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[OUR TAKE]

Quad woos the Indo-Pacific

Wilmington Summit pushes cooperation and collaboration as a way to fight China's coercion

Security and stability across the Indo-Pacific was very much in focus as the four members of Quad — India, Australia, Japan, and the US — agreed on a range of measures to bolster their cooperation in areas ranging from infrastructure to health care and maritime security to digital connectivity. Even in non-security domains, much of the collaboration between the four players is aimed at giving nations across the Indo-Pacific region an opportunity to partner.

What the various statements and fact sheets issued after the Quad Leaders' Summit in Wilmington left unsaid was that most of these measures aim to counter China's aggressive behaviour, be it in the South China Sea or South Asia or the waters off Japan's territories. If there were any doubts in this regard, they would have been dispelled after US President Joe Biden was caught on a hot mic telling the other leaders that China continues to "behave aggressively, testing us all across the region" and that President Xi Jinping wants to buy diplomatic space to "aggressively pursue China's interest".

While Quad leaders have sought to play down the military aspect of their cooperation, the four countries are now part of an annual naval exercise that has grown in complexity. At Saturday's summit, the leaders unveiled new measures that will enhance interoperability between their coast guard forces, expand the maritime domain awareness partnership to counter dark shipping and illegal maritime activities, lead to shared airlift capacities and leverage collective logistics strengths, and create a diversified and competitive market for semiconductors and boost resilience in supply chains for chips. These steps, coupled with Quad's work to bolster Open RAN telecommunications and boost the resilience of undersea cables used for digital connectivity, are all aimed at countering China's efforts to become the pre-eminent player in strategic areas. The new Cancer Moonshot initiative, which will see the rollout of 40 million doses of India-made HPV vaccines, plans for the first meeting of Quad commerce ministers, and future investments by development finance institutions of the four countries are all part of the steps to help nations of the Indo-Pacific.

Quad has benefited from its informal structure and lack of institutional mechanisms, which have allowed it greater flexibility in meeting emerging challenges, with the bulk of the heavy lifting done by the numerous working groups. The grouping will now have to push forward with implementation to match China's efforts on the ground.

India as an emerging chess superpower

There was perhaps no better way to show that India has arrived as a chess nation than by clinching its first-ever gold medal at the 45th edition of the Chess Olympiad. With a record-breaking 193 teams in the Open section, this is the tournament where strength is measured by the depth of talent that a country possesses, and India's spell-binding performance shows that the surge in the number of grand masters (GMs) isn't just a number. Until 2010, India had a total of 23 GMs. People knew about chess thanks to India's first GM, Viswanathan Anand, and even though there were others, the sport and its coverage were largely restricted to him. Now, the number of GMs has surged past 80, there are five players with a "Super GM" Elo rating of 2,700 or higher, five Indian players are ranked in the top 25 of the world, and one of them, D Gukesh, is going to battle for the title of world champion in November.

The challenge now is not becoming a GM. Rather, it is to climb to the very top. This shifting of goalposts is an important moment for India's chess story. Its young GMs have made everyone sit up and notice for a few years now but few expected this rise to happen so quickly. As things stand, Gukesh, Arjun Erigaisi (who has been brilliant at the Olympiad and is the current World No. 4), and R Praggnanandhaa represent just the tip of the iceberg — many more young talents are waiting in the wings, and the success at the Olympiad will not only motivate them to challenge the best but also continue to push India to greater heights. This is just the beginning.

How our Maharajas weaponised English

Long before Indians in British India began talking back to the English in English, it was the Native States that showed how words could be used as shields and sword

For more than a century now, Bengalis have proudly quoted Gopal Krishna Gokhale as saying that "what Bengal thinks today, India will think tomorrow". This line can be found in countless essays and speeches, and none that have cited it, whether from Harvard or from Howrah, have cared to check with the source. Apparently, it was enough for them that another Bengali had said that Gokhale had said it. What Gokhale actually said at the Indian National Congress meeting at Benares in 1905 was that "what educated Indians think today, the rest of India thinks tomorrow".

The case with which Bengalis believe, and have convinced others to believe, that they have played a unique role in the making of modern India, is symptomatic of a deeper problem. It is widely held, especially by Bengalis, that modernity originally arrived in India under the auspices of the so-called Bengal Renaissance. This is the period in the early 19th century when Bengali intellectuals and British aided to the creation of English-medium schools and

colleges that allowed the *bhadralok* to acquire and then transmit to their compatriots the ideas and methods prevalent in industrialising Europe.

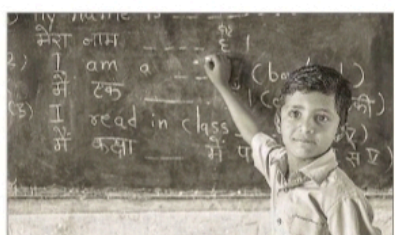
There is one problem with this story — it is false. The first school to offer natives "European learning" was founded in Tanjore in 1784. The idea for a school originated with John Sullivan, the East India Company's Resident (or representative) in Tanjore, who then got his aging translator, Christian Friedrich Schwarz, a prominent Prussian missionary, to manage it. But the land and initial funding for the school came from Tulaji Bhonsle, the Raja of Tanjore, who gifted the school an annual revenue of 500 pagodas (or about £200). Sullivan wanted literate clerks and Schwarz wanted converts. But what did Tulaji, a learned patron of classical learning, want from the school? He, and his successor, Serfoj, wanted their subjects to acquire the knowledge — locked away in English-language books — that was helping the British "terminate every event" in their favour. This ambition acquired particular significance after the Second Anglo-Maratha War (1803-05) left the Company in control of the Deccan. By 1806, a decade before Calcutta began to stir, Serfoj had already set up in Tanjore a public school system, capped by a college within his palace, in order to create a new Maratha elite fluent in English and aware of the scientific methods current in Europe.

Serfoj did not entirely get his way. Alarmed by his ambition, the Company scuttled his plans to revive the Maratha cause. But the Company could not prevent the English-speaking graduates of Tanjore's schools from being eagerly recruited by other kingdoms. Over the next half century, the most important and effective dynasties in Southern and Western India, from Travancore and Mysore through to Baroda and Indore, originated from Tanjore. These ministers not only argued with the English in English — they also helped their Maharajas take advantage of emergent technologies. Thus, before Thomas Macaulay had even arrived in India, Swati Tirunal, the Maharaja of Travancore, and his tutor and descendant, English Subba Rao, a graduate of Schwarz's school in Tanjore, had already begun establishing schools to teach English, hospitals to dispense "European" medicine, and an observatory that aimed to be "second to none in the world". Travancore also surged ahead in experimenting with "Western" music, in commissioning translations and printing literary works, and even in employing Shakespeare. For instance, the first drama in the English language was composed not in Bengal, as is commonly claimed, but in Travancore in 1825. Written by English Subba Rao, the great polymath of that era, the play, entitled *Krishna Kumar*, shed light on the vices that had led the Rajputs to lose their hallowed independence. So while the denizens of



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The fact that "modern learning" began in India not in Bengal but in Tanjore invites us to reassess our relationship with the English language

British India were learning English to obtain employment as clerks, the dewan of Travancore was using the very same language to help the Native States understand why they were succumbing to the British. Little wonder, then, that the Company repeatedly tried to banish English Subba Rao, its officers fretting that his education meant that he "is not unacquainted with our policy".

The fact that "modern learning" began not in Bengal but in Tanjore, and not in British India but in a Native State, invites us to reassess our relationship with the English language and the ideas it carried to our shores. Because we have hitherto focused on how Bengalis in British India greeted education in the English language, with their characteristic excess of either enthusiasm or disdain, we have been encouraged to see the arrival of English as a welcome or unwelcome imposition. The eager or embittered babu may have been the most visible consequence of English learning in Calcutta, but the same books produced a very different outcome in the Native States. There, modern education helped Maharajas and their ministers preserve their sovereignty and devise reforms to adopt new technologies and advance

commerce. For the Native States, the English language was not a gift or a yoke but a weapon.

Of course, as the decades passed, British India was able to outstrip the Native States — the latter were prevented from seeing their most ambitious educational ventures through. But it is worth noting that even as English education spread in British India, Bengal did not play an outside role. Bombay and Madras more than kept pace from the 1830s onwards, and so did the remainder of India from the 1850s onwards — as we can see from the hundreds of periodicals and newspapers that circulated in these regions during this time. This is why, by the time Gokhale spoke in Benares in 1905, all educated Indians were becoming a problem for the British — not only those in Bengal. What we need to remember is that long before Indians in British India began talking back to the English in English, it was the Native States that showed how words could be used as shields and swords.

Rahul Sagar is Global Network Associate Professor at New York University Abu Dhabi. This essay draws on his new book, *Krishna Kumar: The Tragedy of India*. The views expressed are personal.

[GRAND STRATEGY]

Happyman Jacob

Shift in Europe's framing of the Ukraine conflict

A week in Europe and Ukraine made one thing clear to me: The irritating European question to India about the Ukraine war has shifted from "Why won't you condemn Russia's immoral and illegal occupation of Ukraine?" to the more palatable "Why won't you support us in our moment of deep insecurity?" Indians, like many others in the Global South, may still give the same answer (that they don't want to take sides in a war that is not theirs), but the change in the question has opened up more space for a meaningful dialogue between European States and their global counterparts.

Therefore, the change in question marks a major change in the Western narrative about the Ukraine war compared to a year or two ago. Faced with sharp moral shaming by the Western countries, countries such as India either pushed back or called out the Western double standards and hypocrisy, neither of which helped the interests of Ukraine or the Europeans. The West has likely recognised its mistake of using an accusatory tone towards the fence-sitters and is quickly moving from a moral framing of the Ukraine war to one that is rooted in national security interests. On the face of it, this may look like an inconsequential shift, but this has the potential to make the Europeans and non-Europeans more aware of each other's security calculus.

As the war in Ukraine broke out in early 2022, the dominant rallying cry used by the United States and Europe framed it as a conflict between democracies and non-democracies/authoritarian regimes. This was both an ideological positioning and a clever strategy to unite the European States as well as the United States (US) and its allies around the Ukraine cause. As a unifying strategy, it worked well. Moreover, since Ukraine is not part of the European Union or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), it would have been difficult for the US and Europe to use a direct security argument. Instead, they used a "moral, normative and international legal argument" to make their case. It worked among friends and allies but wasn't impactful outside Europe and North America.

While the argument made by the West was a moral one, it felt like an interest-driven one, because many of us felt that it was an argument from self-interest masquerading as a normative one.

Moral arguments — democracies versus non-democracies, the sanctity of territorial sovereignty, non-aggression, and adherence to international law — aren't inherently undesirable or useless. And yet, when the US and the West foreground such arguments, they ring hollow for several reasons. Given the West's

BEING UNABLE TO STOP THE KILLINGS IN GAZA WHILE MORALISING ON THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE SEEMS TO HAVE FORCED A CHANGE IN THE WESTERN NARRATIVE



Happyman Jacob

colonial past or imperial practices and the continuing disregard for the Global South's concerns, moral crusades by the West in world politics are difficult for a lot of people around the world to appreciate. Secondly, the collective West and the US have a certain track record on issues such as the sanctity of territorial sovereignty, non-aggression, and international law that is hardly inspiring. Then there is a serious charge of hypocrisy — the West worries about moral questions only when one of their friends is harmed and maintains silence when they or their friends violate the same norms. Many in the Global South would say that the West and the US routinely engage in the selective application of norms. Consider, for instance, the push to bring the Russian president before the International Criminal Court contrasts sharply with their relative silence at the same court's pronouncements about the Israeli leader.

Moreover, the democracy versus non-democracy argument didn't resonate in the Global South, as issues of war and peace are hardly determined by a country's type of government.

The growing criticism of the West's moral plank regarding Ukraine and the US and European inability to stop the killings in Gaza appears to have forced a change in the Western narrative. As a result, the Western argument about the Ukraine war is increasingly framed in a national interest/national security language rather than relying on moral shaming.

Everyone gets it when a State argues that it has security concerns arising out of a certain development, even if they don't fully agree with the assessment. National security is a good conversation starter among States.

While the new language of interest is more accessible and understandable to a lot of non-Europeans, there are competing perspectives in such framing too. There are several ways in which the question of interests is articulated in the context of the Ukraine war. Europeans tend to frame it in security terms, but Russia has invaded a country next to Europe and they could be next. Another argument is that the Ukraine war is a function of the Russian imperial mindset.

Outside of Europe, the war is framed differently — either as a manifestation of great power competition between the US and Russia or as Moscow's attempt to preserve its sphere of influence which it believes has been steadily shrinking. What is common among all of them is that they use national security or national interests as the basis of their framing.

Going forward, it is likely that the West will continue to foreground the national security arguments in its dialogues with its interlocutors, stepping back from moral posturing. This change in the Western narratives about the Ukraine war gives India an important opportunity to begin a series of conversations with its European partners centred on mutual interests, national security considerations, and shared threat perceptions.

Happyman Jacob teaches India's foreign policy at JNU, and is the founder of the Council for Strategic and Defence Research. The views expressed are personal.

[KEIR STARMER] PRIME MINISTER, THE UK

If you look at the list of what we have already done in 11 weeks, then I would argue strongly that we've done far more than the last government did probably in the last 11 years



[STRAIGHTFORWARD]

Shashi Shekhar



In the high voter turnout in J&K polls, a hope for peace

Democracy has had its first test in the Union Territory (UT) of Jammu & Kashmir where elections are being held for the first time since the abrogation of Article 370. The 24 highly sensitive assembly seats that voted in the first phase of assembly elections saw a turnout of 61.1% overall — the highest in 35 years. Let's hope this trend continues in the coming two phases as well.

Meanwhile, how should we view this massive voter turnout in the first phase? Is it a sign of finally bidding adieu to the violence-ravaged land? Are the people of Jammu & Kashmir ready to march in line with the rest of the country? Will these elections herald an end to the "gun culture"? The past seven decades have taught us that any hope in jumping to conclusions about the Kashmir Valley is a recipe for disaster. The political developments there ahead of the elections bear testimony to that.

Omair Abdullah, the leader of National Conference (NC), had until recently insisted that he was not contesting the assembly elections as his participation would be seen as a sign of his approval of the Centre's action to remove the statehood of Jammu & Kashmir and to divide it into two UTs. However, today he's contesting from two seats. Those who understand politics know that Omair has no choice but to participate in the elections. Had he not contested, he wouldn't have been able to canvass for other NC candidates.

The BJP-flops don't stop here. Earlier, the NC insisted that it wouldn't make Article 370 a poll issue. The stand was aimed at securing an alliance with the Congress party. As a national party, Congress was not to be cornered by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on the national stage for indulging in appeasement politics. Omair now has gone back on his stand and now wants full statehood for Jammu & Kashmir and the restoration of Article 370. This has left the Congress in a quandary.

The actions and comments of another contestant, Engineer Rashid, who has emerged as a significant political force in the Valley since he defeated Omair Abdullah at the general elections, are also of interest. Rashid, who contested the general elections in 2019, was imprisoned at the Tihar jail, organised a rally in his constituency following his release. The crowds present at the late-night gathering surprised all. People

are now asking if Rashid can cause a major upset in the coming polls.

Rashid is doing whatever he can to upset the apple cart, and has ended up on the firing line of every party. Omair has questioned how Rashid got bail (he had been taken into custody under the stringent Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act). Questions are being raised as to how such a huge crowd was allowed to congregate in Bara-amulla district. Almost everywhere in the Valley, barricades are put up and movement is restricted at dusk. Rashid's poll relationship with the Jammu-e-Islami is also creating political ripples. His political opponents think he will help independents win along with his candidates. In case a need arises, these independent candidates can go "any which way", which is euphemism for joining the BJP.

Rashid should clear the air, but he is deliberately vague and talking in riddles. Like his senior counterparts, he has become an expert at sowing the seeds of confusion. Other gladiators in the electoral fray are toying the same line. This tendency is responsible for the present misery in Kashmir.

The tendency to remain vague has affected social workers and journalists too. I have met many such people who are accustomed to saying one thing in Delhi, another in Jammu, and something completely different in Srinagar. Constant duplicity has forced the local populace to practise double standards.

The UT has a large number of people who support separatist ideas in local gatherings, and as night falls, they turn informers for intelligence units and security forces. For them, terrorists and gun-wielding security personnel are the same.

We shouldn't be surprised if people are sceptical of the success of the next assembly in such a scenario. But if that be the case, why did so many people turn up to vote even in those areas badly affected by terror if they were so cynical? Notwithstanding what the leaders say, it's clear that the local population is fed up with terror. They aren't seduced by separatism anymore but are attracted to development. Hopes of peace and progress have taken root amid adversities.

We will have to strengthen this hope.

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

In victory for Marxist Dissanayake, mood for change in Sri Lanka

SHUBHAJIT ROY
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 22

ANURA KUMARA Dissanayake of the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party's broader front, the National People's Power (NPP), won the Sri Lankan presidential elections and is set to be sworn in on Monday. Santosh Jha, the Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, became the first ambassador to meet the president-elect on Sunday night. A post from the official High Commission account on X said, "India as Sri Lanka's civilisational twin is committed to further deepen ties for the prosperity of the people of our two countries."

In these elections, Sri Lanka voted for an outright anti-establishment candidate, reflecting the larger anger and frustration among voters.

A Marxist Member of Parliament from Colombo, Dissanayake, 55, defeated established

lished candidates such as incumbent President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who finished third with just 17 per cent of the votes. Namal Rajapaksa, son of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, won less than 3 per cent of votes.

Message from voters

The fact that the leftist JVP emerged as a winner for the first time in Sri Lankan history does not come as a surprise. The signs were there for the last two and a half years.

When the country's economic crisis prompted the collapse of the Gotabaya Rajapaksa presidency, the streets of Sri Lanka gave a clear call for change.

People suffered amid inflation and long queues for essential commodities in July 2022, and mass protests eventually led to Rajapaksa's fall. But in his place came an experienced hand, in the form of former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. He became the President thanks to support from the Rajapakses, who

were fighting for their survival.

Sri Lankans on the streets could see through the revolving door of the Sri Lankan power corridors, where the political elite was essentially playing musical chairs.

But the 2022 'Aragalya' movement — the word meaning "struggle" in Sinhalese — alone did not unsettle Gotabaya. Dissanayake's JVP played a crucial role in mobilising people across the country. The party also thus received significant traction, something it lacked in the past.

When casting his vote, Dissanayake said it marked "a step forward in our collective journey towards a new era of progress and renewal — Renaissance." The emphasis on renewal and renaissance is telling. For Sri Lankans, he is the ultimate anti-establishment candidate, someone who has promised to fight against the political elite.

For India, he has been a relatively unknown entity. In recent months, as Delhi read the tea leaves, South Block reached out to Dissanayake for a visit to India in February.



Anura Kumara Dissanayake speaks to the press on September 22, 2024. Reuters

He met External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, among other senior officials. Jaishankar said in a post on X that they had a "good discussion" on bilateral ties.

Task for New Delhi

However, some of Dissanayake's politics and public statements pose a challenge to India's interests. He has not supported the implementation of the 13th amendment of the Sri Lankan Constitution, which devolves powers to the country's Tamil minority and has been a long-standing demand from India.

He has also opposed any investigation into the alleged war crimes committed during the civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Sri Lankan forces.

And, in recent months, he has also spoken about cancelling Adani's 450 MW wind power project in Sri Lanka if elected, describing the agreement as corrupt and skewed against the country's interests.

For New Delhi, Dissanayake — who is perceived to have pro-China leanings — is expected to challenge some of the past understandings. Some of those decisions may be unfavourable to India, but it has to nevertheless manage its ties. It recently achieved this with the Maldives, where a period of strain in

bilateral ties following the election of the pro-China President Mohamed Muizzu was diplomatically dealt with. As a result, the two countries now have more stable relations.

An anti-establishment mood has been sweeping across the subcontinent recently — Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party won a massive number of seats in Pakistan's lower house, challenging the dominance of the military establishment last year. In Bangladesh, student protests led to the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government after 16 years. Sri Lanka, too, is facing its anti-establishment moment.

Dissanayake's major challenge will be economic recovery. India's prompt financial and humanitarian help to the tune of \$4 billion in 2022, when Sri Lanka faced its worst economic crisis, has earned it some goodwill. It also helped negotiate a deal with the International Monetary Fund for loans. In dealing with the new president, India's record of helping its neighbour in a time of crisis is expected to come in handy.

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

EARTH MAY ONCE HAVE HAD A RING COMPRISING ASTEROID DEBRIS: STUDY

THE RINGS of Saturn are perhaps the most stunning features of the Solar System. Earth may once have boasted something similar, a study published earlier this month in the *Journal of Earth and Planetary Science Letters* found.

"The existence of such a ring, forming around 465 million years ago and persisting for a few tens of millions of years, could explain several puzzles in our planet's past," Andrew Tomkins, a professor of planetary science at Monash University in Australia, and the study's lead author, wrote in *The Conversation*.



Asteroid debris

Earth's ring would have been like the rings seen today around Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune, and Uranus. It formed when an asteroid passed too close to Earth, was stretched by its gravity to the point it broke down into lots of small and large pieces. These pieces pelted around Earth, gradually evolved into a debris-laden ring orbiting Earth's equator.

However, over time the material from the ring was pulled towards Earth, once again courtesy gravity. While most of the smaller pieces would have been burnt up in the planet's atmosphere, the larger pieces would have formed impact craters on Earth's surface, close to the equator.

It is these impact craters that led the Monash scientists to discover the existence of a ring around Earth. Analysis of 21 crater sites dated between 488 million and 443 million years ago to the Ordovician period, found that the impacts all occurred close to the equator.

"Under normal circumstances, asteroids hitting Earth can hit at any latitude,

at random, as we see in craters on the moon, Mars and Mercury," Tomkins wrote. "So it's extremely unlikely that all 21 craters from this period would form close to the equator if they were unrelated to one another," he said.

A giant parasol

A ring over Earth's equator would have had a profound impact on the planet in more ways than one. Crucially, the axial tilt of Earth relative to the Sun would mean that such a ring would shade winter hemispheres of the planet, while slightly increasing solar flux — amount of solar energy — to reach Earth — to the summer hemispheres. This could accentuate winter cooling while slightly increasing summer heating. Overall, scientists theorise that a ring would lead to global cooling by effectively acting as a giant parasol.

Interestingly, the period in which the ring existed Earth did witness dramatic cooling. Around 460–465 million years ago, mean temperatures in Earth plummeted dramatically. By 445 million years ago Earth was seeing the peak of the Hirnantian Ice Age, the coldest period in the past half a billion years.

Was the ring responsible for this cooling? Possibly. But more research is needed to say for sure. "The next step in our scientific sleuthing is to make mathematical models of how asteroids break up and disperse, and how the resulting ring evolves over time. This will set the scene for climate modelling that explores how much cooling could be imposed by such a ring," Tomkins wrote.



HARISH DAMODARAN

THE LAST two weeks have seen the Narendra Modi-led government take two important decisions to protect the interests of oilseed farmers in India.

On September 13, it hiked the basic customs duty (BCD) on imported crude palm, soybean, and sunflower oil from zero to 20%, and that on their refined oils from 12.5% to 32.5%.

The effective import duty increase for crude oils is from 5.5% to 27.5% (after adding a 5% agriculture infrastructure and development cess and a 10% 'social welfare' surcharge on the BCD with the cess). On refined oils, which attract only the 10% surcharge, the BCD, the increase in effective import duty is from 13.75% to 35.75%.

This is the first time after October 13, 2021 that a BCD has been levied on crude palm, soybean and sunflower oil imports. The effective duty of 27.5% on them is the highest since the 30.25% that prevailed till September 10, 2021. The 35.75% effective tariff on the three refined oils is on par with that until October 13, 2021. The BCD on them was also 32.5% till that date.

Pro-consumer to pro-producer

Simply put, the Modi government has restored the protection that domestic growers have against imports to the levels of three years ago. Since November 2020, it had started cutting import duties in response to soaring international prices.

The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization's vegetable oils price index (base value: 2014–16=100) rose from 98.7 points in August 2020 to a peak of 251.8 points in March 2022, post Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Global prices have eased since, with the index reading at 136 points for August 2024.

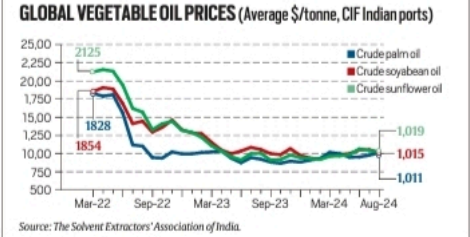
This has led the Modi government to partly shift gears from an overly pro-consumer to a more pro-producer tariff policy. The raising of import duties has been combined with a second decision, earlier this month, to permit the Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Telangana governments to procure soyabean at the Centre's minimum support price (MSP)

EXPLAINED ECONOMICS

Pro-farmer turn in edible oils

Easing of inflation pressures and upcoming elections in Maharashtra have led the Centre to hike import duties and expedite MSP procurement of soyabean, in what marks a pro-consumer to pro-farmer shift

INDIA'S EDIBLE OIL IMPORTS IN (lakh tonnes)				
Oil Year (Nov-Oct)	Palm*	Soyabean	Sunflower	Total**
2017-18	87.01	30.47	25.25	145.17
2018-19	94.09	30.94	23.51	149.13
2019-20	72.17	33.84	25.19	131.75
2020-21	83.21	28.66	18.94	131.32
2021-22	79.15	41.71	19.44	140.3
2022-23	97.89	36.76	30.01	164.66
2022-23 (Nov-Aug)	82.46	31.82	25.46	139.75
2023-24 (Nov-Aug)	76.43	27.15	31.14	134.71



of Rs 4,892 per quintal.

The two decisions have helped the modal (most-traded) prices in local wholesale mandis such as Dewas (MP) and Latur (Maharashtra) recover from Rs 4,200–4,300 to 4,600–4,700 per quintal, closer to the MSP, in the last one month. It comes even as the new crop's market arrivals would take off from next month.

The raising of import duties and MSP procurement approval for soyabean has been prompted by both economic and political considerations. Farmers have sown 193.32 lakh hectares (lh) area under oilseeds this kharif (monsoon) season, as against 190.37 lh in 2023. Soyabean acreage alone has expanded from 123.85 lh to a record 125.11 lh. That, coupled with benign global prices and annual consumer price inflation for edible oils at minus 0.86% in August, has provided an economic case for the Modi government's pro-producer turn.

The political motivation is Maharashtra Assembly polls, scheduled later this year. The state is India's second largest soyabean

Argentina and Brazil, while palm is from India and Malaysia.

BV Mehta, executive director of the Solvent Extractors' Association of India, attributed the surge in sunflower oil imports largely to prices.

In normal years, palm is the cheapest and sunflower the most expensive imported vegetable oil, with soyabean being in between. In April 2022, when the war in Ukraine disrupted supplies, landed prices of imported sunflower oil skyrocketed to an average of \$2,155 per tonne — more than the \$1,909 of soyabean and the \$1,791 of crude palm oil.

But a year later, with the signing of the UN-brokered Black Sea Grain Initiative agreement facilitating safe navigation of vessels from three designated Ukrainian ports, sunflower oil was available at an average of \$1,036 per tonne, less than soyabean (\$1,049) and even palm (\$1,039). Since February 2023, sunflower oil has been generally quoting below soyabean, its immediate competitor, and occasionally palm as well (see Chart).

The southern states have an estimated 70% share of India's sunflower oil market, followed by Maharashtra (10–15%). The big importers and sellers of refined sunflower oil include Gemini Edibles & Fats ('Freedom'), Adani Wilmar ('Fortune'), Kaleswari Refinery Pvt. Ltd. ('Gold Winner'), M K Agrotech ('Sunpure') and Lohiya Industries ('Gold Drop').

Soyabean oil is predominantly consumed in the North and East (along with locally-produced mustard), and also in the West (with sunflower and indigenous groundnut and cottonseed oil). Palm oil is used less for cooking and frying in homes and more in restaurants, sweet shops, bakeries and industries from snack foods, bread and biscuits to noodles.

Domestic versus Imports

India's 16.5 mt imports of edible oil in 2022–23 far exceeded its production of about 10.3 mt from domestically grown oilseeds and other sources — including 4 mt of mustard (rapeseed), 1.9 mt of soyabean, 1.2 mt of cottonseed, 1.1 mt of rice bran, and 1 mt of groundnut oil.

The increase in duties is likely to further slow down imports, restricting it to below 16 mt in the current year.

"Our edible oil consumption is rising by roughly one mt every year. This year, thanks to a good monsoon and the government's efforts to ensure better prices to farmers, domestic production itself should be 1 mt higher and can meet the incremental demand," Mehta pointed out.

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Why Azerbaijan's new climate fund may not be enough to plug finance gap

AMITABH SINHA
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 22

AZERBAIJAN, the host of this year's climate change conference, COP29, has proposed to launch a new climate fund for developing countries. The fund can be financed through "voluntary" contributions from fossil-fuel producing countries and companies, according to Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan's proposal comes at a time when negotiation on a climate finance agreement is struggling to make progress. Finalising this finance agreement is the main agenda before COP29, which is scheduled to run from November 11 to 22 in Baku. The agreement is supposed to include a decision on the amount of money that developed countries must be asked to raise in the post-2025 period to help developing countries fight climate change. The rich and industrialised countries are currently under an obligation to mobilise at least \$100 billion annually for developing countries. The

Paris Agreement, however, mandates that this amount must be increased after 2025 and every five years thereafter.

The new fund proposed by Azerbaijan, though well-intentioned, is unlikely to make a substantial difference to the availability of climate finance for developing countries.

An agreement on finance

Negotiations on the agreement have been ongoing for months. The idea is not to just replace the \$100 billion figure with a higher amount but to finalise a more comprehensive agreement that would bring clarity and transparency to financial flows for climate action.

Currently, there are strong differences over even definitions of climate finance. Bhupendra Yadav, India's Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, said last week that to achieve the goal of tackling climate change, an exact definition of climate finance — and what it should entail — must be arrived at.

Developing countries often complain of double-counting and innovative accounting, and say that the actual amount of money flowing in for climate action is significantly lower than the claims made by developed countries.

The other complaint relates to the neglect of adaptation activities. Most of the climate finance flows are directed at mitigation projects, the ones that lead to emissions reductions. This is because mitigation brings global dividends. Any emission reduction anywhere in the world benefits the entire planet. On the other hand, adaptation has local benefits. Donor countries are less inclined to invest in projects that only benefit the recipients. Developing countries have been demanding that adaptation should receive at least 50% of climate finance, much more than the less than 20% that has gone into it so far. Even this amount has reduced in absolute terms in the last couple of years, according to a 2023 UN re-

port. The finance agreement is supposed to ensure a more healthy balance.

The most important element of the finance agreement, however, is a decision on the new quantum of climate finance, over and above the \$100 billion figure. Several assessments have shown that the money required for climate action now runs into trillions of dollars every year. The revised amount — known as the New Cumulative Quantitative Goal on finance (NCQG) — must reflect this changed reality.

Several developing countries, including India, have made formal proposals on the NCQG amount. The figures are mostly between \$1 trillion and \$1.5 trillion annually — about 1.5% of the combined GDP of the OECD countries, most of which are part of the group that are obligated to provide climate finance. But countries, which failed to meet even the \$100 billion targets can hardly be expected to agree to such a large amount. As a result, little progress has been made on working out

the contours of the finance agreement.

Expanding the donor base

Many countries which were in the low- or middle-income group when the responsibility for providing climate finance was assigned through provisions of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in the early 1990s, have now emerged as large economies with high incomes. Developed countries argue these countries too must be asked to contribute. For instance, China, today the world's second-largest economy, South Korea, and the oil-rich Gulf nations such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar do not have any financing obligations under the UNFCCC.

The demand for expanding the donor base is not without merit, but it is a separate discussion. Moreover, the developed countries have never met their obligations, either relating to emissions reductions or finance. They did not meet their \$100 billion commitments any year — a figure they had proposed without any discussion or needs as-

essment. The argument for expanding the donor base is, therefore, used mainly to continue to evade responsibilities under the international climate framework.

Azerbaijan's fund

Azerbaijan's proposed fund is supposed to be financed by oil and gas producing countries, and corporations, but in a voluntary manner. This has raised questions over the amount of money it can attract as even funds to which countries are obligated to contribute have remained undercapitalised. For instance, the Loss and Damage Fund — created at COP27 in Egypt, in 2022, after years of negotiation — has so far received pledges of just \$600–700 million.

Azerbaijan's fund, even if created, would not have the same status. It has not come through negotiations but at the initiative of a host country. Primarily, it is an effort towards making the COP outcomes more timely, and leaving a legacy, much like similar initiatives by previous COP presidencies in the past.

EXPLAINED CLIMATE

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 2024

THE IDEAS PAGE

The perception of justice

It is as important as justice itself. Transparency in conduct and reticence in public engagement, especially with centres of elected power, are expected of unelected constitutional institutions



THE SIDEBAR
By J SAI DEEPAK

CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACIES, ACROSS jurisdictions, appear to be caught in a cross-fire between individuals, with very little thought being spared for the long-term impact of myopic scorched-earth politics on public discourse, policy and health of the institutions which undergird the edifice of constitutional democracy. Ideological divides are not new, nor is the pitting against each other and propping up of individuals at the expense of issues. The explosion of electronic media followed by social media over the last 25 years has witnessed a bell curve of sorts in the quality of public discourse, which is perhaps past its peak. At this point in the curve, the assumption that the quality of public discourse is directly proportional to heightened "political awareness" may not hold water. If anything, it appears to be inversely related, and this could be significantly owing to conflation of personality obsession with "political awareness", and the simultaneous devaluation of an issue-based approach. This process is aggressively fed and nourished by prime time "debates".

I will desist from making the sweeping statement that individual-centric public discourse has never existed in the past since that would be positively untrue. That said, I will certainly make the statement that the sheer explosion of platforms and the cumulative noise they generate have made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the average consumer of information to distinguish between personalities and principles. From there on, the path to mass hysteria, increased cynicism and apathy is not a long one. If this global state of affairs continues, the road ahead seems bleak for the prospect of a sane discussion on any subject of serious public interest, or critically global interest, such as climate change.

Notwithstanding the global scale of the "information pandemic", the solution may lie in setting our respective national houses in order, starting with restoring respect for institutional boundaries in accordance with constitutional mandates. Sometimes, complex problems are the product of abandonment of first principles and, therefore, the most doable solution worth attempting is to return to the basics. The question that then arises is who must take the lead in showing the way. The media is an amorphous entity and cannot be expected to lead the way in dialling down the noise, given its preoccupation with a breathless news cycle and the need to stay ahead to stay afloat. Political stakeholders oscillate with "market forces" and are, more often than not, beings of incentive and disincentive.

It is precisely for this reason that unelected and independent constitutional institutions were conceived of in the first place to restore sanity and faith when the scales seem to tip towards herdism and cynicism. The very reason they are constitutionally bestowed with institutional independence is to be able to discharge this essential duty without political interference. It is for this reason that they are often looked up to as watchdogs, to protect the letter and spirit of national con-



C R Sasikumar

stitutions. It, therefore, also falls upon them to hold themselves to higher standards, both in operation and optics. The underlying fond hope being that others will follow suit, including the political class and the fourth estate.

As much as democracy is meant to give effect to the will of the people, the role of a constitution is to capture their collective conscience and wisdom, and assign the role of their enforcement to, ironically but not without reason, unelected constitutional organs which are expected to rise above partisan pulls. The wielding of such power by an unelected constitutional organ comes with great responsibility and calls for balance since it cannot be capricious by turning a blind eye to the will of the people, nor can it succumb to the whim of the people. When unelected constitutional organs display greater commitment to probity and quality, they inspire greater confidence in the public, which, in turn, gives such institutions greater moral authority to hold power accountable with public support. In this regard, the example of the formidable T N Seshan in his stint as the Chief Election Commissioner would not be out of place, for he truly showcased

It is precisely for this reason that unelected and independent constitutional institutions were conceived of in the first place — to restore sanity and faith when the scales seem to tip towards herdism and cynicism. The very reason they are constitutionally bestowed with institutional independence is to be able to discharge this essential duty without political interference.

the responsibility and powers of that office while operating within the lines painted by the Constitution. It was one of those rare instances where the individual commanded grudging respect, and not merely because of the office he held. If anything, he added value to it and left fairly large shoes to fill for his successors-in-office.

If one had to distill values from his life and experience, both transparency in conduct and reticence in public engagement, especially with centres of elected power, are expected of constitutional organs to preserve the reality, not illusion, of independence, impartiality and integrity in the eyes of the public. After all, perception of justice is as important as justice itself. Isn't that the standard Shri Ram held himself to? And shouldn't that be one of the attributes of the aspirational Ram Rajya?

The writer is a commercial and constitutional litigator who practices as a counsel before the Supreme Court of India, the High Court of Delhi, the NCLAT and the CCI, and author of India that is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilisation, Constitution and India, Bharat and Pakistan: The Constitutional Journey of a Sandwiched Civilisation

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"US military strategists are right to take a cautious stance toward China, particularly under the increasingly assertive President Xi Jinping. Its possession of hundreds of nuclear weapons, large population and substantial military spending warrant concern." — THE WASHINGTON POST

Rahul's period of reckoning

After 2024 election, Opposition has the perception advantage. It would do well not to get complacent



SANJEEV SRIVASTAVA

RAHUL GANDHI IS once again in the eye of a storm. His comments on the issue of reservation, about Sikhs being insecure in India and his meeting with known India critic, US Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, during his recent three-day US visit, have predictably set many off. The BJP and a section of the media went into overdrive to target him again as an erratic and immature politician who not just maligns the country's image but also has no qualms about hobnobbing with "anti-India" forces on foreign soil.

Congress quite justifiably argues that the BJP and its formidable echo system have mastered the art of distorting and selectively cherry-picking Rahul Gandhi's statements. But that's been the case for over 10 years now, yielding them unprecedented political dividends. So one cannot, from a purely political perspective, fault the BJP for its tactics. The question is: When will Rahul Gandhi stop scoring these self-goals? As Leader of Opposition, and the principal anti-Modi voice in the country, he cannot simply shrug his shoulders and move on, as has been his preferred mode. He has to accept that politics is also very much about perception.

And there is no one in his country, perhaps in the whole democratic world, who should know this better than him. The kind of concerted campaign of calumny and opprobrium he has faced in the last decades has few parallels in political history. The fact that he survived this relentless onslaught is as much a tribute to his strength of character and courage of conviction as the fact that he is, as he'd be happy to acknowledge, also an entitled political dynast who presides over a party that has stood solidly behind him, even when it plunged to hitherto unthinkable depths in two consecutive national elections.

But the constant ridicule of the past has given way to a degree of respect and admiration for Rahul Gandhi post the June 2024 election outcome. Also, there is a near-unanimous acceptance of his new stature; that his is the most vocal, committed and unwavering articulation against the ideas and ideology represented by the BJP and the RSS. As the BJP and its powerful spin factory ensured that focus remained on the more embarrassing aspects of Rahul Gandhi's US trip, some other interesting observations like "dar nika gaya" ("people are no longer afraid) and the 56-inch chest getting shrivelled, got drowned in the din. That's the power of agenda and narrative setting. The sooner Rahul Gandhi realises this, the better it will be for him and the Opposition cause.

The Opposition should also accept that the governing coalition has a comfortable majority and looks stable and secure for now, pending unforeseen dramatic changes in the coalition arithmetic. So, is the Opposition's new-found confidence an accurate assessment of the political reality on the ground? Or is the growing chatter (in the anti-BJP bloc) about this being the

beginning of the end for the NDA a case of premature wish fulfillment? Nobody knows the answer, but this is probably a good time to examine one issue being raised by Rahul Gandhi to take on the BJP. The caste census seems to be one of the Opposition's main planks. And the government's clumsy response makes many believe that this pitting of Mandal against Mandal is the BJP's Achilles' heel. However, if it was so straightforward, then what explains the Opposition's poor showing in Bihar, seen by many as the ultimate citadel of caste politics? Clearly, the caste-backed NDA coalition in the state (with Nitish Kumar, Chirag Paswan, Jitan Ram Manjhi and the forwards supporting the BJP) proved to be more potent.

Also, even as it constantly discusses social justice and caste, the Opposition should not completely let go of the aspirational young and the middle class — many of whom think that both the BJP and Congress see little political use for them and that they have, consequently, been left to fend for themselves. This refrain about redistribution of wealth also has its pitfalls. Framing politics as a zero-sum game can seem rhetorically attractive in the heat of an electoral battle, but it frays at the seams. The goal should be to lift the largest segment of population out of poverty, not threaten to make the rich poor. Marxist and ultra-left thinking may be counter-productive in a young, aspirational country. Having pitched his tent further to the left of Nehruvian socialism, Rahul Gandhi runs the risk of alienating those who would prefer that the country remain on centrist paths.

Rahul Gandhi's description of the BJP vs Congress contest as a clash of two contrasting ideas of India also puts a sharp ideological focus on the issue. The importance of the idea of India cannot be overstated. But in a hard-nosed and pragmatic analysis of the 2024 elections, one did not find the idea of India being a decisive and top-of-the-mind issue among voters. Many people did talk about the shrill campaign around Muslims and disapproved of it, but one saw little empirical evidence of them changing their voting behaviour. Rahul Gandhi and the Opposition need to remain true to their idea of India, but they need to also be respectful of Hindu beliefs and sensibilities, as the average Indian is not a book liberal.

The attack-on-the-Constitution line certainly worked. Most of all, it found resonance on the issue of reservation, and during election travels, one did get a sense of growing disquiet among people regarding the BJP's position on this issue. A mix of arrogance and misuse of agencies and institutions, as the average Indian is not a book liberal (Maharashtra), centralised ticket distribution with little care and respect for state leaders and local sensibilities (Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan) and fatigue and anti-incumbency best explains the 2024 outcome.

buoyed by their own performance and the BJP's reverses in the parliamentary elections, Rahul Gandhi and the Opposition alliance look to be in a promising space right now. But they would do well to remember that on the other side are masters of realpolitik and consummate 24x7 politicians who will stop at nothing to snatch back whatever perception advantage the Opposition may be enjoying at present.

The writer is a senior journalist and political commentator

A grand GST bargain

Extend compensation cess to get states to bring petroleum products under it



ADITI NAYAR

DURING THE FIRST five years of GST, there was a provision to compensate states for a loss of revenue, if any, measured against a 14 per cent growth over their "protected" revenues in 2015-16. The source of this compensation given to states was a cess that the Centre levied and collected on the sale of specific goods. This compensation cess was initially levied for a five year period. Subsequently, its levy was extended till March 2026, to service the loans raised during the Covid years for providing GST compensation to the states.

During July 2017 to March 2023, the government transferred Rs 8.8 trillion to 28 states as GST compensation grants (Rs 6.1 trillion) and loans (Rs 2.7 trillion). Nearly two-thirds of this total compensation was accounted for by 10 large states — Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, West Bengal, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Notably, the percentage of GST compensation within each state's revenue receipts varied substantially, with a higher dependence seen in states such as Punjab.

In the 54th GST Council meeting held in September, the government announced its decision to repay the entire GST compen-

sation loan, amounting to Rs 2.7 trillion, by January 2026, two months prior to the cessation of the compensation period in March. As per our estimates, a surplus of around Rs 480 billion is likely to be left after repayment of the back-to-back compensation loans (Rs 2.7 trillion) as well as the interest on these loans (Rs 0.5 trillion). This is slightly higher than the government's estimate of Rs 400 billion.

Cess, as defined in the Constitution of India, can be imposed only for a specific purpose and is outside the divisible pool of resources between the Centre and the states. Looking ahead, the original purpose of introduction of GST compensation cess is no longer relevant, and the cess period had been extended legally to ensure the payment of back-to-back loans to the states during 2020-21 and 2021-22, which is to be completed soon.

In its September meeting, the GST Council recommended the formation of a Group of Ministers to study the future of the compensation cess beyond March 31, 2026, and how the surplus balance under the GST compensation fund would be used. If the council decides to continue the levy the compensation cess (by whatever name it may deem fit) on specified items beyond March

2026, the purpose for that would need to be identified and a constitutional amendment may also be needed.

The discontinuation of the compensation cess (without replacement by another tax/cess) would imply that the effective tax rates on demerit, sin and luxury goods (such as cigarettes, SUVs, pan masala, and tobacco items) would decline significantly. This appears somewhat unlikely as the government would want to tax these goods at high rates to discourage their consumption, suggesting that the "compensation" cess to continue, albeit in another form and with another name.

One option is for the compensation cess to be revamped into a new cess, for example, a green cess. The proceeds of this can be used to finance green infra projects and the energy transition requirements given that the government's contribution and interventions will be critical for transition in key sectors in order to achieve India's climate goals by 2030.

The council would need to consider the proportion in which such a cess would be shared between the Centre and the state governments to help them meet their transition commitments. Additionally, the horizontal devolution amongst the states would need

to be considered. In our view, the finance commission devolution formula may not be appropriate for sharing such a cess.

So far, petroleum, oils, and lubricants (POL) products remain outside the GST net. One rationale for bringing them within the ambit of GST is to enable businesses to claim input tax credit on the same, which would help reduce costs and make them more competitive.

Further, given the varied tax rates across states, the retail selling prices of items such as petrol and diesel differ substantially in various parts of the country. This flexibility in taxation on POL products enjoyed by the states affords them a lingering modicum of fiscal autonomy, which the transition to GST had whittled away. Bringing POL products under the GST will certainly further compress the states' autonomy.

To convince the states to bring POL products under the GST regime, a grand bargain would be needed. Perhaps, the cess proceeds could be used for compensating the state governments for losses, if any, due to this transition.

The writer is chief economist, head — Research & Outreach, ICRA

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

LIMITING RIGHTS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Reject' (IE, September 21). PM Narendra Modi-led NDA government's Cabinet decision is not merely executive — it reflects a political vision which could impact federalism as enshrined in the Constitution. Justification for ONE in the name of saving costs and removing MCC barrier to development sans evidence seems like political chicanery. The same government in the electoral bond case argued before the Supreme Court that citizens have no right to know the source of political funding. ONE subverts the will of the people by tying it to the election cycle, irrespective of their loss of trust with the government.

L R MURMU, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Reject' (IE, September 21). In a parliamentary democracy, elections are held to assert the people's voice. When people lose confidence in the government, they have every right to replace that MP or MLA. Midterm elections are essential to give renewed political mandate to the political parties. A federal system ensures that citizens of a particular state have complete freedom in deciding their government. ONE is being touted as a

great electoral reform by the Modi government despite the loopholes pointed out by constitutional experts. ONE is not a panacea for electoral malpractices. We must take an honest stand on this crucial issue.

Atul Thakre, Nagpur

TREAD LIGHTLY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Dividing water' (IE, September 20). The landmark Indus Water Treaty (IWT), which has survived India-Pakistan wars and diplomatic tensions over the past 64 years, finds itself in danger today. India has recently sent a notice seeking a review and modification of the treaty in view of "fundamental and unforeseen changes in circumstances that require a reassessment of obligations". Pakistan, which red-flagged its water crisis during a UN Security Council meeting in February this year, is banking on the Permanent Court of Arbitration to resolve the dispute. But to be in a promising space right now, they would do well to remember that on the other side are masters of realpolitik and consummate 24x7 politicians who will stop at nothing to snatch back whatever perception advantage the Opposition may be enjoying at present.

Khokan Das, Kolkata



THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE
PART OF DIPLOMACY IS TO OPEN DIFFERENT
DEFINITIONS OF SELF-INTEREST.
—HILARY CLINTON

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL



C UDAY BHASKAR

In our defence

Joint Commanders' Conference is a welcome step.
A comprehensive review of the military is imperative

DEFENCE MINISTER RAJNATH Singh should be commended for instituting a Joint Commanders' Conference (JCC) that brings together all the top commanders of the Indian military for extended deliberations on matters pertaining to national security. Presiding over the maiden conference in Lucknow on September 5, Rajnath Singh highlighted the fact that "India is a peace-loving nation and the Armed Forces need to be prepared for war in order to preserve peace." This exhortation is par for the course and underlines the raison d'être of the military — to prepare for war.

The JCC is chaired by the Defence Minister and will complement the Combined Commanders' Conference (CCC) that is presided over by the Prime Minister. Until recently, the CCC was an annual event and the Defence Minister addressed the commanders only for one session. The primary focus was on higher-level global, regional and strategic matters dealt with by the Prime Minister. Since PM Narendra Modi assumed office in 2014, the CCC has been transformed with a visible degree of political overhang. It is instructive that the 2023 CCC was held in Bhopal, where the valedictory session was held in an international convention centre and not at a military venue.

The fact that the CCC was held in May and that Madhya Pradesh went to elections in November could not be ignored — the venue had huge posters of PM Modi, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and then-CCM Shivraj Singh Chouhan. This was a case of drawing the military into the electoral framework and it was avoidable. There was no CCC convened in 2019, 2020 and 2022, and while the Covid pandemic may have been a reason in the first two years, the 2022 vote is inexplicable. The fact that PM Modi spends more time with the top police officers of the country than with the military commanders has not gone unnoticed.

Thus, the JCC is a welcome forum for the political leadership, in this case, the Defence Minister, to meet with the military commanders and review professional matters in an informed and unhurried manner. The theme of the inaugural JCC Transforming the Armed Forces has been a Modi priority since

2014. Various major policy initiatives have been launched to this effect — the appointment of a CDS (Chief of Defence Staff) being one of them. However, appointing a retired three-star officer to this post in a four-star rank was unprecedented and has introduced an undesirable precedent. Political preferences trumped institutional norms.

An objective review of the kind of transformation that has taken place over the last decade (Modi 1.0 and 2.0) may offer some useful insights into the Indian military, civil-military relations, and the long-term consequences of the institutional transmutation. Cumulatively, these will be the issues that the next CCC/JCC would have to grapple with to safeguard national security.

PM Modi came to office in 2014 pledging to redress the shortcomings in the national security edifice and improve the welfare of military personnel. His track record over the last decade is mixed. To his credit, he took the decision to award the long pending One Rank, One Pension (OROP) proposal and thought it has some strands that need to be resolved, it has been implemented.

Concurrently, PM Modi has highlighted the indigenisation imperative under the "aatmanirbharata" banner and the restructuring of defence PSUs, encouraging the private sector with an emphasis on MSMEs and enabling academia to undertake research projects are all commendable steps. However, their gestation period is long, progress is often uneven and the results will not be apparent in the near future. In essence, India will remain dependent on imported military inventory in the main — thereby diluting its quest for strategic autonomy.

The material state of the military remains opaque and the thumbnail summary is that all three armed forces are in dire need of modernisation and acquisition to make up for large gaps in the inventory. This issue is often glossed over and merits candid internal review. Did the JCC address this elephant?

The last comprehensive review of the military was done in 2018 when the Standing Committee on Defence cautioned that a modern armed force should have one-third of its equipment in the vintage cate-

gory, one-third in the current category and one-third in the state-of-the-art category. The report noted that the Indian Army had 68 per cent of its equipment in the first, 24 per cent in the second, and 8 per cent in the third. The Committee found that adequate attention has been lacking with respect to both policy and budget for modernising the ageing arsenal.

The Navy and the Air Force are also grappling with a shortfall in major platforms. The Air Force, which is authorised 42 fighter squadrons, is down to 32; while the Navy is operating its aircraft carriers with below-optimum fighter aircraft and grappling with other platform deficiencies. Capital expenditure funds are shrinking, for the rupee has declined in value over the last decade. It was pegged to the US dollar at Rs 62.33 in 2014 and is now hovering at 83.47. This reduces the buying capacity from foreign suppliers. It is a major issue that rarely finds mention in any conference. The standard refrain is that it is all well with the Indian *fauj* and that it will deliver when required — as it did in Kargil in 1999.

Manpower shortage continues to persist and in 2023, the government stated there was an overall deficiency of around 155 lakh personnel within the three armed forces with the Army accounting for the maximum — 136 lakh vacancies. The hastily implemented Agnipath scheme has aggravated the induction pattern and it is understood that a macro review of this scheme is on the anvil.

It is expected that the PM will address the CCC in the course of the year and hopefully, the composite inventory profile of the military will be reviewed objectively. It would be desirable to institute a template wherein each armed force submits the material and HR status to a parliamentary committee annually.

The Galwan setback of 2020 and the surge in cross-border terrorism ought to serve as a reminder that peace on the borders cannot be taken for granted. Being prepared for war in a credible manner is imperative and mere optics will not suffice.

The writer is director, Society for Policy Studies, New Delhi

QUAD'S LIGHT TOUCH

It has avoided being branded as 'Asian Nato'. Smallness of its agenda does not mean its achievements are inconsequential

HOSTING HIS LAST summit of the Quad that brings together leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the US, President Joe Biden said he is impressed by the new things the forum finds to do each time they meet. Meeting the sixth time in less than four years in Biden's hometown of Wilmington, Delaware, the Quad showcased a wide range of agreements — from curing cervical cancer to cooperation on cybersecurity, joint port development in the Indo-Pacific to the creation of an air logistics network in the region and laying the foundation for cooperation in bio technology and quantum computing. Sceptics, however, will say the multiple Quad initiatives announced at each summit are small beer. Friendly critics in the US and elsewhere want the Quad to become a more coherent and tight-knit organisation with a permanent secretariat and greater focus on military cooperation to deal with the principal strategic challenge in the Indo-Pacific — the increasing assertiveness of Chinese power. It was India's reluctance to join military alliances and its preference for an informal forum for Indo-Pacific cooperation that has shaped the expansive evolution of the Quad in the last four years.

The smallness of the agenda does not mean that achievements of the Quad are inconsequential. In focusing on the provision of public goods in the Indo-Pacific, the Quad has avoided being branded as the "Asian Nato" and inviting the ire of the regional states that had no desire to see an American-led military alliance against China. Over the last four years, the Quad has become more acceptable to the once sceptical ASEAN that now appreciates the Quad's light touch on security. For India, which is the only "non-ally" of the US in the forum, the Quad has opened up an expansive agenda of regional cooperation with the US and its Asian allies.

The Quad leaders insisted, once again, that the forum is not directed against China. That does not mean that deterring Chinese expansionism is not on the minds of the Quad partners. The US is developing more explicit military instruments such as the AUKUS, deeper trilateral security cooperation with South Korea and Japan, and lending military support for the Philippines that is at the receiving end of Chinese aggressiveness on the disputed frontiers. India and the US have steadily increased the range and depth of their military cooperation in the last few years. In formally separating the Quad from their bilateral military cooperation, they have created much-needed political room to sidestep the traditional Indian emphasis on "non-alignment" and the US preference for security cooperation through "military alliances". Finally, there is an entrenched Indian perception that the Quad and the bilateral strategic partnership with the US have complicated Delhi's ties with Beijing. But the sophistication of the Quad's approach, individual and collective, towards China, may be opening more diplomatic space for engagement with Beijing. Reportedly, Biden told his Quad partners in Wilmington that China's leader Xi Jinping is "looking to buy himself some diplomatic space" in order "to focus on domestic economic challenges and minimise the turbulence in China". There will be several opportunities for Prime Minister Narendra Modi to test this proposition when he runs into President Xi on the margins of many multilateral forums, including the East Asia Summit, the BRICS and G-20.

WHAT MANIPUR NEEDS

Continuing with a discredited CM and then disempowering him cannot be way forward. Centre must call an all-party meeting

LAST WEEK, SPEAKING at a press conference marking 100 days of the third term of the NDA government, Union Home Minister Amit Shah emphasised on the need for dialogue between communities and for drawing up a "roadmap for making all kinds of efforts" in Manipur to bring under control the 16-month-long ethnic conflagration. And yet, as violence resurfaced in the state earlier this month, among the many failures in governance has been a deepening deadlock between the state administration and the Unified Command of security forces, set up in May 2023 and headed by Kuldip Singh, a retired IPS officer and Security Advisor to Chief Minister N Biren Singh. Now, as a report in this paper has revealed, the tussle between the CM's office and the Unified Command has further strained the already flailing security apparatus, with government functionaries claiming that the CM has been rendered "completely powerless".

From the Naga-Kuki clash of 1992 to the Meitei-Pangal conflict in 1993 to the Kuki-Paithe hostilities of 1997, ethnic conflict has been a part of the region's complex history, tied up in fraught questions of allocation of land, reservation, access to resources and opportunities. But that the CM failed to learn from the past and push for dialogue over militarisation in the early days of the conflict between Kukis and Meiteis showed a refusal to see the crisis for what it really is — a call for development and non-partisan administration. It brought to a standstill the work of politics, of talking and listening, negotiating and healing, paving the way for the mobilisation of ethnic differences into bargaining chips through acts of violence. But the current breakdown in the chain of command where the Security Advisor does not report to the CM also shows the shortsightedness that has been a leitmotif of this tragedy. With complaints against security forces of partisanship and ineptitude, it is not only internal stability that is rendered vulnerable but also security at the borders that is imperilled. The suspension of the Free Movement Regime between Manipur and Myanmar and the proposal to fence the 1,500 km border notwithstanding, the state serves as a gateway to India's Act East Policy. It necessitates transparency and coordination within the government and between its political, administrative and security wings.

Any solution in Manipur will have to begin with a de-escalation of tension and dialogue between communities. Continuing with a discredited CM and then disempowering him, however, is the worst way to achieve this. Instead, a change in state leadership and an all-party meeting to discuss the way forward is urgently needed.



GURUDEV SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR

THE ART OF MAKING PEACE

It requires a fine combination of inner calm and outer dynamism

IN TODAY'S WORLD, where conflict and aggression seem to dominate headlines, the voices for peace and non-violence must be heard loud and clear.

Conflicts arise when there is a breakdown of communication. Whenever there is a conflict, it indicates a certain chasm between communities or between nations. When warring leaders take a unilateral view and become rigid and arrogant, differences only escalate. Talk to any of the warring parties, and they will convince you that they are right.

There are usually two sides to a civil conflict and no matter who strikes first, eventually, both sides are wounded. Conflict arises in the first place because both sides stick to their stand, and yet, to resolve the issue, both need to rise above and look at the larger picture as well as see things from the other side. This is why dialogue is an important tool in resolving conflict.

People who take to violent means due to a sense of injustice can be engaged in dialogue if approached the right way. From their perspective, they are fighting for a cause out of righteousness. In a way, their passion, commitment and the spirit of sacrifice are commendable. We often find that

people who talk about inner peace are complacent. They are resigned from the realities of the world. That peace has no value and that dynamism, which has no thought or sensitivity, which is full of agitation and has brought pain to oneself and others, has no value either. We require a fine combination of inner peace and outer dynamism. We require people who are centred in the face of conflict to be able to resolve them.

World peace can't come by making high-level policies alone. World peace stems from right where we are. It is peaceful individuals who make a peaceful world.

But being peaceful isn't enough, you must also be skillful to mediate peace successfully. A mediator must work without bias and shouldn't attempt to push the parties to accept a preset solution. Say, there is a conflict in front of you; the dispute is about the equal division of a cake. As a mediator, you will tend to divide it into equal halves and give to both parties. But whenever you do this, there is a chance that someone might blame you for being biased or not making an equal division. Instead, what I suggest is that one party divides the cake and the other party chooses which half it would like to have. In this situation,

the person cutting the cake will go to great lengths to ensure the cake is divided equally, and the person choosing will not feel cheated either.

Usually, people come with their problems but they do not think about the solutions, and that perpetuates the problem. So when people do that, I ask them to come to me with what they think the solution should be. For conflict resolution, mediators don't need courage as much as they need communication skills. The mediator should listen to the parties without an iota of bias, assure them that he or she is there for their welfare and try to give them a broader vision.

Turbulence is a part of this world, whereas making peace is the nature of our spirit. If with a strong resolve and skill, we are able to remain centred and in peace, then that peace begins to calm down the turbulence around us as well. On this International Day of Peace, let us resolve to be established in the peace inside us and be dynamic in our actions to bring it to the world outside.

The writer is a spiritual leader and founder of The Art of Living Foundation

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



Retika, Delhi will soon wake up... At least the Election Commission will... - unny.



SEPTEMBER 23, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

POLLS IN DECEMBER

MRS INDIRA GANDHI has decided to go in for the Lok Sabha elections in the second half of December, according to sources in the government. An announcement dissolving the present Lok Sabha and setting in motion the electoral process is likely to be made some time in October. The Election Commission, which needs merely 42 days to go through its pre-election formalities, will be given enough time to make the arrangements.

AKALI-CENTRE TALKS

THE REHABILITATION OF the Nihang chief, Baba Santa Singh, appears to be the main

issue to be settled in the secret negotiations between the government and some senior Akali leaders on the Golden Temple issue. Baba Santa Singh was excommunicated by the five Sikh high priests for starting a "kar seva" of the Akal Takht. Efforts are being made to resolve this prickly issue.

UNDER REVIEW

ANDHRA PRADESH Chief Minister N T Rama Rao said that all decisions taken by the Bhaskara Rao regime, including the restoration of the retirement age of government employees to 58, "shall be reviewed by the cabinet." Talking to newsmen, he described the decisions taken during the brief period when he was out of

power, as "cheap gimmicks". He was particularly sore over the reversal of his regime's decision, which had reduced the retirement age from 58 to 55.

INDO-CHINA DISCUSSION

CHINA AND INDIA made progress in their fifth round of border talks, which ended in Beijing, but they stopped short of examining claims for disputed Himalayan areas, an Indian spokesman said. The two countries narrowed differences over the guiding principles for an eventual solution. A "substantive discussion of the boundary question" will be possible in the next round, the official spokesman said. Diplomats had not expected much progress in the week-long talks.

Is the spike in India's trade deficit a worry?

What are the sectors in which exports have dropped? Is there any significant risk at this point?

Vikas Dhoort

The story so far:

After a positive start to goods exports in the first quarter of 2024-25, there has been a blip in momentum. Outbound shipment values shrank 1.5% in July to an eight-month low, and the contraction deepened to 9.3% in August. This has coincided with a record import bill which hit \$64.4 billion in August, and translated into a merchandise trade deficit of \$29.7 billion, the second highest after the record \$29.9 billion gap in October 2023.

What has triggered the wider trade deficit?

While exports have shrunk in the past two months, imports have not – they grew 7.5% over last July and 3.3% in August. This lifted the deficit to a nine-month peak of \$23.5 billion in July and that gap widened by around \$6.2 billion last month. On the exports front, 18 of India's top 30 segments recorded growth in July and 19 in August, but the biggest sectors like petroleum, and gems and jewellery, have tanked significantly. Oil exports were down 22.2% in July and 37.6% in August, while jewellery exports have dropped well over 20% in both months. In August, growth also slowed significantly in sectors like drugs and pharmaceuticals, and the emerging export growth engine of recent times, electronic goods. With the Chinese economy slowing, some segments like stone, plaster, cement, and iron ore, also retreated.

Interestingly, as oil prices declined about \$6 a barrel in August, India's oil import bill dropped by almost a third to \$11 billion, bringing the petroleum deficit to a three-year low, QuantEco Research economists pointed out in a note.

"The widening of the merchandise trade deficit was predominantly led by gems and jewellery, along with a minor impact from miscellaneous products and electronic items," they said. While gems and jewellery exports slipped below \$2 billion, India's gold imports more than doubled in August to an all-time high of \$10.1 billion. This is in sharp contrast to a 10.7% drop in gold imports in July and the range of \$3 billion-3.4 billion seen since April. Top trade officials attributed this surge to the reduction in gold import duty from 15% to 6% announced in the Budget, the recent rise in gold prices, and domestic jewellery players stocking up for the festive season. Economists believe the full impact of the duty cuts announced on gold and other items will continue to play out, weighing on the import bill in coming months.

Could wider trade deficits pose a risk?

There is no significant risk to the economy at this point. As Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal has emphasised, India is growing faster than the world, so its demand for global products is bound to outpace the world's demand for its exports. "The deficit should not be a matter of concern for a developing economy with high growth and to the extent there are no foreign exchange issues, it should not matter," he asserted this week. Foreign capital inflows have stayed positive in recent months, and India's foreign exchange reserves had reached a record high of \$675 billion as of August 2, which the Finance Ministry reckoned last month to be sufficient to cover 11.6 months of imports. That cover may be a tad lower if imports continue to hover over \$60 billion in coming months, but services exports, reckoned to have risen over 10% between April and August, provide some comfort.

What about foreign trade in goods?

Global trade is expected to grow faster in 2024 than 2023, but for now, demand remains tepid in most developed markets. The festering geopolitical risks and conflicts aside, the upcoming election in the U.S. and its tariff hikes on Chinese goods even as Beijing grapples with a faltering domestic economy, presents a double-edged sword for players like India. While China's demand for imports slip, it has more reason to dump its products in non-U.S. markets at throwaway prices. Moreover, this interplay of downward pressures is expected to keep oil prices low, hurting India's oil export hopes, even as concerns about overall global demand impulses have increased. Beyond the short term, the road ahead for India's trade – the government aims to scale up services and goods exports to a trillion dollars each by 2030 – is not likely to be smooth. There are challenges to boosting the export growth engine, Chief Economic Adviser V. Anantha Nageswaran said, with the global economy slowing down, tariffs and non-tariff barriers proliferating with countries adopting "active industrial policies" since the pandemic, and new trade walls such as the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism and Deforestation Rules coming into play. There could be a year or two that offer the chance to ramp up exports, but all in all, it's going to be a hard time, he concluded.

Why was Hezbollah attacked through pagers?

How do these low-tech gadgets work? Why was Hezbollah using them? What is the scare for future conflicts? Why is it believed that Israel is responsible? How is the low-tech gadget blitz redrawing the contours of the Israel-Iran conflict?

John Xavier

The story so far:

In September 17, at least nine persons were killed and several thousands injured, including Iran's envoy to Beirut, when pagers used by the armed group Hezbollah detonated simultaneously across Lebanon. The Lebanese Information Minister Ziad Makary condemned the attack as an "Israeli aggression". A day after the pager blasts, walkie-talkies used by the Hezbollah also blew up, killing nearly two dozen and injuring over 450 people.

Why are tensions high in the region?

The low-tech gadget attacks have come at a time when tensions between Israel and Iran-backed Hezbollah are escalating. The duo have been exchanging fire across the Israel-Lebanon border since the start of the Gaza war in October. This operation could very well start a new phase in the prolonged regional conflict.

CCTV footage and Instagram posts of blasts in multiple parts of Lebanon surprised Hezbollah as two of its fighters and an 8-year-old girl were killed. The militant group vowed to retaliate against Israel for the blasts. The simultaneous explosions occurred largely in southern Lebanon, a Hezbollah stronghold. Israel's military has declined to comment. But the biggest surprise lies in the weapon used by the perpetrator. The devices behind the serial blasts were low-tech gadgets – pagers.

What are pagers and how do they work?

Pagers, often called beepers, are communication devices that emerged in the mid-20th century. Their presence was eclipsed by cellular phones

The low-tech gadget attacks have come at a time when tensions between Israel and Iran-backed Hezbollah are escalating

that grew in popularity in the 1990s and 2000s. Subsequently, the dawn of smartphones pushed pagers into the shadows. But the humble, palm-sized device has its strengths.

Pagers operate using radio signals, which are transmitted by towers and received by the device. They function as either one-way or two-way systems. One-way pagers receive messages from a central transmitter but cannot send replies. That means a user can receive numeric or alphanumeric messages, which the device alerts them through a beep or vibration. In a two-way system, the pagers are capable of handling communication in both directions. Users can receive and respond to messages, which make them slightly more advanced, but these are still limited in functionality compared to modern smartphones.

Pagers rely on a network of radio towers that broadcast signals over a wide area. In many cases, they are more reliable than mobile phones in certain conditions because their communication system operates over simple, robust radio waves, often penetrating areas where cell coverage might be weak. Despite their technological obsolescence in mainstream use, pagers are still valued in healthcare, emergency services, and remote locations where cellular networks are unreliable. Their simplicity ensures they are more energy-efficient and less prone to network outages.

How are they useful in covert operations?

Pagers are relatively unsophisticated compared to smartphones or other modern gadgets, which make them less susceptible to high-tech surveillance techniques. They don't have GPS or internet connectivity, reducing the risk of location tracking and hacking. Intelligence agencies rely heavily on digital footprints, but pagers are harder to monitor remotely.

Secondly, pagers use radio frequencies, which make it harder for interception compared to cellular or internet-based communication devices. This feature makes them ideal for sending short, encrypted, or coded messages in sensitive situations. With one-way pagers, the risk of being detected is lower since the device does not transmit a response, making it difficult for intelligence agencies or adversaries to trace the origin or location of the message.

Thirdly, their simplicity plays a key role on how they can be manipulated, which could be a likely reason why it was used in the Hezbollah attack. Pagers can be modified to include circuits that trigger a signal when a specific message is received. These modifications are used in covert operations to activate explosives or send alerts without raising immediate

suspicion. "The belief among Hezbollah was that their phone systems, cell phones, were compromised by the Israelis," Bruce Schneier, Adjunct Lecturer of Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School, said in *The Interface* podcast interview. "To maintain security, they used older technology like pagers, thinking they weren't as vulnerable."

"The Israelis preyed on that belief and manipulated the pagers. They could have just eavesdropped, but they used them for destructive purposes instead," he told *The Hindu*. Speaking about low-tech gadgets, Mr. Schneier said: "It's not the vintage tech that matters – it just happened to be vintage because Hezbollah wanted it. The tampering could have been done with any technology."

Will pagers be a new tool in armed conflict?

Their small size and outdated look make pagers an ideal device to send short, encrypted texts that can't be picked up by intelligence agencies. While Israel has declined to comment on both the pager and the walkie-talkie blasts, it is clear who could have pulled off such an operation.

A Reuters report revealed that the pagers in the explosion bore Gold Apollo's branding. While the Taiwan-based company has denied making the pagers used in the blasts in Lebanon, the company's founder, Hsu Ching-Kuang, clarified that the devices were manufactured by a European firm licensed to use their brand. Gold Apollo insists it was not responsible for the product and expressed embarrassment over the incident. Hezbollah reportedly ordered thousands of pagers, which they believed could help evade Israeli tracking systems.

Experts are hypothesising myriad ways by which this attack could have been planned and executed. But there is nothing conclusive yet. It is unclear whether the devices were bugged at the manufacturing level or at the supply chain level. Mr. Schneier noted that "the Israelis were able to set up a front company, selling pagers to Hezbollah, and those pagers were created in Taiwan and modified by the Israelis to have explosives in them."

How could the attack have been pulled off?

Mr. Schneier pointed out that these pagers may have been intercepted and modified by Israeli engineers. The modification could have involved adding explosives, specifically PETN (a chemical explosive), to the pagers. Since reports suggest that the Israelis controlled the sale through their front company, they would have had full access to tamper with the devices in a lab before delivering them to Hezbollah. In addition to pagers, it's believed that Israel used a similar method with walkie-talkies, intercepting them and configuring them for remote detonation. The entire operation was a sophisticated supply chain manipulation, leveraging Israel's control over the sale and distribution of the devices to Hezbollah.



Covert attack: A man holds a walkie-talkie, during the funeral of persons killed during the explosion of pagers across Lebanon, on September 18. AP

What is the Nipah protocol in Kerala?

How did the State respond after a fresh scare in Malappuram? How does the deadly zoonotic virus spread? What are the restrictions that need to be followed once a patient is diagnosed? Who are at risk of contracting the virus? Why is the September death a cause for concern?

Abdul Latheef Naha

The story so far:

On September 14, a fresh Nipah scare erupted in Malappuram, the largest populated district of Kerala, when a 24-year-old man who died at MES Medical College Hospital, Perinthalmanna, on September 9 was found positive for the deadly virus. The health authorities in the State remained silent on that day as they waited for the final test results from the National Institute of Virology (NIV), Pune. But they were almost certain about the final results after the State virology laboratory at the Government Medical College, Kozhikode, flagged the test positive.

What followed the positive test?

The health department adopted the Nipah protocol by forming 16 committees as specified in the standard operating procedure for Nipah and started identifying the people who had come in close contact with the victim after he started showing symptoms about 10 days ago. On September 15, Kerala's Minister for Health Veena George, based on the test result from NIV, Pune, declared that the man, who was a student in Bengaluru, had died of Nipah, a deadly zoonotic virus that causes a range of serious

The latest Nipah incidents have occurred within two months in the Malappuram district

illnesses from respiratory infection to fatal encephalitis. With official confirmation, restrictions on social movement were imposed and face masks were made mandatory in public places in Malappuram district.

This is the second Nipah death in the Malappuram district in less than two months. On July 21, a 14-year-old boy from Chemassery died of Nipah at the Government Medical College Hospital, Kozhikode. Although it had triggered alarm and government-imposed restrictions, the focus shifted when the neighbouring Wayanad district witnessed Kerala's worst landslide on July 30. The Nipah cases of July 21 and September 9 were hardly 10 km apart in a highly populated district. While the schoolboy was presumed to have contracted the virus after he ate a hog plum, it is not clear how the Bengaluru student was infected.

What is the case history of Nipah in the State?

This was the sixth Nipah virus spillover in Kerala since 2018, when the State reported its first case. As many as 22 people in Kerala have died of Nipah so far. While the first outbreak claimed 17 lives in Kozhikode and Malappuram, the second incident at Pazhur in Kozhikode claimed only one life in 2021. Another outbreak that took place in Kozhikode in August 2023 claimed two lives. The latest Nipah incidents within two months in Malappuram have sent an ominous message that Nipah could be here to stay.

Why was there a delay to identify the virus?

The 24-year-old man had reached home from Bengaluru in the last week of August. He visited several clinics after he developed a fever and had difficulty walking on September 5. He was admitted to MES Medical College on September 8 with symptoms of meningitis or encephalitis, where he died on the morning of September 9. A doubt that arose in the doctor who examined the 24-year-old man at this private medical college led him to contact the District Medical Officer and send the body fluid sample for an examination to the Kozhikode virology lab.

How did the government respond?

The government, particularly the health

department and the district administration, was quick to respond by declaring five civic wards in the adjoining grama panchayats of Tiruvall and Mampad as containment zones. Schools, madrasas, coaching and tuition centres, and anganwadis in the region were closed. Cinema halls too were shut. Shops were allowed to open from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. only. Social gatherings were banned. Masks were made mandatory in the district, especially for students and teachers on campuses. The health department prepared a route map of the Nipah victim, traced 267 persons who had come in contact with him, and put them in quarantine. Several of them, particularly his parents, close friends and the doctors and nurses who took care of him at the hospital, were closely monitored. Their serum was collected and tested at the virology lab. So far all results have been negative. As many as 30 of the victim's classmates in Bengaluru too were advised to self-quarantine.

The government also opened a Nipah control room at Malappuram and started closely monitoring the developments. Senior health officers led by health department director K.J. Reena have been camping at Malappuram.

Health workers in 66 teams have undertaken a field survey within a three kilometre radius from the victim's house in Tiruvall panchayat and reached out to 7,953 houses within four days. As many as 175 cases of fever were reported during the survey, and they were put under surveillance. The health department also reached out to nearly 300 persons with psychological support.

Where did Nipah come from?

Bats are considered to be the carriers of the Nipah virus. The primary pathways of transmission from bats to people are through contamination of fruits eaten by humans. The virus can also be transmitted through contaminated food or directly from human-to-human through close contact with people's secretions and excretions. Healthcare workers, friends and family members of an infected person are at high risk of contracting the virus.

It is unclear where the 24-year-old Nipah victim contracted the virus. Experts have been divided on attributing the virus exclusively to bats. Following the outbreak of 2018, there was a drive to destroy bat colonies, but in vain. The definitive connection between Nipah and bats is yet to be ascertained in Kerala.



Quick to spread: The patient suffering from Nipah infection being shifted to a Nipah isolation ward in Kozhikode Medical College on July 20. REUTERS

PROFILES

From the backroom to the top

Atishi Marlena

The educationalist has staunchly remained loyal to the leadership during the AAP's ups and downs and enjoys the trust of party supremo Arvind Kejriwal, which many believe paved the way for her rise as Chief Minister of Delhi

Nikhil M. Babu

In the summer of 2018, appointments of 10 advisers of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) ministers of Delhi were cancelled based on an advice by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs. But a fuming Manish Sisodia, then Education Minister, focussed only on one name: Atishi Marlena.

"This orders' actual intention is to remove the adviser to Education Minister, Atishi Marlena... Their target is Atishi Marlena. She is that woman who is working to take the Delhi government's education to new heights. She has studied from the Oxford University, but works as the adviser at a salary of one rupee," Mr. Sisodia, who is considered to be number 2 in the AAP, said while addressing a press conference.

Back then, she was not one of the prominent faces of the AAP. Fast forward six years, Ms. Atishi, now the Education Minister, while addressing a gathering, breaks down and stops to drink a sip of water. "Delhi's education revolution's founder Manish Sisodia, who was arrested in a false case and jailed for 17 months, got bail today... Today, truth has won."

At this time, Ms. Atishi held about 13 portfolios in the Delhi government – the highest at the time by any Minister and was considered to run the Delhi government with both Mr. Sisodia and party chief Arvind Kejriwal in jail.

The two events also, to an extent, explain Ms. Atishi's meteoric rise from a backroom person in the AAP government to the party's choice for the Chief Minister's post.

Party insiders say she is "extremely hard working" and "loyal", and it is because of the trust Mr. Kejriwal has on her that Ms. Atishi, a first-time MLA and Minister, was picked as the CM over multiple founding members. But it did not come easy.

Oxford to AAP

Born to Tripta Wahi and Vijay Singh, both professors, Ms. Atishi did her schooling from Springdales School in New Delhi and went on to study

history at St. Stephen's College. She pursued her Master's on a Chevening scholarship at the Oxford University. A few years later she earned her second Master's from Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar in Educational Research.

After coming back to India, she taught at a school for a while and then she spent several years in a village in Madhya Pradesh, engaging in organic farming and progressive education systems. She joined the AAP in 2013 and played a crucial role in shaping the party's policies, including as a key member of the 2013 Manifesto Drafting Committee of the AAP.

Later that year, the AAP came to power in Delhi, but it was only for 49 days. Ms. Atishi continued to work behind the scenes. In 2015, the AAP won the Assembly election and came back to power in Delhi.

"She started off with the party in 2013 by spending 25% of her time for the AAP. That was the deal she had. But after the 49-day government fell, she started spending more time with the party. But with the historic mandate that we got in 2015, Arvind ji and others asked her join full time and she did," an AAP insider said.

But shortly, a spat ensued between founding members Prashant Bhusan, Yogendra Yadav versus party chief Mr. Kejriwal. Ms. Atishi, who was considered to be close to the former camp, was removed as a spokesperson of the party.

It was under these circumstances that she picked a side.

She wrote an email to Mr. Bhusan and Mr. Yadav and said that though she would continue to hold both of them in the highest regard, their paths could not be common any more. Within days, both the founding members were expelled from the party. And in July 2015, she was appointed as the adviser to the Education Minister.

Sporting a kurta and dupatta and a small sling bag, she worked behind many of the Delhi government's education programmes, including "mission bunyia" (to enhance students' foundational literacy and numeracy skills) and happiness curriculum. The AAP started allocating 22-23% of



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

the annual Budget for education and made education a cornerstone of what was later coined as the 'Delhi model of governance' or the 'Arvind Kejriwal model of governance'.

After she was removed as adviser in 2018, she was announced as the AAP's East Delhi candidate for the 2019 Lok Sabha election. This also marked the beginning of Ms. Atishi's transformation as a politician.

Ahead of the election campaign, she dropped her surname 'Marlena' from Twitter and the party also started using only 'Atishi' in official communication. She had been given

the name Marlena, referring to Marx and Lenin, by her parents. This was apparently in response to a BJP campaign to label her as a Christian.

She also attended a Kshatriya community event that referred to her as 'Atishi Singh'. Closer to the election, Mr. Sisodia even tweeted that she was a 'Rajputani' and her full name was 'Atishi Singh'.

She lost the election, but later won the Delhi Assembly election from Kalkaji in south Delhi, in 2020.

Over the years, the AAP's electoral politics crystallised into a promise of the 'Kejriwal model of governance',

which is a slew of welfare measures and pro-people policies, peppered with Hindutva and nationalism.

Ms. Atishi, like many others, toed the party line.

In 2022, when communal clashes happened in Delhi's Jahangirpuri, the AAP, including Ms. Atishi, blamed Rohingyas and Bangladeshis.

Later that year, when Mr. Kejriwal demanded that the Indian currency notes should have images of Hindu gods Lakshmi and Ganesha as it will help improve the economy, Ms. Atishi defended the AAP supremo.

Minister Atishi

When Mr. Sisodia was arrested in the Delhi excise policy case in March 2023, Ms. Atishi's role further expanded in the party. She was soon inducted into the Cabinet and she formed the front line of defence of the party along with Saurabh Bhardwaj.

When Mr. Kejriwal was also arrested in the same case in March this year, Ms. Atishi took the reins from him and ran the government, even though he continued to be the Chief Minister. Ms. Atishi is a member of the party's political affairs committee (PAC), the highest decision making body.

Two days after Mr. Kejriwal was granted bail by the Supreme Court on September 13, he announced that he would step down as CM as he wants to face 'Agni Pariksha' in the public's court and would sit in the CM's seat only after they elect him again.

In reality, Mr. Kejriwal's bail conditions limit his powers as CM to certain extent, and a fully empowered Chief Minister could mobilise a welfare crescendo ahead of the election, due in February 2025. Also, the BJP has been relentlessly trying to paint the AAP and its chief as corrupt with three of its top leaders being arrested in the Delhi excise policy case.

In that moment of need, Mr. Kejriwal wanted a safe choice with an unblemished record – in short, Ms. Atishi.

For the time being, Ms. Atishi has got exactly what the AAP supremo was looking for – unwavering faith and loyalty. But the big question is, will Ms. Atishi continue to remain so?

THE GIST

Atishi joined the AAP in 2013 and played a crucial role in shaping the party's policies, including as a key member of the 2013 Manifesto Drafting Committee of the AAP

When a spat ensued between founding members of the AAP, Prashant Bhusan, Yogendra Yadav versus Arvind Kejriwal, Atishi, who was considered to be close the former camp, chose to stay with the latter

When the AAP's electoral politics crystallised into a promise of the 'Kejriwal model of governance', which is a slew of welfare measures peppered with Hindutva and nationalism, Atishi, like many others, toed the party line

The Russians are coming

Pokrovsk

With the Russian troops making gains in the battlefield in the east, Ukraine seeks to hurt Russia with drone and missile strikes

Stanly Johny

The Russians turned to Pokrovsk, the eastern Ukrainian city with a pre-war population of about 70,000, after they captured Avdiivka in February this year. Pokrovsk is part of Donetsk, one of the four Ukrainian oblasts which Russian President Vladimir Putin annexed in 2022 (Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia are the others). Since February, Russian troops have slowly advanced towards Pokrovsk, building pressure on Ukraine's defensive lines. Now, with the Russians a few kilometres away, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says the situation is "difficult".

The city is home to a key railway station, built in the 19th century, and is located at the intersection of several vital roads that connect central Ukraine with the east. Pokrovsk grew around the railway station and emerged as a producer of coking coal, a lifeline of Ukraine's pre-war economy, and a vital logistical hub.

During the Second World War, the city saw some of the fiercest battles. The Germans, who took the city in October 1941, forcibly moved many residents to Nazi labour camps elsewhere in Europe. Pokrovsk also witnessed the massacre of local Jewish people by the Nazis. The ci-



CREDIT: GRAPHICNEWS

ty was liberated in September 1943 by the Soviet Red Army.

In 2014, after Russia-backed rebels in Ukraine's east captured parts of Donetsk, including Donetsk city, the administrative capital of the province, Pokrovsk's profile grew in the Ukraine-controlled parts of the province. After the Russians took Bakhmut last year and Avdiivka earlier this year, their focus shifted towards two strategically important cities in Donetsk – Pokrovsk and Chasiv Yar, a hilltop town.

The Russians took parts of Chasiv Yar in July after months of complex and costly operations, and they kept pounding the city and disrupting Ukraine's supplies using drones and artillery. But the axis where they made swift advances in recent weeks was towards Pokrovsk.

In the first week of August, however, Ukraine did something unexpected. Its troops carried out a daunt-

ing cross-border attack, capturing territories in Russia's Kursk region. The incursion was a setback for Mr. Putin as it was the first major cross-border attack into mainland Russia since the Second World War. Ukraine had a more pressing objective – to divert Russian troops from their campaign for Pokrovsk. The tactical thinking behind the Kursk incursion was that if the Russians are forced to relocate their troops from the Pokrovsk axis to Kursk, Russia's advance in the east would be slowed down. But what happened was exactly the opposite.

Territorial gains

Russia did actually reinforce its Kursk defence, which seemed to have halted Ukraine's advance in the region. But instead of pulling troops from the Pokrovsk axis, Russia doubled down on the offensive. On the other side, Ukraine's decision to move

some of its well-trained forces to Kursk seemed to have weakened the already crumbling defences in the east. As a result, Russia made lightning advances towards Pokrovsk in August. This forced Ukraine to redeploy some of its troops back to the defence of Pokrovsk. But Russian troops are moving from the north and south, which some military analysts say is an attempt to envelop the city.

If the Russians take Pokrovsk, that would seriously affect Ukraine's resupply lines in the east. The defence of other strategic towns, including Chasiv Yar, will further be in peril. This would mean that Russia would be a step closer towards meeting one of Mr. Putin's military objectives – taking full control of the Donbas region. It will also bring the Russians close to Ukraine's deep rear.

But Ukrainians say they are ready to dig in and hurt the Russians as much as possible before they take the city. Ukraine is also hitting deep inside Russia using drones. And they are seeking permission from the U.S. to hit Russia using western long-range missiles. Outnumbered, outgunned and faced with back-to-back setbacks on the battlefield, Ukraine seeks to keep up the pressure on the Russians through long-range attacks with NATO's help.

Three's not a crowd

Jill Stein

While the contest is between the Democratic and Republican parties, the Green Party candidate's strong anti-war position is having an impact among sections of American voters

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Priyali Prakash

The U.S.' two-party system has a third challenger – the Green Party's presidential candidate Jill Stein. Although the Green Party is unlikely to win the election, the support of Republican candidate Donald Trump and Democratic candidate Kamala Harris for Israel's war on Gaza has given Ms. Stein's campaign some unexpected momentum in the race to the White House.

This is Ms. Stein's third attempt in a U.S. presidential race – she previously contested the elections in 2012 and 2016, where she polled 0.36% and 1.07% of popular votes, respectively.

Ecology is one of the four pillars of the Green Party's core politics, and Ms. Stein has had a long association with environmental conservation and health. As a Harvard-graduate physician, Ms. Stein first focused on environmental degradation and its impact on human health in the 1990s. She led the agitation to clean up the 'Fifty Five' coal plants in Massachusetts – Salem Harbor, Brayton Point, Mount Tom, Canal Station, and Mystic Generating Station – which were emitting more pollution than the levels permitted under the Clean Air Act, 1990.

Israel's war on Gaza has



emerged as an important issue in the presidential race, and Ms. Stein has openly advocated putting an end to her country's supply of arms to Israel. Her anti-war stance opposes that of the Democratic candidate Ms. Harris, who is currently the Vice President of the administration that continues to supply arms to Israel, and former President Trump, who has called himself 'a protector of Israel'.

Ms. Stein has publicly referred to Israel's war on Gaza as a "genocide", and recently said the pager attack in Lebanon was an act of "terrorism". In a statement issued alongside her running mate Butch Ware, Ms. Stein included U.S. leaders Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, Donald Trump, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, George W. Bush, and Dick Cheney in a list of "war criminals".

"We condemn Benjamin Netanyahu in the strongest terms for his on-

going atrocities in Gaza, which amount to genocide and war crimes," the statement said.

Ms. Stein's campaign also promises to abolish all student debt, provide life-long free public education, increase public school funding, increase estate tax, increase minimum wage, codify Roe v. Wade, work towards a democratically controlled healthcare by replacing private hospitals, private medical practice, and private medical insurance, and more.

Green New Deal

The Green Party's Real Green New Deal is an important part of Ms. Stein's presidential campaign to fulfil its goals of combating climate change. A 'Green New Deal' has gained popularity in the last decade, but it is non-binding and does not call for a ban on fracking. The updated version promotes ecological sustainability with clean energy, zero greenhouse

gas emissions, and economic security for all.

The Green New Deal was also an important part of Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's campaign, who recently entered a publicised altercation with Ms. Stein. Ms. Ocasio-Cortez blamed the Green Party candidate for not being "serious" and called her "predatory". "Clearly, AOC is the attack dog du jour and the Democrats are running scared. And they should be, because who wants to be, because who wants to go for a genocide? Who wants to vote for a genocide?" Ms. Stein said in response.

Although the 2024 presidential election, like most elections in the country, is largely a contest between the Republicans and Democrats, Ms. Stein's anti-war stance appears to be making a dent in Ms. Harris's vote share in some States. The results of a nationwide poll of American Muslim voter preferences, conducted by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, showed that 29.4% of American Muslims plan to vote for Ms. Harris, 29.1% for Ms. Stein, and 11.2% for Mr. Trump.

Ms. Stein is also leading Harris among Muslim voters in swing States Arizona (35%) Michigan (40%) and Wisconsin (44%). These States are expected to play a key role in deciding the next U.S. President.

SCIENCE

Rugged Falklands landscape was once a lush rainforest

The Hindu Bureau

Researchers have found evidence that the treeless, rugged, grassland landscape of the Falkland Islands was home to a lush, diverse rainforest up to 30 million years ago. The study reveals that the South Atlantic archipelago was once covered in cool, wet woodland – similar to the present-day rainforests

found in Tierra del Fuego, off the tip of South America.

The scientists conducted the research after clues to the whereabouts of buried remains of the ancient forest reached them via word-of-mouth in the tight knit community of Port Stanley, the Falklands' capital. Chance conversations led them to find perfectly preserved prehistoric tree

remains and pollen at a building site in early 2020.

Samples of the peat layers and deposits were removed from the site at Tussac House near Stanley Harbour. These were carefully transported to Australia for laboratory testing at the University of New South Wales, where the sediment was meticulously sampled and the wood analysed with specialised

scanning electron microscopes. The tree remains proved too old to obtain conclusive results from radiocarbon dating, so pollen spores were used instead. The scientists analysed a variety of spores compacted and sealed in the same layers of peat as the wood. Pollen records led them to conclude the tree trunks and branches date to between

15 and 30 million years old. Detailed findings of the research are newly published in the journal *Antarctic Science*.

Tens of millions of years ago the climate in the South Atlantic was much warmer and wetter than today and capable of supporting a rainforest environment. This would have been cooler than tropical rainforests we might typi-

cally think of – such as the Amazon rainforest – but still able to support a rich, diverse ecosystem of plant and animal life.

Many of the tree species growing on the Falklands are now extinct but would have seeded on the islands by being carried on the prevailing westerly winds from rainforests that covered much of the southern hemisphere.

SNAPSHOTS



A study re-envisions Earth's mantle as a uniform reservoir

Lavas from hotspots – whether erupting in Hawaii, Samoa, or Iceland – likely originate from a worldwide, uniform reservoir in Earth's mantle, according to an evaluation of volcanic hotspots. The findings indicate Earth's mantle is far more chemically homogenous than scientists previously thought – and that lavas only acquire their chemical "flavours" en route to the surface. Knowing what the mantle is made of is central to our understanding of how our planet formed and how the mantle has developed over time.



How plants carry environmental clues

A study has revealed the genetic mechanisms behind transgenerational phenotypic plasticity – a crucial factor in plant adaptation to environmental changes. By investigating *Arabidopsis thaliana* grown under different light conditions across generations, researchers demonstrated how maternal environments shape offspring traits. These findings could inform new strategies for crop improvement. The researchers identified critical genetic regions associated with transgenerational phenotypic plasticity.



A study uncovers mechanism for emu's wing reduction

Researchers have uncovered a fascinating mechanism behind the reduction and asymmetry of emu wing bones. The wings not only show significant shortening, but the skeletal elements also fuse asymmetrically. It highlights how differences in embryonic and fetal movement may play a pivotal role in driving morphological evolution, shedding light on the complex developmental processes that shape skeletal structures.

'Commercialisation of health services can be a recipe for disaster'

If contract management is weak, PPPs can end up with public assets going into private hands, and the government abdicating its responsibility to provide affordable/free care to its citizens

INTERVIEW

Sujatha Rao

R. Prasad

A few days ago, Sujatha Rao, former Union Secretary of the Health Ministry, quit the Lancet Citizens' Commission on Reimagining India's Health System. In 2020, the Union government intensified its efforts to privatise health care in India when NITI Aayog proposed and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced in her budget speech that district hospitals will be attached with private medical colleges in a public-private partnership (PPP) mode. This came a year after the Health Ministry issued guidelines for setting up private medical colleges in a PPP mode.

In an email, Ms. Rao shares her views on the perils of increased privatisation of health care in the country.

In July 2024, Madhya Pradesh government issued a notification to privatise 10 district hospitals with 25% of beds reserved for paying patients. Can privatisation of district hospitals in PPP mode "improve health infrastructure" while making healthcare freely accessible to poor people?

For Madhya Pradesh, this is the fourth attempt to hand over public facilities to private parties. I am told that each hospital is proposed to be "leased" out



for 30 years against a down payment of about ₹260 crores. This is being executed by the Finance department under the 2019 Central government scheme that consists of providing 60% of the total project cost as viability gap funding, land, and other assets and allowing 100% operational cost recovery in lieu of keeping 75% of the beds for free treatment. The private sector cannot provide free care unless it establishes a medical college charging hefty capitation to cross subsidise. Even then it is difficult. With weak capacity to enforce conditions, this too will go down as the old scheme of giving land and custom duty exemptions in lieu of 10% free beds and 50% free outpatient (OP).

What challenges can arise when district hospitals are attached to private medical colleges in PPP mode?

This hybrid model is unworkable as can be seen in Chittoor in Andhra Pradesh and elsewhere where



India's health system is the most privatised but it is unregulated and makes access to good quality care a privilege

the private party was allowed to establish a medical college by attaching the 300-bed district hospital. The private party has its own staff and uses the hospital for its own requirements, while the hospital is run by the government staff, creating dual control, confusion, and much bitterness. Instead, the private party could have had an MOU with the government and paid fees for using the hospital for training purposes. The government hospital would have earned revenues and improved the infrastructure while being in command of the hospital's functioning. Since it will be impossible for our weak/soft State to dislodge the private party that has access to prime property and assets worth several crores free, over

time, the government will withdraw and the poor in that district will lose access to good care. If contract management is weak, PPPs can end up with public assets going into private hands, and the government abdicating its responsibility to provide cost-effective affordable/free care to its citizens.

Can the U.S. model of Managed Care be appropriate for India, considering the large population of poor people?

While all health systems try to follow the principles of Managed Care – keeping people healthy, preventing illness, reducing hospital services, and ensuring a continuum of care in case of chronic disease – the U.S. model of managed care is based on an insurance model where a person becomes a member of the network based on his ability to pay the premium. Such systems are seen to have a selection bias, deny critical and timely care, create several such bar-

riers, and do not help contain the cost of care. Instead, they exacerbate inequality. Given that India's primary care is chaotic with different systems of medicine, varied levels of competencies of providers, and so on, a U.S. style of managed care model can not only further exacerbate the existing inequalities but also make health care costly, more so as we lack the regulatory capacity to manage contradictions and redress grievances.

In the absence of any social security, will privatisation of health care in India be a recipe for disaster?

India's health system is the most privatised but it is unregulated and makes access to good quality care a privilege. In neglecting health by allocating meagre budgets, refusing to put a strong regulatory system to reduce the adverse effects of market failures, allowing brazen profiteering as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, and virtually abdicating the obligatory duty of providing universal access to comprehensive primary healthcare services free at point of service, by taking the easy and lazy route of expanding insurance or selling public hospitals to investors, the Indian State has become unfair and unjust as a fifth of its citizens are unable to avail medical care due to their inability to pay. Nearly 60 million people are driven to penny paying medical bills. So yes, unregulated for-profit commercialisation of health services can be a recipe for disaster.

Are antibiotics responsible for bowel diseases?

The Hindu Bureau

Besides causing antimicrobial resistant bacteria, irrational use of antibiotics can also act directly on host cells. A recent study published in the journal *Science Advances* has found that even a short-course treatment of mice with antibiotics twice a day for three days was sufficient to damage the integrity of the mucus barrier, which separates the immune system from microbes present in the intestine. When the thin layer of mucus is damaged, it allows the microbes to come in close contact with host tissues, triggering an immune response and predisposing the mice to intestinal inflammation. The breakdown of the mucus barrier, which separates the intestinal epithelium from the microbiota, is a hallmark of inflammatory

Mice were orally treated with four different antibiotics belonging to different classes of antibiotics – ampicillin, metronidazole, neomycin, and vancomycin. The study found that all four antibiotics were capable of breaking down the mucus barrier leading to encroachment of bacteria upon the colonic epithelium. The study found that vancomycin could impede mucus secretion of goblet cells in the colon, in a microbiota-independent manner.

'Deleterious effect'

Mice treated with vancomycin lacked a clear mucus in most areas of the colonic epithelium. Of particular concern was the ability of vancomycin to affect mucus secretion by the goblet cells a few minutes following vancomycin infusion. The study



All four antibiotics tested were capable of breaking down the mucus barrier. GETTY IMAGES

biotics induce endoplasmic reticulum (ER) stress in colonic cells, thus diminishing mucus production. Based on this observation, the researchers conclude that antibiotics have a deleterious effect on the mucus barrier by acting directly on the host cells. When the microbiota after antibiotic treatment were transferred to germ-free mice, it did not lead to the transfer of penetration phenotype.

conclude that the effects of vancomycin on the mucus barrier could not be transferred to germ-free mice by transferring the microbiota. Besides antibiotic treatment of germ-free mice, the researchers also used fecal microbiota transplant, RNA sequencing followed by machine learning, and ex vivo mucus secretion measurements to confirm that antibiotics directly inhibit mucus secretion in a microbiota-independent manner by inducing ER-stress in goblet cells. This effect was completely independent of the microbiota.

The researchers tested whether they could reverse the mucus secretion defect caused by vancomycin treatment. They had previously found that TUDCA (tauroursodeoxycholic acid) treatment could increase mucus secretion rates by reducing endo-

colonic goblet cells. Since vancomycin treatment induces endoplasmic reticulum stress in the colon, they could restore mucus secretion by alleviating the ER stress using the TUDCA treatment. This confirmed that vancomycin treatment indeed inhibits secretion from colonic goblet cells by inducing endoplasmic reticulum stress.

Eroding barrier

"We propose an hypothesis to explain why antibiotic use is a risk factor for the development of IBD. We speculate that repetitive antibiotic treatment, perhaps together with predisposing genetic factors, erode the mucus barrier which can, after time, lead to gut inflammation," Dr. Shai Bel from the Bar-Ilan University, Safed, Israel and the corresponding author of the paper



Question Corner

Cooling off

Can heat-related illnesses be prevented in dogs?

A study has found that voluntary dunking of heads in water maintained at 22 degree C by dogs with limited water ingestion is the most effective method for rapid cooling after exercise. It reduces core body temperature within five minutes. Currently, the recommended cooling strategy after exertional hyperthermia involves full or partial immersion in cool water or using a fan to increase air circulation and evaporation after wetting the skin thoroughly. Voluntary head dunking also prevented dangerous

spikes. Cooling the head enables rapid cooling of the whole body with limited amounts of water. Heat-related illness is a serious risk for dogs, especially during warm weather. The research emphasises the critical rule of "cool first, transport second," which encourages owners to begin cooling dogs immediately if they show signs of heat stress. Allowing the dog to drink controlled amounts of cool water and pouring water on the dog's head may provide some benefit but it warrants further study.

Readers may send their questions / answers to:



A force to reckon with: Since 1967, the DMK, which had used the symbols of Tamil culture harking back to the glories of the Dravidian past, has been the dominant party in Tamil Nadu politics.
B. VELANKANNI RAJ

In black and red: 75 years of the DMK

The DMK, which split from the DK, tapped into Dravidianism and pursued a politics of community, putting together a broad coalition of the intermediate and lower strata. This has kept the party going all these years. Seen at one stage as an extreme, mass communal force, it has grown into a body that has learnt the art of moderation deftly, writes **T. Ramakrishnan**

The DMK, which split from the DK, redirected mass Dravidianism from a politics of heresy to a politics of community. Central to this change was the fuller incorporation of early Dravidianism's essentialized ethnic categories within a popular discourse, which inspired the mobilisation of a broad coalition spanning the intermediate and lower strata. — Narendra Subramanian in *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization*, OUP, 1999.

It is the element of a "broad coalition" that has been a key feature of the DMK and this, among others, has kept the party going for 75 years. In all likelihood, it will continue to be so in future. A product of social and political changes that Tamil society witnessed in the later part of the 19th Century and the early years of the 20th Century, the organisation, seen at one stage as an extreme, mass communal force, has grown into a body that has learnt the art of moderation deftly.

A dominant Congress

When the DMK emerged on the political scene in September 1949, the Congress was the dominant force. Despite K. Kamaraj being the unquestioned leader of the Congress and hailing from an intermediate community, the DMK, in the initial years, targeted its adversary as a tool of Aryan or north Indian domination, a line of thinking pursued by Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) founder E.V. Ramaswami (EVR) immediately after he quit the Congress in the mid-1920s. Though the Dravidian major has a record of having opposed concepts such as *varna* and *jaati* (caste), it cannot be described as an organisation that adhered to atheism. Ably guided by EVR's former lieutenant C.N. Annadurai, the party declared even in its initial years that it subscribed to the policy of "Onre Kulam Oruvane Devan [One race, One god]". This did not and does not mean that the party was or is free of atheism; but, as articulated by Annadurai, its position can be summarised as follows: neither break the *Pillayar* idol nor break the coconut to make an offering. Believers in the party are no longer considered undesirable persons. In fact, in the government of Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, there are at least a couple of Ministers who do not hesitate to display their religiosity. A few weeks ago, it hosted a conference on Lord Murugan in Palani.

In 1953-54, the party played an important role in the campaign against the Congress government's variant of vocational education, dubbed as "kula kavi thittam (caste-based educational system)". Eventually, the then Chief Minister, C. Rajagopalachari, had to resign. Even as the DMK demanded a separate state — *Dravida Nadu* — till January 1963, it went on to hold a series of agitations, centring around language and culture. In the words of Robert L. Hardgrave, a prominent American political scientist who specialised in Tamil Nadu politics, (as reflected in an article in *Pacific Affairs* in the mid-1960s), the party had used the symbols of common culture within Tamil Nadu, harking back to the glories of the Dravidian past. In 1957, it entered the electoral fray for the first time, recording a modest success.

Agitation against Hindi

The anti-Hindi programme peaked in 1965 when the Union government wanted to fulfil the constitutional requirement of changing the country's official language from English to Hindi. This came in handy for the DMK. Lack of imagination on the part of the Congress in handling the situation led to a serious law and order crisis in the State. The back-to-back failure of the southwest monsoon resulted in an acute shortage of foodgrains all over the country, increasing the depen-

Legalising self-respect and secular marriages between two Hindus during Annadurai's rule is one of the achievements of the party
V.N. SWAMI, journalist

DMK's course in politics: A flashback

1916: Justice Party formed on November 20 to articulate grievances of non-Brahmins

1925: E.V. Ramaswami (EVR), also called Periyar, leaves Congress, launches Self-Respect Movement next year

1930: EVR decides to work together with Justice Party, eventually assumes leadership

1944: EVR along with his followers including C.N. Annadurai (CNA) establishes Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) in Salem

1947: EVR calls Independence Day (August 15) a "day of mourning"; CNA differs

1949: DK suffers split on September 17. CNA launches DMK in Chennai (Robinson Park, Royapuram)

1952: DMK chooses not to participate in general elections

1956: At Tiruchi meet in May, DMK chooses to enter electoral politics

1957: DMK wins 15 Assembly seats - founder CNA elected from Kancheepuram

1962: DMK's tally in Assembly goes up to 50. CNA loses in Kancheepuram. Later, elected to Rajya Sabha

1963: DMK gives up its demand for Dravida Nadu

1965: Anti-Hindi agitation picks up momentum in January. CNA calls Republic Day "black day" to protest against Hindi being made official language

1966: Back-to-back failure of monsoon. Foodgrains shortage all over India

1967: Attempt on M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) in January. Congress ousted from power in Assembly polls. DMK, aided by coalition stitched up by C. Rajagopalachari (CR) & CNA, storms to power in March. CNA becomes Chief Minister (CM)

1968: World Tamil Conference during January in Chennai

1969: After CNA's death, M. Karunanidhi (MK) succeeds him as CM, becomes DMK president

1971: DMK creates history by winning 184 Assembly constituencies

1972: MGR, party treasurer, expelled in October; forms AIADMK

1975: Emergency imposed at all India level. MK opposes

1976: DMK Ministry dismissed. President's rule imposed in Tamil Nadu

1977: AIADMK captures power in June. MGR becomes CM

1980: DMK-Congress alliance sweeps Lok Sabha poll in T.N. in January. AIADMK Ministry dismissed the next month. AIADMK returns to power in June with MGR as CM

1987: MGR dies in December, after being CM for nearly 10 years

1989: In January, MK becomes CM again after 13 years. In December, DMK joins V.P. Singh-led National Front Ministry at Centre; its Member of Parliament (MP), Murali Manan made Urban Development Minister

1992: DMK Ministry dismissed in January. Former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi assassinated in Sriperumpudur during May. AIADMK-Congress alliance decimates DMK-led front. Jayalalithaa becomes CM

1993: Member of Parliament V. Gopalswami, known as Vello, expelled in November. Five months later, forms MDMK

1996: Landslide victory registered by DMK-TMCP-CPI coalition in Lok Sabha, Assembly polls, Jayalalithaa herself loses in Bangalore. MK becomes CM for 4th time in May. DMK becomes a major constituent of United Front government

1999: BJP's Atal Bihari Vajpayee quits as PM in April after losing confidence motion in Lok Sabha. DMK becomes BJP's ally. In October, joins the Vajpayee Ministry

2001: AIADMK returns to power, defeating DMK in Assembly election during May

2003: Maran dies in November. DMK parts ways with Vajpayee Ministry

2004: DMK-led front bags 40 Lok Sabha seats in Tamil Nadu, Puducherry. DMK gets plum portfolios in Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime at the Centre

2006: Single-party majority tradition broken during Assembly polls in May. DMK-led front bags more than two-thirds of seats in Assembly polls though DMK nets only 96 seats. MK becomes CM again

2011: DMK loses power to AIADMK, finishes third in party tally. Jayalalithaa becomes CM once again

2013: DMK leaves UPA government in March

2014: In April, DMK contests Lok Sabha election without any national party's support. Gets no seat. AIADMK, on its own, nets 37 seats. In September, trial court in Bengaluru finds Jayalalithaa guilty

2016: AIADMK retains power. Jayalalithaa, after overcoming legal bar in 2015, takes charge as CM yet again in May. DMK's M.K. Stalin becomes Leader of Opposition in Assembly. Jayalalithaa dies in December

2017: In January, Stalin takes over as DMK working president, after MK's health suffers setback

2018: MK dies in August. Stalin succeeds him as DMK chief

2019: Under Stalin's leadership, DMK coalition bags 39 LS seats in May in T.N. and Puducherry

2023: DMK captures power in May after 10-year gap. Stalin becomes CM for first time

2024: Another massive victory for DMK front in Lok Sabha polls. It wins all 40 seats in June

life had generated sympathy for the party, which knocked the Congress out of power. Inexplicably, Kamaraj, who quit as Chief Minister in October 1963 to become the national president of his party, had contested in Virudhunagar, only to lose to a student leader, P. Srinivasan. Thus began the DMK's spell in power which is continuing today, though there were gaps, including two separate periods of a decade-long uninterrupted rule of the AIADMK. Annadurai's stint as the Chief Minister was short, but he created the impression of being an humane administrator.

In sync with the spirit of the times

V. N. Swami, a 94-year-old journalist who had once worked as a personal assistant to EVR, describes legalising "self-respect and secular marriages" between two Hindus during Annadurai's rule as one of the achievements of the party. When Karunanidhi was the Chief Minister, the party's concern for the poor was evident from the replacement of hand-rickshaws with cycle-rickshaws, the provision of incentives to those who had inter-caste marriages, and the implementation of housing schemes, he adds. A Tamil writer-thinker is full of appreciation for the current government's schemes such as *Pudhumal Penn* and *Mahalir Urimai Thogai*, aimed at helping women financially. On the economic front, just as the DMK was in sync with the spirit of the times during the pre-liberalisation era, it remains quick to respond to the situation after economic reforms were launched.

Believers in the party are no longer considered undesirable persons. In fact, in the government of Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, there are at least a couple of Ministers who do not hesitate to display their religiosity

The party has had its share of minuses. Once an opponent of "dynasty politics", it has become a practitioner of such politics. Its governments were dismissed twice — on corruption charges in 1976 and for supporting the LTTE in 1991. On both occasions, Karunanidhi was the Chief Minister. When MGR and Jayalalithaa became his chief adversaries at different points of time, the DMK's initial response was one of being dismissive of them. It cost the party dear. The DMK government's approach towards the final phase of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009 is still held against the party.

A senior Minister in the Stalin government says his organisation has "not deviated" from its broader goals, focusing on matters such as the two-language formula and social justice. However, the Minister does not gloss over instances of the party having been "flexible" to stay afloat. Perhaps, the references pertain to the U-turns under the leadership of Karunanidhi, in ties with the Congress, headed by Indira Gandhi, between 1971 and 1980. Likewise, the DMK, once a bitter critic of the BJP, did not hesitate to join hands with it in 1999, and this relationship continued for over four years. In recent years, it seemed the BJP would become the DMK's principal adversary, with the AIADMK's meltdown. But the BJP-led front came a cropper in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, though it secured more than 18% of the votes polled. Yet, the Minister said he would not underestimate the AIADMK's strength, calling it a "sleeping giant".

In the years to come, the DMK will face new entrants, including actor Vijay's party. It is aware of the changing situations, says the Minister, adding that it has to pay more attention to issues of livelihood that have a bearing on youth welfare.

HARYANA



Wrestler-turned-politician and Congress candidate from Julana Assembly constituency Vinesh Phogat being felicitated during her election campaign for the upcoming Haryana polls at Chabri village in Jind district of Haryana. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

From mat to maidan

In Haryana, Vinesh Phogat goes from a wrestler who narrowly missed an Olympic Games medal to a politician who hopes to win a seat in the Assembly election in October. **Ishita Mishra** reports on her transition and how people respond to her on ground in a State where patriarchy persists

A convoy of cars and tractors, with Congress flags billowing on the top, blaring campaign songs, races along the narrow road in Aasan village in Haryana's Julana constituency. It threads through the verdant paddy fields. Polling is less than two weeks away and they have many stops to make.

Every now and then, wrestler-turned-politician Vinesh Phogat puts her head out of the sun-roof of her SUV to wave at the onlookers. For women, she takes the extra step of getting down and greeting them. With folded hands she asks for their blessings. The sun is beating down and oppressive humidity is making everyone sluggish. A lot has changed for Vinesh in less than two months. On August 6, minutes after her bout, the image of her in a red singlet, kneeling down on the wrestling mat at the Paris Olympics with hands folded in gratitude, flooded social media. A jubilant nation cheered for her. She was to be the first Indian woman grappler to enter the wrestling finals at the Olympic Games. But within hours of this triumph came the crushing news of her disqualification. She was 100 grams overweight. A stunned nation mourned for her. On August 8 she announced her retirement from wrestling, the sport which had defeated her not once, but on several occasions.

Not one to walk into the sunset quietly, she is back on the mat. This time the rules of the game have changed. As a Congress candidate in the upcoming Haryana polls, she has a tough contest on her hands. The Congress has not won the Julana Assembly constituency, her husband and fellow wrestler Somvir Rathee's home, in the last three Assembly polls.

"The fun is always in doing what is difficult," Vinesh says, on her way to a meeting at Aasan village. Beginnings, she says, are always difficult, whether it is politics or wrestling. "It gets easier as you get a hang of it," she adds, her face flushed with the demands of campaigning. But she keeps her smile throughout the day. Her routine as an athlete, of training and maintaining a strict diet, is lost in the hectic electioneering. She has swapped her sporting clothes for a kurta-pyjama.

On the road

The convoy enters Aasan village where she is welcomed by an eager crowd with a shower of flowers. On the cement stage at the centre of the village, she is the only woman. Other women watch her from the margins. Most of them are veiled. She pitches herself as the "bahu and beti" (daughter and daughter-in-law) of Julana. On her messy mop of hair, hastily cropped at the Olympics to drop a few grams of weight, the villagers place a *paggi* (turban) signifying power and respect. Speakers ahead of her extol her struggles both in the sporting arena and outside of it. One of them introduces her as the next Sports Minister of Haryana.



During the crucial time that she should have been practising for the Olympics, Vinesh was fighting the police's cane at Delhi's Jantar Mantar... We will ensure that our daughter gets justice

USHA DEVI

Julana resident

With the practised ease of a politician, she puts a towel on the microphone, to ensure that her voice is clearer. She speaks in an even tone in Haryanavi. She begins by listing out the failures of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) government that has been ruling the State since 2014. She rushes through the script: a litany of unkept promises, high unemployment rate, poor health-care facilities, and a power crisis. From delayed results of competitive exams to the bad condition of schools and colleges, she reminds people how one 'wrong' decision had ruined the lives of an entire generation of youth.

Using the Congress' symbol as a metaphor, Vinesh asks people to vote for the 'hand' to get their lost dignity back. "One vote of yours to the hand will act as a tight slap on their (the BJP's) faces. This slap will hit hard in Delhi on October 5," she says. She has been addressing eight to 10 meetings a day.

She briefly touches upon her Olympic loss and her battle against Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, the five-time former MP from the BJP and former chief of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI), who is accused of sexually harassing many young female wrestlers. "They [BJP] have not left anyone, be it *kisan*, *jawan*, or *pehwan* (farmer, soldier, or wrestler)," she says. She doesn't go into the details. Her Paris debacle was well publicised and it is assumed that her audience knows what she had to go through.

Vinesh's fight against Brij Bhushan started in January 2023. After months of protest on the streets of Delhi, India's national capital, the Supreme Court ordered for an FIR against the former BJP MP. Her fight for justice continues.

"During the crucial time that she should have been practising for the Olympics, Vinesh was fighting the police's cane at Delhi's Jantar Mantar. What she had gone through cannot be described



Vinesh Phogat on the campaign trail, pitching herself as Julana's bahu-beti. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

in words. We will ensure that our daughter gets justice," says Usha Devi, 55, who walked a mile to sing a song she wrote for Vinesh. In a nasal voice Devi and her choir sing, 'Sare jag me naam kamai hai... meri beti Phogat aai hai' (She has made a name for herself in the world; my daughter Phogat has arrived). The accompanying singers wear colourful dupattas tightly wound around their heads; only their eyes are exposed.

Bhupendra Deshwal, a Panchayat member assures Vinesh that Julana will avenge her and bring back the dignity of Haryana's daughter.

The unending battle

Born in Balali village of Charkhi Dadri district, Haryana, Vinesh's father was murdered when she was nine. She was brought up by her extended family alongside her cousins, Geeta and Babita Phogat, daughters of her father's brother Mahavir Singh Phogat. Wrestling was an essential part of childhood. She has been training since she was six years old. The Phogat family, especially her uncle Mahavir, broke the convention of women staying at home in a deeply patriarchal State.

Mahavir's life has been canonised in the Hindi film *Dangal*. Her uncle stood by her when she and other fellow wrestlers raised allegations against ex-WFI chief Brij Bhushan. In solidarity, he announced that he would return his Dronacharya award, given to coaches by the Indian government. Geeta too had extended support to her sister. Mahavir cheered her on when she qualified for the finals at the Paris Olympics. But she hasn't got his endorsement for entering politics, especially the Congress.

Mahavir and his second daughter Babita had joined BJP in 2019. Babita never supported the wrestlers' protest.

For now, Vinesh is focusing on more immediate problems on her hands. Paraded into politics just days before polling, she has many miles to travel, meet, and greet political influencers and navigate the tricky caste terrain of the constituency.

She has multiple opponents to worry about. The Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) has fielded Surendra Lather, formerly with the BJP, from this seat. He switched to INLD only after he was denied a ticket by the BJP, which was keen to field a non-Jat candidate here. The Jannayak Janata Party (JJP) had fielded the sitting MLA Amarjeet Dhandha. His party's intransigence on farm laws and delay in leaving BJP has put them on a weak wicket, though Dhandha is banking on his own followers to see him through.

Along with Vinesh, all the other candidates are Jats, traditionally a farming community. Breaking this trend, the BJP has fielded Captain Yogesh Bairagi, an OBC. Numerically, Jats are the single largest bloc with some estimates pegging their strength at 42% of the total voters. But the disparate group of OBCs, including Bairagi, Khatri, Kumhar, Nai, Rohillas, Saini, Yadavs follow close behind. "We have four Jats in the fray, including from the Congress, Aam Aadmi Party, INLD and JJP. The BJP had fielded an OBC which might be an advantage, as the Jat votes will be divided," says Satpal Panchal from Lajwana Kalan village. He himself is a BJP supporter.

AAP's Kavita Dalal, a World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) player who has branded herself Julana's 'Lady Khali' is also in the fray. AAP's

rank and file is split down the middle on who they will support. Virendra Arya, vice president of AAP's farmer wing in Julana says that the party workers had conveyed to the leadership not to field any candidate against Vinesh. He himself is campaigning for her. All her opponents are careful not to indulge in any personal attacks on her. BJP candidate Bairagi refers to her as "sister" in her election speeches.

Home but not dry

In Bakhta Kherda, her husband Somvir's village, Vinesh has been an infrequent visitor since the two were married in 2018. Now, she is camping here, reacquainting herself with many members of the extended Rathee family.

A cousin, Avinash Rathee, chips in, "When she retires, I am sure she will come to live with us." Avinash explains why Vinesh prefers to be called Phogat rather than Rathee at her rallies. "She is known because of the Phogat surname. Everyone knows the Phogats and their passion for wrestling practice."

Conversations on elections veer towards Vinesh and Somvir's wedding reception in 2018. Bombastic estimates of the number of guests who turned up are made. Each household from Bakhta Kherda and those from around 50 villages were invited for the function, one proclaims.

That is not how everyone remembers the event. Around 300 metres away from Somvir's house lives Rani. She was neither invited for the reception nor has she ever met her. "I am a Dalit and poor. You think anyone will invite me to their house?" she says.

After the Jats, the Schedule Castes comprise the second highest vote share, at 21% in Julana. She is also fighting the tag of "outsider". To counter it, in her interviews and speeches, she repeats, "I am here to stay." At an election meeting in Kharkh Kharkh village, Vinesh assures the gathering, "I am not here to make money. I had a great city life and money as well and I left it all just to work for you."

The Congress fielded Vinesh, a greenhorn, in the hope to enthrone women and young voters. While Vinesh's election meetings are drawing women voters, she may not be their natural choice. Nirmala, 65, from Radhana village where Vinesh held a rally on September 18, says that she has never seen her in person or on the television.

The sexagenarian keeps her face covered with a dupatta, as there are several men around, and to reveal her face to them would be considered an insult to her husband. She is unsure whether she will vote for Vinesh. "I will vote wherever my husband asks me to. Every woman should do that. We cannot do anything against the wishes of our husband. They are the breadwinners who run the family," Nirmala says.

Her candidature has generated some interest among the young. Rohit Banwala, 19, who has been cheering Vinesh on, says he will vote for the first time on October 4 in favour of the grappler-turned-politician. He has taken up wrestling himself, inspired by the Phogat sisters.

The next fortnight will decide the course of Vinesh's future. She is confident that she will stick around, irrespective of the October 5 outcome. "Politics is everywhere. I have a long way to go and a longer battle to fight," she says.

