recently, from Bengaluru to Hyderabad. There were many people who got into the compartment and it was obvious that they were travelling without a reservation. They were also

becoming an impediment for other bonafide passengers. There were a few people who were inebriated and who had got into the compartment. This led to a very stressful situation developing. As I was travelling alone, I felt unsafe as a woman passenger. There were no

officials to check things but they made an appearance after a complaint was lodged. The situation went back to square one once the officials left. The Railway officials must ensure that passengers are able to travel safely.

Radhika Sandip,  
Hyderabad



# In Kerala, a dependence on migrant workers

Legislation on the lines of the Karnataka State Employment of Local Candidates in the Industries, Factories and Other Establishments Bill, 2024, reserving jobs for locals in the private sector, is nearly impossible in Kerala and could prove to be counterproductive to the State's interests. Given the stiff opposition to it, the Karnataka Bill has been suspended for the time being.

In Kerala, even manual labourers, who are highly likely to lose jobs to inter-State workers, despise the idea on moral, ethical, and legal grounds. "Regionalism flies in the face of the constitutional right guaranteed to every Indian to work anywhere in the country. How can Malayalis, who have travelled across the world in search of better prospects, oppose migration? Migrants have not encroached into our space," says M.A. Mohanan, 57, a headload worker in Kakkannad, Ernakulam, and district committee member, Headload and General Workers Union.

## Treatment of migrant workers

However, migrant workers say they face hostility. Rajendar Naik, 40, migrated to Kerala when he was 15 and works in the plywood industry hub of Perumbavoor in rural Ernakulam. He says the local workforce can be hostile towards migrant workers. George Mathew, chairman of the Progressive Workers' Organisation, which works for the welfare of migrant workers, agrees: "Migrant workers are seen as an underclass by the local community. But any attempt to push them out will be met with resistance from the government – not because of an ethical stance – but because their labour is linked to the profit-making capacity of corporates."

A working group report by the Social Service Division of the Kerala State Planning Board noted in 2022 that the number of migrant workers, called 'guest workers' by the government, was 31 lakh in 2017-18. Of them, 21 lakh



M.P. Praveen

were temporary workers; the remaining stayed in the State for a longer period. It said, "Among the long-term migrants, about 5% live with their families in Kerala."

In a Planning Board-sponsored study, "In-migration, Informal Employment and Urbanisation in Kerala", in 2021, Jagati Keshari Parida and K. Ravi Raman said that migrants formed about 26.3% of the total workforce in Kerala. Considering that Kerala is an ageing society with two districts already registering negative population growth, and there is large-scale out-migration of youth from the State, there is a huge gap in the availability of people for unskilled and semi-skilled jobs.

"It is a strange situation. Even Keralites who return from abroad, where they were doing unskilled jobs, are unwilling to do the same in their State," says Martin Patrick, a social scientist and expert in the field of unorganised labour force.

## Minimum wages

In Kerala, migrant workers are guaranteed minimum wages, which are higher than what they would get in their home States. Kerala has also introduced health insurance schemes and limited paid hostel accommodation for migrant workers. In Ernakulam, a programme ensures the education of the wards of migrant workers.

R. Chandrasekharan, the State president of the Indian National Trade Union Congress, however argues that nine minimum wage notifications across various sectors in the last seven years of the Left Democratic Front government have remained in limbo after various managements, which were party to the elaborate consultative process leading into the notifications, got them stayed by the court. "The State's law officers have failed to convince the court about the double standards of the parties concerned in questioning the notifications after giving their consent during the consultation

phase," he says.

Benoy Peter, executive director of the Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development, says Kerala relies on migrant workers than the migrant workers rely on Kerala. "So, if they turn elsewhere, the State will be staring at a crisis," he says. Already, traditional and largely informal sectors such as construction, marine fishing, plywood, and hospitality are almost fully reliant on migrant workers.

"In fact, the migrant influx is not threatening the jobs of the local workforce in Kerala. Rather, there is an acute shortage of unskilled workers. On the other hand, reserving work in the private formal sectors poses the threat of flight of industries," he says. Mubej Rahman, a leading plywood manufacturer, says around 95% of workers in plywood factories are migrants. It is impossible to find a local workforce with the right skill sets to replace them, he says.

## A dignified environment

Supriya Debnath, 30, who migrated to Perumbavoor from Kendrapada district in Odisha nine years ago, is now a link worker for the National Health Mission. She is troubled by the indifference of a section of the local populace towards migrant workers. "Being without work can be a nightmare for migrants as they hardly receive any help from their employers. This is especially in the case of seasonal industries such as brick kilns. Migrants are left without work during the rains," she says. Debnath wants the government to provide a dignified and hygienic living environment for these workers. Her concern assumes significance in the wake of a recent incident at Piravom along the eastern suburbs of Ernakulam district where a migrant worker was found living in a dog kennel for a monthly rent of ₹500.

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# The many jobs across the border

People from A.P. who work in Karnataka say the system will break down without them



K. Umashanker

The Karnataka government's decision to introduce two laws – the Factories (Karnataka Amendment) Bill 2023, and the Karnataka State Employment of Local Candidates in the Industries, Factories and Other Establishments Bill, 2024 – unsurprisingly found no takers among the contractors and workers of the unorganised sector from Andhra Pradesh, who go to work in Karnataka and elsewhere.

Bengaluru and its surroundings have become a haven for contractors of the construction industry thanks to the real estate boom ushered in by the IT sector. The construction industry in Karnataka depends on migrant workers in Kolar, Bengaluru, Mangaluru, Mysuru, Belgaum, Sivamogga, Bellary, and Hubli, besides the rural sector.

## Dependence on Karnataka

About 50,000 migrant workers from the Rayalaseema districts of Chittoor, Anantapur, Sathya Sai, Annamaya, Kadapa, and Kurnool in Andhra Pradesh earn their livelihood in Karnataka. The daily-wage workers mostly work in construction as masons, plumbers, electricians, etc.

Thousands of workers from the Kadapa and Annamaya districts who are unable to secure unskilled and semi-skilled jobs in the Gulf or fear exploitation find their way to Karnataka as migrant labourers. Similarly, thousands of families in the combined Anantapur district depend on Karnataka for their livelihood.

Apart from the construction sector, migrant families work in malls, vegetable markets, and sanitation works in private establishments.

The workforce from the northern States, particularly Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha, also have a strong connection with the districts of the Rayalaseema region, which has a long border with Karnataka. They claim that they get the best patronage from contractors based in Rayalaseema, who execute building contracts in Karnataka. Thousands of families from the northern States settled in Tirupati, Madanapalle, Rayachoti, Kadapa, and Kurnool in both States. Their employers arrange for transport, food, and accommodation for them.

"Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's plans to scuttle the livelihood of non-locals in the State will never materialise. All this is political drama to garner votes in the name of providing jobs to locals," says Ganasekhar, a contractor from Puttur of Tirupati district.

"The move to increase working hours in factories in 2023 was also opposed. Bengaluru is an ocean of migrant workers. Any move to deter people from migrating there for work would lead to a break down of the system."

## A change in view

Janardhan Reddy, another contractor from Tirupati, who keeps a workforce of 180 from the northern States, executes individual housing projects and apartment projects in Bengaluru. "I have been in the construction sector for the last decade. My workforce started with just five. The number

swelled over the years. My men execute the works with precision. They don't demand anything extra. They don't argue. They are content with six hours of sleep in temporary sheds. They cook for themselves. Most of them don't drink or smoke. They remain responsible to their families, hundreds of kilometers away," he says.

Sunkara Sravan, 27, a software engineer from Nellore, who owns a three-bedroom flat in Krishnarajapuram in Bengaluru, says: "I have been observing the lifestyle of the migrant workers for the last three years. My husband is also a sub-contractor. They are extremely skilled and disciplined. The workforce from the north accepts ₹300-500 a day for a whole day of work. Even when supervisors scold them, they just smile. This is an eye-opener to the migrant workers from the south, and also for locals in Karnataka," she says.

Senior contractors say the workforce from the Hindi-speaking belt is no longer seen as "unreliable," as was the case earlier. "They are gaining admiration not only across Karnataka, but elsewhere in the south," says Gangadhar Gowda of Kolar, who supplies steel to clients in Bengaluru and parts of Rayalaseema.

Radhe Shyam, a worker from Tirupati who whitewashes homes, says, "I work for six months a year in Bengaluru and five months in Tirupati. I take a one-month vacation at our native place, Dharbanga (Bihar). We don't belong to any particular State. There are in crores of people like me. The government should not be playing with our lives."

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# A snapshot of migration in India

Migrants going from Uttar Pradesh to Maharashtra formed the largest chunk of all external migrants

## DATA POINT

Jasmin Nihalani  
Srinivasan Kamaneni

The Multiple Indicator Survey of the National Sample Survey Office's 78th Round, conducted in 2020-21, offers a detailed look at the reasons for intra and inter-State migration across India, and the problems faced by migrants. We parsed unit-level data from the survey (more than 11.63 lakh respondents) to arrive at the tables.

Tables 1 and 2 show the States with the highest share of external and internal migrants among all migrants in India. Maharashtra hosted the highest share of external migrants, followed by Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. U.P. also contributed the highest number of migrants, followed by Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Bihar. These States also hosted a significant number of internal migrants.

If we look at pairs of regions, migrants going from U.P. to Maharashtra formed the largest chunk of all external migrants (Table 3), followed by migrants from the Gulf countries (some returning to Kerala), and migrants going from U.P. to Delhi. Suburban Mumbai remains the district that hosts the highest number of migrants (Table 4), followed by Pune and Thane in Maharashtra.

Among migrants moving States for economic reasons (who constituted roughly 22% of all reasons), which include better employment prospects, business, service transfers, etc., migrants going from U.P. to Maharashtra formed the largest chunk of all migrants, followed by those moving from U.P. to Delhi and from Bihar to West Bengal. Marriage was one of the main reasons (68.2% of all reasons) for migration as well, with migrants from U.P. to Maharashtra, Bihar to Jharkhand, and Madhya Pradesh to U.P. accounting for the top three highest numbers (Table 6).

## Migration patterns

The data for the tables were arrived at after parsing unit-level data from the Multiple Indicator Survey



Table 1: States with the highest external migration

Migrated to	% of external migrants
Maharashtra	11.21
Uttar Pradesh	10.23
West Bengal	7.83
Delhi	5.74
Kerala	5.51
Gujarat	5.09
Rajasthan	4.70
Punjab	4.69

Table 2: States with the highest internal migration

Migrated to	% of internal migrants
U.P.	13.34
Maharashtra	10.12
West Bengal	7.58
Tamil Nadu	6.53
Rajasthan	5.68
Bihar	5.43
M.P.	5.19
A.P.	4.81

Table 3: The pair of States where the highest share of migrants come from and migrate to

Migrated to	Migrated from	% of external migrants
Maharashtra	Uttar Pradesh	3.7
Kerala	Gulf countries	2.6
Delhi	Uttar Pradesh	2.5
West Bengal	Bihar	2.4
Jharkhand	Bihar	2.2
Uttar Pradesh	Bihar	1.6
Uttar Pradesh	Delhi	1.6
Punjab	Uttar Pradesh	1.5

Table 4: Districts with a high proportion of migrants

District name	State name	As % of all migrants
Mumbai Suburban	Maharashtra	1.17
Pune	Maharashtra	1.15
Thane	Maharashtra	1.03
North 24 Parganas	West Bengal	0.98
West Tripura	Tripura	0.87
Ahmedabad	Gujarat	0.74
Bangalore Urban	Karnataka	0.72
Malappuram	Kerala	0.58
Hooghly	West Bengal	0.57
Nashik	Maharashtra	0.56
Surat	Gujarat	0.55
South 24 Parganas	West Bengal	0.54
East Godavari	Andhra	0.54
Ghaziabad	Uttar Pradesh	0.53

Table 5: Migration for economic reasons

Migrated to	Migrated from	% external
Maharashtra	Uttar Pradesh	2.6%
Delhi	Uttar Pradesh	1.8%
West Bengal	Bihar	1.5%
Gujarat	Uttar Pradesh	1.2%
Punjab	Uttar Pradesh	1.1%

Table 6: Migration for marriage

Migrated to	Migrated from	% external
Maharashtra	Uttar Pradesh	1.1%
Jharkhand	Bihar	1.1%
Uttar Pradesh	Madhya Pradesh	0.9%
West Bengal	Bihar	0.8%
Uttar Pradesh	Bihar	0.8%

# The construction worker conundrum

The lack of proper data and the absence of registration of workers are challenges



Syed Mohammed

During the mornings, the labour addas (informal job markets where labourers hope to get hired for a day) of Hyderabad are filled with young men. Speaking in Bengali, Odia, Hindi, and other languages, they hope to get hired by supervisors of construction sites.

Babul Shaik, a mason, arrived five years ago from a village in Malda district of West Bengal. "I had to look for work because I have no land, and no property except a small house that my father built," he says. "I live in a room with four others from my village. In the morning, I walk to the Zehra Nagar labour adda, which is near our room. I mostly do plastering work and make ₹1,000-1,200 a day."

At an under-construction site, Laxmi, 30, from Chhatisgarh, works as a helper. "I work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. or even 7 p.m. I carry material (cement and sand amalgam) into bathrooms, and throw debris out. I get paid ₹500-600 a day," she says.

At a larger construction site, a contractor is entrusted to source migrant labourers. "Most of the larger projects are in West Hyderabad, in and around the IT Corridor. It is better to work here than live under tarpaulin sheets at smaller sites," says a property consultant who deals with large construction firms.

Informal sector workers' rights bodies such as India Labour Line have identified 220 labour addas spread across the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation limits. These are frequented by migrants from

Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Odisha, and Jharkhand. About 100 to 1,200 workers go to these addas looking for work every day.

While there is no conclusive data on migrant workers in Telangana, the number was estimated to be around 8 lakh before the pandemic. More than 44 lakh informal sector workers are registered on the eShram portal in Telangana. In the construction sector, an official data set for Hyderabad district shows that 22,934 male and 4,457 female workers are registered. The Telangana Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board (TBOWB), a state-run body that looks into the well-being of workers, says the number of workers is 15,06,171.

"The problem is that a vast majority of the workers, including construction workers, are not registered," says Brother Varghese Thekanath, director of the Monfort Social Institute. The lack of registration means that these workers do not get access to welfare schemes. This includes compensation for accidental deaths, suffering disability while working at construction sites, and natural deaths.

TBOWB Secretary and Chief Executive Officer E. Ganadhar says in the last 10 years, the Board has paid accidental death claims of 76 lakh each to 2,31 individuals, who are the relatives of the workers who died. ₹1 lakh each to 48,266 individuals, the relatives of workers who died of natural causes; ₹5 lakh to each of the 603 individuals who sustained disabilities; and also registered 3,959 cases of hospitalisation.

However, the issue of tracking migrant workers remains. "The over 15 lakh who have been registered are mostly

construction workers from Telangana (and not from other States)," Ganadhar says. He adds that the Labour Department has conducted campaigns in the past to educate workers about the importance of registering with the Board.

It is important to note that the TBOWB is supposed to comprise two members representing building workers and two others representing employers. However, at present, the first two posts are vacant.

In 2022, the Bharat Rashtia Samithi had announced that 95% jobs in government departments, agencies, and corporations would be reserved for locals. This move was not extended to the private sector.

Sources say a large share of migrant workers are unaware of both the eShram portal and TBOWB. Also, the registration process could prove difficult. "They have to apply for registration at the MeeSeva (a centre where a host of government services are available). For this they have to take a day off, as they cannot leave the site midway. This means losing out on daily wages," says an expert who studies informal sector workers.

Both Shaik and Laxmi are unaware of schemes for construction workers. "Workers don't know what schemes are available for them," says U. Lingaiah, State Coordinator, India Labourline, which works with workers of the informal sector. "In July last year, there were two accidental deaths of construction workers – one from U.P. and the other from Odisha – in Madhapur. We managed to get ₹5 lakh each for their families from building owners. These were not registered workers."

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# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

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

**40,099** The death toll includes the 25 deaths in the last 24 hours, according to the health ministry in Gaza. At least 92,609 people have been wounded in the Gaza Strip since the war started. AP

**Fatalities recorded in Himachal Pradesh since monsoon began**

**31** Between June 27 and August 16, the State recorded 51 cloudbursts and flash flood events. The State Emergency Operation Centre said that 33 people were missing. At least 121 houses were completely or partially damaged. PTI

**Share of Indian spice samples that failed safety standards tests**

**12** In per cent. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India conducted inspections and testing of mixed spice blends. The data, obtained under the RTI Act, shows 474 of the 4,054 tested samples did not meet quality and safety parameters. REUTERS

**The company secretaries India will need by 2030**

**1** In lakh. According to the Institute of Company Secretaries of India (ICSI), the demand for company secretaries will increase amid rising economic growth. Currently, there are more than 73,000 company secretaries and around 12,000 are practising company secretaries. PTI

**Rise in the number of acutely malnourished children in Yemen**

**34** In per cent. According to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, more than 18,500 children under five are projected to be severely malnourished by the end of this year. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## Hasina's exit and India's hour of reckoning

A revolution spearheaded by students succeeded in toppling an increasingly authoritarian regime that had been in power for 15 years. What began as a protest against a quota system evolved into a nationwide movement that led to the ouster of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh's longest serving political leader

### WORLD INSIGHT

Syed Munir Khasru

In August 2024, Bangladesh witnessed one of the most significant political upheavals in its recent history.

What began as a protest against a controversial quota system in government jobs evolved into a nationwide movement that ultimately led to the ouster of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh's longest serving political leader (from 1996-2001 and 2009-2024). The irony is that both the government and the students were initially aligned in their desire for quota reform, with the government preparing to appeal against the court order that led to the restoration of the quota system. The inevitable question then is what could have gone so wrong that the world's longest serving female head of government was ousted within a week?

This movement was primarily led by students not affiliated with any political party, making it a genuinely organic uprising. The spark that ignited the protests came on June 5, when the High Court re-established a job quota reserving 30% of civil service posts for the children and grandchildren of freedom fighters of Bangladesh's liberation war. This reignited a long-standing debate about the fairness of the quota system in government employment.

Initially, protests were peaceful and as the movement gained momentum, by July 7, students had escalated their actions, staging blockades and demanding rescinding of the quota. On July 10, a student's blockade severely affected Dhaka's transport system.

As the movement grew, so did the tension between the protesters and authorities. On July 14, a controversial statement by Prime Minister Hasina, referring to protesters as the "children of Razakars" (collaborators of Pakistani forces during the 1971 war), inflamed the situation. Ms. Hasina's aggressive stance and derogatory comments aggravated the protesters, and the government had to shut down the internet to disrupt communication among protesters.

The last nail in the coffin was unleashing the Bangladesh Chhatra League, the much despised student wing of the ruling Awami League, who attacked protesters, which rapidly escalated and galvanised the movement as protesters spread nationwide, with students from schools, colleges, and private universities joining. Major highways and railway lines were blocked, bringing much of the country to a standstill.

The government announced indefinite closure of all educational institutes. The situation reached a critical point on July 18 when approximately 20 students were killed amid clashes between the protesters and police. Thus, negotiations between the government and protest leaders began on July 19. However, these talks were marred by allegations of government coercion and the disappearance of key coordinators.

### The beginning of the end

On July 21, the Supreme Court reduced the quota percentage from 30% to 7%. This was seen as a potential breakthrough, but it failed to quell the unrest due to the arrests of student protest coordinators. The movement persisted, with protesters resuming large-scale demonstrations on July 29 after the government ignored their leaders.



In rage: Protesters shout slogans as they vandalise a mural of Sheikh Hasina on August 3. REUTERS

On August 2, the situation escalated with renewed clashes between protesters and police. The movement reached its climax on August 3 when the students movement announced their single key demand – the resignation of Sheikh Hasina. They called for a non-cooperation movement from August 4, effectively marking the end of the quota protests and the beginning of a broader anti-government movement. Violence shook the nation, with the death toll climbing to a nearly 100 people – the highest and deadliest death toll for a single-day protest in the nation's history.

Public anger mounted, and on August 5 the "March to Dhaka" brought hundreds of thousands to the streets in Dhaka and other surrounding towns. It was at this point that law enforcers realised the situation was beyond control and advised Ms. Hasina to step down. She reportedly refused and urged for more forceful measures to subdue the crowd. In a crucial turn of events, the army refused to comply. Faced with a refusal from the military and a massive public uprising, Ms. Hasina finally fled the country. A revolution spearheaded by students succeeded in toppling an increasingly authoritarian regime that had been in power for 15 years.

### The opposition and India's position

Throughout this period, protests were marked by a complex interplay of various actors. Students formed the core of the movement, but with the loss of innocent lives, it increasingly became a mass popular movement joined by parents, teachers, lawyers, cultural activists, artists, professionals and civil society members. The international community also took notice, with organisations like

UNICEF expressing concern over the deaths of at least 32 children during the crackdown. The protests highlighted deep-seated issues in Bangladesh's political and social fabric, including concerns about authoritarian rule, lack of participative democracy, nepotism, corruption, and suppression of dissent.

In the aftermath of Ms. Hasina's departure, there was an outpouring of pent-up anger towards anything associated with her and the Awami League. This included desecration of statues and murals of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, father of Sheikh Hasina who led Bangladesh's war of liberation. Even if there is some element of truth in Awami League's claim that the student movement was exploited by opposition parties, led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the right wing Jamaat-e-Islami, it does not take away from the fact that anger and discontent had been fuelling below the surface for a long time due to Ms. Hasina's repressive style of governance wherein she suppressed opposition and presided over three controversial, non-participative elections in 2014, 2018, and 2024. If the opposition took advantage, hiding behind the cloak of the student movement, and unleashed unacceptable violence resulting in the loss and damage of public property and killing of law enforcers, Awami League can't avoid responsibility by letting a one-point quota reform movement spiral out of control because of the sheer arrogance and high handedness it displayed from the very beginning.

The Indian government's response, articulated by Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar on August 6, was notable for its omission of human rights violations and killings that had occurred. It

appeared to downplay the democratic nature of the movement, instead framing it in a way that aligned with the Awami League's narrative of external instigation. This approach has been criticised for failing to recognise the genuine grievances and widespread public discontent that fuelled the protests.

India's policy of turning a blind eye to Ms. Hasina's exercise of hard power, often justified by some of the commendable economic progress and relative stability achieved during her rule, did not go well in Bangladesh. Most Bangladeshis view India's relations as being aligned with one particular party and one person as opposed to the people of Bangladesh. This presents a challenge for India's diplomacy and the need for having a more nuanced understanding of Bangladesh's socio-political landscape.

As aptly stated by Shivshankar Menon, India's former National Security Adviser and Foreign Secretary, "Primarily, it was a people's movement. It was a revolution on the streets, and we should recognise it as such rather than looking for foreign influences or purely political explanations." Additionally, the role of a section of the Indian media did not go well in Bangladesh where exaggerations and at times outright fake news, as verified by credible sources like BBC, about the persecution of Hindu minorities generated anger and resentment in Bangladesh when policies such as the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 and the persecution of Muslims in India in the last decade are fresh in their minds. While there may have been instances of attacks on minorities, what was notable is the open public vigil by students, activists, and even opposition parties against attack on minorities, particularly Hindus, with helplines and phone numbers given out for seeking support should any such attack take place. Professor Muhammad Yunus visited the Dhakeshwari National Temple, exchanged greetings with leaders of the Hindu community, and assured them of their safety and security.

### What next?

As the movement transitioned from quota reform protests to a broader call for political change, Bangladesh is entering uncharted territory. Depending on how things unfold in the coming months as the interim government takes the reign of power, South Asia's rising star is facing one of its biggest challenges on the path to achieving a pluralistic society based on democratic principles, rule of law, good governance, inclusive growth, and human rights. The events of 2024 would have far-reaching implications for the country's political landscape, governance structures, and social dynamics.

Given the open enmity Ms. Hasina displayed against the interim government leader Prof. Yunus, including the alleged corruption charges brought about by her government against the Nobel laureate, which he termed as politically motivated, the challenge for Prof. Yunus would be to rise to the occasion and hold a free, fair, and participative election in contrast to what the Awami League did for 15 years.

For India, the takeaway is the importance of engaging with the broader population rather than relying solely on relationships with one individual or party. Embracing the truth helps in the long run as opposed to either being in a state of denial or continuing the justification of misperceptions. After all, Bangladeshis know their country better than outsiders, including their friends and neighbours.

Syed Munir Khasru is chairman of the Institute for Policy, Advocacy and Governance, an international think tank.

### THE GIST

▼ The spark that ignited the protests came on June 5, when the High Court re-established a job quota reserving 30% of civil service posts for the children and grandchildren of freedom fighters of Bangladesh's liberation war.

As the movement grew, so did the tension between the protesters and authorities. On July 14, a controversial statement by Prime Minister Hasina, referring to protesters as the "children of Razakars" (collaborators of Pakistani forces during the 1971 war), inflamed the situation.

▼ As the movement transitioned from quota reform protests to a broader call for political change, Bangladesh is entering uncharted territory.



CACHE



# How a foreign covert group was using ChatGPT to influence U.S. elections

How was ChatGPT used by these operatives? How has OpenAI, the Microsoft-backed company, which developed ChatGPT reacted to the situation? What are some of the issues these operations tried to use to swing voters in U.S. states?

Sahana Venugopal  
Poulomi Chatterjee

## The story so far:

In August 16, OpenAI said it banned ChatGPT accounts linked to an Iranian influence operation that used the chatbot to generate content to influence the U.S. presidential election. The Microsoft-backed company said it identified and took down a "cluster of ChatGPT accounts" and that it was monitoring the situation.

## What is Storm-2035?

OpenAI assigned the group the Storm-2035 moniker, and said the operation was made up of four websites that acted as news organisations. These news sites exploited issues like LGBTQ rights and the Israel-Hamas conflict, to target U.S. voters. The sites also used AI tools to plagiarise stories and capture web traffic, as per a Microsoft Threat Analysis Center (MTAC) report issued on August 9. Some named sites included EvenPolitics, Nio Thinker, Westland Sun, Teorator, and Savannah Time. The operation allegedly targeted both liberal and conservative voters in the U.S.

## How did the group use ChatGPT?

According to OpenAI, the operatives used ChatGPT to create long-form articles and social media comments that were then posted by several X and Instagram accounts. AI chatbots such as ChatGPT can potentially assist foreign operatives

fool gullible internet users by mimicking American users' language patterns, rehashing already existing comments or propaganda, and cutting down the time it takes to create and circulate plagiarised content meant to sway voters.

Apart from the upcoming U.S. presidential election, the Storm-2035 operation covered world issues such as politics in Venezuela, Hispanic rights in the U.S., the destruction in Palestine, Scottish independence, and Israel taking part in the Olympic Games. The network also exploited popular topics like fashion and beauty. OpenAI shared screenshots of some of the news stories and social media posts it attributed to the operation; one article claimed that X was censoring former president Donald Trump's tweets, while separate social media posts asked users to "dump" Trump or Vice President Kamala Harris.

## How severe is the impact of Storm-2035?

OpenAI has downplayed the severity of the incident, claiming that audiences did not engage much with the uploaded content on social media. Using Brookings' Breakout Scale, which measures the impact of covert operations on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 6 (highest), the report shared this operation was at the low end of Category 2, meaning it was posted on multiple platforms, but there was no evidence that real people picked up or widely shared their content. However, OpenAI stressed it had shared the threat information with "government,

campaign, and industry stakeholders."

While OpenAI presented the discovery and disruption of the Iran-linked influence operation as a positive development, the use of generative AI tools by foreign operatives against U.S. voters is a gravely urgent issue that highlights multiple points of failure across OpenAI, X, Instagram, and the search engines ranking the sites.

## Were there other similar issues OpenAI faced in the past?

In May, the AI firm posted a report revealing it had been working for over three months to dismantle covert influence operations that used its tools for generating comments on social media, articles in multiple languages, fake names and bios for social media accounts, and translating or proofreading text.

A Russian outfit that OpenAI called 'Bad Grammar', used Telegram to target Ukraine, Moldova, the Baltic States and the U.S. Separately, another Russia-based operation titled 'Doppelganger', an Israeli operation that OpenAI nicknamed 'Zero Zeno', a Chinese network called 'Spamouflage', and an Iranian group called 'International Union of Virtual Media' or IUVM, used ChatGPT to write comments on social media platforms like X and 9GAG, and to post articles and news stories. The investigation found that the content covered issues like Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Gaza conflict, Indian and European elections, and criticism of the Chinese government by dissidents or foreign governments.

Besides hunting down influence networks, OpenAI also found incidents of state-backed threat actors abusing AI to attack enemies. Other serious cases exposing OpenAI's vulnerabilities followed. In July, the Microsoft-backed firm revealed that early last year, a hacker gained access to OpenAI's internal messaging systems and stole information related to its AI technologies. While the hacker was found to be an individual, the incident raised alarms that Chinese adversaries could easily do the same.

## What is OpenAI doing to safeguard its tech?

While studying these cases, OpenAI found that its AI tools refused to generate text or images for some prompts due to the safeguards already built into them. The firm also developed AI-powered security tools to detect threat actors within days instead of weeks.

While not explicitly discussed by OpenAI, the AI company has become enmeshed with prominent figures from U.S. federal agencies or government bodies. In June, OpenAI picked cybersecurity expert and retired U.S. Army General Paul M. Nakasone to be a part of its Board of Directors. Mr. Nakasone led the U.S. National Security Agency and has served in assignments with cyber units in the U.S., Korea, Iraq, and Afghanistan. A couple of weeks ago, the firm also announced it will be teaming up with the U.S. AI Safety Institute, so that its next big foundational model GPT-5 can be previewed and tested by it.

## THE DAILY QUIZ

The 33rd edition of the prestigious Premier League for English football clubs kicked off on August 17. Here is a quiz on the Premier League

Soorya Prakash, N

### QUESTION 1

Which are the six clubs to have played in all 32 seasons?

### QUESTION 2

Which are the three clubs to have been promoted for the 2024-25 season?

### QUESTION 3

Which is the first non-English club to play in the Premier League?

### QUESTION 4

Who is the only non-European club

manager among the 20 clubs playing in the 2024-25 season?

### QUESTION 5

Who among the current players of the 2024-25 season has played in more than 600 games in Premier league history?

### QUESTION 6

Who has won the Golden Boot award the most number of times?

### QUESTION 7

Who has scored the most number of hat-tricks in Premier league history?



### Visual question:

Identify this legendary manager and his distinction? REUTERS

## Questions and Answers to the July 16 edition of the daily quiz:

- Madonna won the Golden Globe for this movie which featured this song. **Ans: Evita; You must love me**
  - The original title of Madonna the album. **Ans: Lucky Star**
  - The lyrics to this smash-hit Madonna song is an ode to this particular style of dance. **Ans: Voguing**
  - This album brought together two of the biggest names in pop — Madonna and \_\_\_\_\_. **Ans: Into the Zone; Britney Spears**
  - This movie that was released in July featured a 1989 hit song by Madonna. **Ans: Deadpool and Wolverine**
- Visual: The final concert of this tour of Madonna was held here. **Ans: The Celebration Tour in Rio de Janeiro**
- Early Birds: Nobody got all the correct answers.



## KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

# His bike was the cynosure of all eyes

Please don't talk to me about him. He is a duffer who does not understand the rules of the game

S. Upendran

## What is the meaning and origin of the word 'duffer'?

This is a word I haven't heard in a while. As a kid going to school in the 1960s, it was the favourite word of some of my teachers — when we couldn't understand a concept they were trying to teach us or when we failed to solve a math problem, we were called 'duffers'. It comes from the Scottish 'duffar' meaning 'dull' or 'stupid'. When the word was first used, it referred to someone of very low morals; a no-good cheat who sold counterfeit goods. With the passage of time, however, the meaning "no good" shifted from the seller to the naïve buyer. The individual was "no good" because he did not have the intelligence to differentiate between real and fake goods. By the way, the first syllable of 'duffer' rhymes with 'stuff', 'tough' and 'rough'.

All the candidates we interviewed this morning were duffers.

The word has other meanings as well. A duffer is someone who is not very good at games — a person who plays golf without any skill is called a 'duffer'.

Mala was kind enough to play a round with us although she knew we were duffers.

## How is the word 'cynosure' pronounced?

The word consists of three syllables. The 'c' sounds like the 's' in 'sit', 'sip' and 'sin', while the following 'y' sounds like the 'y' in 'my' and 'by'. The 'o' in the second syllable sounds like the 'o' in 'china', while the final syllable is pronounced like the word 'sure'. One way of pronouncing the word is 'SY-ne-sure' with the stress on the first syllable. It comes from the Greek 'kynosoura' meaning 'dog's tail', and this term was used to refer to Ursa Minor or the North Star. Being a fixed star, sailors remained focussed on it; in fact, for several centuries, they depended on it to navigate around the world. Nowadays, the word 'cynosure' is mostly used to mean someone or something that is always the centre of attention or attraction. The object is so attractive that everyone's eyes gravitate towards it; it becomes the focal point without really trying.

When he walked out to bat, Tendulkar was the cynosure of all eyes. The word can also be used to mean 'something serving for guidance or direction'.

The spotless life that my uncle led remains the cynosure for many of us.

## Is it okay to say 'make much of something'?

(Farooq, Rajko) When you 'make much of something', you are giving the object in question a lot of importance. You firmly believe that it is important, and therefore remain focussed on it; you give it a lot of attention.

Please don't make too much of the help we gave you. It was nothing. upendrankey@gmail.com

## Word of the day

### Encumber:

restrict (someone or something) so as to make free movement difficult

### Synonym: restrain

Usage: These rules will encumber the people we are planning to help.

### Pronunciation: bi.ly/encumberpro

### International Phonetic Alphabet:

/ɪnˈkʌmbə(r)/, /ɛnˈkʌmbə(r)/

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MONEYWISE

Healthy way to pick insurance

COVERNOTE

Choosing the right policy can be an herculean task with innumerable choices and combinations making it quite a task to sift through with a fine comb; regulator's standardised policy seeks to clear the maze

K. Nitya Kalyani

You think taking care of health is a big undertaking? Try taking care of your health insurance. Or any insurance for that matter. But there are ways to make it simple and smooth and yes, you can do it yourself.

A friend recently sent me a Whatsapp forward called 'A long rant on health insurance.' It included problems in buying and maintaining other forms of insurance also.

A retired journalist himself, this forward was a compilation of a discussion with his peers. CoverNote readers would agree with most points, including about writers' shortfalls.

Of the many good points, let us see some in this instalment of CoverNote.

Getting spammed

How to choose a policy, given too many variables was a major problem. One that, unfortunately, publications "glibly say, read brochures, compare. Who has the time?" As for online brokerages and aggregators, their experience is they are poorly informed and, what is more, only forward numbers to companies and you get spammed. Insurance company websites themselves don't have easy-to-find comparative charts of features either.

All these are true mostly and, if I may add, your own agent or broker/adviser, does not add much value or provide greater clarity.

We have tried to address these issues in CoverNote at different points in time and about all classes of insurance, but this is advice worth repeating and updating.

So, we will do a new, improved version of how to go about it!

Focussing for now on the point about too many variables, yes this is a compound problem. The mutual fund industry faced a similar chaos and the regulator, about a year or two ago, simplified things by announcing a set of categories or variants of funds that could be offered.

This streamlined the market offerings and seems to have led to less anxiety among lay investors.

I am pretty perplexed because of this same challenge when I need to buy a mobile phone or a car. Small and sometimes puzzling features are added or subtracted to make a new variant. So, correlating price, benefit, and the value that a feature presents to me as a user probably needs an algorithm. So, we go out and buy what our friends have bought.

The same approach can be disastrous for insurance. However, the insurance regulator, about three years ago, created standardised policies in each category like health, life, home insurance, annuity policies and so on, and mandated each insurer to offer it.

Optimum coverage

The policies are well-designed for optimum coverage. In fact, if you are in a hurry for a cover, this would be a good choice provided you take the time between now and renewal to do some more homework and renew with a better option/variant. This factor will apply only to annually renewable policies, which means life and annuity policies are not suitable for this quick approach.

We have, in CoverNote explained each standardised policy in detail and given a toolkit how to use it to arrive at the best policy for yourself. This exercise will continue with new policies and variants. These are as far as buying policies are concerned. About claims-related grievances await further instalments of CoverNote.

(The writer is a business journalist specialising in insurance & corporate history)

Send queries on personal finance and investing to the moneywise@hindu.co.in ID. Our experts in the personal finance will respond to specific queries, but will not give specific recommendations for investment in a particular mutual fund, share or fixed deposit.



Right choice: Applicants should factor in unavoidable expenses like utility bills for selecting optimum loan tenure. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

Tips to improve chances of personal loan approval

Some of the key factors lenders consider include applicants' income, occupation profile and credit score; there are some areas where applicants can work on to improve chances of loan approval

KEEP A TAB

Gaurav Aggarwal

Banks and NBFCs consider several factors to evaluate the creditworthiness of personal loan applicants. Some of those key factors include applicants' income, occupation profile, credit score, employer's profile and existing debts. While applicants can do very little to improve income, job or employer profiles to meet the lender's criteria, there are some areas where they can work on to improve chances of loan approval.

Credit score

Lenders usually prefer applicants having credit scores of 700 and above.

Individuals having such credit scores maintain credit discipline and thus, carry lower credit risk for lenders which allows lenders to offer loans to applicants with lower credit scores, such applicants are usually charged higher interest rates to cover the higher credit risk.

Many lenders also offer pre-approved loans to existing customers with good credit profile. Such loans usually have instant or same-day disbursal. Thus, having higher credit scores can also raise chances of getting pre-approved personal loan from lenders with which you have existing deposits/loans and thereby, increase your financial

Individuals should always work towards building/improving credit scores by following practices like repaying EMI or credit card bills by due dates

financial capability to deal with financial emergencies/other financial goals.

Individuals should always work towards building/improving credit scores by following certain healthy credit practices like repaying EMI or credit card bills by due dates and by ensuring the timely repayment of the loans guaranteed or co-signed by them.

Fetching credit reports at periodic intervals would allow the individuals to take corrective steps for improving credit score. It would also allow them to identify inaccurate information or fraudulent credit activities in their name, if any, in credit reports. Such errors or fraudulent activities should be reported to the credit bureaus for rectification. Rectified credit reports may raise credit score and improve their personal loan eligibility.

Keep EMIs limits

Banks and NBFCs usually approve applicants whose total monthly repayment obligations, including the EMI of proposed personal loan, are within 50-60% of monthly income. Those exceeding this limit have low-

er chances of personal loan approval. Note the lenders also factor in the existing credit card outstanding of applicants while evaluating repayment capacity. Thus, individuals planning to avail personal loans should use online personal EMI calculators to check if monthly repayment obligations fall within the aforementioned limit. Those exceeding the limit can opt for longer tenures or opt for a smaller loan amount to reduce monthly EMIs.

Additionally, applicants should also factor in unavoidable expenses like insurance premiums and utility bills for selecting optimum loan tenure/EMIs. Avoid loan/credit card applications with multiple lenders within a short span. Whenever a lender receives an application for loan/credit card, the lender fetches the applicant's credit report(s) from the credit bureau(s) to assess creditworthiness.

Such a report is considered hard inquiry by the credit bureaus, which then reduce the credit scores of the applicants by a few points. Moreover, those making multiple loan off-

ers within a short span are considered as credit hungry by the lenders, which may further reduce chances of loan approval.

Compare loan offers

The chances of securing loans from different lenders can vary widely depending on credit risk assessment policies. Similarly, the pricing of loans too can vary.

Thus, applicants should compare the personal loan offers of as many lenders as possible before making the loan application.

Check online marketplaces to compare the best offers.

This would not only save them from the hassle of applying separately with each lender but also reduce the risk of reduction in credit scores due to multiple loan applications.

Frequent job changes

Applicants having unstable careers are considered to carry higher credit risk, which in turn adversely impact chances of loan approval or cost higher rates.

If you are planning to apply for a loan, try to avoid job switches.

Conclusion

One should always work towards maintaining a good credit score. Applicants should also keep total EMIs within 60% of the monthly income. And finally, loan applicants should check the personal loan eligibility criteria of as many lenders as possible.

(The writer is Chief Business Officer, (Unsecured Lending) Paisabazaar)

Choices can confuse

THINKINVESTOR

To keep investment choices simple, invest in a new fund offer if it is benchmarked to an index against which no existing fund is available; limit investments to one fund per benchmark

Venkatesh Bangaruswamy

Are you overwhelmed by the abundant choice of equity funds available in the market? In this article, we discuss the rule you can follow to choose from the existing universe of funds and the suite of new fund offers.

Avoiding future regret

More the choice, more difficult it is to choose a fund. Why? You want to avoid future regret. This you could face a year from now if the fund you choose today underperforms the funds you considered but did not invest. Small wonder many do not invest when the choices are overwhelming. More choices are not necessarily better than some.

The confusion is even more when you invest in a new fund offer. What is the difference between a children's gift fund and a multi-sector rotation fund when both are benchmarked to the Nifty 500 Index? Note, the benchmark tells you the investible universe of a fund. Both funds having the same benchmark may buy similar stocks, though based on different parameters.

One way to select a fund is to base decision on the benchmark index rather than the name of the product or its investment objectives. Suppose you already hold a fund benchmarked to the Nifty 50 Index and you are considering buying another fund. You must consider a fund benchmarked to a non-overlapping index – a fund benchmarked to, say, the Nifty Midcap 50 Index.

Overlapping index

A fund benchmarked to the broadest index would be the overlapping index when added to any fund you already hold. Why? Suppose you add an active fund benchmarked to the Nifty 500 Index to your existing large-cap active fund benchmarked to the Nifty 50 Index. Your portfolio will have a significant bias towards large-cap stocks as the Nifty 500 Index is tilted towards large caps.

Conclusion

To keep your investment choices simple, invest in a new fund offer if the fund is benchmarked to an index against which no existing fund is available. Also, limit your investments to one fund per benchmark. It is preferable to hold funds with non-overlapping benchmarks. Note, the entire argument rests on the premise that you want to invest in multiple funds, and you want to self-manage your investments.

Alternatively, if you want to keep your investments simple and easy to self-manage, you could consider investing in one passive fund (ETF or index fund) benchmarked to the Nifty 500 Index or the Nifty 50 Index.

(The author offers training programmes for individuals to manage their personal investments)

Bank Fixed Deposit Rates

Bank Name	Interest Rates (%)			
	Highest Slab	1-year Tenure	3-year Tenure	5-year Tenure
<b>Small Finance Banks</b>				
AJ Small Finance Bank	8	7.25	7.5	7.25
Equitas Small Finance Bank	8.5	8.2	8	7.25
ESAF Small Finance Bank	8.25	6	6.75	6.25
Jana Small Finance	8.25	8.25	8.25	7.25
Northeast Small Finance Bank	9	7	9	6.25
Suryoday Small Finance Bank	8.65	6.85	8.6	8.25
Ujjivan Small Finance Bank	8.25	8.25	7.2	7.2
Unity Small Finance Bank	9	7.85	8.15	8.15
Utkarsh Small Finance Bank	8.5	8	8.5	7.75
<b>Private Sector Banks</b>				
Axis Bank	7.2	6.7	7.1	7
Bandhan Bank	8	7.25	7.25	5.85
City Union Bank	7.25	7	6.5	6.25
CSB Bank	7.75	5	5.75	5.75
DBS Bank	7.5	7	6.5	6.5
DCB Bank	8.05	7.1	7.55	7.4
Federal Bank	7.4	6.8	7	6.6
HDFC Bank	7.4	6.6	7	7
ICI Bank	7.25	6.7	7	7
IDFC First Bank	7.75	6.5	7.25	7
IndusInd Bank	7.75	7.75	7.25	7.25

Bank Name	Interest Rates (%)			
	Highest Slab	1-year Tenure	3-year Tenure	5-year Tenure
<b>Public Sector Banks</b>				
Jammu & Kashmir Bank	7	7	6.75	6.5
Karur Vysya Bank	7.5	7	7	7
Karnataka Bank	7.25	7.3	6.5	6.5
Kotak Mahindra Bank	7.4	7.1	7	6.3
RBL Bank	8.1	7.5	7.5	7.1
SBI Bank India	8.25	7.05	7.3	7.75
South Indian Bank	7.25	6.7	6.7	6
Tamilnad Mercantile Bank	7.5	7	6.5	6.5
Ais Bank	8	7.25	7.25	7.25
<b>Public Sector Banks</b>				
Bank of Baroda	7.25	6.85	7.15	6.5
Bank of India	7.3	6.8	6.5	6
Bank of Maharashtra	7.25	6.75	6.5	6.5
Canara Bank	7.25	6.85	6.8	6.7
Central Bank of India	7.45	6.85	6.75	6.5
Indian Bank	7.25	6.1	6.25	6.35
Indian Overseas Bank	7.3	6.9	6.5	6.5
Punjab National Bank	7.25	6.8	7	6.5
Punjab & Sind Bank	7.3	6.3	6	6
State Bank of India	7.25	6.8	6.75	6.5
Union Bank of India	7.4	6.8	6.7	6.5

Home Loan Interest Rates

Name of Lender	Loan Amount (Rs.)			
	Up to 30 lakh	Above 30 lakh & upto 75 lakh	Above 75 lakh & upto 100 lakh	Above 100 lakh
<b>Public Sector Banks</b>				
State Bank of India	8.50-9.85	8.50-9.85	8.50-9.85	
Bank of Baroda	8.40-10.65	8.40-10.65	8.40-10.65	
Bank of India	8.35-10.75	8.35-10.90	8.35-10.90	
Union Bank of India	8.35-10.75	8.35-10.90	8.35-10.90	
Punjab National Bank	8.45-10.25	8.40-10.15	8.40-10.15	
Bank of India	8.40-10.85	8.40-10.85	8.40-10.85	
Canara Bank	8.50-11.25	8.45-11.25	8.40-11.15	
UCO Bank	8.45-10.30	8.45-10.30	8.45-10.30	
Bank of Maharashtra	8.35-11.15	8.35-11.15	8.35-11.15	
Punjab and Sind Bank	8.50-10.00	8.50-10.00	8.50-10.00	
Indian Overseas Bank	8.40-10.80	8.40-10.80	8.40-10.80	
Central Bank of India	8.45-9.80	8.45-9.80	8.45-9.80	
<b>Private Sector Banks</b>				
Kotak Mahindra Bank	8.70*	8.70*	8.70*	
ICI Bank	8.75*	8.75*	8.75*	
Ais Bank	8.75-11.30	8.75-11.30	8.75-11.30	
HDFC Bank	8.50*	8.50*	8.50*	
South Indian Bank	8.70-11.70	8.70-11.70	8.70-11.70	
Karur Vysya Bank	9.00-11.05	9.00-11.05	9.00-11.05	

Name of Lender	Loan Amount (Rs.)			
	Up to 30 lakh	Above 30 lakh & upto 75 lakh	Above 75 lakh & upto 100 lakh	Above 100 lakh
<b>Housing Finance Companies (HFCs)</b>				
UIC Housing Finance	8.50-10.35	8.50-10.35	8.50-10.35	
Bajaj Housing Finance	8.50*	8.50*	8.50*	
Tata Capital	8.75*	8.75*	8.75*	
PNB Housing Finance	8.50-14.50	8.50-14.50	8.50-14.50	
GIC Housing Finance	8.80*	8.80*	8.80*	
SIMF India Home Finance	10.00*	10.00*	10.00*	
Aditya Birla Capital	8.60*	8.60*	8.60*	
ICI Home Finance	9.10*	9.10*	9.10*	
Godrej Housing Finance	8.55*	8.55*	8.55*	

\*Onwards Rates as on August 14 Source: Paisabazaar.com



# fMRI may reveal depression ‘subtypes’ and treatments that could work

Leonardo Tozzi, of Stanford Medicine's Center for Precision Mental Health and Wellness, likened the study's purpose to cardiologists using electrocardiogram data to evaluate a patient's heart condition: 'We're trying to turn psychiatry into that'

Karthik Vinod

**A**ntidepressants and therapy can provide much needed relief to people with mental health illnesses.

But there are many people whose symptoms don't respond to treatment and whose road to recovery often begins after trial and error with different medicines and/or modes of therapy. And in this time, their symptoms could get worse. According to one estimate, people with such treatment-resistant depression make up 30% of seekers of mental healthcare.

A recent study by an international team of researchers, published in *Nature Medicine*, offers a solution – and it requires reimagining psychiatric diagnoses.

"The way we think about depression in the clinic is that it's one label," Leonardo Tozzi, a neuroscientist and the study's first author, said. He was at Stanford before he joined a neurodiagnostics firm in the U.S. last year.

The brain is the seat of our mind, and people with depression manifest it in their brains in different ways. These manifestations appear as faulty brain patterns that, the study's researchers said, psychiatrists often don't account for.

Dr. Tozzi et al. showed that these patterns can be grouped into six unique subtypes of depression. The team also found that at least three of these subtypes could predict the antidepressants and/or the modes of therapy that may work to treat these people.

## Brain biomarker

Dr. Tozzi joined Stanford Medicine's Center for Precision Mental Health and Wellness as a postdoctoral researcher in 2018. He likened the study's purpose to cardiologists using electrocardiogram data to evaluate a patient's heart condition. "We're trying to turn psychiatry into that."

Like the heart, the brain has electrical activity, too. A functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) machine can capture this activity and the way it changes over time through electric signals.

In those with mental illness, the underlying brain circuits that connect different regions don't activate normally. One region can have more intense electrical activity than it does in a healthy person.

Different people have different patterns, both normal and abnormal. When some of them were shared between people with a specific mental illness, the researchers called it a subtype.

In this way, many studies have



Many studies have subtyped depression based on brain activity but the new study used a "theory-driven" approach to create subtypes that are also clinically relevant. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

subtyped depression based on brain activity. But the new study used a "theory-driven" approach to create subtypes that are also clinically relevant.

## Data crunching

In 2021, Dr. Tozzi & co. began work on the study, scouring 801 patient records from clinical trials conducted in the last two decades. All these individuals had been diagnosed with depression and/or an anxiety disorder but didn't undergo treatment at the time. "Many had comorbid anxiety," Dr. Tozzi said.

The records had patients' responses to symptom questionnaires and behavioural performance results, plus fMRI data – lots of it. Scanning each brain volume involves tracking changes in 100,000 data inputs across 20 minutes, the typical scan period in the trials.

"We had to do some sort of compression and reduce the data to a meaningful, smaller set of variables," Dr. Tozzi said.

They narrowed their analysis down to six brain circuits that previous studies had linked to depression and anxiety disorders. But these circuits didn't light up all the time or in unison in the fMRI data.

Instead, an individual's attention, salience, and "default mode" circuits were activated when the person was sitting idly, preoccupied with their thoughts. Elucidating the other three circuits – of cognitive, positive, and negative affects – required a series of tasks.

During the clinical trials, the individuals had been scanned with an



There are many whose symptoms don't respond to treatment and whose recovery begins after trial and error with different medicines or modes of therapy. And in this time, their symptoms could get worse

fMRI machine when they were task-free and again when they were reacting to smiling or sad faces or obeying commands that flashed on a computer screen.

Dr. Tozzi recalled a "eureka" moment when the team realised the best way to go about spotting faulty brain activity in people using a machine-learning algorithm. "Everything else kind of fell into place after that," he said as the algorithm revealed the six subtypes.

## Cutting across depression

The team was subsequently able to prove the subtypes were real, not artefacts in the data, by validating them with people's reported symptoms and their performance on behavioural tests.

The team also analysed treatment response data of 250 participants from the clinical trials. These individuals had been randomly assigned some common antidepressants – sertraline, venlafaxine XR, and escitalopram – and therapy. The team members found that people bearing three of the six depressive subtypes could avail of treatment and expect their symptoms to improve.

One subtype the study discovered features a hyperactive cognitive circuit. The researchers determined that people with this subtype reported a lot of anxiety, a lack of interest in engaging with the outside world, and general feelings of being threatened. Their analysis suggested they could respond better to venlafaxine XR.

Individuals with the two other subtypes could fare well against therapy, per the analysis, although one of them that featured a hyperactive attention circuit had a "worse response to behavioural treatment," the paper stated.

The researchers couldn't associate people with the other three subtypes with treatment options that could help them. However, for one of these subtypes, the researchers couldn't find much associated faulty brain activity, and there wasn't enough data to reliably gauge the treatment responses for the other two.

Dr. Tozzi said the next step would be to find more treatments that could address symptoms of depression across all subtypes. In fact, he said Stanford has been running a clinical trial for a year now – after the team's study concluded – to test the subtypes' ability to help predict treatment response.

"People get scanned, their [subtype] gets determined, and then they get a medication that is designed to target that specific [subtype]," Dr. Tozzi said about the new trial's vision.

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## THE GIST

Depression manifests in different ways. It appears as faulty brain patterns. These patterns can be grouped into six unique subtypes. At least three of these subtypes could predict the antidepressants or modes of therapy that may work

An fMRI can capture the brain's electrical activity and the way it changes over time. In those with mental illness, brain circuits don't activate normally. When some brain patterns were shared between people with a specific mental illness, researchers called it a subtype

The team proved the subtypes were real, not artefacts in data, by validating them with people's symptoms and performance on behavioural tests. Researchers found that people bearing three of the six depressive subtypes could get treatment and expect symptoms to improve

## BIG SHOT



Riptides and waves crash against the South Shore as winds from Hurricane Ernesto approach Church Bay, Bermuda, on August 16. The storm knocked out power, downed trees, and flooded parts of Bermuda – an archipelago with a population of around 64,000 – on Saturday, but the British island territory's population appeared to have escaped major injuries or property damage, officials said after an initial assessment. REUTERS

## WHAT IS IT?

# Blue moon: a baleful sequela?

Vasudevan Mukunth

The blue moon is a common example of an invented tradition – something someone has claimed is an old, time-honoured practice but which was in fact invented more recently. A second full moon in a single month is usually called a blue moon. But there are other ways in which the moon can be blue, such as literally.

For example, on April 5, 1815, Mt. Tambora in contemporary Indonesia produced the most powerful volcanic eruption in recorded history. The previous year, the Mayon volcano had erupted powerfully in the Philippines.

The effects of these volcanoes, combined with other climatic factors, lowered the temperature of the earth by 0.4–0.7 °C in 1816, producing what has since been called the "year without summer". The dust and other small particles lingering in the air could have caused the moon to look blue, as indicated by a description in the poem *Alastor*, written by Percy Bysshe Shelley that fateful year.

After the Krakatoa caldera exploded in 1883, the Royal Society in London recorded that the moon appeared blue, and the Sun a shade of green, in many



A blue moon rises above the Apollo Temple of ancient Corinth, Greece, on August 30, 2023. AFP

parts of the world.

The use of 'blue moon' as a metaphor for a long period of time emerged in the early 1820s, and its use to describe the second full moon of a month came about in a farmers' almanac published in the U.S. in 1937. August 2023 had such a blue moon.

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Opinion

MONDAY, AUGUST 19, 2024

## Caught in a cleft

Companies are either not able to push volumes due to low demand, or aren't raising prices to retain market share

**INDIA INC.'S PERFORMANCE** in the June 2024 quarter has been disappointing to say the least. Among the larger companies, misses far outnumbered the positive surprises. While the subdued numbers have been attributed partly to a harsh summer and the general elections, it is evident that consumption demand remains weak and that the rural recovery hasn't been as strong as was anticipated. This is reflected in the muted growth (just 5-8% year-on-year) in revenues over the past several quarters. Companies have either not been able to push volumes because demand has been tepid or they have been unable to raise prices for fear of losing market share. This has been particularly true for the consumer goods space where even leading players have been unable to grow volumes meaningfully.

With the raw materials bill falling only slightly during the quarter — only 43 basis points (bps) compared with a much steeper drop in earlier quarters — operating profit margins (OPM) have been under pressure across businesses. At JSW Steel, for instance, the OPM contracted by a steep 350 bps driving down the earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortisation (EBITDA) by 22%. Again, at Asian Paints the margins contracted by as much as 422 bps y-o-y driving down the EBITDA by more than 20%. Companies have been trying to rein in costs — the wage bill in Q1FY25, for example, went up by a relatively slower rate than in Q3 and Q2FY24.

In fact, the interest bill too hasn't risen much. Despite this, the aggregate net profits for a sample of 2,347 companies (excluding oil marketing companies, banks, and financials) grew at 15% y-o-y, the slowest in at least four quarters. As analysts at Motilal Oswal have said, the 4% y-o-y growth in net profits for the Nifty50 firms is the slowest since the June 2020 quarter when the pandemic had set in. To be sure India's macro-economic story remains strong and the gradual pick-up in private sector investment is expected to boost employment. However, consumption demand has been weak for nearly two years now for several reasons including high joblessness and inflation. Demand for cars, which has been buoyant, is slowing and this could happen for homes too. Moreover, the slowdown in exports remains a big concern since it is a sector that employs large numbers. Importantly, newer players and technologies are disrupting the business models of legacy players and have driven up competition across sectors. As such revenues are now distributed across a larger number of players in consumer-oriented sectors.

The good news is that software services firms have a more positive outlook on discretionary spends by clients and a few have upped their guidance. Analysts are not sure if there is a significant broad-based pick-up in spends because clients continue to focus on cost-saving initiatives, but they expect spends to start normalising early next year. While banks have fared reasonably well, and asset quality has shown few worrisome signs, banks have been hiking loan rates to protect their margins as the cost of borrowings goes up. The concern is that at such high interest rates, demand for credit might be impacted. With numbers not living up to expectations, earnings have been downgraded for a large number of companies. While the festive season should boost demand, it's not clear how India Inc. will fare in the rest of the year.

## Oil's AI hedge works, just don't mention a recession

**EARLIER THIS YEAR**, around the time Nvidia Corp.'s market cap eclipsed that of the entire S&P 500 energy sector, I wrote about whether oil and gas stocks might offer a decent hedge when AI-fever breaks. The past several weeks have offered a test.

The good news for energy bulls is that the sector has acquitted itself well since early July, when Nvidia's Magnificent Seven cohort, and the wider technology sector, peaked. The less good news is that things got complicated during the panic around the health of the labour market that kicked off in August.

Big Tech had gained 36% from the start of the year to July 10, with the Magnificent Seven notching 41%. Since then, tech has slumped by as much as 16%, while energy stocks held their own, outperforming the broader index.

It gets a bit murkier after that. Tech fell further on August 1, a Thursday, with chip makers such as Nvidia leading the way. But energy stocks, and crude oil, also slumped after factory gauges in both the US and China wobbled. It was a portent of what was to come when those US jobs numbers heard round the market dropped that Friday, sparking mentions of recession. Energy still beat tech through the first eight days of trading this month, but also sank and lagged the S&P 500.

Once the narrative shifted from AI-is-overhyped to it's-the-economy-stupid, cyclical oil stocks buckled. The re-emergence of US recession risk comes at a particularly delicate time for the energy sector. First, China's economy is struggling. Having jumped by 1.4 million barrels a day in 2023, Chinese oil demand is projected by the International Energy Agency to rise by just 300,000 barrels a day in 2024 and not by much more in 2025. Even OPEC finally trimmed its peculiarly high forecast for global demand this week.

Speaking of oil cartels, the second problem concerns OPEC+. Its supply cuts support oil prices, but they also create an overhang of spare capacity: 5.5 million barrels a day in July according to IEA estimates, equivalent to 5.3% of global demand or, put another way, the entire current output of Iran and Libya, plus Venezuela.

In a strong oil market, that sort of overhang caps rallies. But in a weakening one, it leaves OPEC+ looking rather like a central bank with interest rates already at zero. If recession hits, you don't have another lever to pull. As it is, oil prices aren't high enough to cover Saudi Arabia's fiscal deficits. If big economies slip into recession late this year or next, cutting OPEC+ supply even further could mean a combination of less market share and lower prices, meaning less cash flowing into petrostate treasuries. At least some members probably wouldn't stick to targets in that scenario, weighing on prices further.

"If you like tech, it's hard to like energy. If you're fearful of the economy, it's also hard to like energy," is how Dan Pickering, chief investment officer at Houston-based Pickering Energy Partners LP, sums up the vice shift in August.

Overall, though, energy stocks have performed well as a hedge over the past month or so. And while the risk of a US recession is up, it isn't the base case. Nor is it the only risk out there, given expectations of an imminent Iranian attack against Israel, potentially sparking a wider conflict and oil-price spike, especially given how short speculative positioning in futures has gotten.

Big Oil has cleaned house over the past five years, eschewing growth for capital discipline and consolidating. As it stands, though, tech has picked back up, Nvidia's market cap is now 79% bigger than the entire energy sector. Energy has shown it can act as a hedge against tech unless economic weakness takes center stage. The market considers chips to be the currency of the future. It's a sustained adjustment in that attitude, glimpsed last month, that energy stocks could really use.



LIAM DENNING  
Bloomberg

**INDIA'S 78TH INDEPENDENCE DAY** is an occasion to look back on our major achievements as well as our failures to learn, so that we can move faster to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cherished dream of Viksit Bharat@2047. The year is still quite far away, but to achieve this ambitious goal, we must clearly define our milestones every three to five years till 2047. This will help us to measure our progress on a given time scale, and, if need be, to make mid-course correction in our policies and strategies. But India is not alone on this planet. When we become Viksit by 2047, where would the other major countries be, especially our neighbour China?

Two fundamental duties of the state are to secure its borders, and have peace and prosperity for its people. I am not an expert on border security, but suffice to say India has managed it reasonably well so far despite having small wars with Pakistan and China. But its challenge on the borders is increasingly worrying with the rapid rise of China, both economically and militarily. Not just that, but almost all of our adjoining neighbours are getting closer to China and away from India. We need a better policy and diplomacy.

However, domestic peace and prosperity comes primarily from freedom from hunger and poverty. When India achieved independence in 1947, more than 75% of her population was immersed in extreme poverty. We also have the memories of British India when in 1943, there was the Bengal famine, in which 1.5-3 million people are estimated to have died of starvation. The biggest debacle on the food security front, however, took place in our neighbouring country, China, where an estimated 30 million people died of starvation during the Great



## FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

INDIA NEEDS TO MOVE FROM FOOD SECURITY TO NUTRITIONAL SECURITY

# Freedom from hunger, poverty

ASHOK GULATI

Distinguished professor, ICRIER

Leap Forward from 1958 to 1961. Both nations had exploding population in 1960s, and had a major challenge in feeding their people. Both were saved by the introduction of new technologies in agriculture, which ushered in the Green Revolution in India in the late 1960s, and almost a similar breakthrough in China.

China learnt its lessons much earlier than India and ushered in economic reforms in 1978, starting with agriculture. It dismantled the commune system and moved on to a household responsibility system and freed the prices of most of its crops from government controls. As a result, China's peasantry doubled its real incomes in just six years, increasing by more than 14% per annum during 1978-1984. These rising real incomes in rural areas provided the demand base for manufactured products being produced by their town and village enterprises. Today, China is the hub of global manufacturing, and its per capita income is almost five times that of India in dollar terms. And its agriculture produces almost double the value that India does from a lesser cultivated area. China has not only opened land lease markets for 30 years, but also supports its farmers immensely, primarily as

income support on per acre basis and also through market price support. This support (producer support estimate [PSE]) is even higher than the average farmer in OECD countries. In contrast, India's PSE is negative, meaning that it actually taxes its farmers through restrictive trade and marketing policies, even when it gives input subsidies as in case of fertilisers or power.

We must also remember that China imposed the one-child norm from 1981 to 2016, which contributed to a faster rise in their per capita income. We have a lot to learn from this experiment. Although India cannot and should not go that way, investing in the girl child's education is critical to contain population growth, especially at lower levels of income.

India's agri-growth has been moderate in relative terms. In the 20 years from 2004-05 to 2023-24, covering both the Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi governments, agri-GDP has increased by 3.6% on an average. This is reasonably good to feed the nation, where population growth has been coming down over the years and hovers below 1% per annum today. India is also a net exporter of agri-produce. Its exports in the last three years hover

India is also a net exporter of agri-produce. Its exports in the last three years hover around \$51 billion and imports are around \$34 billion

around \$51 billion and imports are around \$34 billion. While exports are well diversified from rice to marine products to spices to buffalo meat, etc., its imports are highly concentrated in edible oils and pulses.

In case of pulses, while the government keeps harping on self-sufficiency, the reality is that with business as usual, it is not going to happen. In fact, if policies do not change for the better in case of pulses, I am afraid our imports may go up to 8-10 million tonnes by 2030, as demand is likely to touch 40 million tonnes and production is hovering between 22 and 25 million tonnes since the last seven-eight years. Pulses are less water- and fertiliser-consuming. If we reward them with the subsidies that we pay to grow rice in terms of power and fertiliser subsidies, we can have not only self-sufficiency in pulses but also much healthier diets and better soil, water, and environment (greenhouse gas emissions). In case of the Punjab-Haryana belt, our research at ICRIER suggests providing ₹35,000/hectare to farmers shifting from paddy to pulses for at least five years. It requires bold policymaking, but it is doable, provided the Centre and states join hands to do it.

Agri-R&D, irrigation, opening up land-lease markets, and building value chains of perishables on the lines of the AMUL model are some of the other policy issues that need to be put in place. Only then India can provide food security on a sustainable basis in the face of climate change. Nutritional security still remains a major challenge. Roughly 35% of our children below the age of 5 are stunted. We need to move from food security to nutritional security.

Views are personal

## A new frontier for disputes under GST



MUKESH BUTANI  
HARSH SHUKLA

Respectively managing partner and managing associate, BMR Legal Advocates

Without definitive direction, taxpayers, especially MNCs, will face uncertainty in ensuring compliance and determining GST liabilities on related-party transactions

**EMBOLEDENED WITH "ONE Nation, one tax,"** establishing the goods and services tax (GST) regime marks a climatic transformation in India's taxation landscape, earmarking the most significant indirect tax reform in history. Having a revitalised impact on the Indian economy and an accelerated fiscal consolidation, the introduction of GST has fostered a more unified and robust economic environment. Since its inception, GST has triggered a wave of litigation; yet the government has adeptly navigated these proactively through extensive democratic deliberations with the GST Council. Indeed, collaborative efforts have facilitated resolving some of the trickiest issues, often through administrative circulars and legislative amendments. While other litigious issues in GST have been addressed with relative efficacy, related-party transactions (RPTs) have been an area that continue to remain unsettled for years on end.

RPT under the GST law has a wide coverage since it is considered as deemed supply, even if no consideration is attached to it. Thereby, any transaction with a related party is within the scanner of the GST law. To aggravate the situation, the definition of related party is widely worded to cover relationships which are based on control, employment status, control by third person, and family relations. This again gives another wide coverage to the scope of RPT.

Interestingly, the erstwhile service tax law did not recognise RPT for the purpose of levying service tax. Thus, taxpayers never faced service tax levy on RPT. It is also widely known that the erstwhile service tax law formed the basis of the GST law, which has borrowed most of the concepts from it. The absence of provisions on RPTs under the erstwhile service tax law could be one of the key reasons for the far from ideal RPT provisions under the GST law. This situation exacerbates further, since service is intangible in nature and is difficult to envisage a transaction between related parties in the absence of any concrete documentation.

However, comparing with transfer pricing (TP) provisions under the income tax law, RPT is well-defined with a complete valuation framework. It is also supplemented with a range of domestic and international jurisprudence as well as rich soft law. This augurs well for taxpayers, as the availability of a settled principle leads to effective implementation and certainty. Thus, identifying service-related transactions within the domain of TP provisions is simple, given its framework.

The lack of clear RPT provisions under the GST law has wide ramifications.

As it results in any transaction potentially being classified as an RPT with GST implications on it. Complexities in this context arise, especially on the valuation front, since some transactions may not go through the rigorous of open market value.

Amidst the tax authorities deeming every transaction between related parties as "supply", the apprehension within the industry has become quite palpable. The industry was notably taken aback by the imposition of GST on corporate guarantees offered without consideration. After an era of uncertainty, this has finally attained certainty after the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs clarified that the valuation will be 1% of the guaranteed amount or the guaranteed fees.

However, unlike tangible corporate guarantees, valuing transactions involving intangible assets like trademarks, patents, and copyrights between related parties is an even more complex challenge. Tax authorities have scrutinised transactions concerning the use of logos or brand names owned by a holding company but used by subsidiaries without payment. A case in point is the recent news about Mahindra & Mahindra being served a GST notice for the use of the "Mahin-

dra" brand name by various group companies. Despite there being no agreement or consideration for the practice. Such transactions are very common for business conglomerates. This development comes against the backdrop of the pre-show cause notice issued to information technology giant Infosys on transactions with its overseas offices. These demand notices have opened a Pandora's box and have serious repercussions. Numerous multinationals may face scrutiny and potential GST demand in the coming days. The absence of any methodology in the current GST framework in determining open market value would result in disputes, which is not desirable.

Given the widened ambit of the GST framework and its encompassing definition of supply, many transactions have the potential to fall within its scope. Without definitive direction, taxpayers, especially MNCs, will continue to face uncertainty in ensuring compliance and accurately determining GST liabilities on RPT. Clear guidelines to determine the open market value of services, including rules for benchmarking the transactions between related parties, are regardless the need of the hour. Addressing these ambiguities will naturally foster a predictable tax environment for the country, leading to a holistic good and simple tax regime.

With assistance from Lopamudra Mahapatra, associate, BMR Legal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Global economic headwinds

The global economy is encountering considerable challenges, with China and the Eurozone signalling potential downturns. In China, economic stability is under strain due to record levels of foreign investor outflows and weak consumer spending, even in the face of interest rate cuts. Similarly, the Eurozone is grappling with declining consumer spending, sluggish private-sector growth, and waning

confidence in Germany, its largest economy. These issues have broad implications for global trade and economic stability, particularly affecting South Asia and India. For India, these global economic shifts could lead to trade disruptions, reduced foreign investment, and declining commodity prices, which may affect export revenues, foreign capital inflows, and the earnings of commodity exporters. To counter these challenges, India can focus on diversifying export markets, boosting

domestic consumption, implementing structural reforms to enhance productivity and resilience, and strengthening regional trade partnerships within South Asia. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

### Systemic cracks

Apropos of "Horror at the workplace" (FE, August 17), the brutality of RG Kar Hospital rape and murder have reminded us all about 2012 Nirbhaya case. This case also highlights one critical point that on-call resident

doctors don't even have a rest room in most of the hospitals. The medical system treats them as the lowest class of citizens. The lack of a restroom was the reason she went to the seminar hall to take a quick rest where there were no CCTVs. They deserve better facilities at all the hospitals across the country. And apart from that, a lenient legal system is to be blamed, which is too slow. —Bal Govind, Noida

Write to us at [feletters@expressindia.com](mailto:feletters@expressindia.com)



# THE ASIAN AGE

19 AUGUST 2024

## Probe Sidda wife acres, pleas against others too

Karnataka governor Thawar Chand Gehlot's decision on Saturday to accord sanction to prosecute chief minister Siddaramaiah for alleged irregularities in the allotment of land parcels to his wife by the Mysore Urban Development Authority (MUDA) in Mysuru city when he was the leader of the Opposition in the state Assembly in 2011 is sure to kick up a political storm.

The governor's action, according to him, is as per the provisions of Section 17 of the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1889, and under Section 218 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Samhita, 2023. While the governor is "prima facie satisfied" that there is sufficient material to order a "neutral, objective and non-partisan investigation" into the allegations, the Cabinet called the sanction unconstitutional and illegal. Mr Siddaramaiah has rejected the calls for his resignation and said he will face it legally.

The governor's action comes on a petition by activists who alleged that MUDA assigned 14 alternative sites in the upscale Vijayanagar area of Mysuru to the incumbent chief minister's wife in lieu of the 3.16 acres the government agency acquired from her in 2014. The allegation is that those housing plots were officially valued at over ₹8.33 crores in 2023 while the acquired land was worth only ₹3.5 crores. Given the real land value, the loss for the government would have been around ₹45 crores.

The chief minister's rebuttal is that MUDA had acquired the land illegally and his wife was not the land parcels back if the government gives her ₹63 crores which he says is the real value of the land.

He alleges a political conspiracy behind the episode. He maintains that the governor had issued him a show cause notice on the day he was given the complaint. Moreover, while sanctioning his prosecution at lightning speed, Mr Gehlot has been sitting on applications of the Karnataka Lokayukta seeking permission to prosecute Union minister for heavy industries and steel H.D. Kumaraswamy for irregularities committed during his tenure as CM.

Kumaraswamy for irregularities committed during his tenure as CM and to move against former BJP ministers Shashikala Jole, Murugesu Nirani and Janardhan Reddy as well for close to a year. While the governor has refused to act in the cases of such persons, when it came to Mr Siddaramaiah, the sanction was granted even before a preliminary investigation was conducted. According to the CM, Mr Gehlot is acting "as a representative of the Union government and the whole process is part of the attempt by the BJP-led Union government to destabilise the state government by using the governor".

There are no two ways about it that a proper investigation ought to be conducted into the allegations of irregularities involving the Karnataka chief minister's wife which is said to have caused a loss to the state exchequer. The governor is justified in his contention that "a neutral, objective and non-partisan investigation" is needed into the affair. But while the governor may be legally right in his decision to sanction the prosecution of the chief minister, which is a rare instance in Indian political history, he will have to answer questions on his selective anxiety over corruption by people in powerful positions. His decisions on the requests by the anti-corruption body for the prosecution of BJP leaders could well offer a clue as to the rationale behind his present action.

## Tahawwur must face Indian courts

The wheels of justice may turn slowly but they do churn on. India has every right to feel righteousness will be served as a California appeals court in the US ruled that Tahawwur Hussain Rana, a conspirator in the 26/11 terrorist attack India suffered in its modern history in the 26/11 assault on Mumbai in 2008, can be extradited to India.

More than a decade and half may have passed since a boatload of Pakistan terrorists laid their siege of Mumbai and in the process took 166 lives indiscriminately and left scars on the nation's psyche that may never heal. It was on the day that Ajmal Kasab, one of the 26/11 terrorists, was executed that the people may have had a sense of closure on this heinous plot by a perfidious Pakistan.

Rana may have been peripherally associated with the main 26/11 conspirator and American terrorist David Coleman Headley (Doo Doo Doo Syed Gilani) but he did facilitate his visa and visit to India on a reconnaissance trip to the Taj Mahal hotel. After all, had not the former Pakistan Army doctor said that the people of India deserved the 26/11 attack?

With the passage of time, people may have wearied of the legal hunt for these criminals with a terrorist mindset, but India, still smarting from such a breach of the peace of Mumbai, had persisted in providing sufficient competent evidence to support Rana's extradition, a first favourable ruling on which came in May 2023.

It was for his role in the conspiracy to attack India that the Chicago resident Rana was first apprehended in the US, but later acquitted of Mumbai attack charges since he may have only facilitated Coleman Headley's visa to India. It was for his involvement in a Leashkare (Taliban) plot to bomb a Danish newspaper that he was convicted in the US in 2013 for 14 years.

Wanted by India for waging war, murder, terrorism and forgery, it is only right that he faces trial here too. This legal fight may take longer as the process could drag on in appeal, but there is no denying that India has persevered to bring to justice those who plotted. Many conspirators and handlers in Pakistan may be protected by the terror-sponsoring state, but India's search for a full closure on the 26/11 events is wholly justified.

THE ASIAN AGE

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Kishwar Desai  
London Diary

## Graffiti art cheers post-riots London; Edinburgh is back, but with 'warnings'

After a summer of the worst riots ever, it was a time to introspect and think about who lights these sudden fires. And how quickly the social fabric of a stable nation can be torn down. People were still in shock and mourning over the deaths of counter graffiti — a rather clever Banksy graffiti which had a wolf painted on a satellite dish was stolen within hours of being set up. Perhaps that sly comment on the television networks really hit hard.

No one knows the identity of the artist who remains shrouded in mystery — but one can only be grateful to him for changing the discourse from a very difficult and depressing time to something rather more intriguing, and thoughtful.

Undoubtedly it has been a very tough time for the new government. Even before they could settle down came the Southport stabbings and the need to clamp down on the ultra-right-wing rioters and looters who took advantage of the festive situation. Thus, we have even seen children in their teens appearing in court and being convicted. Even though the prisons are already overcrowded everyone felt the time had come to lock up the looters. Fortunately for all, the new Prime Minister, Sir Kier Starmer, had

Subhani



## Bangladesh's Yunus can 're-ear' his Peace Prize



Sanjaya Baru  
Sanjayovacha

Democratic institutions ensure that a nation state renews its legitimacy with civil society. When those who take control of the State subvert and delegitimise the institutions of democracy, this renewal ceases to happen. Regular and transparent elections to the legislature, that represents civil society, enable the State to renew legitimacy through a popular mandate. When this fails, crises or is subverted, then a revolution is the only means by which civil society regains control of the State.

This is precisely what is happening in Bangladesh. The government of Sheikh Hasina lost its legitimacy because of the manner in which it chose to govern and sought to renew its mandate. A democratically elected government had subverted the institutions of democratic governance to the point that democracy itself was under threat. The State in Bangladesh could have sustained itself through increasingly authoritarianism. If populist governance, that story has played itself out in many countries around the world.

In the end, no bankrupt had Sheikh Hasina's democratically elected regime become that of a regime of youth ensured its exit. What is interesting about Bangladesh is that this body of youth, that had spontaneously come together and battled for change, was able to find a leader who had independently secured the support of civil society through his life and work. The popularity and social standing of Muhammad Yunus and nothing to do with the movement of the youth. The two came together the day Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina escaped to exile. Bangladesh is fortunate to have had Mr Yunus.

What could have happened without a Yunus around is what we saw in Sri Lanka in 2022. A popular uprising forced President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa to eventually step down. However, the Sri Lankan Parliament remained in place and soon a new government was formed under the leadership of Ranil Wickremesinghe. An entrenched political elite ensured regime continuity by merely replacing individual leaders.

In Bangladesh, the youth wanted more. They sought real regime change. As events unfolded in Dhaka, many analysts had forecast a familiar scenario.

A military takeover. In the event, Bangladesh witnessed a civil society takeover. In a remarkable turn of events a group of respected and highly qualified citizens came together to form a government under the leadership of Mr Yunus. His individual social and global standing, as a Nobel Peace Prize-winning social activist who has empowered millions of the poor, has for the moment restored a semblance of stability.

Regime change can be noisy, dirty and bloody. Hence, and understandably, there have been repeated calls for a youth revolt against repression and injustice. They will cast a dark shadow on what was essentially a youth revolt for freedom and self-respect. But such is the nature of any revolt. Revolution is not a dinner party, said Mao Zedong famously. One has to break an egg to make an omelette, was an earthy

By setting an example of good governance in South Asia, by reconnecting civil society across the sub-continent, and by revitalising Saarc, Mr Yunus can stabilise the neighbourhood...

metaphor of R.L. Stevenson.

It remains to be seen in which direction Bangladesh will move. Will communal forces overwhelm a State in disarray? Will big power rivalry impact the future course of events? Can the interim government put Bangladesh back on the course it was set barely a decade ago, as a bright spot in South Asia?

Sri Lanka's precedent suggests that while political stability can be restored, a corrupt elite who ran the country down may yet return to once again dominate the institutions of the State. Restoring democracy after an authoritarian regime has been dislodged requires enormous patience and wisdom on the part of civil society leaders. India had Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in its early years and South Africa had Nelson Mandela. Bangladesh is fortunate to have Mr Yunus around as it seeks to renew its democracy.

Whatever the future holds for Bangladesh, the representatives of civil society who are now functionaries of the State can play a historic role by revitalising the social and political foundations of Bangladesh that attracted global attention not long ago. Nelson Mandela, like Mahatma Gandhi, eschewed power and facilitated the transfer of power. Muhammad Yunus too could play such a facilitating role, ensuring that a modern, secular and forward-looking movement is once again empowered.

For its part, the political leadership in India can play a significant role by supporting such a transition in Bangladesh rather than use the divisions

within that country to further stoke divisions within ours. In the long term, India has the obligation and the opportunity to empower plural and secular democracies all across South Asia. If India chooses to secure short-term gains by exploiting the divisions within the region, it will pull the entire region down.

One of Mr Yunus' first statements after he returned home to take charge was to seek the revival of Saarc — the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. There was a time in the early 2000s when I too joined the ranks of Saarc sceptics. However, over the years I have realised that our sub-continent requires an institution that facilitates regional cooperation and trust building. Over the past decade New Delhi has turned its back on Saarc and has tried hard to breathe life into BIMSTEC — the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. While BIMSTEC has been viewed as a bridge to Asean (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), it has not been able to entice its membership in the manner that Saarc once did.

Saarc was in fact originally a Bangladesh initiative taken in the early 1980s. It was formally established in 1985. A half century later, Bangladesh once again has the opportunity to revitalise Saarc. By setting an example of good governance in South Asia, by reconnecting civil society across the sub-continent, and by revitalising Saarc, Mr Yunus can stabilise the neighbourhood and once again earn his Nobel Peace Prize. Mr Yunus today has the stature across the region that would enable him to take that initiative. He should do that.

The writer is an author, a former newspaper editor, and adviser to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. He has recently edited 'The Importance of Shimo Abe: India, Japan and the Indo-Pacific.'

## LETTERS NATION OF AUNTS

India has become like a nation of old aunts whose only interest in life seems to be wanting to know who is hooking up with whom. From Rahul Gandhi to Neeraj Chopra, their only question is when they are getting married. Once somebody reaches their twenties everybody wants to know about their marriage plans as if getting married is the only aim and ambition in life. Getting settled is the terminology used to signify marital status. It should be nobody else's business and is an intensely private matter, but here in India we have an army of relatives cajoling and pleading individuals to get married. It is time for everybody to stop this noxious behaviour.

Anthony Henriques  
Mumbai

## DON'T TRUST BJP

BY DEMANDING the resignation of Mamata Banerjee from the post of the chief minister, BJP has surely cracked the joke of the millennium. Following the horrific gang rapes and murders in Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, did the BJP ask the concerned CMs to resign? What about Manjiv where riots have wiped out countless civilians and destroyed livelihoods and properties? There, truly normal life has broken down. Rape cannot be prevented by the state and can never be completely eliminated. And though it is the job of the government to control crime, every government, including the Left and the BJP, has failed to stop it and has protected its own. Hence I urge the citizens to agitate responsibly and not fall prey to political games.

Kajal Chatterjee  
Kolkata

## TOO MANY THEORIES

TRINAMULI CONGRESS leader Kunal Ghosh on Sunday objected to his colleague Sukhendu Sekhar Ray's demand regarding the interrogation of Kolkata Police commissioner Vinay Kumar Goyal in connection with the rape and murder of a trainee doctor at RG Kar Medical College. Ray also said that a criminal investigation of the principal of the medical college, Sandip Ghosh, is necessary to know who "fostered the theory of suicide" initially. This seems the ruling party is under pressure from protesters.

Sankar Paul  
Chakdaha, West Bengal

₹500 for the best letter of the week goes to Debashish Gautam (Aug. 15). Email: asianage.letters@gmail.com.

deal with such situations in his previous avatar — especially when riots had broken out in 2011, and he has been able to bring some peace into our lives.

Also what was very heartening for so many of us was sight of many "right thinking" (not ultra-right) citizens who came onto the streets and fearlessly confronted the thugs who thought that they could capitalise on the anti-migrant sentiments that they were trying to whip up. The pro-peace demonstrations were truly reassuring for so many who make up the rich multicultural fabric of the country today — and for those who come from diverse backgrounds and are of all colours and races. It was great to see that the majority of people in the country are anti-racist and hold the "right" values. And they were unafraid to come onto the streets to show their solidarity with people of other races and religions, and even asylum seekers. It was very touching for many — and let us hope that this peace between the communities holds firm.

It is summer time and so festivals are the talk of the town. The Edinburgh Festival has now become a globally attractive event. From humble beginnings, now it attracts so many participants that choosing between events is a challenge.

The only annoyance nowadays is the number of mandatory "trigger warnings" that come before performances. In case people are offended or become unwell due to what they have been exposed to. Today's audiences are apparently so sensitive that they have to be alerted about all possible reactions. Thus, in a stand-up comedy show, they are even warned about the likelihood of "audience participation". Other performances warn the audience to be prepared for "surprise entrances" or that there may be actors "with marginalised genders". Even in a Shakespeare comedy where Falstaff figures you are warned that some dialogue involves "body shaming". There are warnings about adult themes such as "heavy drinking". You wonder what sort of delicate souls go to watch these shows. But they still go by the scores so I am sure Edinburgh Festival is well worth a visit.

Thus if you just want a straightforward joyful show, just go to Regents Park theatre in London and watch *Fiddler on the Roof*, the classic musical which will lift your spirits with its lively songs and comic turns.

Kishwar Desai is an award winning author and columnist. She is also the Chair of the Partition Museums in Amritsar and Delhi.





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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to [explained@indianexpress.com](mailto:explained@indianexpress.com)

# Why districts created in 2016 are now under spotlight in Manipur

SUKRITA BARUAH & JIMMY LEIVON  
GURUWATI, IMPHAL, AUGUST 18

CHIEF MINISTER N Biren Singh, during the recently concluded session of the Manipur Assembly, said it was necessary to reorganise districts in the state. This was in context of the 2016 move by the Imphal Singh-led Congress government to carve out new districts in the state, a decision which Biren Singh said was "driven by political interests". The 2016 move had not gone down well with the Nagas, who alleged that the demarcation encroached into their ancestral lands. It prompted the United Naga Council and other Naga groups to carry out a 139-day blockade of two highways leading into the state. At the same time, the move also presented the Naga groups an opportunity to gather support from the Kuki-Zomi ahead of the state elections in 2017.

With the state in the grip of the ethnic conflict between the Meiteis and Kuki-Zomis for over a year, what will be the impact of the Biren Singh government's proposal to reorganise districts?

## What changed in 2016?

Citing the need for administrative efficiency and the long-standing demands of locals, the Imphal Singh government, through a notification in December 2016, created new districts by bifurcating seven of the nine districts of the state, months ahead of the Assembly elections.

Before the reorganisation, the Meitei-majority valley had four districts — Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal and Bishnupur — while the remaining five districts of Ukhrul, Senapati, Chandel, Tamenglong and Churachandpur were tribal-majority hill districts. Churachandpur was dominated by the Kuki-Zomi tribe, while the remaining four

were Naga-dominated.

In the reorganisation, Pherzawl was carved out of Churachandpur, Kamjong, Noney, and Tengnoupal was carved out of Ukhrul, Tamenglong and Chandel respectively. A new district, Kalching, came into being in the valley, while a geographically contiguous part of Imphal East in the western-most part of the state was carved out as Jiribam district.

The most contentious issue was the creation of the Kuki-Zomi dominated Kangpokpi district, carved out from the Naga-dominated Senapati district in the Sadar Hills region of the state.

## What were the prevailing political circumstances?

Ahead of the 2017 Assembly polls, the Congress, in power in the state since 2002, faced an exodus of prominent leaders, in-

cluding its former vice-president (and current BJP CM) Biren Singh.

The Imphal Singh government was also reeling under massive protests in the hills, which had left eight people dead in Churachandpur, over the three Bills passed by it to replace the Inner Perimeter Line (IPL) regime in 2015.

The IPL would stay eventually till 2020 as tribal groups kept opposing its removal, due to apprehension that their lands — which enjoy Constitutional protection — could be infringed upon.

## Why was the 2016 decision opposed by the Nagas?

The United Naga Council along with the largest insurgent group of the northeast, the NSCN (IM), accused the Imphal Singh government of "appropriating" Naga villages and merging them with non-Naga areas.

They also claimed that the Hills Areas Committee, which comprises all MLAs from the hill areas of the state, was not consulted on the issue.

Many saw the move as an attempt by the Congress government to win over Kuki-Zomi groups ahead of the elections, at the expense of Nagas' interests.

The opposition to the new districts continues to this day. Meanwhile, the demand by Kuki-Zomi groups to have a separate administrative regime for their areas, following Manipur's ethnic violence, has aggravated the Naga anxiety over their lands.

## How did the issue come up in Assembly?

Expressing concerns over the creation of the Kangpokpi district, and emphasising on the contentious history and ongoing dissatisfaction among the Naga communities, Naga People's Front MLA Leisho Keisho moved a calling attention motion on the is-

sue on the last day of the Assembly session on August 12.

Speaking on the issue, CM Biren Singh said that though the previous Congress government cited administrative efficiency as the reason for creating the new districts in 2016, this was based on ethnic lines and "such mistakes, when left unaddressed, gave birth to further ethnic divide".

"People do not consider themselves Manipuri first. A community which is in majority in a particular district consider themselves as the owners of the land," he said, and claimed that Naga residents of Kangpokpi and Churachandpur have voiced concerns over lack of essential services and opportunities, as well as illegal taxation.

The CM also assured that the district boundaries would be reorganised based on "genuine administrative convenience" and after consultations with civil groups and leaders of tribes.

## TELLING NUMBERS

### How Indian Americans contribute to the United States

Indiaspora, a US-based non-profit group which details the contributions of Indian Americans to the US and their impact on the country, has released a new report. Titled, Small Community, Big Contributions, Boundless Horizons: The Indian Diaspora in the United States, it quotes data from the Migration Policy Institute and says:

**5.1 MILLION** Indian Americans reside in the United States, including those born in India and in the US. The Indian diaspora in the US makes up only 1.5% of the population.

**72** unicorn startups out of 648 in the US are led by Indian migrants. The collective value of these startups exceeds \$195 billion. They employ approximately 55,000 people (13% of unicorn employees).

**60%** of all hotels are owned by Indian Americans. These hotels generate approximately \$700 billion in revenue and create more than 4 million jobs, directly and indirectly, annually.

**\$300** billion is contributed in tax revenues by Indian Americans annually, on top of the \$370-\$460 billion in annual spending, which translates into a major economic wave in terms of sales tax, etc.

**13%** of all 2023 journal publications were co-authored by scientists of Indian origin in the US, up from 11% in 2015.

**35** out of top 50 colleges in the US have an Indian American in their leadership ranks, including roles like deans, chancellors, provosts, and directors of colleges.

**45%** of them migrated to the US after 2010, while around 30% moved before 2000. The population is concentrated in New York State and California.



**35%-50%** of all convenience stores in the US are owned by Indian Americans. They generate \$350-\$490 billion in revenues each year.

**28** out of the 34 Scripps Spelling Bee winners were of Indian origin since 2000.

**\$3** billion has been donated by Indian Americans to US universities since 2008.

**\$15-2** billion annually is contributed by Indian Americans to charity.

ENS

## EXPLAINED POLICY

# Lateral entry into bureaucracy

Centre has opened another round of lateral recruitments into senior posts in the bureaucracy. Such appointments have been criticised for not extending reservations to people of SC, ST and OBC communities

SHYAMAL YADAV  
NEW DELHI, AUGUST 18

THE UNION Public Service Commission (UPSC) on Saturday issued an advertisement seeking applications for "talented and motivated Indian nationals for Lateral Recruitment" to the posts of Joint Secretary, Director, and Deputy Secretary in 24 ministries of the Union government.

A total of 45 posts have been advertised with individuals having appropriate qualifications and experience from State/UT governments, PSUs, statutory organisations, research institutes and universities, and even the private sector eligible to apply. The advertisement mentions that all posts are "suitable for candidates belonging to the category of Persons with Benchmark Disability (PwBD)".

## What is 'lateral entry' into the bureaucracy?

In 2017, NITI Aayog, in its three-year Action Agenda, and the Sectoral Group of Secretaries (SGoS) on Governance in its report submitted in February, recommended the induction of personnel at middle and senior management levels in the central government. These 'lateral entrants' would be part of the central secretariat which, till then, had only career bureaucrats from the All India Services/Central Civil Services. They would be given three-year long contracts, extendable to up to five years.

## Which positions are open?

Based on this recommendation, the first vacancies for lateral entrants were advertised in 2018, but only for Joint Secretary level positions. Posts of the rank of Director and Deputy Secretary were opened later.

A Joint Secretary, appointed by the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC), has the third-highest rank (after Secretary and Additional Secretary) in a Department, and functions as the administrative head of a wing in the Department. Directors are one rank below Joint Secretaries, and Deputy Secretaries are one rank below Directors, although they perform the same job in most ministries. While Director/Deputy Secretaries are considered middle-level officials in a department, the Joint Secretary-level is where the decision-making starts.

## What was the Union government's logic behind introducing lateral entries?

In 2019, Minister of State for the

## The view from Centre and Opposition



"I have always said that the underprivileged are not represented in all the country's top posts, including the top bureaucracy, they are being pushed further away from the top posts through lateral entry."

RAHUL GANDHI,  
LOK SABHA LEADER,  
CONGRESS LEADER



"If people from SC, ST and OBC categories are not given appointments in proportion to their quota in these government appointments, it will be a direct violation of the Constitution."

MAYAWATI,  
EX-UP CM, BSP SUPREMO



"Lateral recruitment is aimed at... bringing in fresh talent as well as [to] augment the availability of manpower... as supplementation and not replacement of the existing services."

JITENDRA SINGH,  
MINISTER OF STATE, DOPT

Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) Jitendra Singh told the Rajya Sabha that "lateral recruitment is aimed at achieving the twin objectives of bringing in fresh talent as well as augment the availability of manpower".

On August 8, 2024, Singh said that "Keeping in view their specialized knowledge and expertise in the domain area, lateral recruitment at the level of Joint Secretary, Director and Deputy Secretary in Government of India, has been undertaken to appoint persons for specific assignments".

Basically, the idea behind lateral recruitment is for the government to tap into individuals' domain expertise and specialised know-how, regardless of whether they are career bureaucrats or not. In line with this idea, officials of various Central Civil Services have been given opportunities to serve in the Central Secretariat in the last decade, though it was always considered a last resort.

## How many people have been appointed via lateral recruitment so far?

The first round began in 2018 and attracted 6,077 applications for Joint Secretary-level posts. After a selection process by the UPSC, nine individuals were recommended for the appointment to nine different Ministries/Departments in 2019.

Other rounds were advertised in 2021, and then in 2023. In total, as MoS Jitendra Singh told the Upper House on August 9, 63 appointments have been made through lateral entry... in the last five years. Presently, 57

officials [lateral entrants] occupy positions in Ministries/Departments."

## Why has it been criticised?

Lateral entries have been criticised on the ground that there are no quotas for Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) candidates in such recruitment.

Reacting to the latest advertisement, Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge posted on X that the "the BJP is deliberately making such recruitments in jobs so that SC, ST, OBC categories can be kept away from reservation".

Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Tejashwi Yadav condemned the move as a "disgusting joke", saying that had the 45 advertised appointments been made through the civil services examination, "nearly half of the openings would be reserved for SC, ST, and OBC candidates".

## Why are there no quotas in recruitment?

In a May 15, 2018 circular, the DoPT noted that "in respect of appointments to Central Government posts and services there shall be reservation for Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe/Other Backward Class candidates in temporary appointments which are to last for 45 days or more". This was a reiteration — with OBCs added — of a circular issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs as far back as on September 24, 1968.

In effect, reservations have to be offered for any appointment into the bureaucracy.

However, on November 29, 2018, while the first round of lateral recruitment was being carried out, then DoPT Additional Secretary Sujata Chaturvedi wrote a letter to UPSC Secretary Rakesh Gupta, Secretary saying: "The candidates to be considered from the State Government, Public Sector, Autonomous Bodies, Statutory Bodies, Universities, would be taken on Deputation (including Short Term Contract) with lien in the parent department. There are no instructions stipulating mandatory reservation for appointment on deputation".

The letter further stated that "The present arrangement of filling up these posts may be deemed as a close approximation of deputation, where mandatory reservation for SC/ST/OBC is not necessary. However, if duly eligible SC/ST/OBC candidates are eligible, they should be considered and priority may be given to such candidates in similarly situated cases for ensuring holistic representation".

## How have lateral entries been kept out of the ambit of reservation?

Reservation in public jobs and universities is implemented via what is known as the "13-point roster". According to this policy, a candidate's position on a roster of openings is determined by dividing the quota percentage of their group by hundred.

For example, the OBC quota is 27%. Therefore, OBC candidates are recruited to every 4th post for which a vacancy arises in a department/cadre (100/27=3.7). Likewise, SC candidates, with 15% reservation, are supposed to fill every 7th vacancy (100/15=6.66). ST candidates, with 7.5% reservation, are supposed to fill every 14th vacancy (100/7.5=13.33). And EWS candidates, with 10% reservation, are supposed to fill every 10th vacancy (100/10=10).

According to this formula, however, there is no reservation for up to three vacancies. Files obtained from the DoPT by The Indian Express under the RTI Act state that "In single post cadre, reservation does not apply. Since each post to be filled under this scheme [lateral entry] is a Single Post, reservation is not applicable" (reported on June 14, 2019).

In the current round of recruitment, the UPSC has advertised 45 openings. If these were to be considered as a single group, according to the 13-point roster, six vacancies would be reserved for SC candidates, three for ST candidates, 12 for OBC candidates, and four for the EWS category. But since these vacancies have been advertised separately for each department, all of them are effectively single-post vacancies, and hence bypass the policy of reservations.

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# Rise of Paetongtarn Shinawatra as Thailand's PM, amid political turmoil

RISHIKASINGH  
NEW DELHI, AUGUST 18

THAILAND'S PARLIAMENT elected Paetongtarn Shinawatra, 37, as the country's new Prime Minister on August 16, more than a year after her centre-right Pheu Thai party came second in the general election.

Although the progressive Move Forward Party (MFP) had won the largest number of seats in the election, a political arrangement brokered by Paetongtarn's father and former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-06) resulted in a coalition led by Pheu Thai coming to power.

Pheu Thai leader Srettha Thavisin became prime minister in August 2023. However, less than a year later, he was ousted from the position by the order of a constitutional court on August 14.

The court said Srettha had "breached ethical standards" by appointing an individ-

ual with a criminal conviction to his cabinet. Before Paetongtarn, her father Thaksin and his sister Yingluck (2011-14) have been prime ministers. Both leaders were removed from power in military coups.

Many in Thailand had looked to the MFP with hope of political reform, given the decades-old dominance of the military and the Thai royalty over the country's politics.

## EXPLAINED GLOBAL

### Who is Paetongtarn Shinawatra?

Paetongtarn, the youngest-ever PM of the nation of 70 million, joined politics only three years ago. She previously managed Thaksin's Rende hotel group.

According to a profile published by the BBC, Paetongtarn "describes herself as a compassionate capitalist, a social liberal". However, her personality is seen as being indistinct from the legacy and reputation of the powerful Shinawatra clan.

Thaksin, now 75, was in the police before joining politics. He also owned several



Thailand PM Paetongtarn Shinawatra with her father, former PM Thaksin Shinawatra, in Bangkok. Reuters

businesses and expressed disdain for the country's entrenched elites, such as businessmen, bureaucrats, and other power players linked to the influential monarchy and the military. The two institutions are

seen as helping sustain each other in Thailand's constitutional monarchy.

Thaksin's welfare policies cemented his popularity among poor and rural Thais. But in 2006, protests erupted following allegations that the Shinawatra family had failed to pay taxes on their businesses, leading to a military-orchestrated ouster.

Yingluck was accused by opposition leaders of running a proxy government for Thaksin. She too was ousted after a judicial order against her in 2014. Thaksin has since backed several parties, and remained a powerful player in Thai politics.

## What are the implications of the Shinawatras' return to power?

Thaksin is seen as a once-popular leader who has joined hands with the conservative forces he was earlier positioned against. This 'deal' reportedly allowed the former PM to return to Thailand in 2023, after having lived in exile for 15 years. During this period, he was sentenced to eight years in prison over an abuse-of-power case during his tenure,

but the sentence was reduced to one year by King Maha Vajiralongkorn last September.

On August 17, Thaksin received a royal pardon reducing his parole to two weeks, Reuters reported.

Recent events have raised concerns over the shrinking of spaces for strong political voices representing the will of the Thai people. In the 2023 general election, the MFP had emerged as the biggest party with 141 seats in the 500-seat lower house. Its major agenda was loosening the *lèse majesté* laws that punish any criticism of the Thai monarchy, including liking social media posts.

The party, led by 42-year-old Pita Limjaroenrat, enjoyed considerable support among the youth. It first appeared in politics in 2018 under the name Future Forward Party, but was dissolved by a constitutional court in 2020 over a violation of electoral rules. Viewing the ruling as politically motivated, tens of thousands took to the streets.

That sequence of events has now somewhat repeated itself. Earlier this month, a constitutional court ordered MFP to be dissolved over its "unlawful" pledge to reform *lèse majesté* laws. The MFP has been re-constituted as the People's Party.

Limjaroenrat told The Guardian in an interview that Thailand was trapped in a "double lock democracy", where the legal system and military coups were repeatedly being used to undermine election results.

## What happens next?

Analysts believe Paetongtarn Shinawatra will likely be in her father's shadow, given her inexperience. Ensuring her political survival will be a major challenge, given Thailand has seen 19 coups since it became a constitutional monarchy in 1932.

Another concern will be the economy. According to a Nikkei Asia report, "The economy has grown 1% to 4% per year since the 2014 coup, compared with around 5% for Southeast Asia as a whole. Cheap labour and infrastructure investments once drove rapid growth, but the country has struggled to further develop its industrial base even as Vietnam and other neighbours catch up."



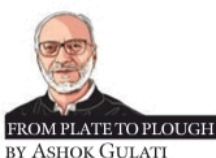
# THE IDEAS PAGE



C R Sasikumar

## The path runs through fields

Investing in R&D, irrigation, opening up land-lease markets, and building value chains of perishables can help India provide food security, fulfil Viksit Bharat vision



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH  
BY ASHOK GULATI

INDIA'S 78TH INDEPENDENCE Day is an occasion to look back on our major achievements as well as failures. We need to learn from them to move faster towards the Prime Minister's cherished dream of Viksit Bharat@2047. The year 2047 seems distant, but to achieve the ambitious goal, we must have our milestones clearly defined for every three to five years till 2047. This will help us measure progress on a given time scale, and if required, course-correct midway. India is, of course, not the only country with such challenges. When we become viksits by 2047, where will other major countries be, especially those in our neighbourhood?

The two fundamental duties of the state are to secure borders and promote peace and prosperity at home. I am not an expert on border security, but suffice it to say, that India has managed reasonably well on that front despite conflicts with Pakistan and China. However, the rapid rise of China poses both economic and military challenges. Almost all our neighbours are moving closer to China. We need better policy and diplomacy.

Domestic peace and prosperity come primarily from freedom from hunger and poverty. When India gained independence in 1947, more than 75 per cent of the country's population was shackled by extreme poverty. Four years before Independence, in 1943, an estimated 1.5 to 3 million people died of starvation. The biggest debate on the food security front, however, took place in China, where an estimated 30 million people died of starvation during the Great Leap Forward from 1958 to 1963. Both nations had exploding populations in 1960s and had major challenges in feeding their

people. Both were saved by the introduction of new technologies in agriculture — India witnessed the Green Revolution in the late 1960s, and China too experienced a similar breakthrough.

China learnt its lessons much earlier than India, and ushered in economic reforms in 1978, starting with agriculture. It dismantled the commune system, moved on to the household responsibility system and freed the prices of most of its crops from government control. As a result, the income of China's farmers increased by more than 14 per cent per annum between 1978 and 1984. It is this rise in real incomes in rural areas that provided the demand base for items, produced by China's Town and Village Enterprises (TVEs). Today, China is the hub for global manufacturing, and its per capita income is almost five times that of India in dollar terms.

China's farm sector produces almost double the value of produce than that of India even though it has less area under cultivation. China has not only opened land lease markets for 30 years but also supports its farmers immensely, primarily through income support on a per acre basis. The Chinese government also gives the country's farmers market price support (producer support estimate or PSE), which is even higher than in the OECD countries. In contrast, India's PSE is negative. In other words, the government actually taxes farmers through restrictive trade and marketing policies, even though it gives input subsidies — in fertilisers or power, for example.

At the same time, we must also remember that China imposed the one-child norm from 1981 to 2016, which contributed to a faster rise in the country's per capita income. There is a lot to learn from this experience. Although India cannot and should not impose the one-child norm, investing in the girl child's education is critical to contain population growth, especially at lower levels of income.

India's agri-growth has been moderate in relative terms. In the 20 years from 2004-05 to 2023-24, which covers both the Manmohan Singh and the Narendra Modi governments, agri-GDP increased by 3.6 per

The government has been harping on achieving self-sufficiency in pulses. However, that is not going to happen if it goes about the objective in a business-as-usual manner. In fact, if the policies do not change for the better, I am afraid the country's imports may go up to eight to 10 million tonnes by 2030 because the demand is likely to touch 40 million tonnes — we have been producing between 22 to 25 million tonnes in the last seven to eight years.

cent on average. This is reasonably good to feed the nation, especially because population growth has been coming down over the years — it's below 1 per cent per annum today. India is also a net exporter of agri-products. Its exports in the last three years are around \$51 billion, while the country's imports amount to \$34 billion. While the exports are diversified — rice, marine products, spices and buffalo meat — India's imports are primarily that of edible oils and pulses.

The government has been harping on achieving self-sufficiency in pulses. However, that is not going to happen if it goes about the objective in a business-as-usual manner. In fact, if the policies do not change for the better, I am afraid the country's imports may go up to eight to 10 million tonnes by 2030 because the demand is likely to touch 40 million tonnes — we have been producing between 22 to 25 million tonnes in the last seven to eight years. Pulses are less water- and fertiliser-consuming. If governments reward farmers who grow pulses with the kind of subsidies they provide rice cultivators — in power and fertiliser — the country will not only be self-sufficient in pulses but people will eat healthier diets. The change will also have a positive effect on soil, water, and environment (GHC emissions). Our research at KRIER suggests that providing Rs 35,000/ha to farmers in the Punjab-Haryana belt for at least five years could encourage a shift from paddy to pulses. The change requires bold policy making, but it is doable provided the Centre and the states join hands.

Agri-R&D, irrigation, opening up land-lease markets, building value chains of perishables on the lines of the Amul model are some of the other policy measures that need to be put in place. Only then can India provide food security on a sustainable basis in the face of climate change. Nutritional security still remains a major challenge. Roughly 35 per cent of our children below the age of five are stunted. We need to move from food security to nutrition security.

The writer is Distinguished Professor at KRIER. Views are personal

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Anger with Conservatives will linger, but sceptical voters also need reasons to be optimistic about the future. Time is already ticking by fast if Labour wants to defer public frustration during the arduous process of turning change from a slogan into a reality."

— THE GUARDIAN

## Co-creators of new solutions

As partners, India and Japan have a significant role in ensuring regional and global peace and stability



YOKO KAMIKAZE

TODAY, I AM visiting India for the first time since my appointment as Minister for Foreign Affairs. As a member of the Japan-India Parliamentary Friendship Association and a long-time promoter of Japan-India relations, I am sincerely looking forward to feeling the vibrancy of India.

Japan and India have historical ties which date back to the introduction of Buddhism in the 6th century. My hometown, Shizuoka Prefecture, also has deep ties with India. For example, while Shizuoka is famous for its green tea, Tada Motokichi, who ran a tea business in Shizuoka in the 19th century, is said to have learned black tea production techniques in India, brought them back to Japan, and applied them to green tea production.

Japan and India, which forged such deep ties, launched the "Japan-India Special Strategic and Global Partnership" in 2014, and in the past decade have dramatically strengthened our relationship in wide-ranging areas. Through our past efforts, I am convinced that there are tangible possibilities for further cooperation in the future. Based on this conviction, I would like to broaden the scope of our bilateral relationship built up over the years, and further deepen our relationship in the following four areas by formulating concrete projects.

First, in the area of defence and security, my visit will include the third Japan-India Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meeting ("2+2"), the first such meeting in nearly two years. Cooperation in the security area has made remarkable progress in recent years, including joint exercises between the Japanese Self-Defense Forces and the Indian Armed Forces in all types of land, sea, and air forces, as well as efforts to promote defence equipment and technology cooperation. Through this "2+2" meeting, I would like to share our understandings of the strategic environment, and further promote various efforts. I look forward to fruitful discussions with Minister Subramanyam Jaishankar and Minister Rajnath Singh.

Second, in the economic area, we have made steady progress in specific projects including our flagship High-Speed Rail project, the development of the northeastern region, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi attaches great importance to, and the industrial value chain concept linking the northeastern region of India to the Bay of Bengal. In addition, our countries are firmly committed to achieving the 5-trillion-yen target of public and private investment and

financing in five years, which was set by the leaders in 2022. Building on this track record of cooperation, we will continue to promote cooperation in new areas such as Green Transformation and Digital Transformation, as well as development of the investment and business environment, to take our relationship to the next stage.

Thirdly, ties between the people of Japan and India are the foundation of our bilateral relationship, and we would like to greatly expand the base of people-to-people exchange in the future. The extension of this year's "Japan-India Tourism Exchange Year" to fiscal year 2024 was announced on the occasion of the Japan-India Strategic Dialogue in March. From September to October, various events will be held intensively in India as "Japan Month", and similar events will be held in Tokyo as "India Month". We hope that these efforts will further promote mutual exchanges between our countries.

Fourth, I would like to work with India in the area of Women, Peace and Security (WPS), which the Japanese government has firmly promoted in recent years and which is also my lifework. WPS is based on the idea that society can be much closer to a more sustainable peace through the participation of women themselves in leadership positions in prevention as well as humanitarian and reconstruction assistance, while at the same time working to protect vulnerable groups such as women in times of crisis. India is one of the countries that has deployed many women in PKOs, and at the Japan-Australia-India-US (Quad) Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Tokyo last month, which I hosted and in which Minister Jaishankar also participated, we committed to contributing to and implementing the WPS Agenda, including its application to disaster risk reduction. We would like to consider how we can materialise cooperation with India on WPS.

In addition to these bilateral efforts, Japan and India are deepening cooperation globally, including through multilateral frameworks. At the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting last month, we reaffirmed our opposition to any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo by force or coercion, and our steadfast commitment to ward the realisation of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP).

The friendship between Japan and India is a unique one, as it is built on a common foundation of long historical ties and democracy. As the world faces various challenges and stands at a turning point in history, Japan and India, as partners in "co-creating" new solutions, are expected to make a significant contribution to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. I sincerely hope that my visit to India will mark a new page in the Japan-India relationship and lead to the further deepening of our partnership.

The writer is the Foreign Minister of Japan

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### A FAIR CHANCE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Things are not what they seem to be' (IE, August 25). Hindenburg Research's allegations against the Sebi chief should lead to some systemic improvement of the regulatory regime. Madhavi Puri Buch, the first person from the private sector to be appointed to head Sebi, and her husband have had successful careers in the corporate world. The biggest change required in the regulatory regime is to make all regulators periodically testify before multi-party committees of legislators as happens in the US. This would give them autonomy, and yet hold them accountable to the people. Buch deserves a fair chance to explain how her conduct carries no conflict of interest to a committee of elected representatives.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

### FOR BALANCE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Disparity among Dalits needs to be acknowledged' (IE, August 18). The Supreme Court has said that the sub-classification of SCs and STs has to be justified by quantifiable and demonstrable data by the states. The challenge for the states is to ensure that the benefits of reservation percolate down to those who need it most. The court has recognised that the cream layer among SCs and STs has availed reservation most often, even as the weakest sections continue to lag socially and economically. One hopes that states will make earnest efforts to remove intra-quota imbalances and disparities.

SS Paul, Nadia

### THE RIGHT STEP

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Back to the people' (IE, August 17). Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir are encouraging and an appreciable step towards the restoration of the democratic process. The union territory administration has taken multi-directional initiatives towards prosperity, especially in the development sector. However, the main challenge remains unemployment amongst the youth. The security concerns in the region need to be tackled effectively and jointly by politicians, agnostic of party loyalties. After the elections, the government should utilise the Centre's assistance to serve the people. J&K's statehood must be restored earlier. It does not bode well for a democracy that the UT has not had elections in 10 years.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi

### RISE OF MANGA

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'There's a story for everybody' (IE, August 18). It was refreshing to note that Indians' fascination with manga (Japanese comics) and anime (Japanese animation) is on the rise. As pointed out in the article, manga is filling the vacuum created by the decline of the traditional superhero genre of Marvel and DC. This trend is perhaps a harbinger for the future where the dominance of Western modes of thought is no longer a given. Superhero stories in the West glorify the individual vigilante, while Japanese comics have more layered storytelling. By reading more of the latter, one is able to develop a more nuanced understanding of such concepts as justice.

Animesh Rai, Noida



BALBIR PUNJ

## The aliens and the alienated

Congress governments have perpetuated a colonial prejudice against RSS

PAWAN KHERA'S ARTICLE, 'RSS smoke and mirrors' (IE, July 31), combines half-truths and twisted facts. The decision to lift the ban on government employees' participation in RSS activities is one of several steps the Modi government has taken to decolonise India since it assumed office in 2014.

The British government of the Central Provinces initiated the first move against the RSS in 1930 and again in 1932 when it issued a circular prohibiting government servants from joining the organisation. The colonial government, however, backtracked following huge public protests by various sections of civil society, including Congress members. The aliens departed on August 15, 1947, and were unfortunately replaced by the alienated. The Nehru government used the unfortunate assassination of Gandhiji on January 30, 1948, to perpetuate the colonial prejudice against the RSS. Not only was the Sangh banned, its leaders were arrested, workers persecuted, and there were reports of violence against suspected RSS sympathisers and Maharashtra Brahmins.

In his autobiography, *Living an Era* (Vol 2): 'The Nehru Epoch, From Democracy to Monocracy', veteran Congress leader and noted freedom fighter D P Mishra (who was also twice chief minister of Madhya Pradesh), has given a vivid description of this sordid episode of Indian history. According to Mishra, but for prompt police action, the entire RSS leadership, including the then RSS chief M S Golwalkar, would have been in

grave danger. He writes, "The Nagpur incidents were not isolated as more harrowing scenes of violence against Brahmins were enacted in many parts of Marathi-speaking areas... the troublemakers were mostly Congressmen."

While Khera has quoted Sardar Patel multiple times, surprisingly, he hasn't mentioned Nehru once. Nehru hated the RSS because he abhorred India's Hindu traditions. He was steeped in Marxist lore, which attributed all of India's ills to its Hindu character.

Nehru's distrust of the RSS ended only a little before he breathed his last in 1964. When China invaded India in 1962, Communists tried to sabotage Indian war efforts by giving strike calls. In contrast, the RSS stood by the government, organised blood donation camps, sent supplies to the army at the borders and helped nab anti-national elements.

India's humiliating defeat at the hands of the Chinese and the sterling role of the RSS during the war helped Nehru understand the organisation's mettle. The 1963 Republic Day parade included a proud contingent of RSS volunteers, smartly dressed in their uniforms of white shirts and khaki half pants.

Unlike what Khera would have us believe, Sardar Patel considered the RSS a patriotic organisation. On January 6, 1948, he said in Lucknow, "In the Congress, those who are in power feel that by virtue of authority they will be able to arrest the RSS. By 'danda' you not suppress an organisation. Moreover,

'danda' is meant for thieves and 'dulus'... After all, RSS men are not thieves and dulos. They are patriots. They love their country. Only their trend of thought is divergent. They have to be won over by Congressmen with love." Is Rahul Gandhi listening?

Khera alleges "grants and appointments going to people and organisations belonging to or close to the RSS." What about the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation (RGF)? Apart from accepting funds from the Chinese government, the organisation has received donations from the governments of Ireland, Luxembourg, and the European Union. The RGF has also received enormous contributions from multiple government institutions during the UPA rule, including the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund. Is Khera's case that only enterprises connected with the Nehru-Gandhi clan should have access to public funds?

Khera is right; the RSS had no written constitution till 1948. That didn't make it either "secretive" or undemocratic. The UK has no written constitution, but it is a vibrant democracy. The Congress has a constitution but dysfunctional inner-party democracy. It functions like a monarchy where leaders are chosen by dynastic succession.

In this part of the world, India is the only functioning democracy. Its pluralistic values and catholic ethos are steeped in the liberal traditions of Hinduism that celebrate diversity. Political opponents are rivals and not enemies, as is the wont with several ideologies

and creeds, where any dissent is blasphemy, punishable with death.

To appreciate this aspect of Indian democracy, one should read what Atal Bihari Vajpayee said in Parliament following Nehru's death. Vajpayee said, "...a dream has been shattered, a song silenced, a flame has vanished in the infinite... Bharat Mata is stricken with grief today — she has lost her favourite prince."

In 1966, after V D Savarkar's demise, Indira Gandhi paid tribute to him in these words, "It removes from our midst a great figure of contemporary India. His name was a byword for daring and patriotism. Mr Savarkar was cast in the mould of a classical revolutionary, and countless people drew inspiration from him." In 1970, Indira Gandhi also issued a commemorative stamp in Savarkar's honour.

On Gurjip Golwalkar's death in 1973, Indira Gandhi said in Parliament, "Another eminent personality, who was not a Member of this House, was Shri Golwalkar. He was a scholar and a man of fervent beliefs... We mourn the departure of distinguished sons of the country."

However, under Rahul Gandhi, it is a different Congress, heavily borrowing from the Left lexicon, Communist tactics and woke tool-kits. Khera's piece is in line with the changed ideological profile of his party.

Punj is the author of the recently published *Trust with Ayodhya: Decolonisation of India*





## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## STAKES ARE HIGH

Delhi must engage all political forces and institutions in Bangladesh to get a sense of its changing domestic dynamics

THE FIRST CONVERSATION between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the chief adviser to the new government in Bangladesh, Muhammad Yunus, last Thursday, underlines the imperative of geography that binds the two nations and the resilient foundation for good relations that has been laid in the last decade and more. Underlying the positive conversation was a recognition by both sides of the importance of putting behind some of the acrimony between Delhi and Dhaka triggered by the tumultuous conditions under which the old order collapsed in Bangladesh and Delhi's anxious response to it. On his part, PM Modi reiterated "India's support for a democratic, stable, peaceful and progressive Bangladesh" and underlined Delhi's "commitment to supporting the people of Bangladesh through various development initiatives." Yunus assured Modi "that the interim government would prioritise the protection, safety and security of Hindus and all minority groups in Bangladesh".

There is far too much at stake — in the form of economic interdependence and mutual security — for Delhi and Dhaka to allow suspicions and grievances to overwhelm the need to preserve a beneficial partnership. To be sure, there are lingering concerns in Delhi on how the new rulers came to power in Dhaka; and there is a deep sense of hurt in Bangladesh that India stood by the authoritarian rule of Sheikh Hasina until the very end. As reports in this paper from Dhaka in the last few days have highlighted, senior officials of the new regime as well as leaders of political parties that were opposed to Hasina fully understand the importance of the relationship with India and are open to looking ahead rather than continuing to bicker about the past. Yet, the two sides need to be mindful of the potential dangers to the re-engagement between Delhi and Dhaka.

India was right in providing refuge to Sheikh Hasina. But Delhi needs to impress upon the former PM the dangers of indulging in political activity from Indian soil. Dhaka, too, must avoid the temptation of embarking on legal processes to extradite her from India that will put Delhi in an awkward position. At stake is not just the question of managing this delicate moment in bilateral relations. It is, even more, about ending the bouts of violent retribution that have followed every major political change in Bangladesh. Bangladesh needs internal political reconciliation; it also needs a long overdue closure on the nation's disputed history and contested identity. The continuing mob violence in Dhaka undermines the lofty ideals of the student movement to build a new democratic order in Bangladesh. There are enough forces within and outside Bangladesh that are desperate to hijack the student movement for their own narrow political ends and drag the nation back into perpetual internal conflict. Undoubtedly, the new order in Bangladesh is fragile. Delhi must engage all political forces and institutions in the country, without prejudice, to get a deeper sense of its changing domestic dynamics and to guard against political surprises ahead. For now, though, helping Yunus succeed is India's best insurance against continuing instability in Bangladesh.

## POLICY, NOT COURT

Application of SC verdict on states taxing mining activities from 2004 has raised an unfounded spectre of retrospective taxation

ON JULY 25, a nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court ruled that states in India have the power to tax mining activities, and that their collecting "royalties" from mining leaseholders does not violate the Constitution. This ruling has wide-ranging ramifications not just for India's federal polity but also for the mining companies. The apex court was soon moved by mining companies with the aim of convincing it to apply this ruling prospectively — that is, starting 2024. Last week, the SC ruled that the ruling will be applicable from 2004. This has raised concerns about the spectre of retrospective taxation, but a close reading of the latest verdict suggests that this is not the case.

Retrospective taxation essentially implies raising a new tax demand for a time in the past when such a tax did not exist. But the facts of the current case are substantially different. In 1989, in the *India Cements* case, a seven-judge SC bench ruled that royalty is a tax and the states can't raise any such revenue demands. In 2004, in the *Kesoram* case, a five-judge bench revisited this issue and concluded that there was a "typographical error" in the *India Cements* judgment. While this judgment by a smaller bench could not overturn the 1989 ruling, it set the precedent for different states to raise demands for royalty payments from companies. In 2011, the SC took notice of the continuing confusion on the matter and sent it to a bigger nine-judge bench, the *Mineral Area Development Authority or MADA* case. The MADA ruling in July conclusively overturned the 1989 *India Cements* judgment. In its ruling last week, the same nine-judge bench chose to start the application of its ruling from 2004 — the date of the *Kesoram* case verdict. The court explained that it applies prospective overruling when a law is found to be ultra vires to the Constitution. But, "In the case of taxing statutes, such a declaration would make the State liable to refund all amounts collected under the invalid legislation."

While the SC has softened the financial setback for companies — they are required to pay only the principal amount, not the interest, and the payment can be staggered over 12 years — it is undeniable that this protracted judicial process and reversal of verdicts can undermine business confidence. However, the primary responsibility of creating a stable policy environment lies not with the court but with policymakers — both at the Centre and states. In this regard, it is all the more important that policymakers ensure that — as the sole dissenting voice, Justice BV Nagarathna, warned — this verdict does not lead to the "breakdown of the federal system" in the context of mineral development.

## FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



K SUJATHA RAO

ON AUGUST 16, this newspaper reported that the National Medical Commission has constituted a Task Force for the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Medical Students in response to the alarming incidents of 122 suicides by medical students in the last five years. The Commission's online survey showed that a whopping 27.8 per cent of undergraduate students had mental health conditions and 31.3 per cent of postgraduate students had suicidal thoughts. Clearly, mental health cannot be neglected anymore — it needs a calibrated policy.

The 2015-16 National Mental Health Survey showed that 10.6 per cent of the above 18-year-old population had such disorders — this includes 16 per cent of those in the productive age group of 30-49 years. The survey revealed that the lifetime morbidity affected 150 million people, with 1 per cent reporting high suicidal risk. The human resources required to deal with the condition and treatment facilities are woefully inadequate. This means that the treatment gap in the country is an extremely disquieting 80 per cent.

It has been apparent for some time now that mental health is low priority for policymakers. Against an estimated need of over Rs 93,000 crore for addressing this challenge, the Union government earmarked Rs 600 crore in 2019 (the allocation in the latest Budget is Rs 1,000 crore, less than 1 per cent of the health budget) of which 93 per cent was for tertiary institutions such as NIMHANS and the psychiatric departments of medical colleges, leaving Rs 40 crore for the District Mental Health Programme and other community-based initiatives. Of this, only Rs 2.91 crore was spent.

Poor policy attention is often ascribed to the "lack of political will". However, the more important reason is the substantial knowledge gap — "how-to" intervene and "when-to" intervene are often difficult challenges for policymakers. The rights-based National Mental Health Policy of 2014 and the Mental Health Act of 2017 did indicate a shift in policy towards ensuring that the mentally ill receive as much priority as those suffering from physical ailments and are treated with dignity. While the policy and the Act delineate a clear vision, there is a lack of clarity on implementation, the financial and physical resources required, and by when.



D RAJA

THE SUPREME COURT'S recent verdict on caste classification has led to a renewed debate. Many commentators tend to see caste and its effects as remnants of the past and hope that changes in attitude would hasten their end. It has taken much fight to situate caste as a political matter. It continues to be amongst the biggest determinants of the country's policy, economy, society. One may appreciate the SC's intent in expanding the benefits of quotas to the most marginalised. But the verdict has too many loopholes which will hinder the deepening of democracy.

Political equality for all was implemented in India's hierarchical society. The precedence accorded to political over social/economic inequality has meant the silencing of SCs and STs. To understand the gravity of the judgment, let us return to the Constitution's promise of liberty and equality.

Article 14 ensures equality for all irrespective of religion, gender, or caste. Yet, the Constitution drafters recognised that a lone provision will not overturn skewed power dynamics and affirmative action was deemed necessary. To tackle economic inequality, the Directive Principles of State Policy state that "the State shall, in particular, strive to minimise the inequalities in income". These provisions are meant to work in tandem.

Indian society, as Ambedkar pointed out, is a conglomeration of various caste groups organised hierarchically. The Brahmanical order is responsible for the exclusion and violence experienced by Dalits and Adivasis.

Operating parallelly, in recent years, is the myth of castelessness amongst savarnas — this is also behind the flawed logic of merit.

The abysmally low conviction rates under the SC/ST POA Act and the unfulfillment of existing provisions of reservation in employment and education at all levels are testaments to Brahmanical hegemony. Examining the effects of reservation on SCs and ST communities could be a democratic step. However, not answering questions related to the implementation of the current affirmative action policy is downright immoral.

Non-liberal policies have shrunk opportunities for secure employment. The government's apathy to this and its reluctance to adequately increase seats in public educational institutions is creating dissatisfaction because people continue to aspire to work in the public sector. The crisis in agriculture has pushed several communities to demand quotas.

## A health gap

Taskforce to study mental health of medical students is welcome. More interventions are needed

A common critique of India's policymaking system is the substantial bias towards what needs to be done and what is actually feasible and doable. Formulating strategic interventions requires a nuanced understanding of the challenges and constraints within which a system works. Such initiatives require consultation and dialogue among all stakeholders. India's success in stemming HIV-AIDS case offers lessons in the country's endeavours to tackle mental health-related challenges. To formulate policy and implement the National AIDS Control Programme's III's strategy, the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) sought the intervention of 20 Technical Resource Groups, with at least 250 representatives from diverse sections of society such as academia and those involved in sex work.

The HIV-AIDS story has lessons in four key realms. One, crafting strategic interventions based on epidemiological evidence drawn from a concurrently operating surveillance system. Two, the importance of modelling different options and the wide array of interventions required in different geographies among different target groups. These exercises provide data related to cost-effectiveness and supply chain information for scaling up interventions. Three, advocacy related to systemic issues and removal of stigma — here, parliamentarians, media, judiciary, police and other government departments were involved. Four, engagement with leaders of the community and civil society — this endeavour was allocated 25 per cent of the budget. The programme framers realised that without the active engagement of community leaders, the policy would not touch the lives of the most marginalised, especially the groups which are often stigmatised. The programme was centrally funded. Most importantly, however, the interventions were designed with active participation and dialogue with states and affected communities.

Such an approach is urgently needed to craft an implementable strategy for mental health patients — like HIV-AIDS patients, their condition is chronic, they require empathy from society and commitment from different government sectors. Mental health problems are often products of the times; Pressures and stress caused by poverty, growing inequalities

of opportunity, the frustrations due to lack of jobs, judgmental and discriminatory environment on account of barriers of caste, gender and religion are powerful triggers which, if left unaddressed, can keep recurring despite medication. In other words, biomedical approaches are not enough to treat mental health conditions.

Notwithstanding the policy vacuum, civil society has been active. Good quality research and solid evidence based on models of rehabilitation and care continuum of those with mental disorders is available, thanks to the pioneering efforts of groups such as Centre for Tamil Nadu, Sangath in Goa and Centre for Mental Health Law and Policy in Pune. Evidence-based strategies such as creating short-stay homes and emergency care centres and peer leader-led interventions need to be studied for scaling up. The Chennai-based Banyan, for instance, focuses on addressing the needs of an estimated 60 lakh homeless and abandoned women, who are mentally ill, through its innovative Home Again intervention. This is a comprehensive strategy consisting of five stages — awareness, rescue, treatment, rehabilitation, and reintegration with family. Public policy focuses on treatment. In contrast, the Banyan model continues to engage with people who have received treatment and helps them to develop the necessary social skills to get reintegrated with society and family.

It is time the government prioritises mental health and implements community-anchored and affordable interventions. In the ultimate analysis, public policy on mental health must be driven by a sense of justice. An autonomous implementing agency along the lines of NACO can help mobilise the required financial and human resources, balance institutional care with community involvement and enable the widening of the effort for addressing the varied needs of affected people at different levels. The constitution of a taskforce to study the mental health of medical students is a welcome measure. Governments at central and state levels, however, need to do more and address mental health challenges of all sections of people.

The writer is a Former Union Health Secretary

## THE UNMET PROMISE OF EQUALITY

SC verdict on sub-quota should spark conversation on 50 per cent limit, caste census

While allowing for sub-classification, the SC verdict did not touch upon the overall cap of 50 per cent reservations imposed by the Court itself. As many commentators have pointed out, the 50 per cent limit and the lack of quotas in the private sector are major reasons for resentment among deprived sections.

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resentment among deprived sections. The cap needs to be removed to ensure that backward sections get appropriate representation, including in the judiciary and private sector.

The SC should clear the confusion created by four of its judges who advocated the delineation of a creamy layer among SCs and STs. This has created fears that reservation will end. The basis for reservation for SCs and STs is historical discrimination. This could get attenuated if this criteria is introduced.

Moving ahead, the judiciary's inconsistent position on affirmative action should be addressed. While Tamil Nadu has 69 per cent reservation, the Bihar High Court struck down a similar extension in reservation in the state. The SC has held the 10 per cent EWS reservation as legal, despite it breaching the 50 per cent cap. State governments are best equipped to decide on quotas following scientific assessment of deprivation. The current data on social groups is inadequate. A caste census is necessary to measure the standing of different social groups and degree of representation. People's aspirations should be reflected in policymaking and scientifically gathered data should be the base for inclusive policies.

To usher in an era without caste discrimination, equality should be extended to all those who face marginalisation. The verdict should lead to introspection on current policies and their inadequacies must be ironed out.

The writer is General Secretary, CPI

## AUGUST 19, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### PROTESTS FOR NTR

ABOUT 170 MLA supporters of the former chief minister, N T Rama Rao, will be paraded before President Zail Singh on August 20 to demonstrate the majority support he still enjoyed and to expose the unconstitutional manner in which his ministry was dismissed. This was decided by an all-party action committee as part of a plan to get the "puppet government" of N Bhaskara Rao dismissed and the Rama Rao ministry installed immediately.

### 17 DEAD IN AP

THE DEATH TOLL in police firings on irate

mobs protesting against the dismissal of the N T Rama Rao ministry in several parts of Andhra Pradesh rose to 17, with four people succumbing to injuries and delayed reports of two more deaths in police firing in the Cuddapah district. This takes the number of persons killed in police firing on violent agitators to 119.

### KARNATAKA'S TURN?

THE KRANTI RANGA leader, S Bangarappa's talks with Congress (I) MPs during his current visit to the capital led to speculation in political circles on the possibility of a Kashmir and Andhra-type operation being repeated in Karnataka. Bangarappa said his current visit

had no political significance. Bangarappa had a meeting with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, some months ago when the question of the merger of the Kranti Ranga faction led by him with the Congress (I) had been discussed.

### SOUTH AFRICA POLLS

THE SELECTION COUNCIL has declared as "null and void" South Africa's "so-called new constitution" and the elections to be held along racial lines. The 15-member Council voted overwhelmingly in favour of a resolution sponsored by the eight-member non-aligned group "strongly" rejecting both the "constitution" and the "elections".







THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# America's climate election could prove pivotal for everyone else

Candidates Trump and Harris couldn't differ more in their approach to the crisis and that's reason enough for bated breath



**BARRY EICHENGREEN**

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Every US presidential election is consequential, but American voters face an unusually weighty decision in 2024. The outcome will have implications for US foreign policy, social policy and the integrity of the political system itself. But none of its consequences will be more profound or far-reaching than on global efforts to combat climate change.

As president, Donald Trump pulled the US out of the Paris climate agreement, while America under President Joe Biden rejoined it. Trump has vowed to expand oil and gas production, and his campaign has vowed that he will again withdraw the US from the Paris accord if he wins a second term. By contrast, US Vice-President Kamala Harris, the Democratic nominee, supported the Green New Deal, an ambitious congressional plan for tackling climate change, while serving as a Senator in 2019. As California's attorney general, she investigated the oil industry, securing a settlement from a subsidiary of British Petroleum for underground gas tank ruptures, as well as indictments against a Texas-based pipeline operator for an environmentally damaging oil leak.

Clearly, the positions of the two candidates on the climate crisis could not be more different. But one might ask: What's so catastrophic about a newly re-elected Trump pulling the US out of the Paris accord a second time, if the next president could, like Biden, simply rejoin it?

In fact, Trump's advisors seem well aware of that possibility. They are reportedly drafting executive orders that would remove the US not just from the Paris climate agreement, but also from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the foundation on which the Paris agreement is built.

Reversing that step would then require approval by the US Senate. And Senate approval cannot be taken for granted, given the ample representation in that chamber of oil- and gas-rich states.

Moreover, a Trump presidency would put other bilateral climate agreements, actual and potential, at risk. Currently, a prospective US-EU climate deal, intended to reconcile the respective economies' different approaches to reining in greenhouse-gas emissions, is in suspended animation, owing to the approach of the US election.

The EU has combined its cap-and-trade permit system with a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which is, in effect, a tax on the carbon content equivalent of imports from countries failing to put an adequate price on emissions. A carbon price being a non-starter in the US Congress, the Biden administration has instead proceeded with subsidies for low-carbon production of steel, aluminium and other products.



Trump is unlikely to persist with climate-friendly subsidies, much less with negotiations. The EU would then apply its CBAM to US exports in full. Inevitably, US retaliation would result.

Late last year, moreover, the US and China successfully negotiated the Sunnylands Statement affirming their commitment to work together to combat climate change. This commitment by the world's two largest economies to limit emissions was predicated, in each country's case, on the willingness of the other to do likewise. Significantly, China agreed for the first time to add non-carbon greenhouse gases—including methane, nitrous oxide and hydrofluorocarbons used in the manufacture of air-conditioners—to its prior agreements.

Trump, of course, has famously insisted that China "cheats" its international partners. If the US reneged on its climate commitments, China would have every incentive to do likewise. And Trump's proposed 60% tariff on all imports from China would be another nail in Sunnylands' coffin.

Harris, on the other hand, would probably seek to reinvigorate these negotiations, at least if her support for the Green New Deal is any guide. But she could also do more. She could demonstrate her independence from her predecessor by removing Biden's punishing tariffs on imports of Chinese

electric vehicles (EVs), lithium-ion batteries and solar panels (which also cover solar equipment made by Chinese firms in Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam).

Various rationales are offered for these tariffs. They secure domestic supply chains. They offset unfair Chinese subsidies and dumping. They give US factories time to move down their production learning curves and cut costs in key industries that would otherwise be dominated by a strategic rival. They hold out hope of creating additional manufacturing jobs.

These are worthy goals. But they come at the cost of impeding climate-change adaptation and abatement of emissions. Shutting out economical Chinese EVs encourages US motorists to stick with internal combustion engines. Taxing Chinese solar panels discourages American households from installing lightweight plug-in panels on their balconies, as Germans do.

Thus, President Harris, should she win this year's election, would face a dilemma. She would have to decide whether to prioritize domestic manufacturing jobs and economic independence from China over the fight against climate change. There is no avoiding the trade-off. But, then, this is the sort of question that presidents are elected to decide.

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# China should consider setting a formal inflation target of 2%

Faced with deflation, Beijing ought to empower its central bank



**DANIEL MOSS**

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China should let its central bank act freely to maintain price stability

The achingly slow pace of consumer price increases in China has led to amplified calls to juice the economy, and Beijing has taken some modest steps in the right direction. But a dramatic concept recently surfaced: elevating an economic icon of the 1990s. It's not the breakthrough expansion of that decade when the country's GDP soared. Instead, an influential advisor to the central bank suggested the adoption of a compulsory 2%-3% inflation target. This was an idea that spread quickly in the last decade of the 20th century. New Zealand was an early mover. Soon came the UK and Australia. When the euro began life a few years later, the European Central Bank was handed a price-busting mission with a 2% target. The US Federal Reserve coalesced around that figure, but delayed a formal pronouncement until 2012.

Didn't most policymakers who adhere to targets recently suffer from much higher inflation? Yes, and in large part, authorities failed to react sooner because price gains were consistently below their objective in pre-covid years. Central bankers wanted to be convinced that the surge in late 2021 was real. The point is that aiming for a particular number drives policy—both up and down. Fans say that it adds predictability over the long run. Households and businesses know the inflation goal, then they will adjust their behaviour accordingly.

Like all approaches, this isn't flawless. It beats punishing investors for a justifiably bullish perspective on the economy. China takes a dim view of the bond-market rally and has threatened to intervene to prevent yields dropping too low. Economists are being urged to refrain from using terms like "deflation." Colourful descriptions of market weakness can invite reproach.

China's problem right now is the opposite of inflation. Consumer prices slipped slightly in July. While any increase is good news at this point, broad deflationary forces still predominate. Factory-gate prices extended a decline that began in 2022. This is a long way from what a former People's Bank of China chief called a "central banker's dream": 2% inflation. Officials are clearly attracted by ideals behind a target. They have aimed for 3% in the past, though more as a ceiling, not necessarily something that must be met.

President Xi Jinping gets a lot of economic advice. Beijing is urged—or admonished—to boost consumer spending, rein in exports, curb overcapacity and clean up local government debt. And please tackle the risk of deflation and be less timid in cutting interest rates. China has gone from

guaranteed superior performance to being stuck with poor outcomes. Leaders typically baffle at what they see as Western critiques aimed at hampering the world's second-largest economy, and some of them do fit that description.

That's what makes comments from Huang Yiping, dean of the National School of Development at Peking University and a member of the PBOC's monetary policy committee, so intriguing. While careful not to mention the D-word, Huang is clearly alive to the dangers of sluggish demand and floated the 2%-3% target. "The economy is now easy to cool, but difficult to heat up," Huang Yiping said. "If it really falls into the low inflation trap, the consequences will be serious."

A potential stumbling block is politics. Central-bank independence tends to go hand-in-hand with defined inflation objectives. If you are directing officials to hit goals, better they be free to do so without fretting about the political considerations that beset finance ministers and legislators. An added advantage is that, if policy fails, the central bank can be hung out to dry. An independent anything in Beijing is problematic; Xi has consolidated power like no leader since Mao Zedong.

But that shouldn't detract from the merit of the idea. There's also room for nuance. The Bank of England, for example, was given an inflation objective in 1992, five years before the UK's Tony Blair government bestowed autonomy. Politics isn't divorced from borrowing costs even in the contemporary era. In Australia, the top bureaucrat at its Treasury is on its Reserve Bank board, and two respected former RBA chiefs have argued against changes that would remove the ability of the Cabinet to veto decisions. US Fed policymakers are wary of getting Congress offside. Former Fed chair Ben Bernanke took soundings on the target in 2009, and met with resistance. Sarah Binder and Mark Spindell wrote in their book *The Myth of Independence: How Congress Governs the Federal Reserve*, Bernanke would need to wait for more favourable conditions.

An inflation target for China along the lines of goals set elsewhere is a stretch. The substance of the idea shouldn't be. Anemic prices aren't great for China and weak on the global economy.

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THEIR VIEW

# It's we who nurtured this examination coaching crisis

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India's coaching and tuition industry has ballooned into a multi-billion-dollar enterprise, and we are acting shocked as if its rise was unexpected. The truth is, coaching centres, medical entrance and other exam tutorials have been around for decades, and we as a society have actively nurtured this beast. Yet, we now recoil as if it's something beyond our control.

Let's be honest, are we not being blasé when we push our children toward what we perceive as socially prestigious fields like engineering and medicine even if their true interests lie elsewhere? We all have stories of families that borrow or pledge to send their kids to these coaching centres, driven by the hope that "they will settle down well in life better than us." It's easy to blame the system, but the truth is that we are the system. We've turned education into a high-stakes race. Should we be astonished that the coaching industry is thriving?

Are we not as a society singularly responsible for creating generations of formally

educated but not job-ready participants in India's workforce? Should we not take due credit for instilling in our younger generation the false hope that education, as we've structured it, will solve their life challenges and livelihood needs? We have created a monster called tuitions, turning it into a full-fledged industry. And now demanding government regulation of this sector defies logic. It assumes that regulatory frameworks are a panacea for all ills. Have we really learnt nothing from the fact that Indian education already suffers under the tight grip of regulators and regulatory elites?

Education regulations in India have largely failed by focusing on control rather than quality, creating an environment where bureaucratic oversight has taken precedence over ensuring that students receive meaningful and relevant education. These regulations have done more than just stifle innovation. They have actively served the interests of certain elites whose institutions have benefited from regulatory capture.

By imposing everything that has little to do with real-world educational needs, the system allowed well-connected institutions to flourish under the guise of compliance, while genuine educational reform got sidelined. This has led to a proliferation of medi-

ocre institutions that meet regulatory requirements on paper but offer little in terms of actual learning outcomes. The result is a deeply flawed system where the employability of graduates is poor, Indian universities struggle to compete globally, and inequities in access to quality education persist—benefitting few at the expense of many.

Let's not forget how local political stakeholders in the 1980s used education as a means to wash their 'black' money into white, using this as a life-long annuity scheme. This era saw the mushrooming of engineering and medical colleges and 'institutions' built on the foundations of capitulation fees and management seat sales.

Many of these legacy institutions have done everything they can to cover themselves in glory and seek respectability. They've been generously granted university status, with influential figures in the country eager to be associated with their events and advertisements.

Is it any wonder then that we are mired in

academic and intellectual poverty? Few of our educational institutions are counted among the world's best in either intellectual accomplishment or the creation of intellectual property. Our children look to the West for quality education and opportunities because we have failed them at home.

## Unhealthy expectations of our children have created a monster and we have the nerve to act surprised

The psychological toll on students ensnared in the relentless cycle of exams and coaching is troubling. The constant pressure to excel and meet the demands of coaching centres leads to severe stress, anxiety and burnout. Students endure sleepless nights and overwhelming workloads, driven by an ever-present fear of failure. This toxic environment stifles their natural curiosity and enthusiasm, replacing it with dread and inadequacy. The emotional cost is high, with rising rates of depression and anxiety among these young learners.

As a society, we merely applaud movies like *Kota Factory* and *Three Idiots* that highlight such issues, offering momentary empathy. But we fail to address systemic problems. It with dread and inadequacy. The emotional cost is high, with rising rates of depression and anxiety among these young learners.

Our collective response is to acknowledge the crisis fleetingly and move on, neglecting the urgency of meaningful change.

The meteoric rise of edtech promised to democratize education. Yet, it has paradoxically entrenched the very coaching culture it sought to disrupt, turning the pursuit of knowledge into a relentless race. In striving to level the playing field, these platforms have inadvertently deepened the cycle of competition and pressure.

The coaching and tuition sector is not some external enemy—it is a problem of our own making. The relentless pursuit of academic success through coaching places a heavy economic burden on middle-class families, often pushing them into financial strain or debt, while returns on investment in education get increasingly elusive.

It reflects our collective failure to prioritize genuine learning over the pursuit of high-stakes exams and societal prestige. To dismantle this monstrosity, we must confront the uncomfortable truth that we are both the creators and sustainers of this flawed system. Only then can we begin to chart a course toward an education system that truly serves the needs of our children, rather than perpetuating a cycle of pressure, rote learning and unfulfilled potential.





## From El Niño to La Niña: Is respite at last in sight?

After a sweltering summer, recent downpours hinted of a sudden flip of this Pacific see-saw. Climate change is also at work, though, so India's rainfall picture is getting more complex

The scorching summer that India just trudged past was yet another reminder of a rapidly warming Earth, with temperatures soaring to almost 50° Celsius in one of our longest heatwave spells. The country logged more than 40,000 suspected cases of heatstroke, with a death toll of over 100 people. But 2024 stands out for another reason: a shift in the Pacific Ocean's see-saw of warm and cool water along the equator, a phenomenon that distorts weather around the globe. An El Niño phase that began in mid-2023 gave Asia drier weather than usual, with weak rains witnessed in the early part of the monsoon. By end-May 2024, however, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) noted that this Pacific oscillation had turned neutral, and now it forecasts the likely development of its other extreme, La Niña, towards the end of August. The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has put a number to it. It predicts a 66% chance of La Niña emerging during September to November. The way this year's monsoon roared back this month from sparse to plentiful, though, makes one wonder if the awaited tilt has already occurred.

Under the sun's glare, oceanic water is always warm close to the surface around the equator, but the eastern end of an ocean can still be cooler than the other (and vice-versa). Under usual conditions, the Pacific's warm water moves east slowly along with the planet's rotation. But equatorial trade winds can blow it west. In a neutral scenario, these forces balance each other. If trade winds weaken, which happens periodically, then the Earth's spin prevails and the ocean's warm water slops towards the Americas, leaving a great bulk of

water on the Asian side cooler—and with less cloud formation and thus relatively dry. That's El Niño. Should those winds gain force, though, the warmth gets blown Asia's way instead, causing lower air pressure, more evaporation and heavier rainfall in our part of the world. This is La Niña. Something similar happens in the Indian Ocean, where 'dipole,' which measures the heat gap between its east and west, must also be kept track of. It's more complex, but also seen to make less of a difference. An August IMD press release states that it found the dipole neutral, a reading it expects will endure through the monsoon season. The IMD's map of cumulative rainfall from 1 June to 14 August shows that most of India got either normal or excess rain after El Niño ended. Our recent downpours may have been on account of the vacuum effect of an expansive low-pressure zone created by a scorching summer, rather than a sudden shift in the Pacific see-saw. So, has climate change become the dominant cause of warped weather?

Maybe it always was the bigger factor. The 2021 report of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was "virtually certain" that global warming would impact ocean conditions this century. With "medium confidence," it also held that El Niño and La Niña will gain in frequency. Only 10 instances have been recorded of a flip within a year since 1950, but its rarity seems in decline. Since Indian rainfall gets affected, complex interactions could make projections of farm output, food prices and overall inflation less reliable. Our rain-deficit anxiety has been washed away before the start of La Niña, which now looks likely to aid the rabi crop. Thank warped weather for small mercies.

## The EU's border tax poses major challenges for Indian businesses

The compliance burden will be heavy and we must ponder how carbon pricing here can lighten it



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The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) requires all EU imports to bear the same cost for each tonne of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emitted as those being produced in the EU. Initially confined to six sectors—iron and steel, aluminium, cement, fertilizers, electricity and hydrogen—it will eventually expand its coverage.

For India, the immediate impact is on two sectors: aluminium and steel. The EU is a major destination for these, accounting for about 27% of India's aluminium and 38% of steel exports.

The CBAM's current phase, which runs till 31 December 2025, is focused on detailed data reporting of both direct and indirect emissions. The former are those generated during the production processes of CBAM goods, including of relevant precursors. Indirect emissions cover the production of electricity that is consumed during the production of CBAM goods.

CBAM levies commencing 1 January 2026 will focus only on direct emissions. Their impact on aluminium from India is expected to be in the range of 7-10% ad valorem duty. However, when indirect emissions are included, the impact could potentially be over 70%, effectively closing the EU as a market for Indian aluminium exports. This is because in India, aluminium smelters run on coal-fired electricity. Greener sources of producing aluminium by

way of hydro or gas-based electricity account for far fewer emissions. But shifting to renewable energy is a challenge in India, given the need for round-the-clock power, constraints on the availability of alternative sources such as hydro, gas and nuclear energy, and unviable battery-storage options.

There is also a significant ripple effect of the CBAM, even in the current 'report only' phase. Non-EU customers are demanding CBAM declarations from Indian manufacturers as further value is added to imports from these countries and supplied to EU markets. While the Indian government has indicated that it would be seeking waivers from the EU for Indian MSMEs, there is no mechanism within EU's CBAM regulation for this.

Despite the EU's attempt to extol the virtues of CBAM—that it will nudge countries to decarbonize production—the reality is different. The EU's system penalizes imported emissions at its own rates. If product A produced in the EU and product B made in India each yields the same quantity of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (say, 10 tonnes), CBAM requires the importer of product B to pay EU authorities the difference in price-per-tonne of CO<sub>2</sub> paid in India and that determined by the EU for its producers. Not only will this make such imports less competitive, ironically, it will result in reverse financing of the EU's carbon budget by developing countries.

While there are larger questions about how this upends the balance achieved under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and potentially flouts WTO rules, pressure is building up on businesses to put in place mechanisms to comply. At a basic operational level, clarity is needed on several aspects.

Arriving at a carbon price in India: India does not have an explicit price for CO<sub>2</sub> right now, but its regulatory framework addresses CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in ways that place an implicit price on emissions. This includes Renewable Purchase

Obligations (RPOs) by electricity distribution licensees (the compliance territory for which has steepened), energy efficiency by notified industries (aluminium and steel included), a coal cess, taxes on mining, etc. Most businesses have sustainability plans. We need a clear methodology for assessing the resultant implicit price of CO<sub>2</sub>. While it is unclear whether the EU will allow adjustments based on such implicit carbon price assessments, it could mitigate the price burden of CBAM.

Data privacy and protection: At the end of the reporting period, the EU will have access to a minefield of installation-level emissions data from all over the world. Most of this is business sensitive data, access to which necessarily needs to be restricted.

Alignment of the CBAM with India's CCTS: India is in the process of developing its own carbon credit trading system (CCTS), which can be an important framework for carbon pricing in India. Whether it subsumes or subsists with existing mechanisms (such as RPO targets) remains to be seen. It would be useful to consider ways in which this can align with the CBAM, and whether this can simplify compliance.

Addressing these, however, are only stop-gap arrangements. The UK will also shortly start implementing its version of the CBAM, largely along EU lines. Both the UK and EU CBAMs may nullify the benefits of any tariff reduction and market access under free-trade agreements being negotiated with India. While the immediate impact may be on aluminium and steel, CBAM's applicability to other sectors will raise risks for Indian businesses.

Certainty and predictability are needed for both the climate and business climate. Mechanisms like CBAM arm-twist countries to follow only one jurisdiction's vision aligned with its own industrial interests. Such unilateralism does a disservice to both climate justice and economic logic.

These are the authors' personal views.



JUST A THOUGHT

I have no colour prejudices nor caste prejudices nor creed prejudices. All I care to know is that a man is a human being—that is enough for me; he can't be any worse.

MARK TWAIN

## India's Supreme Court is right: Exclude creamy layers

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoupled'

No other nation describes its elite as "creamy layer" because "cream" is enough to convey the idea of a top layer. But this is the least of India's flaws. A few days ago, India tried to reform an injustice within its social justice programme when a Supreme Court bench said that caste is not a homogenous entity, and that the "creamy layers" of oppressed castes should not be entitled to the same benefits as the poor among them. One of the judges said, "Putting the children of the parents from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who on account of benefit of reservation have reached a high position... and the children of parents doing manual work... in the same category would defeat the Constitutional mandate."

Across the world, when a disadvantaged community is given special treatment, the elite among them, who might even be better off than the traditional elite, are the first to benefit. It is a way of the world; there are no villains in this. This was, in fact, an argu-

ment against political quotas for women. It is hard to dispute that the way reservations have worked so far is by taking seats from upper castes and giving them to the privileged among oppressed castes. The government thought about the Supreme Court's opinion and decided that it does not want to antagonize 'creamy layers' of Dalits, which is a term that refers to those who were traditionally oppressed by the Hindu caste system, including 'outcastes' who were not assigned any caste. The government may have practical reasons, but its decision is not morally sound.

The Dalit community has its own caste structure, where top Dalit castes treat lower castes poorly. For instance, they don't intermarry and some high-castes do not even dine with lower castes. I once met a Dalit activist who had eaten in a Valmiki household in a Gujarat village and was therefore denied entry to a Vankar village. It appears that victims of evil imitate the same evil to feel that they at least have something going. It is even possible that modern Brahmins have a stronger sense of caste-equality today than some upper sub-castes among Dalits. The reason why rural Dalits flee to the city is not only to escape the oppression of traditional high castes, but also from other Dalits

who consider themselves superior to them. In Mumbai, my maid, who was an Ambedkarite, told me that her community would not mingle with Valmikis. The poorest Dalits are so choiceless that they often have to perform activities that human beings should not be doing anymore, like cleaning filthy toilets and sewage clog-ups.

Quotas in government institutes and jobs have helped some Dalits who had a good head-start get better off. In some states, a few sub-castes have fared better than others. As a result, there is a lot of resentment at the bottom, from where demands have arisen for sub-categorized quotas. There have been demands that whole sub-castes of Dalits be given preferential treatment. Reservation within reservation. But then, a sub-caste that is not doing well in Maharashtra might be doing very well in Karnataka. This is a reason why the Supreme Court thought it prudent to consider the economic creamy layer a category in itself exclude it from reservations.

People who oppose this idea are usually privileged Dalits. What they say is that economic progress is not a sign that they are like anyone else. They say they still face social discrimination. Even highly placed civil servants and police officers do. They may have cracked a difficult exam, but they find it hard to rise. The social contacts that come easy to others don't come to them. Even so, why should their children benefit at the expense of the children of a man who crawls into manholes for a living?

There could be an argument that being middle class is a fragile condition: one misfortune can push a family into poverty. But then, how would quotas change middle-class fragility? Also, India's depth of poverty is such that everyone who is lucky has to make way for those who are not.

But there is one sound moral defence for the creamy layer's contention that they should not be denied quota seats. Social justice occurs not out of the goodness of people, but as a by-product of friction between

creamy layers. The second rung hits back at the top rung by demanding moral concessions for all, and then everyone benefits.

Quotas for Dalits too was a battle won for them by their elites. It is time for their elites to let go of the benefits. But then, this departure may result in the elite losing the heart to fight other battles for the community. They may assimilate into the urban mainstream and increasingly identify less with their caste. The Dalits would then have to groom a new elite that cares for them.

Reservations have helped many Dalits escape poverty, but its effect has been limited in transforming social prestige. To feel lower than others is a form of poverty, and in that, the policy has not helped because of the powerful nature of a banal kind of evil.

The promise of reservations has been that Dalits will be able to break into the clubs of old elites. But then, there are very few clubs that can change destinies. For example, civil services can do that. Maybe to an extent. It's too, but even their powers are waning. Clubs are prestigious because they were clubs of the upper class. What ends prestige is equality. The moment a poor tribal has the means to join a club, it begins to lose its power to transform its destiny. The doors of social life are ajar, but are still held by gatekeepers.

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES



INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

— Ramnath Goenka

## DEMOCRACY GETS A CHANCE IN THREE-PHASE J&K ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

A gentle breeze of democracy has finally started wafting across J&K with the Election Commission of India announcing assembly polls in three phases, ending October 1. It is expected to strengthen after the new assembly is constituted and J&K's statehood restored. The previous assembly was dissolved on November 21, 2018 following the collapse of the PDP-BJP government led by Mehbooba Mufti, when the state was placed under central rule. The security situation appears much better now with reduced militancy though it picked up in the Jammu region in the past few weeks. Terror merchants and separatists have been put out of business, local hiring of youth by mujahideen outfits is dipping, all institutions are functioning normally with no strike calls or stoning, tourism is booming, and the valley just witnessed the most peaceful Amarnath yatra in recent memory. Holding elections in three phases as against five in the previous assembly polls 10 years ago itself is an index of the improvement in the overall security grid. Assembly elections could have easily been conducted simultaneously with the general elections a few months ago when polling was held in five phases in J&K, had the Election Commission been confident of pulling it off successfully.

However, the price J&K had to pay for the turnaround was staggering. Even fundamental rights were extinguished in 2019, making it a global human rights hotspot before the curbs were slowly eased. J&K's special powers under Articles 370 and 35A were smoked out by Parliament, and the state bifurcated into two Union Territories. The Supreme Court took an inordinately long time to adjudicate on the abrogation of Section 370 and imposed the September 30 deadline for fresh assembly polls. The record turnout in this year's general elections showed people's urge to participate in the democratic exercise. They defeated big hitters like Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti while electing jailed separatist Engineer Rashid. Polling percentage in the assembly elections is expected to go up further as local issues like development, prices and jobs have more resonance among the voters than national ones.

As many as 90 seats will be up for grabs. With the polls being held under international glare, the challenge for the Election Commission is to make it truly free and fair. Powerful regional parties forcing multi-cornered contests add an element of uncertainty to the whole exercise and could leave the field open for post-poll maneuvering.

## RUPEE DEPRECIATION SHOWS CRACKS IN ECONOMY

THE fall of the rupee against the US dollar has been accentuated in the recent months with visible cracks in some key economic indicators. The local currency is within kissing distance of the 84-a-dollar mark. The rupee has depreciated against the dollar by almost a percent in the current calendar year but it may not breach the 84 level in FY25 with the Reserve Bank of India keeping a close watch. The weakness in the currency reflects the gathering storm clouds over the Indian economy. Indian exports have been slowing for quite some time and so have FDI inflows. In the current financial year till July, exports were 6% lower than the same period previous year. This is despite the fact that services exports showed a 7% growth. FY24 saw foreign direct investment in the country declining by 3.5%. Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) have been pulling out money from the country thanks to an overheated equity market in India. In August so far, FPIs have pulled out \$2.5 billion from Indian equities. Bank of Japan's decision to increase rates has also added to some of the capital outflow, neutralising the impact of inclusion of government bonds in international bond indices. The constant fear of surge in oil prices due to geopolitical tension will continue to put pressure on the rupee. In FY24, India's oil import bill was contained by heavily discounted Russian crude oil. But FY25 will be different, as discounts on Russian oil have come down significantly.

India's central bank, the Reserve Bank of India, has been intervening in the currency market to moderate rupee depreciation. However, RBI has its own limits despite having at its disposal a strong foreign reserve, which has crossed \$675 billion. A weaker rupee would further delay RBI's easing of its monetary policy as the central bank generally adopts a hawkish stance to defend the currency. India's merchandise trade deficit in July has already touched a 9-month high of \$23.5 billion. A weak rupee makes imports more expensive, and though exports benefit from a weaker domestic currency, if they do rise commensurate with imports, the trade deficit situation could further aggravate. Mind you, India's \$5-trillion economy target also gets farther away with the fall in value of the Indian rupee.

### QUICK TAKE

#### WEIRD vs FREAK SEASON

MONDAY onwards, thousands of US Democratic party delegates will descend on Chicago to anoint their pick for November's presidential election. The choice of Kamala Harris has already been decided by a phone vote. What remains is the delicate dance of Joe Biden formally handing the reins to Harris while giving her enough space to mark a policy identity of her own. Apart from the joyous jamboree that is meant to enthuse the party workers, Indian small-d democrats can take another leaf off the American system. Even if the conclusion is foregone, the candidate will need to spell out her policies. There is no place for complacency.

GROWTH was fine until it wasn't, at least according to financial markets. A few economic indicators underperformed expectations, and stock market and bond markets moved to the depressive end of manic. Pundits cooed about 'corrections' and then panicked.

In truth, growth has been slowing for decades. A global average GDP growth rate of anything around 3 percent is now considered acceptable. This compares to 5 percent between 1950 and early 1970s and 3-4 percent subsequently. Recent growth is also of poorer 'quality'. It is volatile, unevenly distributed and the drivers are unsustainable.

Since the 2008 global financial crisis, activity has been driven by loose monetary policy (low zero and even negative interest rates) and fiscal largesse, made up of tax cuts and spending on programmes that range from the rational to the quixotic. Lower interest and corporate tax rates explain probably half the real growth in corporate earnings over that period.

Global growth became unbalanced and excessively dependent on emerging markets like China and India, which have structural issues. Activity was based on cheap money-driven speculation into real estate and 'growth' stocks, such as the 'magnificent seven' focused around emergent technologies. This inflated financial asset prices and the paper wealth of higher income sections that own them, but inequality worsened. GDP per capita increases in many advanced economies are lacklustre.

There is an event-driven element, such as the rebound from the contraction of the pandemic or one-off spending on wars and disasters. True growth relies on four fundamental factors now in decline.

First, demographics—rising population and increased participation in the workforce drives activity. The world's population doubled twice in the 20th century. It will not do so once in this century. Population growth in advanced economies is slow. It is largest in geographies where poverty and lack of opportunities mean their contribution is marginal. The global population is also ageing, slowing spending and increasing the claim on income for health and aged care. There is still scope to increase workforce participation in some nations, but that depends on employment opportunities and cultural issues. Urbanisation benefits have slowed.

Second, rising trade underpins activity increasing markets and access to labour and resources. With most countries now integrated to some degree into the global system, that too has run its course. Concerns about sovereignty, security, domestic jobs

Growth has been slowing for decades. Recent growth is also of poorer 'quality'. It is volatile, unevenly distributed and the drivers are unsustainable. But this has been ignored across the globe

## ECONOMIC RISKS HINDERING GLOBAL GROWTH

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STOCK PHOTO

loss and immigration are accelerating trade barriers, which will impede cross-border commerce and skills transfer. This will be felt especially in emerging markets that are reliant on both to drive development.

Third, as is now frequently cited, productivity improvements have slowed as major one-off gains from improvement in workplace skills and tech have diminished.

Fourth, innovation is waning. A new industrial revolution, despite consultants and futurists' pretty presentation slides, is not on the horizon. New technologies do not represent the quantum leap that characterised earlier episodes that introduced electricity, internal combustion engines, modern communication, entertainment, petroleum, chemical and computing.

New fadish technologies are not dra-

matic changes and are unlikely to create the much-sought-after virtuous cycle that creates large industries and well-paid employment. Most innovation is focused on marketing and selling existing products or amassing us to death. Smartphones and internet connectivity that feed cheap narcissism will not address urgent problems such as new resources, improving crop yields, cheap clean energy and its storage.

Many technologies such as robotics actually reduce living standards as it replaces most workers. Innovation now is about the enrichment of a few people who control the technology at the expense of the vast majority, entrenching and increasing inequality. The flagging effects of traditional growth drivers was what drove the world to financialisation and debt, which is not durable.

## THE PEACE WE FIND AMIDST FOOD WARS

RENUKA NARAYANAN

FAITHLINE



ON 78th Independence Day just went by. Each of us had our own thoughts about the state of India, what's good and what needs fixing. I found myself thinking of the hidden drama in our lives and how I was given peace amid food wars that occasionally flare up.

As a Hindu today I don't care who eats what. My parents brought me up on the principle of 'loko bhinnam ruchi', the Sanskrit equivalent of the Latin maxim 'de gustibus non est disputandum' (there is no disputing over taste). Whereas if we as children said 'Chhe! Thoo!' to any food, we heard a steady stream of mildly delivered but wearying reproaches on how disappointing it was to find such judgemental people in one's own family at such a young age.

Of course, there was a denouement. One fateful summer day in the Bombay of our childhood, a bottle of sarsaparilla pickle from deepest South India made its way to the table. The moment it was opened, my father said, "Take it away! It smells like cockroaches!" My mother was not amused. Needless to say, we watched this development with great interest. A precedent had been set. Although we were foolish children in many ways, we could tell a 'Thoo' and certainly a 'Chhe' when we heard one.

This milestone event in our little lives altered family politics forever. We were now empowered by example, and although the powers that were tried to reassert authority by saying it was different for grown-ups and children had to eat everything on their plate, everyone knew the balance of power had shifted. But the message of the *maahatmi kizhangu*, as sarsaparilla is called in Tamil, stayed. It was perfectly acceptable to not like certain foods. But it was unacceptable to make fun of others or think badly of them for liking them.

My mother, a committed vegetarian and devout Hindu, baked us cakes and pies, made egg sandwiches with mayonnaise and happily went out to Chinese and Mughlai restaurants with her non-veg colleagues from Calcutta, Shillong and Delhi. They valued their friendship more than food rules inherited by accident of birth. The meat-eaters never mocked my mother for being vegetarian while she had no opinion on their diet. It was all 'live and let live'.

When our trusted family doctor said I was too frail and apologetically recommended meat broth, my practical mother did not think twice. With the advice of Mrs Khan, our neighbour in Bombay, the required

kitchen equipment was set up in a corner of our long balcony and meat soup became my rasm. When I was officially declared fit, the equipment was simply given away and no more was said, although mutton-and-egg rolls from Akbarally's famous shop would turn up now and then as my mother was not entirely sure about my health.

This very mother was devoted to Devi. She recited the 'Mahishasura Mardini Stotram' and 'Mahalakshmi Ashtakam' every



When my father complained about the sarsaparilla pickle's smell even though we were scolded for such actions, our family politics changed and a new message was in place. It was perfectly okay to not like certain foods. But it was unacceptable to make fun of others for liking them

day and observed the 'Varalakshmi Nombu' (vrat and puja) with sincerity during Shravan Shuklapaksh. So I too grew up being easy-going about food choices. You could be a devout person whatever your diet. And I would sooner eat sarsaparilla than imagine the Universal Mother spurned my mother for her priorities.

From food, it was a short mental step to water. It's generally agreed in India that drinking water from an earthen pot rather than the fridge makes better wellness sense. Along with the chemical contribution of the baked earth to the quality of water and throat-friendly temperature of water from a traditional earthen pot, there is so much cultural romance attached to it. The simple, everyday act of drinking a

glass of water (ideally eight) thus gets invested with great charm.

All the East loves jasmine. Jasmine, that blooms so profusely in our land, value-adds to the pleasure of water from an earthen pot. My grandmother floated fresh jasmine flowers in the water every day when they were in bloom. That delicately perfumed water is a beautiful childhood memory.

Everyone says 'jug' today but I found north and south India had different words for the earthen pot. The north says *surahi* for a spouted water pot ('su' is Turkish for 'water') while the south says *kudam* or *kazam*. Persian for water pot and used for jugs made of glass, plastic and stainless steel.

The word 'kudam' naturally leads us to Edward Fitzgerald's 19th-century English translation of the 12th-century Persian quatrain called the 'Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam'. In Fitzgerald's version are nine verses called 'Kuzma Nama' (Book of Pots) describing Omar Khayyam's visit to a potter's shop and how some pots 'spoke' verses with philosophical content. Later generations have severely critiqued Fitzgerald's translation. However, his verses were too ardent an element of our own texts to do away, especially poignant verses from the Kuzma Nama like, "Then said another, Surely not in vain, My Substance from the common Earth was 'ta'en, That He who subtly wrought me into Shape, Should stamp me back to common Earth again."

The image of 'pot and potter' as 'man and Creator' dramatised here is a universal idea. It found a powerful expression in India through our classical name for a potter, 'Pratigrahi' (All-Father). So, when humans 'made of clay', consisting mostly of water, drink from a *surahi* or *kudam* to replenish themselves, the philosophy, poetry and ritual theatre has a perfection all its own. It could also be our personal gesture of gently rebuking our 'Creator' in Fitzgerald's words: "Oh, Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make, And who with Eden didst devise the Snake; For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man is blacken'd, Man's Forgiveness give - and take!"

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### MAILBAG

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#### Eco audits

Ref: Redefining the nature-human contact (Aug 18). The environmental crisis faced today is multipronged. It would be good to make 'eco audit' mandatory for corporates and other businesses. This would be a better initiative than a lifetime photohoot planting a sapling on special occasions like the World Environment Day. Krishnaprasad S, Edappally

#### Data abuse

Ref: A glass half-full or half-empty? (Aug 18). With the available data we can categorically say that factors like life expectancy and economic growth have increased substantially since independence. But the absence of sound data is an impediment to making correct decisions. Dharmanjan A K, Thalassery

#### Doctors' strike

Ref: Doctors' strike gains nationwide traction (Aug 18). Healthcare services across the country were severely hit as doctors halted non-emergency services in a hecatomb across the country. This strike was necessary to show their solidarity against the gruesome rape and murder of a trainee doctor in Kolkata. P Vitor Selvaraj, Palayamkottai

#### SC intervention

The Supreme Court taking suo motu cognisance of the Kolkata rape case is a small victory. After the Kolkata police's insignificant progress in the case, the high court intervened to hand over the case to the CBI. The SC's intervention will definitely be crucial considering the many attempts to subdue this case. Sumit Saha, Delhi

#### Another assault

The dust has not settled on the gruesome Kolkata hospital gang rape and murder when news of yet another lady doctor assaulted, this time from Mumbai, has further escalated the apprehensions of the already anguished medical community. But the onus is on the public as well to ensure that healthcare providers are able to discharge their duties without having to fear for their personal safety. C Balaraman, Shoranur

#### Common good

The news about people razing down a Kaliappan temple in a Vellore village because people from Scheduled Castes were allowed to participate in the temple festival was painful to read. What is there to feel proud of one's non-emotional service to the community should not be discrimination based on castes in places of worship. God is common to all and one's birth should never be considered as a factor for worship. Prema P, Thanjavur