



Delay and bail

Senthilbalaji's bail was overdue, but he should not be made a Minister

Bail is no boon. It is a routine relief for anyone arrested and kept in custody to give the investigating agency enough time to gather evidence about an offence without the risk of interference by the suspect. In fraught times when agencies are seen as political weapons of the ruling dispensation, the release of a political functionary such as former Tamil Nadu Minister V. Senthilbalaji on conditional bail becomes a cause for celebration among his party colleagues. The allegations against him are quite serious, and a spell of imprisonment once a serious investigation was taken up was not surprising. However, his prolonged incarceration on the charge of money laundering gave the criminal proceedings against him a political colour. After over 15 months, he has obtained bail from the Supreme Court of India. While courts have been reluctant to grant bail in money laundering cases, it was only a matter of time before the courts began reiterating that bail is the norm, and jail the exception. It is a welcome sign that the Court feels no more constrained by the bail-denying features of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) and similar laws. Its concern has now rightly shifted to the possible violation of the remand prisoners' constitutional rights in the form of protracted delay in commencing and conducting the trial. Therefore, long imprisonment without hope of an early trial has become a justified ground for grant of bail.

In Mr. Senthilbalaji's case, the PMLA charge arose from the allegation that when he was Transport Minister in the erstwhile AIADMK regime, he had collected bribes through his associates from job aspirants in his department, but ultimately those who had paid for jobs did not get any appointment. The police case regarding this has resulted in six charge sheets. The Court has noted that the final decision in his PMLA case can come only after the trial in respect of these cases. The former Minister, a defector from the AIADMK to the DMK, enjoys unwavering support from his present party, to the extent that Chief Minister and DMK President M.K. Stalin has extolled his "sacrifice" and "resolve". However, this demonstration of support from one side and loyalty from the other should not mean that the gravity of the offence involved should be forgotten. After all, Mr. Stalin himself had, while he was in the Opposition and Mr. Senthilbalaji a Minister, highlighted the allegations and demanded action. Mr. Senthilbalaji's entry into the DMK may have changed the political equations between them. However, the cause of justice for the victims of the job scandal and a fair trial for the accused would be served well if Mr. Stalin avoids inducting Mr. Senthilbalaji again in his Cabinet until he is cleared of the charges.

Staying the course

The Centre and the States need to fight air pollution together

With the southwest monsoon drawing to a close, north India, particularly the States in the Indo-Gangetic plains, brace themselves for the annual spike in winter pollution. Earlier this week, a top functionary in the Prime Minister's Office convened a meeting with representatives from Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, along with the heads of several ministries in Delhi. The brief was to take stock of the steps in place to prevent air quality from deteriorating catastrophically in Delhi. While pollution from vehicular emissions, road and construction dust, solid waste management, and diesel sets have over the years been counted as key sources of emissions, the burning of paddy stubble in Punjab and Haryana is known to be responsible for as much as 40% of the pollutant load during October and November. Punjab is expected to generate 19.52 million tonnes of paddy straw this year as compared to Haryana's 8 million tonnes. At the meeting, both States have committed to "eliminate" paddy stubble burning this year. To be sure, last November, the Supreme Court of India had expressly ordered that such burning completely ceases. This year, it has demanded to know from the Centre the steps that have been taken to address the problem. Whether the States can comply remains to be seen.

The harvest season of 2023 saw a 59% fall in the number of stubble-burning incidents in Punjab as compared to 2022; in Haryana it dipped by 40% but Uttar Pradesh saw a 30% rise. Despite the solutions to address the problem being known — create economic incentives as well as punitive measures to prevent straw from being burned — implementation remains a challenge. Punjab says that it hopes to manage 11.5 million tonnes of its paddy straw through in-situ (on the field) crop residue management and the rest via ex-situ methods. Similarly, Haryana will manage 3.3 million tonnes in-situ and use ex-situ methods for the remainder. In addition to this, 2 million tonnes of paddy straw would be 'co-fired' in 11 thermal power plants across the NCR region. Co-firing refers to turning the straw into pellets that can be used as a source of carbon. Experience over the years shows that several of these machines are not available to farmers when required. While using the straw in power plants has often been touted as a solution, there is no well-oiled system in place to transport straw from field to plant. The causes of the pollution crisis are multi-layered and will yield results only gradually. The States and the Centre must set aside their political differences and stay the course collectively.

Keep the fire of the self-respect movement going

This year marks the start of the hundredth year of the Self-Respect Movement. An emancipatory movement unlike any other, its aim was to empower individuals and communities to challenge and overthrow the hierarchical structures that oppressed them. But the movement traversed farther to nurture rational thinking, inspire subaltern politics, advocate women's rights and promote social justice. Though the Self-Respect Movement is synonymously associated with the Dravidian Movement, there are key but subtle differences. Together, both movements continue to guide the political outlook of Tamil Nadu and provide an undisputed counter-balance to the emergence of the majoritarian onslaughts across Indian society.

The emergence of self-respect

Over the last decade or so, September has been celebrated as 'Dravidian Month' to commemorate the historical highlights of the Dravidian Movement. This month, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) commemorates three landmark events: the birth date of C.N. Annadurai (Anna); the founding of the DMK and the birthdate of E.V. Ramasamy ('Periyar'). While Anna is regarded as the political patriarch of contemporary Tamil Nadu, Periyar is considered its compelling thought leader. To understand the modern social architecture of state, it is essential to track the impact of the Self-Respect Movement, which Periyar conceptualised and carried through for nearly 50 years.

In the history of the Self-Respect Movement, the year 1925 is regarded to be significant for two key reasons: the launch of the first issue of the Tamil weekly, *Kudi Arasu* (The Republic) in May, and Periyar's departure from the Indian National Congress (INC) in November. While the last mentioned event is commonly regarded as marking the formal beginning of the Self-Respect Movement, *Kudi Arasu*, even in its early months, introduced a new dynamic in the erstwhile Madras Presidency. The publication exhibited a strong zeal for social reform beyond merely advocating the political gains of communal representation. After leaving the Congress, Periyar used *Kudi Arasu* to adopt an unrestrained approach in criticising the then INC and Brahminism, a term which he used to refer to the horrors of the Hindu caste orthodoxy it espoused.

In the Madras Presidency, the Justice Party had formed Government in 1920 and was a vanguard for non-Brahmin politics, which also nominated the first woman Legislative Council Member, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy and issued the Communal Government Order advocating reservations in government employment. Parallely, Periyar organised the first Self-Respect Conference in Chengalpet (Tamil Nadu) on February 17, 1929



Manuella Shunmuga Sundaram
Advocate, Madras High Court and Spokesperson of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)



Vignesh Karthik K.R.
Postdoctoral Research Fellow of Indian and Indonesian Politics at the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, Leiden, and the author of the forthcoming book, 'The Dravidian Pathway: The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the Politics of Transition in South India' (2025)

With growing cultural homogenisation and divisive ideologies in India, the movement must step up the fight for social justice, equality and rationalism

which was revolutionary even by today's standards. The conference addressed equal property rights for women, abolition of caste names, education and employment opportunities for women, marital equality and more. The participation of the senior Justice Party leaders including the then Chief Minister of Madras Presidency at the Chengalpet Conference testified its popularity and success. Periyar leveraged this to turn the focus from mere non-Brahmin political representation to the remedies for religion-sanctioned lower caste groups, the depressed classes, and women within society.

The first 100 years and Self-Respect 2.0

The Self-Respect Movement is known for its radical social reforms including the introduction and the popularisation of self-respect marriages, which removed the necessity for Brahmin priests and religious rituals. By doing so, Periyar threw down the gauntlet to traditional Hindu practices controlling marriage. He fashioned self-respect marriages in a manner to grant women autonomy, equality and dignity, and symbolised a break from tradition. Self-respect marriages were enacted into law when the DMK formed the government in 1967, thereby marking the first legislative achievement for the Self-Respect Movement.

Another key limb of the Self-Respect Movement was its advocacy for women's liberation from oppressive social norms. This included championing causes such as widow remarriage, the right to divorce, the right to property, and even abortion. Additionally, the movement criticised ancient texts that degraded women, and actively promoted contraception as a means of empowering women to control their own bodies. Moreover, the Self-Respect Movement was also pivotal in its promotion of inter-caste marriages, which was seen as a push-back to the patriarchal forces controlling choice of partner and marriage.

Throughout the pre-Independence years, the Self-Respect Movement was seen to advocate the prioritisation of social reform over political independence. This has come to be a major critique of the movement itself, with some commentators going as far as accusing self-respectors to be monarchists and separatists. This hides a complex relationship between the movement and the nationalist cause. The Self-Respect Movement was not opposed to independence but warned of a replacement of British rulers with elite Hindu caste groups. Over the years, the idea seeded by this movement has resulted in a greater understanding of political autonomy and has contributed to the evolution of the spirit of federalism within the country.

The movement has its set of challenges. It is essential for every movement to redefine itself and its role in contemporary society. Looking around the country, the biggest challenge and

opportunity for the Self-Respect Movement is the cultural homogenisation led by the right wing. The ideology of Hindutva poses a significant challenge to the principles of the Self-Respect Movement by promoting a singular identity that seeks to assimilate India's diverse cultural practices into a standardised framework. This homogenisation undermines the distinct regional, linguistic, gender and caste-based identities that the Self-Respect Movement has historically sought to protect and promote. By marginalising movements that challenge the social order and resisting social reforms that address inequalities, Hindutva threatens to erase the cultural diversity and progressive changes advocated by the Self-Respect Movement. The movement's future relevance depends on resisting this push towards cultural uniformity and continuing to champion individual identities with particularistic grievances to protect the larger ideal of social justice.

The modern world around us is seeing the rise of more complex identities where caste intersects with class, religion, gender, and sexuality. As gender norms continue to evolve, the movement would need to address newer gender-related issues, such as LGBTQIA+ rights and gender fluidity, which were not a focus when the movement originated. Integrating these concerns of intersectionality into the next version of the Self-Respect Movement while staying true to its foundational principles will be a critical challenge.

The information era, today, is rife with misinformation and falsehoods in the guise of free speech. The digital and social media are manipulated to reinforce and aggravate caste biases and group prejudices. The movement has to engage particularly with young people in order to rebut and resist this modern-day menace. It is also equally important to continuously communicate with the generations of young persons who are far removed from traditional caste practices but still susceptible to right-wing propaganda, questioning anti-caste reforms and social policies such as reservations.

A critical mission

As the Self-Respect Movement enters its second century, its mission is more critical than ever. Confronted with cultural homogenisation and rising divisive ideologies operationalised by a host of organisations including the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, coincidentally also established in 1925, the movement must intensify its fight for social justice, equality and rationalism. By boldly addressing contemporary issues, it can sharpen its impact while staying true to its roots. The future of an inclusive society hinges on this renewed vigour. Now is the time to reignite the movement's revolutionary spirit, ensuring that its ideals not only endure but also lead the way for generations to come.

Russia's geopolitical pivot to Asia, a new India chapter

In 2022, Moscow cut its economic ties with Europe and made a U-turn to the Asian countries. As a result of this move, the knot of neoliberal interdependence between Russia and Europe became undone, with costs to the global economy.

The need for such a turn was repeatedly proclaimed since the financial crisis of 2007-08 but was 'adjoined sine die'. For the Russian political leadership, the core motives remained well-established. The country's economy was closely woven into western markets and financial structures and, therefore, remained susceptible to external shocks resulting from political and ideological confrontations.

The core feature of today's geopolitical manoeuvres is that they have both eastern and southern implications. Russia's \$240 billion trade with China did not overshadow the dynamism of India-Russia ties, which, for many, proved to be the most important outcome. The countries without common borders and well-established logistic routes have managed to build up trade relations almost from scratch. The opportunities offered by India, previously considered as *terra incognita* for Russian business, spurred discussions on the necessity to change the economic grounds of cooperation.

The factors that mattered

For Russia, political imperatives were a prerequisite for enhanced commercial relations. India's position of non-involvement in the European conflict served as a guarantee for stability in policy planning. For India, on the contrary, it was the economy that led to the extension of political contacts, as foreign policy is driven by internal factors.

These distinct positions have become a subject for convergence and a shift to more pragmatic grounds. India is not willing to make any type of political commitment. But, at the same time, it imports Russian oil which helps it with savings and also provides it an opportunity to re-export it to Europe as a petroleum product. Another case is the import of fertilizers and sunflower oil from Russia that helps to reduce food inflation amid climate shocks.



Ivan Shchedrov
Junior Research Fellow at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IEMO-RAS)

The Ukrainian crisis has become the major incentive for Russia's turn to India, but there are hurdles in the bilateral engagement

In just three months after the Ukraine conflict, the countries have covered much of what they have failed to do in decades. Russia is India's fourth large trading partner. In June 2022, the level of bilateral trade surpassed \$3.5 billion. Two years later, in May 2024, the figure rose to \$7.5 billion. If one factors in unofficial trade, the figure could rise to several billion. Thus, in just one month, the trade turnover figure exceeded that of the entire 2021.

The meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin in July this year resulted in the announcement of setting up a bilateral trade target of \$100 billion by 2030. In the context of the relatively low capacity of the Russian market, problems in access to foreign technologies, low-developed logistic routes and a sanctions regime, achieving this target will require additional political efforts.

Some hurdles

The first problem arises from the lack of economic complementarity between the two countries. Russia is now promoting its own industrial production and pursues a policy of moderate technological nationalism. It is the same with India which is pursuing a 'Make in India' agenda.

Second, the sanctions regime limits opportunities to overcome trade imbalances. Small and medium enterprises could become major factors in the boosting of bilateral trade and investments, but the countries lack a stable payment mechanism, an investment protection agreement, a clear arbitration system and single logistics operator for transport corridors which can provide a full spectrum of transportation services for exporters. Some of these obstacles could be eliminated by having a better presence of Russian banks in India — by the means of integration of national payment systems and creation of the payment gateways in order to soften the effect of sanctions in the financial sphere.

Third, technology and investments. This area was a hallmark of the India-Soviet friendship but became the main casualty in the collapse of the

USSR. Except the nuclear and military spheres, the current bilateral interaction lacks big investment projects in the secondary sector as well as research programmes of significance. Today's technology cooperation should be more business oriented. Construction and the modernisation of factories, power plants, refineries and mines in India are promising areas.

Finally, cooperation in science and education does not have the desired pace of development. It should include projects in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects and also in social science, which would help to eliminate the information vacuum between each other.

The outlook

The Ukrainian crisis has become the major incentive for Russia's turn to India but it limits the scope of the bilateral engagement. India is now facing pressure from outside and Russia is directing its financial resources to sustain its economy. These circumstances have caused scepticism about the stability and life time of the current thaw.

In the midterm, there could be a certain contribution from the booming military complex. Russian industry will be able to increase its share in the Indian market due to the low-price characteristics of products. With prospects of a transition of some Russian production capacity from the military to the civilian sphere, engineering will cause no less interest. Agricultural and construction machinery, railroad trains and medical equipment could be bound for India. At the same time, India could provide Russia with a range of products less accessible for business and consumers. Smartphones and digital processing units have already become India's main export items.

The major problem is about the quality of trade. India's export misses engineering products; smartphones exported to Russia are manufactured in the assembly plants of foreign companies. In order to have a more stable footing, India and Russia should look at how to increase integration in bilateral production chains and negotiate issues of localisation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Bail granted

One fails to understand why there is so much hype over the release of former Tamil Nadu Minister V. Senthilbalaji. The felicitations showered on

him by the State Chief Minister — "Your sacrifice is great and your will is even greater" — are out of scale (Inside pages, September 27). One would like to know

what this 'sacrifice' is, and for who and when. The Chief Minister should resist the temptation to make Mr. Senthilbalaji a Minister again. Mr. Senthilbalaji should wait till pronounced

clean by the law.
A. Jainulabdeen,
Chennai

Growing conflict

The escalating conflict between Hezbollah and

Israel in Lebanon has raised concerns that it may become another Gaza-like situation. World leaders must prevent the risk of greater conflict and the existing war being fought

from spreading. They must ensure that Israel is kept in check as it seems to be focused on choosing war over peace.

Ganti Venkata Sudhir,
Secunderabad

THE ASIAN AGE

28 SEPTEMBER 2024

Karnataka reining in CBI may be good in long run

The wheel comes full circle with the Karnataka government withdrawing the general consent to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) for probing cases within the state. Karnataka was the first state to withdraw such consent when the then Janata government alleged bias in 1986 and set a precedent of sorts in taking aim at the federal structure of the Union of states that is India.

In the current political scenario, fraught with friction in Centre-state relationships, Karnataka is the eighth to withdraw such consent, the others being Punjab, Jharkhand, Kerala, West Bengal, Telangana, Meghalaya, and Tamil Nadu; except Meghalaya all states being ruled by Opposition parties.

The withdrawal of consent means the federal investigating agency would have to seek permission from the state government on a case-by-case basis before any probe, even if it is to do with investigating Central government employees under the Prevention of Corruption Act.

The removal of general consent takes away a major flashpoint between the BJP-led Centre and Opposition-ruled states and since the consent mechanism is the vigilance directorate being under the control of the state, it is only likely that they will not be allowed to probe netas and babus who are with the ruling dispensation.

The Supreme Court had commented that such withdrawal "is not desirable" while at various times accusing the Central agency of being a "caged parrot". But the accusations of CBI being partisan have been more in the air since the Centre came to exercise greater power over Central agencies with the 2018 amendments to the PCA Act of 2018.

There is no denying that the timing of the arrests of party leaders and chief ministers like Mr. Soren and Mr. Kejriwal by the Enforcement Directorate under FdIA Act interfered with their campaign-related work before elections. Furthermore, there is no denying the generally ineffectual investigation record of the Central agencies like CBI and ED leading to very few convictions since the CBI was set up in 1964 under the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act.

The fear is the withdrawal of general consent may reinforce a sense of impunity to politicians. With investigative agencies like the police, the Lokayukta or the vigilance directorate being under the control of the state, it is only likely that they will not be allowed to probe netas and babus who are with the ruling dispensation.

The Supreme Court had commented that such withdrawal "is not desirable" while at various times accusing the Central agency of being a "caged parrot". But the accusations of CBI being partisan have been more in the air since the Centre came to exercise greater power over Central agencies administratively as well as legally with the 2018 amendments to the PCA Act of 2018.

While courts are empowered to institute CBI probes when they think the case warrants, the difficulty of putting up safeguards to ensure objectivity and impartiality in any probe by Central agencies has proved to be so difficult in the current partisan political climate that it is best the nation breathes without the fear of federal powers being misused. Inured as the nation has become to corruption in high places, it is best the fires of confrontationist politics of the time do not singe the nation.

Saudi output up, oil prices to dip

A bold move, Saudi Arabia has decided to increase its oil production despite the potential for a global oversupply. This comes at a time when other major oil-producing nations are treading cautiously. While this decision has sent shockwaves through oil markets, leading to a drop in the stock prices of oil companies, the Kingdom's strategy appears to be driven by long-term considerations rather than short-term price fluctuations.

Saudi Arabia, as a leading member of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), has historically wielded significant influence over oil prices through coordinated production cuts and increases. OPEC, currently comprising 13 nations including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Venezuela, has often worked to stabilise markets. In recent years, OPEC has expanded its collaboration with non-member producers like Russia, under the OPEC+ alliance.

The larger group, which includes players like Mexico and Kazakhstan, has sought to balance oil markets by adjusting output during "times of oil income bread". Saudi Arabia's decision to boost production, however, marks a potential shift in its approach within this framework.

By ramping up production, Saudi Arabia seems willing to endure lower prices for the short term. It argues that the ramp up could add about 1.8 million barrels per day (bpd) of extra crude oil supply each month. This is expected to loosen the global oil balance and lead to stock builds in 2025 and keep prices under moderate pressure.

The strategy may aim to maintain or increase its market share by undercutting higher-cost producers. This could be significant as many nations shift toward renewable energy sources and reduce reliance on fossil fuels. Flooding the market with cheaper oil could push out smaller producers and ensure Saudi Arabia's dominance when demand stabilises.

Crude oil prices have fluctuated significantly in recent months, with prices reaching \$80-\$85 per barrel in late 2023 due to OPEC+ production cuts. However, with Saudi Arabia's new production strategy, prices could drop further in the coming months. This would hurt oil-producing economies, but bring significant relief to oil-importing nations like India, Japan, and many in Europe. Lower energy costs would help ease inflationary pressures, reduce production costs, and stimulate economic activity.

In the short term, oil and gas companies may experience a hit to their stock prices. Yet, in the long term, Saudi Arabia's gamble could reshape the global oil market, benefiting economies that rely on lower energy prices while reinforcing the Kingdom's role as a dominant force in the energy landscape.

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KASHISH MEHTA
Editor
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R. Srinivasan
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Farrukh Dhondy
Cabbages & Kings



"A drizzle leads to a downpour
A metaphor — little to more?
The sky speaking of the currents of trouble
Which comes in threes, exceeding the double?
Or is it saying that blessings multiply
A lottery win — just luck — no reason why?
Or if affection means your fragmented heart
— The horse reared to the front of the cart?"

— From The Peeping-Tom Adventures of Don Qihoko
Tr. from Bengali by Bachchao

(VAT) of about 20 per cent.
Take this comment by Lisa Kerr, former head of Gordonstoun, where King Charles III went as a pupil. "Labour's VAT raid on private schools poses an existential threat". The school charges each pupil £23,000 a year. The average wage of British workers is around £35,000 and that's before income tax is deducted. Existential threat?
Whose existence or existentiality? (I've read Albert Camus, etc, but never quite understood what the word now means).
Also, in the Peltograph ("Torygraph"), a paediatrician who earns £30,000 a year from the National Health Service, means that "I will have to quit being an NHS doctor and work in LIDL (a comparatively low-price supermarket) under Labour's private school tax raid." Does this make any sense?

The least popular policy already announced by Labour is restricting the number of old-age pensioners who will get a winter fuel allowance, a benefit introduced by Gordon Brown in 1997. When I reached the happy age of 65 and then some, I have been sent sums of over a £100 each year to help pay heating bills. So have millions of people over the age of, at first 60, and later starting at 65. Did we need it? Would we have frozen to death or had to wear three sweaters through winter? Er... no! I treated the allowance as though I'd won a local lottery without buying a ticket.
Now Labour says it will restrict the payment to

those who really need it and check eligibility for the allowance through the layers of the existing benefit system. Undoubtedly, there will be some, through bureaucratic or other causal factors, who will suffer the winter cold without the allowance. Nevertheless, Labour's argument is that this cut will provide £1.9 billion towards filling the £2 billion hole in the nation's finances which the Tory government left had them.

Apart from several Labour-supporting unions and a substantial number of their own Labour MPs criticising the cut, there were of course the hypocritical "compassionate" Tory MPs and commentators vociferously opposed to Labour's move. This despite the fact that over 14 years of Tory rule these same MPs and commentators presided over, or demonstrated no concern against, the catastrophic rise in homeless numbers and the proliferation of charitable food banks all over the country helping those who couldn't afford, through inflation and rising prices, their daily bread.

I am sure, as any reader of Dickens will be, that very many citizens of the 19th century were subject to bitter cold and to starvation. At times in the last 14 years of Tory government it could easily appear to advanced cynics (ahem... yours truly?) that "Conservative" values meant preserving or regenerating "British" read "Dickensian" T conditions.

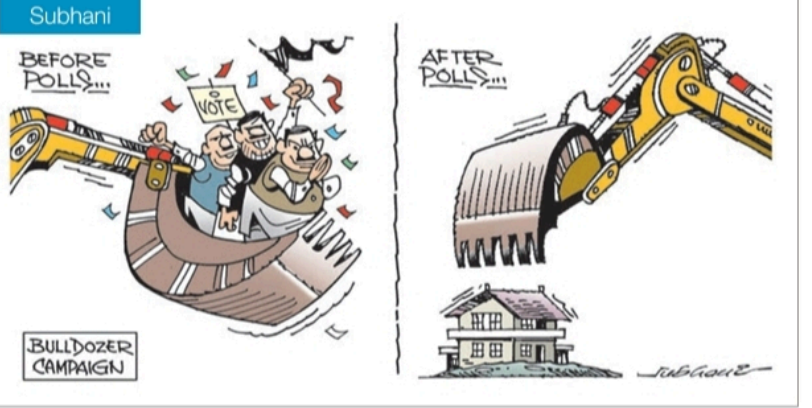
Alli, gave Sir Keir Starmer a pair of spectacles and several gentlemen suits which the PM proudly and publicly wore. Lord Alli also donated some made-to-measure dresses to Lady Starmer, who made no secret of the present.

Boris Johnson, who writes a column for the right-wing Daily Mail — being paid £1 million a year for his views — wrote a piece in which he alluded, slyly, to these gifts to Sir Keir and Lady Starmer, calling their acceptance of these sleaze and corruption. Heaven help us, and Boris' self-consciousness!

This was not the pot, but an astronomical "black hole" calling the kettle black.
Oh Boris, I know of no remedy for quicksand memory but may I remind you of the £300,000 you and your messmate, when you were PM, took from a friendly donor to buy soft furnishings and bad taste golden wallpaper for your residential quarters at 10 Downing Street? And this while on a donated holiday? And the drunken parties at 10 Downing Street when you'd imposed a lockdown on the nation during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Yes, Sir Keir has realised that taking freebies, such as specs and suits and several box tickets for premier football games, is corrupt and has wisely decided to stop accepting such. Except maybe for the football freebies which his staff say have to be in the box and not the stands.

Not enough, I suppose they don't want his ear shot off!



Migrants facing heat in UK, Europe: Indians in trouble?

Sunanda K. Datta-Ray
Reflections

India's home minister Amit Shah would have dismissed them as "termites". Being equally unsympathetic to those who take incredible risks to better themselves, Britain's new Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer, promises to "shut down the smuggling routes" and "smash the gangs" trafficking in human beings. To that end, he has appointed a former senior police officer, Martin Hewitt, as border security commander with orders to lead a "new era of international enforcement".

This isn't the only controversy to darken Sir Keir's horizon. His cancellation of the winter fuel allowance paid to pensioners, the £170,000 salary — £3,000 more than he draws — sanctioned for his chief of staff, Sue Gray, not declaring clothes worth £5,000 that the Labour peer Lord Alli listed just to his wife, accepting all manner of freebies, the list just goes on. But the international overtones of the "termites" controversy affect Britain's image and identity.

The bulk of migrants — or otherwise — come from the poorer Afro-Asian nations targeting the rich West. Can they be permanently excluded from the world's wealth without making a mockery of globalisation? Moreover, any battle against them can lead to a head-on clash with aspiring Indians who comprise the world's largest diaspora.

For all Prime Minister Narendra Modi's boasts about India being a "Vishwa Guru", 2.5 million Indians happily escape from the country annually. William Dalrymple's new book, *The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World*, flatters them by embellishing India's history "with visions of a fantastic, technologically advanced,

For all Prime Minister Narendra Modi's boasts about India being a "Vishwa Guru", 2.5 million Indians happily escape from the country annually. Britain is rapidly becoming an immigrant's paradise.

is called "offshoring" includes setting up two migration processing centres in Albania, intercepting and screening 36,000 refugees, and sending back those who are not considered suitable for absorption in Italy. Ms Meloni's government has also provided £18,000 to the border force commander, with him to Rome to show he means business. But media reports indicate that to Mr. Hewitt's view, strong-arm methods will not succeed without supporting deterrent measures.

He took Mr. Hewitt, the border force commander, with him to Rome to show he means business. But media reports indicate that to Mr. Hewitt's view, strong-arm methods will not succeed without supporting deterrent measures. Many more feel that the plan devised by Britain's previous Tory governments under Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak, to send asylum-seekers to Rwanda may have acted as a deterrent. The scheme, which Mr. Starmer lost no time in abolishing, cost the UK at least £318 million.

Sooner or later the organisers may have to face up to the fact that the route the migrants take and the help they may or may not receive en route matters less than where they come from. That's why India looms so large on the illicit migration map. According to the British Home Office, 1,192 Indians arrived in the UK illegally in small boats in 2023. Indians now also make up the third-largest group of undocumented immigrants in the United States, says the Pew Research Centre, putting their number at 725,000.

It's a mistake to think of these migrants as poor. The poor in South Asia cannot afford to take a flight. Most migrants are relatively well-off by Indian standards and hail from India's more prosperous states with a long history of migration to the US. They follow what traffickers call the "donkey route" — a circuitous, perilous man-hop journey — to avoid long delays on account of a massive backlog of immigration cases involving years of waiting.

The US Customs and Border Protection service reported nearly 97,000 Indians in 2023. Significant, those along the northern border skyrocketed from around 1,200 in 2021 to more than 30,000 because many illegal migrants to the US now find Canada a quicker and safer option than the traditional donkey route via Mexico. Justin Trudeau's desire to attract international students made it easier for Indians to obtain Canadian visas despite his problems with Mr. Modi. With many more Indians now crossing the northern US border than the southern, 22,300 encounters were reported in the first six months of 2023 in the north, against only 11,053 in the south.

This shift can extract a tragically high price. The bodies of eight migrants, including a family of four from India, were recovered in March last year in the St Lawrence river, which they had tried to cross. From the US. Similarly, a family of four from Gujarat froze to death in January 2022 only a few feet from the US border.

With Sir Keir Starmer determined to prevent superfluous Channel crossings, Giorgio Meloni and other Tory MPs and commentators vociferously obstructing illicit trips across the Mediterranean, and all US presidential candidates committed to banning illicit entry, the confrontation might position a lawful India against a law-abiding world.

The writer is a senior journalist, columnist and author

LETTERS INDORE FASHION SENSE

Surely, the urban development minister of Madhya Pradesh has more important things to do rather than worry about the revealing dresses some women are said to wear in Indore. He would do well to address the issue of rapes and caste discrimination in the state. Times change and what was unacceptable some decades ago is normal now. And how does a woman wearing revealing clothes tarnish the image of the city? Exactly what are revealing clothes? The minister would do well to clarify. Such leaders who complain about degeneration of Indian culture by Western influence are second to none in sending their children to corrupt West to study and live there.

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

WELL DONE, ANURA

IT IS APPRAUDABLE that Anura Kumara Dissanayake, the newly elected President of Sri Lanka, has withdrawn most of the unwarranted perks on President's Privileges. As a security services enjoyed by members of Parliament and ministers and has also done away with the pension drawn by them. He has allowed only one government vehicle to each MP and advised them to surrender extra vehicles in their possession. It seems such surrendered vehicles are now parked in the Galle Face green and people are thronging to have a look at those luxury vehicles. Politicians with corruption charges against them and those who have accumulated ill-gotten wealth at the cost of the taxpayer are jittery now.

Tharicus S. Fernando
Chennai

CHANGE OF GUARD

SHIGERU ISHIBA, former defence minister, will be Japan's next Prime Minister after winning the Liberal Democratic Party's leadership vote on Friday. As Fumio Kishida ends his tenure, the former defence minister is next in line to become Japan's PM. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) holds a majority in the Lower House of Parliament currently, effectively securing Shigeru Ishiba's position as Prime Minister of Japan.

Sankar Paul
Chakdaha, West Bengal

Let's spare the bazooka



DANIEL MOSS

China's latest effort to shore up the economy and buttress markets is commendable — all the more so if the follow-up is resolute. In tough times, it's vital policymakers get ahead of markets, or at least don't allow themselves to be seen as constantly playing catch-up. Taking the initiative counts, but military metaphors only go so far. They can

obscure as much as enlighten.

The package rolled out Tuesday was noteworthy in content and delivery. Markets were enthusiastic, at least for a day. Battlefield imagery was everywhere: A stimulus "blitz" had been unleashed. The measures, which included an interest-rate cut and steps to assist the stock market, amounted to a "barage." Cash handouts will be given to people in extreme poverty. And, of course, no policy shift would be complete without "bazooka." That tag probably shouldn't be used to bestow praise. It has a tumultuous history.

The individual G's anti-tank weapon from World War II has been used as a descriptor to hall responses as varied as the Bank of Japan ramping up quantitative easing a decade ago and Mario Draghi's race to keep the eurozone intact. Understanding the B-word and some of

its tangled deployment is useful for figuring what may come next, and why there is likely no single solution to China's challenges.

One particularly unfortunate invocation is attached to a different era: The American subprime crisis of 2007-2009. While efforts to rescue the US and global economies are now praised, aspects of what transpired didn't look so heroic at the time. There were certainly bad calls as well as breakthroughs, and Henry Paulson, US Treasury secretary under George W Bush, probably wishes he never heard of the MSAI Rocket Launcher. To appreciate the context, it's necessary to go back to the darkest weeks of 2008.

Worried about the stability of Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae, Mr Paulson went to Capitol Hill and sought the ability to seize the companies — if necessary. The firms operated under a government charter and

accounted for almost half the US mortgage market. He told lawmakers that handing him the authority to rescue them would be reassuring and keep private capital flowing. "If you have a bazooka in your pocket and people know it, you probably won't have to use it," Mr Paulson told senators in July. Congress soon passed the law.

It wasn't enough. Shares in Fannie and Freddie tumbled and, in September, officials were forced to nationalise them. What Mr Paulson was so convinced wouldn't be needed was, in fact, required. There's even an argument that rather than bolster confidence in the two companies, the bazooka undermined it by raising the threat of action by the state. It was a rough period: On September 15, Lehman Brothers Holdings Inc. filed for bankruptcy.

Despite the Freddie-Fannie debacle, the bazooka refused to be idled. The analogy evolved to mean you blast everything you have at a problem with as big a weapon as you have. You assume, or hope, that markets will recognise that it's futile

to fight beyond a certain point. Within days of Lehman's failure, American International Group Inc got an emergency lifeline from the Fed. Officials lobbied Congress for the broad \$700 billion financial rescue that became known as the Troubled Asset Relief Program. It was originally devised to facilitate the purchase of dodgy assets from banks, but ended up being a kind of all-purpose fund. The lesson is to keep improvising. Conducting stress tests on banks in early 2009 was an idea that Tim Geithner, who succeeded Mr Paulson, hatched on a Mexican beach during a short break.

By the time the results were released in May 2009, markets had begun to rally and banks returned to profit. The economy soon started growing again and the expansion became the longest on record. Circumstances can look miserable in the moment, with reason, but get a more flattering assessment over time.

With an imagined track record like that, it's no wonder the bazooka keeps getting

pulled out as a metaphor whenever a large gain is needed. But by firing everything at anything, it doesn't really mean that much anymore. Almost as cliché as the bazooka is the follow-on phrase: It isn't big enough.

Chinese officials truly face a lot of incoming fire. A disappointing recovery from the pandemic, the threat of deflation and the continuing slump in the property industry. China is improvising, too, with local authorities encouraged to buy empty houses and officials floating the idea of a market stabilisation fund. Beijing is also considering the injection of \$142 billion into the biggest state banks. It has certainly been an impressive week for policy mobilisation. If one thing doesn't work, try another.

In a tough spot, thinking creatively — and big — can be advantageous. There's a lot to be said for marshalling national power in moments of acute need. But, please, let's give the bazooka a break.

© Bloomberg



Mr Mann has a lot to do



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

In March this year, Arvind Kejriwal, then Delhi chief minister, was arrested on suspicion of money laundering in connection with alleged corruption in awarding liquor licences.

The Lok Sabha polls were just around the corner. Mr Kejriwal was the country's first serving chief minister to be arrested. State ministers Atishi, now chief minister, and Saurabh Bhardwaj, who were leading a mega protest march in Delhi, and other protesters were detained. Dramatic visuals from TPO (in central Delhi) showed Atishi being dragged away by cops to a bus meant to take the protesters to the nearest police station.

As part of security arrangements, the police closed all roads leading to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) headquarters. Water cannons and paramilitary forces were deployed on the road leading to the Bharatiya Janata Party headquarters. The TPO Metro station was shut down.

But all this was in Delhi. In Amritsar, Punjab, it was all business as usual. No water cannons, no protests, you would never have guessed the founder of the party in power in Punjab had been hauled off to prison. There were no reverberations of the arrest anywhere else in Punjab either. This set off chatter that all was not well between Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann and AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal.

The chatter restarted earlier this

week, when the Punjab government effected its fourth cabinet reshuffle in the 30 months the AAP has been in power in the state. That the reshuffle should happen within days of Mr Kejriwal's release suggested it was not Mr Mann but the party bosses who were pulling the strings.

The AAP formed the government in Punjab in March 2022 with a slew of promises. These included free power, employment, corruption-free governance, world-class schools, health facilities, a ₹1,000 per month allowance for every adult woman, an increase in old-age pension to ₹2,500 per month, reverting to the Old Pension Scheme (OPS), and eliminating drugs from the state.

Only a few of these promises have been kept. The decision to revert to the OPS, for instance, is yet to be implemented and pensioner organisations have warned of a statewide agitation that will cover Haryana as well. On October 2, the AAP has high hopes of winning in Haryana (polling for Assembly elections on October 5). The one that hasn't, conspicuously, been kept is the vow of corruption-free government. In the reshuffle just effected, the Department of Mining has had its fourth minister after three previous ones were sacked. Mining should have got the Punjab government annual revenue amounting to ₹20,000 crore, a figure the party itself promised in its election manifesto. Instead of revenue going up, local media and opposition leaders allege the nexus between the illegal mining mafia and the government has lost revenue for the state, raising only about ₹300 crore annually.

The AAP government has its critics in the Congress and Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). However, the government is facing attacks from within as well. Policemen-turned-legislator Kanwar Vilay Pratap, member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Amritsar North, has criticised his own govern-

ment in the legislature — not just on the issue of handling cases of sagelike against the Guro Granth Sahib dating back to 2015 but also on local self-governance matters in Amritsar like sewage management and water supply. He complained a junior engineer was more powerful than the chief minister, pointing to several orders issued by the government that were simply ignored by the local administration.

That the AAP still has traction with the voter in Punjab is evident from the party's victory in the Jalandhar West byelection held in July. The sitting AAP MLA from the constituency, Sheetal Arora, crossed the floor to the BJP ahead of the Lok Sabha election. He was fielded by the BJP for the byelection. It was a big error of judgement. He lost the election after Mr Mann rented a house in Jalandhar, camped in the constituency, and made the victory of Mohit Bhagat, the AAP candidate, a matter of personal prestige. Mr Arora lost the poll by a margin of more than 35,000 votes, quite substantial for an Assembly constituency.

This was something of a reversal of fortune. In the Lok Sabha election, Mr Mann and the AAP had promised to win all 13 Lok Sabha seats. They could win only three. The party had got 42 per cent of the vote in the 2022 Assembly elections. In the Lok Sabha polls in Punjab it got 26 per cent. The increase in the BJP's vote share in the Lok Sabha elections suggests other political players are not sitting still and twiddling their thumbs.

As the campaign for the Assembly elections in neighbouring Haryana carries on apace, Mr Mann is quite visible, testifying to his personal appeal among voters. But the performance of the Punjab government is below par. And when you add to that Mr Mann's own ambitions in relation to his party chief, Arvind Kejriwal, maybe some course correction is needed. Before anything else, Mr Mann needs to get his act together and tone up governance in the state.

Army, faith, democracy

How can Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey, and Sri Lanka remain constitutional, democratic, and stable despite Islam and Buddhism, respectively, but Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar don't?

If you promise not to go to the answer, I will ask you a question. So please tell me, other than Peace Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, which name have you heard in the context of the power shift in Bangladesh? Dr Yunus has, this week, been lionised on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly by top Western liberal leaders, from the US to the EU.

Now the second question. Why is it that among both our large subcontinental neighbours, democracy has been so fragile? The instinctive answer would be Islam — that Islam and democracy can't go together. Tempting though it may be for many, given the mood today, it doesn't pass the simplest fact check.

Look far enough east and this stereotype fails in Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim population. Halfway there, Malaysia also has peaceful electoral traditions, even if these elect a Mahathir Mohamad. Or go west to Turkey.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is no liberal democrat. If anything, he might be Mahathir-plus-plus. But he also has to face elections, and we never said democracies are perfect. Indonesia and Turkey are just about as Islamic in terms of their population mix as Pakistan or Bangladesh. This demonstrates the idea that Pakistan and Bangladesh keep flourishing because Islam is incompatible with democracy.

I can take you now to another country next door: Myanmar. There is no Islam there. If anything, they've persecuted and expelled most of their Muslims, the Rohingyas. It is an almost entirely Buddhist country. Dictators have mostly been in charge, and army juntas keep taking over, as they did in February 2021, imprisoning the somewhat democratic Aung San Suu Kyi, a Peace Nobel laureate too. You can't blame Islam for Myanmar's stolen democracy. What would you blame it on then, Buddhism?

We can demolish this notion, too, just keeping our gaze within our neighbourhood. Sri Lanka is predominantly Buddhist. Its clergy is often violent, racist and rarely a force for liberalism. We in the subcontinent tend to forget what happened in Sri Lanka during the original terrorist avatar of the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna), the party whose leader has now been elected to power under his new name. In that violent period, Buddhist bhikkhus not only conducted sectarian killings and targeted minorities, they encouraged them. Therefore, junk the idea that "Buddhism is good for democracy while Islam is bad." It takes something more than a faith —

Islam or any other — to bedevil democracy.

At this point, I need to tell you the answer to our first question: Which name have you seen or heard most besides Dr Yunus's since the power shift in Bangladesh? It is General Waker-us-Zaman, whom Sheikh Hasina appointed as her army chief on June 23, just weeks before her ouster.

He spoke to Reuters earlier this week and told us what Dr Yunus hasn't: A timeframe for the next election, and thereby the period for which this interim administration will be in charge. It's 12-18 months. This arrangement, remember, is unelected, is ruling without a Constitution, and the man in charge does not have an executive or political title. Dr Yunus is called chief adviser. Not in recent decades have we heard of a republic, least of all a large one with over 170 million people, being run by a chief adviser.

General Pervez Musharraf tried this stunt after he overthrew Nawaz Sharif in 1999. Too bashful to call himself president, he chose "chief executive". Even that was less convincing than chief adviser. Of course, he didn't stay in that camouflage long. He used the excuse of the Agha Summit (July 2001) to appoint himself President. How could a mere chief executive represent Pakistan at talks with the Prime Minister of India?

I am not suggesting, either, that Dr Yunus will similarly change his designation, or that this general will take over. It's now become very uncomfortable for generals to take over power in Pakistan and Bangladesh, they've shown how to "lead from behind." I steal the ridiculous line attributed to an Obama adviser to justify his abandonment of Libya after unravelling it. For now, General Zaman's words are ones of reassurance. He told Reuters' Devoyt Ghoshal and Ruma Paul: "I will stand beside him (Yunus). Come what may. So that he can accomplish his mission." He promised essential reforms in the judiciary, the police, and even financial institutions so that free and fair elections could be held.

"If you ask me, then I will say that should be the timeframe (12-18 months) by which we should enter into a democratic process," he said. And while what he says is important, the more material fact is: Look who's talking.

At this point, we can dial backward to where we started. How come Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey, and Sri Lanka remain constitutional,

democratic and stable despite Islam and Buddhism, respectively, but Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar don't?

Does the penny drop? It isn't faith alone that threatens democracy in a country, any faith. It is the combination of faith and military.

If the military is glorified as the only institution deserving of respect, with religion giving it sanctity, outcomes familiar in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar follow. There is no way this change would've been possible in Dhaka or Dacca. National Press Club and attended by the Pakistani deputy high commissioner, speakers explained why Jinnah deserved to be celebrated in Bangladesh. If his two-nation theory hadn't led to the creation of Pakistan, how would Bangladesh have emerged?

All these decades, the argument was that by breaking away, the Bengalis of East Pakistan had demolished Jinnah's two-nation theory. Now, there is this revisionist rehabilitation of Jinnah. It may or may not sustain. But the larger point remains: That if religion is so central to your national ideology and the army is seen as the only institution to protect its frontiers, any Constitution becomes secondary to nation-building or governance. In Myanmar, militant bhikkhus give legitimacy to military excesses. That is the revisionist rehabilitation of Jinnah, to democracy and underlines the struggles of our three neighbours. In its much shorter history (53 years since 1971), Bangladesh has seen as many new constitutional arrangements and generals formally in charge as Pakistan. All governments, military or elected, have messed with the Constitution in a fundamental manner. Now a governing arrangement informal to the street will bring in yet another Constitution.

All democracies face challenges, as did India's when Indira Gandhi must rewrite our Constitution during the Emergency. But when her successors repealed her toxic changes, her party voted with them. A few things that remained are by no means toxic. Today, a preamble describing India as socialist and secular would be seen as progressive. The reason India was able to step back from that precipice was that no religious power would sanctify this subversion, and no army would either support it, or promise to restore democracy.

That's why you might as well repeat after me: No religion by itself is an enemy of democracy. It is when you place religion at the heart of your political thinking and use it as a source of your power that you run into problems.

By special arrangement with ThePrint

Pink bowls & yellow bottles

EYE CULTURE

VENU SANDHU

Back in the day, kitchens in urban homes looked quite similar. There would be steel utensils for daily use and ceramic ones — either all white or with floral patterns on the border — for when guests came visiting. Then came the eighties and the kitchen started changing. What was until then a purely functional, no-frills space had a new entrant: Melamine.

Melamine dinnerware positioned itself as a replacement for those simple steel plates and bowls. It added colour and patterns to everyday dining, and since it was "unbreakable," you didn't have to worry about it getting chipped like ceramic when handled day in and day out. Steel plates and bowls were now pushed to one side of the kitchen rack stacked away in a cupboard.

So strong was melamine's "unbreakable" pitch that it was tempting to test it. Many curious children would give in to that temptation and deliberately throw a plate on the floor. It would invariably break, and the mischievous child would get a sound dressing-down, or have been pulled, or end up with a thrashing, depending on the model of punishment the parent subscribed to.

Those of us old enough to remember that period would probably also remember Lucille Ball, the lovable American comedy star of sitcoms like *I Love Lucy*, *The Lucy Show* and *Here's Lucy*, which were broadcast on Doordarshan. Today, these shows would make one cringe, both for their over-the-top acting and their

problematic portrayal of gender roles and power equations, but back in the day, they were all the rage. Among other things, they captured — and questioned — the trends of the time.

In one episode of *The Lucy Show*, titled "Lucy Gets Trapped", the protagonist, or did she, comes to work so that she can go to a sale at a department store. And what does she encounter there? A dinnerware section with a sign that reads, "Try our unbreakable dishes." She promptly proceeds to "try" them out — by picking up a plate and hitting it on the counter corner. Of course it breaks, sending an alarmed store manager rushing to Lucy to arrest further damage.

Melamine dinnerware was not the only kitchen revolution to make it to popular culture. There was also Tupperware, which entered the scene in India in the late nineties and quickly infiltrated the urban kitchen.

Tupperware wasn't just a brand of colourful and innovative containers and bottles. It was a phenomenon that created an ecosystem through which housewives could make some money of their own rather than depend on their husbands for a monthly allowance, like Lucy did on her screen (and real life) when her husband was in *Love Lucy*. This was a time much before the gender-neutral "homemaker" replaced the term "housewife".

With an army of women as its "direct sellers", many of whom organised Tupperware parties in their circles to promote and sell the product, Tupperware was not just an object of desire to an object of necessity. The women didn't have to really convert their own or their community circles since

this was a home business. So, while they got a bit of financial freedom, often for the first time in their lives, it all remained well within the acceptable gender boundaries. The debate on whether Tupperware challenged gender stereotypes or strengthened them, or did both, comes later.

Shows such as *For Family* and *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel* have captured this contradiction in some episodes. In the animated series *For Family*, the character of a soft-spoken Sue Murphy, a wife and a mother, has an emotional breakdown as the purposelessness of her life hits her while she is sitting at her dining table with her "hobby" — packing Plast-A-Ware (a take on Tupperware) in cartons with thank-you notes to people for attending her Plast-A-Ware Party.

In *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel*, the protagonist, Midge Maisel, turns to selling Tupperware in desperation when her standup comedy career hits rock bottom. To her Tupperware party guests, she introduces the beautiful pastel-coloured containers as "Plastic, the modern miracle." Among other things, she presents the retro Wonderlier bowl.

The scene was the result of a collaboration between Tupperware and Amazon, on which the show aired. Five-piece sets of Wonderlier bowls were later put on sale on Tupperware's website for a limited period, with the company inviting fans to "Stock your fridge like Midge". This was perhaps Tupperware's last hurrah, as the brand was being sold for bankruptcy. Its blue, green, pink, yellow containers today a memory of the time that once was.

Indian chess needs corporate support

YES, BUT...

SANDEEP GOYAL

Last Sunday, India scripted history as both its men's and women's teams clinched maiden golds at the 45th Chess Olympiad in Budapest, Hungary. The men's team defeated Slovenia after D Gukesh, Arjun Erigaisi, and R Praggnanandhaa won their respective matches in the 11th and final round. The women's team beat Azerbaijan 3.5-0.5 to clinch the title. India had earlier come close, but never secured a top podium finish. The men had previously won two bronze — in 2014 and 2022, while the women had won a bronze in the 2022 edition in Chennai. But this time around, thankfully, it was gold all the way.

The men's contingent ended up with a remarkable 21 points out of a possible 22. They conceded just a lone 2-2 draw to Uzbekistan, losing to all their other opponents. The Indian women's team then obtained a rare double gold for the country as they scored an emphatic final round victory against Azerbaijan.

India has rarely been No 1 globally in any game or sport, bar cricket (hockey is re-emerging after decades in the dumps, but that's a different story altogether). So, it is heartening to see ourselves emerge as world beaters in chess.

The inevitable din that is building up after the Olympiad victory is whether we are doing enough for our newly minted chess champions? For a trailblazer! For their global participation? For their travel? For their well-being? As of September 2024, there are 85 Grandmasters (GM) in India; India also has 124 International Masters (IM). And we have 23 Women's Grandmasters (WGM); plus 42 Women International Masters (WIM). That's a pretty impressive talent pool, for sure.

As of this week, the world "live ratings" for Classical Chess, 33-year-old Magnus Carlsen leads with a score of 2,830.8. Hikaru Nakamura (30) follows in second with 2,802. Hikaru Arjun Erigaisi (21) ranks third with 2,797.2, while D Gukesh (18) holds fifth place with 2,794.1. Viswanathan Anand (54), who no longer actively plays, is ranked 10th. R Praggnanandhaa (19) ranks 12th with 2,746.3, and Vidit Santosh Gujrathi (22) placed with 2,726.0, just one rank below world champion Liren Ding (31), who has a score

of 2,738.9. Indians are, therefore, fairly well-placed in the global chess rankings.

Sponsorship monies are starting to trickle in, albeit slowly (even hesitantly). The Prashant Foundation has committed ₹2 crore over two years to support six exceptional women players — Savitha Sri Baskar, Shubhi Gupta, Anvika Agrawal, Saparya Ghosh, Charvi Anil Kumar and A R Ilamparthi. GM Arjun Erigaisi has signed a \$1.5 million five-year sponsorship deal with Singapore-based Quantbox. Praggnanandhaa has recently got the backing of the Adanis. D Gukesh entered into an exclusive sponsorship agreement with WestBridge Capital for five years, and is now represented by talent agency ThePlay Sports.

Viswanathan Anand in his heyday was a very visible brand ambassador of NIT. He also went on to endorse other brands like Subway, Chess.com, Horlicks, Parle Milk Shakti, Edify, Vodafone, and Crocin. But then Anand has stepped back from an exception. Grandmaster contemporaries Dibyendu Barua and Pravin Thipsay, for example, earned almost nothing from brands. Interestingly, the All India Chess Federation (AICF) does not endorse any corporate support. It has been a long time since tournaments, h2c Power Systems is another seemingly big sponsor. FIDE and Tech Mahindra have

now joined hands to promote chess through interactive technology-enabled platforms by leveraging next-gen technologies. At a personal level, Anand Mahindra gifted Praggnanandhaa a Mahindra XUV400 electric SUV for his parents, in appreciation of his remarkable performance. But chess, with India's big leap forward globally, now needs a strong push in terms of corporate brand support.

"Intellectual" businesses like IT majors — HCL, TCS, Wipro and their likes — need to use the game to boost the global belief that Indians and Indian companies are brainy and smart. Chess is a great fit for them. The big consultancies — EY, Accenture, BCG, McKinsey, KPMG and Deloitte — should support chess. They all surely want to be seen as brainy and smart too. It would be a good move. The Byju's Indian cricket sponsorship (now gone away) was actually a better fit with chess than cricket. Now that PhysicsWallah has raised \$2.8 billion at a valuation of \$28 billion, it's time for it to associate itself with chess for all the studios and cerebral types.

And yes, the likes of Complan, Horlicks and Bournvita that have always tommorow *munn ki shakti* need to lend their might to the cause of chess. It will be a win-win.

The writer is Chairman of Win4Business

Opinion

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2024

Remodelling Indian capitalism

The question is whether companies can embrace shared value at the expense of shareholders

ATATIME of activist shareholder backlash against so-called woke capitalism — notably, corporates espousing sustainability objectives, including environmental, social, and governance (ESG) causes — it is interesting that an argument is being advanced to remodel Indian capitalism. There is no doubt that conglomerate capitalism that is dominant in the country discourages innovation, widens income disparities, contributes to environmental degradation, and slows growth over the long run. In a recent article in this newspaper, M Muneer and KM Chandrasekhar made a strong pitch for corporates to have a greater sense of purpose in balancing the interests of all stakeholders like employees, customers, communities, and the environment rather than focusing solely on shareholders. One of the earliest proponents of purpose-driven capitalism is the business of humanity project of the Katz Graduate School of Business, University of Pittsburgh, according to which humanity-oriented decision-making of firms leads to superior economic performance. Humane decisions include the option of, say, eschewing layoffs during a downturn. Safety, quality, environmental sustainability, gender equality, and integrity are other examples.

This is indeed a challenging proposition for business to be governed by values and principles as well as profitability, which after all is what capitalism is all about. Embracing the shared value concept makes a lot of sense but is difficult to sustain if it is at the expense of profitability. Look no further than the example of Unilever under the far-sighted leadership of Paul Polman, who led from 2009 to 2019 and his successor, Alan Jope, who doubled down on purpose in accelerating climate change actions within the company's operations and the wider value chain. Another lesson from the Polman era is that purpose can also help reduce tensions in the workforce and create optimum conditions for growth. But after five years with Unilever's stock on a downward trend and pressure from activist shareholders, the company's current leadership is relatively less focused on sustainability objectives and is even cutting jobs. In other global companies like Ford, activist shareholders have successfully exerted pressure on the top management to back away from policies promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion and focus more on shareholder value.

Clearly, these are not good times to advocate that India Inc. must integrate social impact and ESG into their core business models. To persuade more companies to embrace the shared value concept, it is necessary to point to successful cases that have enhanced both societal and shareholder value. Muneer and Chandrasekhar, for instance, suggest that companies could be persuaded to develop new products or enter new markets that address societal needs. This is a variant of the late management guru CK Prahalad's thinking that companies must address the needs of humanity. But if there was indeed fortune in catering to the bottom of the pyramid, why aren't many companies addressing the needs of the poor?

If that was happening, there would be no warrant for the government to mandate corporate social obligations on companies. However, what is important is that they want to start a debate on remodelling Indian capitalism in which corporates address societal needs rather than only shareholders. That the business of business is not only generating profits but sustainably enhancing the welfare of all stakeholders. Unfortunately, this thinking coincides with a time when activist shareholders are asking questions to the top management as to whether adopting a shared value concept could be at their expense.

Economic firepower fine, let's spare the bazooka

CHINA'S LATEST EFFORT to shore up the economy and buttress markets is commendable — all the more so if the follow-up is resolute. In tough times, it's vital policymakers get ahead of markets, or at least don't allow themselves to be seen as constantly playing catch-up. Taking the initiative counts, but military metaphors only go so far. They can obscure as much as enlighten.

The package rolled out Tuesday was noteworthy in content and delivery. Markets were enthusiastic, at least for a day. Battlefield imagery was everywhere. A stimulus "blitz" had been unleashed. The measures, which included an interest-rate cut and steps to assist the stock market, amounted to a "barage". Cash handouts will be given to people in extreme poverty. And, of course, no policy shift would be complete without "bazooka." That tag probably shouldn't be used to bestow praise. It has a tumultuous history. The individual GI's anti-tank weapon from World War II has been used as a descriptor to call various responses. Understanding the B-word and some of its tangled deployment is useful for figuring what may come next, and why there is likely no single solution to China's challenges.

One particularly unfortunate invocation is attached to a different era: the American submarine crisis of 2007–2009. While efforts to rescue the US and global economies are now praised, aspects of what transpired didn't look so heroic at the time. There were certainly bad calls as well as breakthroughs, and Henry Paulson, US Treasury secretary under George W. Bush, probably wishes he never heard of the M91A Rocket Launcher. To appreciate the context, it's necessary to go back to the darkest weeks of 2008.

Worried about the stability of Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae, Paulson went to Capitol Hill and sought the ability to seize the companies — if necessary. The firms operated under a government charter and accounted for almost half the US mortgage market. He told lawmakers that handing him the authority to rescue them would be reassuring and keep private capital flowing. "If you have a bazooka in your pocket and people know it, you probably won't have to use it," Paulson told senators in July. Congress soon passed the law.

Despite the Freddie-Fannie debacle, the bazooka refused to be killed. The analogy evolved to mean you blast everything you have at a problem with as big a weapon as you have. You assume, or hope, that markets will recognise that it's futile to fight beyond a certain point. And you keep moving, overwhelm the problem with whatever you have to hand. Within days of Lehman's failure, American International Group Inc. got an emergency lifeline from the Fed. Officials lobbied Congress for the broad \$700 billion financial rescue that became known as the Troubled Asset Relief Program. It was one of the most successful — and vilified — programs.

It was originally devised to facilitate the purchase of dodgy assets from banks, but ended up being a kind of all-purpose fund. The lesson to keep improving. Conducting stress tests on banks in early 2009 was an idea that Tim Geithner, who succeeded Paulson, hatched on a Mexican beach during a short break.

By the time the results were released in May 2009, markets had begun to rally and banks returned to profit. The economy soon started growing again and the expansion became the longest on record. Circumstances can look miserable in the moment, with reason, but get a more flattering assessment over time.

Chinese officials truly face a lot of incoming fire a disappointing recovery from the pandemic, the threat of deflation and the continuing slump in the property industry. China is spending, too, with local authorities encouraged to buy empty houses and officials floating the idea of a market stabilisation fund. It has certainly been an impressive week for policy mobilisation. If one thing doesn't work, try another.

In a tough spot, thinking creatively — and big — can be advantageous. There's a lot to be said for marshalling national power in moments of acute need. But, please, let's give the bazooka a break.



DANIEL MOSS

Bloomberg



ADAPTING TO TECH

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella

"I think this is really the time not to swim with conventional wisdom. Be playing with the technology. In fact, be introspective as to where you are in your ability to adopt new stuff and change processes, because I think that's going to be key

DECODING JOB DATA

SHARES OF AGRI- AND SELF-EMPLOYMENT HAVE GONE UP, SHOWS PLFS 2023-24

Employment crisis deepens

THE PERIODIC LABOUR FORCE Survey (PLFS) 2023-24 data was released recently. The clear picture emerging over the last decade has only been confirmed. India's employment crisis, already deep, shows no signs of letting up. The uncalled-for national lockdown Covid began had resulted in India's economy contracting by nearly twice as much as the world economy (5.8% versus 3.1%, compared to the previous year). That short-note lockdown of national scope (China had no national lockdown) sent millions back from the cities to their rural abodes. That decision and its adverse impact on an already slowing economy resulted in 60 million workers being added to agriculture in the next three years alone. PLFS 2023-24 shows that more workers have been added to farming in the last year again. Shockingly, it shows the share of agriculture has gone up from 45.8% (2022-23) to 46.1% (2023-24).

Agriculture had seen a sharp decline of workers since 2004 for the first time in India's post-independence history. This was because non-farm work grew sharply till 2012, at 7.5 million new non-farm jobs per annum. As a result, real wages in agriculture and all non-farm work rose from 2004 to 2012. This fall in farm workers continued even after 2014 as construction work sustained, although at a slower rate till 2019 when agriculture accounted for 42% of India's workforce.

However, not only has agriculture's share gone up to 45% or higher over 2020-23, but 2023-24 has seen a further increase in workers in agriculture, to 46.1% of India's workforce. This continuing trend has confirmed and reinforced a reversal of the structural transformation that India's economy was undergoing until 2014. The last four years have reinforced that reversal.

This trend is confirmed by another piece of data in PLFS 2023-24: manufacturing share of employment compared to last year has stagnated at 11.4%, which

SANTOSH MEHROTRA

The writer taught economics in JNU and was with the Planning Commission

was lower than in 2021-22 (11.6%), and 2012 (12.8%). The continuing stagnation in manufacturing is merely sustaining a trend that the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government injected with policy-induced shocks. First, it began with demonetisation, which led to manufacturing contribution to gross value added falling for five years, from 17% (which prevailed from 1992 to 2015-16) down to 13% in 2021 — a phenomenon not seen in post-independence India.

Second, this was followed by another policy shock — a poorly designed and hurriedly implemented national goods and services tax — that caused another decline of micro, small and medium enterprise output and employment, especially in manufacturing. The decline gathered momentum. Third, the national lockdown continued the process, so labour-intensive manufacturing, which accounts for 50% of all manufacturing jobs, suffered the most, resulting in an absolute fall in jobs in the labour-intensive sectors: garments, textiles, leather/footwear, food processing, and wooden furniture.

Government economists have recently gloated over the trend of rising female labour force participation (for decades among the lowest in the world). Why? PLFS 2023-24 shows that the share of regular salaried employment (the best type of employment, even if without social security) has fallen for both urban

and rural women in the last few years as well. Animal husbandry has seen some rise, but that is still agriculture.

Worse, there has been an accentuation of the trend of the last three years that the worst form of employment — self-employment — has increased in share, from 53% of India's workforce to 57.3% in 2022-23, and 58.4% in 2023-24. Of that there is an increase, again in 2023-24, like in 2022-23, of unpaid family labour (UFL).

The International Labour Organization does not consider this category as employment, but the National Statistical Office (NSO) continues to do so. No wonder the labour force and the worker participation rates in India have risen after Covid, and continue to rise. And the government, and its economists, continue to gloat over the resulting fall in unemployment rate.

Similarly, they keep pointing out that accordingly, youth unemployment rates that had risen to 17.8% in 2017-18 (from barely 6% in 2012) have fallen to 10.2% in 23-24. The point is that a significant share of these youth are also in agriculture, and also in UFL. Education levels of youth are rising constantly, as PLFS itself shows, and the educated youth have no desire to work in agriculture, let alone as UFL.

Yet in August, the Reserve Bank of India's KLEMS analysis put out a claim that eight crore (80 million) new jobs were created in the last four years (including 2024). The latest PLFS puts that number

Private consumption has grown at only half the rate of the inflated GDP growth, which has historically not been the case



also to shame, as we had demonstrated elsewhere. That exaggerated claim, trumped by the Prime Minister and government/party spokespersons, itself was arrived at on a methodologically flawed basis: by multiplying the ratio emerging from PLFS by projected Indian population growth rates, which bear no relationship to reality. The so-called researchers, hired by the RBI, were oblivious of the fact that India's total fertility rate has been falling sharply since the last Census of 2011, and in 2021 stood at below the replacement rate (2.1 children per woman) for India (actual is 2.0).

Meanwhile, India is supposedly the "fastest-growing" large economy in the world. However, those numbers don't quite find resonance in the employment created. So what could be the reasons? First, we know that since the policy shocks to the economy, the recovery was rapid, as is unsurprising, given the steep fall in FY21 was worse than the global fall. The recovery has been K-shaped, now generally accepted. Unorganised sectors were already struggling for the last eight years, as proven by the data for 2021-22 and 2022-23 of NSO's unorganised enterprises (non-farm units); they are still struggling. Recent research showed that the organised segment of almost every sector gained at the expense of the unorganised for the 85% of GDP accounted for outside agriculture. Given that organised segment's growth is used to project unorganised segment growth, the GDP calculation overstates it for the unorganised segment. Second, private consumption has grown at only half the rate of this inflated GDP growth, which has historically not been the case but it has for the last few years. There are other reasons (for example, around the GDP deflator) why GDP is likely to be overestimated, which for reasons of space we ignore.

Thus, the job crisis is clearly reflecting deeper structural issues in the real economy.

China missing in US election debate



STEPHEN S. ROACH

Faculty member, Yale University, and former chairman, Morgan Stanley Asia

OTHER THAN a few glib remarks, surprisingly little was said about China at this month's US presidential debate. Former President Donald Trump asserted that his proposed import tariffs would punish "China and all of the countries that have been ripping us off for years." Vice President Kamala Harris, for her part, disparaged China's pandemic response, stating that President Xi Jinping "was responsible for lacking and not giving us transparency about the origins of Covid."

The failure to focus on China was in one sense predictable. US voters have been largely fixated on other anxieties during this election cycle: abortion and women's reproductive rights, immigration and border security, inflation and pocketbook issues. The moderators and their pre-selected line of questioning did little to probe what could well be America's most consequential foreign-policy issue of this 21st century, even though the Commission on National Defense Strategy and the White House's National Security Strategy have elevated China risks to near existential status.

China has invariably been an important topic of discussion in past campaigns, starting with the October 1960 debate between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy, which featured an extended back and forth over the disputed islands of Quemoy and Matsu in the Taiwan Strait. Almost all subsequent presidential debates, including the three encounters between Trump and Hillary Clinton in 2016, have included exchanges on Sino-American

relations. (Trump's constant references to "Chal-nah" that year were even the subject of a viral video.) Is the American electorate so overwhelmed by polarised social-media discourse and the 24-hour news cycle that it has lost its appetite for substantive policy discussions?

Of course, both parties' agreement on the severity of the China threat may also explain their inclination to ignore it.

Moreover, given the tendency of US politicians to blame others for problems of their own making, the shared scapegoating of China is hardly surprising.

A case in point is blaming China for America's massive trade deficit, which is an outgrowth of an equally massive budget deficit and a concomitant shortfall in domestic saving. The same can be said of US paranoia over Huawei, the poster child of the Sino-American tech war — it is far easier to blame China than to acknowledge that inadequate spending on research and development is a risk to America's innovation potential.

No, I am not naive enough to expect US politicians to come clean on contentious issues like China. The political expediency of false narratives, as I stress in my book *Accidental Conflict*, has reached a new level in the 2024 presidential campaign. Consider Trump's tariff fixation: he misrepresents not only who pays for them but reverses their impact, arguing incorrectly

that tariffs will cut inflation at home while raising prices for foreign exporters.

At the same time, one can criticise Harris for embracing the Biden administration's decision to maintain Trump's China tariffs and impose new ones. As I have argued ad nauseam, going after China without addressing the root cause of America's domestic savings shortfall is like squeezing a water balloon: the pressure merely forces the water to the other end. Likewise, the supposed bilateral fix (tariffs on China) has simply diverted the US trade deficit to Mexico, Vietnam, Canada, South Korea, Taiwan, India, Ireland, and Germany — largely higher-cost producers, which boosts prices for hard-pressed American families. But try telling that to a US politician these days.

So if it were up to me, I would attempt to draw out the candidates on three key pieces of the China puzzle:

First, can the US hope to eliminate a multilateral trade deficit (with 106 countries in 2023) by targeting its largest trading partner? The government tried that with Japan in the 1980s and failed, so why do politicians think this same approach will now miraculously work with China? Second, what are the chances that this trade war will backfire? It has happened before, with the Great Depression of the 1930s being the most painful example. When countries are hit with tariffs, they

tend to retaliate. When companies are singled out by sanctions, they focus on competitive survival. Huawei's new generation of smartphones and laptops could be seen as especially striking examples of this.

Third, what would victory in a Sino-American trade war look like for the US? Mutual concerns over national security have made conflict inevitable. Chinese leaders fear that America is pursuing a strategy of comprehensive containment, a claim that the US denies, arguing instead that it is creating a "small yard and a high fence" to protect sensitive technologies. Is there a compromise that might be more palatable to both countries? Engagement is not a four-letter word. Nor should it be mistaken for appeasement. What would it take to consider the possibility of a new era in US-China engagement?

These are not trick questions. I myself have taken a stab at answering them over several years. What most worries me is that incursive voters have no interest in probing these and other aspects of the China debate, let alone considering alternatives to conflict.

America is in the grips of a toxic Sino-phobia that makes the first Cold War seem like a drill. Surely there is a better way to engage with China than seeing threats around every corner. It will be exceedingly difficult to find constructive solutions if US presidential candidates are not pushed to debate the nation's toughest problems.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Retail investors need to exercise prudence

Apropos of "FOMO in IPO market" (FE, September 27), the bull market's initial public offering (IPO) frenzy can be a double-edged sword, offering tantalising short-term gains but also posing significant risks to impulsive investors. Recent data highlights the prevalence of premature exits, with many retail investors selling IPO shares quickly for profits. To safeguard

against such pitfalls, the Securities and Exchange Board of India's investor education initiatives are vital. Investors should adopt a prudent approach. This includes diversifying portfolios beyond IPOs, avoiding emotional decisions driven by market sentiment, and conducting thorough research. Effective risk management and long-term insights are also crucial for expert investment success. By striking a balance between potential gains and caution, investors can

mitigate risks and capitalise on opportunities in India's market. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

Rein in SMEs

Retail investors are suffering from FOMO, especially when it comes to small and medium enterprises (SME) initial public offerings (IPOs). A case in point is Resourceful Automobile, a Delhi-based Yamaha dealership that has two outlets and eight employees. It garnered bids worth ₹4,800 crore

against an IPO size of ₹12 crore. Listing gains is not a permanent phenomenon. Retail investors will suffer the most when companies list below their IPO prices and a bear phase hits the stock market. The market regulator has given a warning but will have to ring-fence this space with tighter norms so that no SME can take retail investors for a ride. —Bal Govind, Noida

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com

GROUND ZERO



The Nagapattinam-Kankesanthurai ferry docked at Kankesanthurai port in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. NACCHINARKKINIYAN M.

A journey across the Palk Strait

The Nagapattinam-Kankesanthurai ferry between India and Sri Lanka, restarted in October 2023 after nearly 40 years, was suspended after a week and resumed only this August. While the demand for the service was initially low, it has picked up in the last few weeks. **Nacchinarkkiniyan M.** travels on the ferry with tourists, traders, and refugees and reports on the excitement and concerns about the initiative in the two countries

In a cloudy September morning, five childhood friends in their late 60s gathered at Nagapattinam port in Tamil Nadu, their laughter cutting through the sea breeze. For over four decades, they had travelled across India together, but that day was different. They were boarding the Nagapattinam-Kankesanthurai ferry between India and Sri Lanka for the first time. When asked the purpose of their visit, retired headmaster, C. Sugumar, who was part of the group, said with a wide grin, "Just for fun."

The ferry service had been restarted on October 14, 2023, after a nearly 40-year hiatus. In video messages, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the then Sri Lanka President, Ranil Wickremesinghe, had hailed the diplomatic effort and highlighted the importance of launching the service between the two nations. Calling it a "new chapter in diplomatic and economic ties between India and Sri Lanka," Modi said that the service would help strengthen cultural, commercial, and civilisational ties between India and Sri Lanka. Wickremesinghe said the ferry was an important step in improving connectivity.

However, authorities temporarily suspended service after just a week, citing technical issues and rough weather.

On August 16 this year, service was resumed, with support from the External Affairs Ministry. The demand was initially low, forcing the operator to reduce frequency from seven days to three days a week. When interest grew again, the operator, IndiSri Ferry Services Private Limited, added a fourth day. In recent weeks, there has been an encouraging rise in occupancy, with an average of 80 passengers per trip. Ticketing agencies said this was due to positive feedback, largely by word-of-mouth.

A ferry ride to another country

The ferry accommodates 165 passengers and crew and includes 27 premium seats. The price of a ticket is ₹5,000 for economy and ₹7,500 for premium. Passengers are allowed 23 kilograms of luggage for free. They can carry up to 50 kg of luggage by paying ₹50 for every additional kg. The ferry leaves Nagapattinam at 8 a.m. and reaches Kankesanthurai at noon. It leaves Sri Lanka at 2 p.m. and returns to India by 6 p.m.

The captain of the passenger ferry, *Sivagangai*, was J. Baskar. He explained that the vessel would operate at 18 knots with strict anti-smuggling protocols and would be monitored by authorities from both nations throughout the journey.

"Both sides can inspect the vessel at any time. It is mandatory for us to provide information on all aspects of the journey, including passenger numbers and nationalities, for transparency and security," Baskar said. He added that the ferry was equipped with life jackets, life rafts, and a rescue boat.

A group of five families in the ferry was excited to explore Sri Lanka's cultural and historical ties with India. They aimed to visit places connected to the Hindu epic, the Ramayana.

S. Shanthi, who was travelling with her husband and son, was delighted. "We are going to

We visited temples and saw remnants of the war. But what stood out was the warmth of the local Tamils who treated us not as visitors, but as family.
SHANTHI S.
Passenger

see the land where Sita (from the Ramayana) was imprisoned," she said.

The same day, R. Sugitha, a librarian from Jaffna in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, used the ferry service to travel to Tamil Nadu. She said it offered a more affordable alternative to flying. "Travelling by air costs 60,000-70,000 Sri Lankan rupees (₹12,000-16,000), but the ferry is only 31,000 rupees (₹8,600) to go across the Palk Strait and come back," she said.

During the journey, Sugitha and her fellow passengers formed a WhatsApp group called 'Ship Friends'. They promised to stay in touch after the journey ended.

Reflecting on her return from Sri Lanka, Shanthi said, "We visited temples and saw remnants of the war. But what stood out was the warmth of the local Tamils who treated us not as visitors, but as family."

While the passengers enjoyed the ride, they also had suggestions for improvement. "While most of the trips are smooth, rough seas can occasionally cause bumpy rides. A larger ferry could provide a more comfortable experience in such conditions," noted a senior crew member.

Prabhakaran V., an environmental activist from Chennai, who was travelling with his wife, Akshaya, said that the couple had originally planned to go to Sri Lanka for their honeymoon, but the delay in resuming the service had forced them to delay their visit.

"There could be more food options," Prabhakaran complained, referring to the packets of instant noodles and ready-to-eat food that were available for purchase in the ferry. "They could also offer better amenities at the ports, a smoother connection to Jaffna, and a help desk for the elderly at the Kankesanthurai terminal." Jaffna is located 21 kilometres from the port. As buses are rare, auto rickshaws are the only mode of transport to the capital city of the Northern Province.

Many traders said that while the service is use-

ful, the baggage allowance could be increased to at least 100 kg per passenger. F.A. Rohan, a trader from Colombo, imports ready-made garments from Tamil Nadu using the ferry service. Despite the relatively low fares for the ferry, Rohan said that the margins in his trade are thin, and he would have to save as much on travel costs. "More baggage allowance would help," he said.

Rohan also felt that the immigration process in India was time-consuming and the officers unfriendly.

Historical connections

The links between India and Sri Lanka are historical. Writer and publisher K. Sachithanathan noted that the Tamil text, *Chola Mandala Sathagam*, refers to a famine in Jaffna in the 13th century. "Sadayappa Vallal, the patron who supported Kambar in writing the Tamil epic *Kambaramayanam*, is said to have sent a thousand boats of rice to the king of Nallur in Jaffna," he said.

Sachithanathan highlighted the flourishing tobacco trade via the Kankesanthurai port, which thrived until the 1950s, especially with Kerala. The Jaffna Malayalam Tobacco Exporters Association played a key role in this trade, he added.

R. Kulasingam, a Tamil writer from Paruthithurai in Jaffna, explained the significance of the ports of the Northern Province, such as Kankesanthurai, Oorkavalthurai, Paruthithurai, and Valvettithurai. His grandfather, a "Thangayal" (sailor) on the Paruthithurai-Nagapattinam route, witnessed the region's prosperity, he recalled. However, former Sri Lankan Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's nationalisation efforts led to the shutdown of many operations, he said.

Highlighting the region's shipbuilding history, B. Meenakshi Sundaram, son of a shipbuilder from Valvettithurai in Jaffna, spoke of the prominence of these areas in producing skilled sailors. His father built the ship, *Parvatha Pathini*, during British rule, which was later sold to Pakistan. Though smuggling increased after the ports ceased functioning, Sundaram said many sailors from these areas continue to work globally, keeping the legacy of their craftsmanship alive.

The British, too, established formal transport links between India and Sri Lanka. In the late 1880s, the Boat Mail Express connected Talaimannar and Rameswaram through a collaboration between the Sri Lankan and Indian Railways, allowing for seamless travel and the movement of goods. Under British colonial rule, Indian Tamils, known as 'hill country Tamils', were brought to Sri Lanka to work in plantations and built much of the island nation's early infrastructure. The ferry service was operational until 1964, when a cyclone wiped out Dhanushkodi on the southern tip of Pamban island in Tamil Nadu, shifting the route to Rameswaram. The service continued until the Sri Lankan civil war in 1983 forced its suspension. In 2011, an attempt was made to revive the Thoothukudi-Colombo ferry service, but it was short-lived.

S. Rathinamani Ammal, 88, from Matale in the Central Province of Sri Lanka, fondly recollected over a phone call her journey on the ferry in 1965, from Talaimannar on the northwestern coast of Mannar Island to Rameswaram in the Ramanaathapuram district of Tamil Nadu. She spent 10 days at her ancestral home in Karaikudi and visited temples in Srirangam and Madurai.

"If the rice cooked at home in Matale was packed in leaves, it would still be hot when we landed in Rameswaram," she said. Ammal said that her family would often travel to India to manage their land and pray at temples.

Since then, there have been many efforts to resume the ferry service across the Palk Strait. S. Niranjan Nanthagopalan, managing director of IndiSri Ferry Services, who has long championed stronger India-Sri Lanka ties, was among those leading the initiative. During colonial rule, Nanthagopalan's ancestors operated ships between Jaffna and Vedaranyam town in Nagapattinam district, transporting passengers and goods.

According to him, tourism can reconnect the



Will Jaffna truly benefit from this economic relationship or merely become a market for Indian goods, which will undermine local production?

AHILAN KADRIGAMAR
Senior lecturer at the University of Jaffna

Tamils on both sides of the Palk Strait and open up new opportunities. "Connectivity is the first priority," Nanthagopalan said. "Once that is established, other aspirations can follow."

Economic and strategic ties

Highlighting the need for stronger connectivity between India and Sri Lanka, Sai Murali S., the Consul General of India in Jaffna, explained that the Indian government has been covering part of the costs of the ferry service. "The aim is to lower user costs and strengthen bilateral ties," he said.

The Sri Lankan government plans to expand the Jaffna International Airport and introduce new routes to Tamil Nadu and diaspora hubs. Sai Murali said that the Indian government would also bear part of the costs of the expansion of the airport. Thanks to the success of the Chennai-Jaffna route by air, there are now IndiGo flights between India and Sri Lanka every day.

"India will also be managing renovation costs at Kankesanthurai port; work is set to begin this year," he said. "Prime Minister Modi's vision includes restoring the Talaimannar-Rameswaram route too. There are feasibility studies under way to reconstruct the ancient land bridge between Dhanushkodi and Talaimannar, with India covering most of the cost." Sai Murali added that discussions are also ongoing with more ferry operators to pitch in and also to improve the quality of service between Kankesanthurai and Nagapattinam. Passenger feedback is expected to help the authorities resolve issues.

K.D.S. Ruwanachandra, Secretary of Sri Lanka's Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Aviation, acknowledged India's vital role in enhancing connectivity. A bilateral committee oversees ferry operations, though challenges remain, especially in securing vessels with cargo capacity.

"We have implemented security measures at Kankesanthurai port. Customs and immigration officers are working alongside Sri Lanka's Ports Authority security and Naval officers," Ruwanachandra said, stressing the importance of preventing illegal activities.

A boon for the Tamil community

Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India said they prefer the ferry over flights as it has a larger cargo capacity. R. Manikandan, 25, was born in the Devakottai special camp in Sivagangai district in Tamil Nadu as a refugee. He recently returned to Sri Lanka by the ferry and obtained citizenship for the first time in his life. "I felt a deep connection. Everything seemed so near, both physically and emotionally," he said.

The ferry service has been hailed as a boon for the Tamil community. M. Piratheepan, an Acting District Government Agent in Jaffna, highlighted the deep cultural and spiritual ties between India and Sri Lanka. He emphasised plans to create a tourist-friendly environment with proper facilities, including information centres and support for hotels and guides.

R. Jayasekaran, President of the Jaffna Chamber of Commerce, stressed the need for improving the ferry service and introducing cargo services. "India could supply 75% of our daily needs, which would reduce our reliance on China," he said. Jayasekaran explained that a 500-tonne cargo ship could lower costs, expand Jaffna's market, and reduce dependence on Colombo.

S. Narasimman from the India-ASEAN-Sri Lanka Chamber of Commerce and Industry, added, "We are very watchful of the ferry development. While the current patronage appears to be low, the introduction of a cargo service in the near future could certainly capture our attention."

Scepticism and concern

However, fishermen on both sides were sceptical that relations would improve through the ferry service. Cautiously hopeful about future relations between the Tamil fishermen of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu, N.V. Subramanyam, former president of the Northern Province Fishermen's Union, highlighted the impact that India's bottom trawlers had on Sri Lankan fishermen. "They cut our nets and take away our livelihoods," he said.

Subramanyam recalled the time when the fisherfolk from both sides would share food and enjoy camaraderie at sea. "They would watch Tamil movies like *Pattikattu Ponniya* and *Thanga Padakkam* in Rameswaram during the 1970s," he said. "But those days are long gone."

R.M.P. Rajendran Nattar, President of the Indian National Fishermen Union, echoed these concerns. "We face attacks from the Sri Lankan Navy and our government remains silent when our boats are seized," he said. Despite the challenges, Nattar stressed that Indian fishermen bear no ill will towards Sri Lankan fishermen, as many of them continue to struggle post-war.

Ahilan Kadrigamar, senior lecturer at the University of Jaffna in Sri Lanka, welcomed the renewed connectivity, but emphasised that it is only part of a more complex picture. While Tamil Nadu's economy has flourished, Jaffna remains largely rural, he noted. "Will Jaffna truly benefit from this economic relationship or merely become a market for Indian goods, which will undermine local production?" he said.

Kadrigamar was also worried about how tourism would impact the fragility of the region, and the potential over-reliance on India. "The Northern Province is now viewed through New Delhi's strategic lens," he said. "The India-Sri Lanka relationship is increasingly centred on security and geopolitics rather than cultural ties."

nacchinarkkiniyan.m@thehindu.co.in

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[OUR TAKE]

Restoring a critical balance

The Supreme Court's observations on PMLA in the Senthil Balaji bail order, once again, expand the scope of individual liberty

The Supreme Court's sharp disapproval of the use of provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) to prolong the incarceration of an accused is the latest in a larger batch of orders that have curtailed the scope of the stringent law (and others of its ilk) and expanded the remit of individual liberty. The Court's strong comments came on Thursday while granting bail to former Tamil Nadu minister V Senthil Balaji, who was arrested in June 2023 on money laundering charges in a cash-for-jobs scam case. The Court sounded a clear warning about the abuse of PMLA provisions by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and delivered a scathing critique of how the law is being used to keep individuals jailed without trial for an unreasonably long time.

The order by a bench of justices AS Okla and AG Masih assumed importance for two unique reasons. One, the Court acknowledged that there was a *prima facie* case against Balaji, but decided that the prolonged detention without a foreseeable end to the trial tipped the scales in favour of his release. Two, the bench also sent a signal to all constitutional courts (such as the high courts) by ruling that they should not allow indefinite pretrial detention under the anti-money laundering law.

"The constitutional courts cannot allow provisions like Section 45(1)(ii) to become instruments in the hands of the ED to continue incarceration for a long time when there is no possibility of the trial concluding within a reasonable time," the judges declared. Section 45 of PMLA prescribes a high threshold requiring courts to conclude that the accused is not guilty of the offence and is not likely to commit the offence while on bail.

The bench built on a rationale that was at the heart of string of recent top court orders freeing top politicians such as Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) chief Arvind Kejriwal, former deputy chief minister of Delhi Manish Sisodia, AAP parliamentarian Sanjay Singh and Bharat Rashtra Samithi leader K Kavitha—all of whom were arraigned as accused by the ED in the Delhi excise policy case. The backdrop to this is clear. There appears to be growing judicial concern that the statute is open to being weaponised in a way that violates fundamental rights under Article 21 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to life and personal liberty. As a response, in bail order after bail order involving high-profile politicians, recent judgments have underscored the importance of personal liberty, including bail as a constitutional right, even in cases involving statutory restrictions. They have also emphasised the primacy of individual liberty, asserting that courts must ensure liberty, not incarceration, is the default position.

All eyes are now on the top court, which is expected to soon decide when to hear petitions challenging the validity of some controversial PMLA provisions, particularly those related to summons, arrest, search and seizure. Under scrutiny will also be the top court's 2022 *Vijay Madanlal Choudhary* verdict that upheld several provisions of PMLA with far-reaching impact.

As this newspaper has noted before, corruption cannot be tolerated in public life. But at the same time, stringent laws cannot run afoul of constitutional protections or make the process the punishment. PMLA, first enacted in July 2005 and then progressively made harsher between 2009 and 2023, is the most prominent example of this disturbing trend, which has also sparked allegations that Opposition politicians are being targeted. Restoring this balance—as demanded by the Constitution—and dispelling the fog of allegations is critical for India's democratic setup.

[THIRD EYE]

Barkha Dutt



Why J&K polls feel nothing like those in the past

There is no boycott call this time, neither has coercion to vote been reported. The assembly polls, however, feel unpredictable and full of intangible variables

Outside a small polling booth in a village in the interiors of South Kashmir, where the only access to the booth was a precarious walk down a steep hill's slippery mud track, I witnessed an intriguing argument between two voters.

The focus of their friction was over the participation of an independent candidate Sayar Reshi, backed by the Jamaat-e-Islami. "The Jamaat should explain how what it considered *haram* all these years has become *halal* all of a sudden," said one irate citizen. The other countered by questioning the absence of development in the constituency, pointing upwards to the pebbled pathway we had just taken. "We need new options," he said, explaining why he was supporting the local, Jamaat-backed professor, whose election symbol is the laptop and election song is "Top top laptop".

The historic election in Jammu and Kashmir—the first in ten years and the first since the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution—is a very curious and unpredictable one. The Jamaat-e-Islami was banned by the Narendra Modi government in 2019 under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (anti-terror law). In February 2024, home minister Amit Shah announced the extension of the ban on social media platforms, asserting that the organisation had been found "continuing its activities against security, integrity and sovereignty of India".

But in this election, the Jamaat has backed at

least 10 independent candidates. It has also tied up for a strategic alliance with Engineer Rashid, the "giant killer" who defeated both Omar Abdullah and Sajjad Lone in the Lok Sabha elections this summer while being in jail for a terror-funding case. Rashid, who has been granted bail for campaigning in these elections, scoffs at the charge of being a proxy for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). "I can't both be called an Islamist and a BJP proxy, can I?" he quizzed me in his usual provocative style, full of confidence that he would once again be the game-changer in this election.

Is separatism being mainstreamed in this significant election? It would not be the first time that the attempt has been made. In 2002, Lone, then a separatist, fielded a proxy candidate named Ghulam Mohiuddin Sofi from Handwara in North Kashmir, in his first flirtation with electoral politics. Today, Lone is "mainstream" and "legacy" while there is an attempt to build a new class of politicians.

The Jamaat, for instance, has not directly engaged with elections since 1987. When I asked Reshi what made him take the plunge this time, he said "Dunya badal paye hai" (the world has changed). "He referred to the widely quoted example of the 1987 elections being manipulated and rigged, to explain why the Jamaat began staying away—1987 was the same election in which the Hizbul Mujahideen terrorist, Syed Salahuddin (then Mohd Yusuf Shah), took part in the polls.

THE ABROGATION OF ARTICLE 370, OF COURSE, IS THE BACKDROP AGAINST WHICH THE ELECTIONS ARE BEING HELD. BUT THE MOST VOLUBLE CHORUS YOU HEAR IS THE DEMAND FOR JOBS

Fight against heart disease needs precision medicine

September 29 is observed as World Heart Day. In India, a heart attack occurs every 33 seconds, claiming over two million lives annually. Yet, up to 80% of these deaths are preventable. Almost tripling in prevalence since the 1980s, cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) have silently become India's leading killer, claiming one in every four lives. The average age for a first heart attack in India is just 50, a decade earlier than in western countries. Shockingly, CVDs also account for 45% of deaths in the 40–69-year age group. This silent epidemic pushes families into financial distress and diminishes survivors' quality of life.

The impact of early-onset CVD extends beyond health, causing an estimated annual productivity loss of ₹18 lakh crore. Preventing CVDs is not just a health imperative but an economic necessity.

However, current prevention strategies face significant challenges. Traditional health care paints all 1.4 billion Indians with the same broad brush, leading to imprecise risk assessments and patient non-compliance. Also, the common refrain of "What harm can one *samosa* do?" echoes the sentiments of many. This emotion gains credence as millions with seemingly unhealthy habits, who have 94% of all heart attack complaints are closed without any action taken, according to *Le Monde*, women "spill everything out into the open only to be humiliated", she retorted.

Gisèle Pelicot has emerged as a feminist hero with crowds applauding as she leaves

Standard CVD prevention strategies fail to

address the country's genetic diversity and cultural nuances. Risk prediction models, largely based on western populations, inadequately capture India's unique risk profile. Tobacco use, physical inactivity, genetic predisposition, poor diet, and air pollution further compound the problem.

Traditional cardiac risk assessment tools only help gauge a broad probability of developing heart disease. They essentially only answer if you are at high risk or low risk. While this categorisation is critical, it does not identify exact causes, factors or account for short-term risk for scientific follow-up, leading to a majority of patients getting overtreated or undertreated.

Patient compliance is also a major challenge, stemming from resistance to testing, over-reliance on unproven lifestyle modifications, and the tendency to "carry on" until symptoms become unbearable. Cultural beliefs further complicate matters. The perception of traditional Indian diets as inherently healthy overlooks their high carbohydrate content, while the normalisation of conditions like hypertension and diabetes as "family" traits, and the dangerous lack of urgency in seeking medical attention. These challenges underscore the need for a more nuanced, personalised approach to CVD prevention.

Let's consider the case of Amit, a 38-year-old IT professional from New Delhi. Amit, health-

conscious and proactive, undergoes his first comprehensive health check-up. His initial tests are within normal range, albeit with slightly elevated LDL cholesterol. Following standard protocols, his doctor advises statins, exercise and healthy eating with regular follow-up.

Amit is resistant to taking medication at his age but understands his risk given his father's angioptasy at 52. He opts for additional assessments using predictive precision medicine that combine genetic and clinical data with lifestyle factors using AI to create a comprehensive personalised risk profile.

The tests offered a more accurate understanding of Amit's CVD risk: Advanced lipid panel confirms high lipoprotein(a), a risk factor often missed in standard tests; genetic testing detects variation in the APOC3 gene, associated with regulation of triglyceride levels; coronary artery calcium (CAC) scoring shows deposits in the arteries, a marker of plaque buildup; AI-driven risk assessment predicts very high 10-year CVD risk—much higher than suggested by traditional calculations.

These insights allow Amit's doctor to create a more personalised 10-year CVD prevention plan; immediately starting Amit on statins, more aggressive lifestyle modification, regular lipid profile and other relevant investigations. This risk assessment also made Amit more attentive to health advice. By 55, despite a family history of early heart disease, Amit maintained good cardiovascular health.

While standard testing remains crucial for baseline health assessment, precision medicine offers deeper insights into individual risk factors, allowing for more accurate risk stratification and tailored prevention strategies. Mass

implementation of predictive precision medicine may not be immediately feasible due to cost and limited availability. But incorporating advanced genetic testing and biomarker analysis into corporate health check-ups offers a starting point. This approach not only protects a vital segment of our workforce but also provides a resource-effective model that could unlock cost-effectiveness when implemented at scale.

This data could significantly advance how we approach cardiovascular health at the population level. By analysing this comprehensive dataset, researchers could identify novel biomarkers and risk factors unique to the Indian context. This information could be used to develop new prediction models, algorithms, or tools more accurately tailored for our population. Such tools, when validated and implemented, could enhance the effectiveness of existing government programmes targeted to address the rising incidence of non-communicable diseases. This could improve risk stratification at primary health centres, potentially leading to more targeted interventions and efficient use of tertiary care resources for high-risk individuals.

As we advance, ethical challenges around data privacy, informed consent, and genetic discrimination are likely to emerge necessitating the formation of comprehensive guidelines for the use of genetic and biomarker data. Despite the potential challenges, the integration of predictive precision medicine into India's CVD management strategy offers an unprecedented opportunity to tackle this epidemic holistically.

Dr Naresh Trehan is chairman and managing director of Molana. The views expressed are personal



Naresh Trehan

[ANOTHER DAY]

Namita Bhandare



Gisèle Pelicot is changing the way we talk about rape

The 17-year-old girl is telling me about life after being raped in a village in Haryana. The problem, she says, is there's nowhere to go. If she smiles in public, eyebrows shoot up. And there are times when even her father, frustrated with legal proceedings, yells at her for bringing so much trouble.

Rape is perhaps the only crime deemed so horrible that it robs victims of the right to joy; where mediators, including judges, counsel girls to marry their rapists because, of course, nobody else will—unless they

end up dead, in which case we rush to bestow martyrdom as if a Nirbhaya or, now Abhaya, had willing leapt into the flames of patriarchy instead of just being regular women who wanted to work and aspire.

This is why I find the story out of Avignon, southern France so gripping. By choosing to turn down her legal right to anonymity, Gisèle Pelicot, a 72-year-old woman is changing the narrative on how we talk about rape.

Over a decade from 2011 to 2020, Dominique Pelicot, Gisèle's now ex-husband, had

been dragging her until she was practically comatose, and then he invited them to rape her while he filmed them. By refusing to be anonymous, Gisèle has taken control of her own life and is reminding us that the shame of rape does not fall on her but on the men who raped her.

She is showing the world what rape victims go through when they seek justice. Last week, a defence lawyer asked if she might have "tendencies you are not comfortable with". In a country where 94% of rape complaints are closed without any action taken, according to *Le Monde*, women "spill everything out into the open only to be humiliated", she retorted.

Gisèle Pelicot has emerged as a feminist hero with crowds applauding as she leaves the courtroom. But, most crucially, she has turned the spotlight on men who rape. "The sight of the courtroom filled with regular men and a stark reminder that it is regular people who rape," says Sohaila Abdullahi, author of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape*.

Indeed, the fire officer, prison warden,

nurse, journalist, neighbour and even the one who raped her on the day his daughter was born are your average guys. Some have claimed they didn't realise what they were doing was rape, another said he had the husband's consent and presumed it was enough. Only three men reportedly refused to go through with the crime. Not one reported to the police.

Not all men. But always a man. Globally, 90% of rapists are known to their victims, and the Indian National Crime Records Bureau tells us that 96.8% of men accused of rape in 2021 were neighbours, relatives, friends, and co-workers. Yet, we continue to peddle the notion that rapists are monsters who lurk in dark alleys.

Gisèle Pelicot is reminding us that the sexual abuse of women is a terrible reality. But a fightback is possible. That we must break the silence, and that she has, in fact, broken it.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

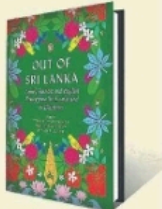
[EDITOR'S PICK]

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

BEYOND THE POLITICS

Anura Kumara Dissanayake of the Janatha Vimukthi Perumuna (JVP) has just been elected as the executive president of Sri Lanka. JVP once wanted to overthrow the State in the island-nation. It led insurrections twice. In the early 1970s they won the election in 1980s. But this time, to the surprise, Sri Lanka's history, quite like that of many other nations, holds enough contradictions within for this to be possible.

This week, we recommend *Out of Sri Lanka*, an anthology of poems in Sinhala, Tamil, and English by Sri Lankans and coles who respect that identity. The poems, the many voices that have emerged from that political geography, are key to understanding how its many peoples have endured despite civil wars, brutal violence, natural disasters and crushing economic pain. These poems juxtapose its beauty with its horrors, the oppression of its people with the oppression by its people, its joy with its trauma.



Out of Sri Lanka: Edited by Vidyan Raventhiran, Sri Senewiratne, Shash Trevet Year: 2023



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How SC deals with errant judges, works around limitations

PURVA VISHWANATH
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 27

A BENCH of the five senior-most Supreme Court judges headed by Chief Justice of India (CJI) D.Y. Chandrachud "expressed serious concern" about comments made by a Karnataka High Court Justice V. Srihananda earlier this month.

During a hearing, Justice Srihananda had referred to a particular locality of Bengaluru as being "in Pakistan". In another hearing, he had made an "objectionable" comment against a female lawyer.

Since the judge tendered an apology, the SC dropped its intervention. But even a mild reproach by the apex court against a judge of a constitutional court is rare, and sends a strong message. The situation also highlights the constitutional limitations on how the judiciary can discipline judges.

Impeachment or nothing

Judges of constitutional courts enjoy a great degree of protection to ensure that they can exercise their powers without fear of interference from the executive. However, this also poses a difficult question: who will watch the watchdog?

As per the Constitution, impeachment, which is a political process, is the only recourse to dealing with errant judges. According to Article 124(4), a judge of the Supreme Court (or any High Court) can be removed from office only "by an order of the President passed after an address by each House of Parliament supported by a majority of the total membership of that House and by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the members of the House present and voting has been presented to the President in the same session for such removal on the ground of proved misbehaviour or incapacity".

"Proven misbehaviour" or "incapacity"

are the only two grounds for removal of a judge of the constitutional court. This, along with the level of political consensus required to pass an impeachment motion, makes the standard for impeachment very high.

Impeachment proceedings have been triggered only five times in history — against Justice V. Ramaswami (SC, 1993), Justice Soumitra Sen (Calcutta High Court, 2011), Justice J.B. Pardiwala (Gujarat High Court, 2015), Justice C.V. Nagaraj (High Court of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, 2017), and then CJI Justice Dipak Misra (2018). The proceedings, however, have never been successful, although Justice Sen was impeached by Rajya Sabha and subsequently resigned.

Several actions might fall short of the standard for impeachment, or become difficult to prove or generate political consensus on — indiscipline, petty corruption, instances

of bias, or like in the case of Justice Srihananda, questionable conduct in court. Given that the alternative to impeachment under current laws is to simply look the other way, over the years the SC has developed alternative ways of disciplining judges.

Judicial intervention

The first is through action on the judicial side, as in the current case.

In 2017, a five-judge Bench of the SC headed by then CJI Jagdish Khosla held Calcutta High Court's C S Karmann guilty of contempt of court, and sentenced him to six months' imprisonment. This was in response to some of Karmann's actions as a judge in the Madras High Court, including the "sentencing" of SC judges to imprisonment, and accusing members of the judiciary of nepotism, casteism, and corruption. His transfer to the Calcutta HC in 2016

also took place in this context.

Karmann retired less than a month after the SC verdict, and was taken into custody to serve his sentence. But this set an uneasy precedent, with many voicing concern about one constitutional court taking to task judges of another. While district courts are under the supervisory jurisdiction of the respective High Courts, the relationship between High Courts and the SC is different.

Veteran lawyer K.K. Venugopal had urged the apex court to ignore the judge's comments, and let him retire with dignity. Senior Advocate Indira Jaising had argued that transferring the judge, or holding him guilty of contempt is no alternative to notifying him for impeachment.

As the court of last resort, the SC's word is final and binding. This means that through judicial action, it can send a message to errant judges, even if such a power is not defined in the letter of the law.

Transfer policy

Another way in which the SC exercises influence over High Court judges is through the Collegium. The SC Collegium, comprising five senior-most judges of the apex court including the CJI, recommends the transfer of High Court judges. Given that the decisions of the Collegium are opaque, this transfer policy can be deployed as a tool to discipline judges as well.

The 2010 case of Justice P.D. Dinakaran is often cited as an example of the transfer policy being deployed to deal with judicial corruption. Even as proceedings for his removal as a judge were pending before a parliamentary panel, the then Karnataka High Court judge was transferred to the Sikkim High Court. Dinakaran was facing allegations of land grabbing and corruption. The move was criticised as only "transferring corruption" rather than dealing with it. Eventually, Justice Dinakaran resigned in 2011.

EVERYDAY HEALTH

RANDOM CHECK FINDS 'NSQ' DRUGS IN MARKET: HERE'S WHAT TO KNOW

ANONNA DUTT
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 27

SAMPLES OF around 50 medicines, including some common ones such as paracetamol (used for fever), metformin (first line of treatment for diabetes), and pantoprazole (used for acidity), have been found to be spurious or not of standard quality by the country's top drug regulator.

These findings came out of a routine, periodic exercise by the regulator, in which medicine samples are tested randomly for quality.

CDSCO and NSQ

Every month, the regulator, Central Drug Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO), releases a list of drugs that are found to be "not of standard quality" (NSQ) during checks. Central and state regulators periodically collect samples of various medicines from the market at random and put them through tests.

A list of medicines that fail the test, along with the parameters on which they have fallen short, is published every month.

Why this is done

The monthly lists are released to inform the general public, government health departments, industry, and the state drug regulators of the drugs available in the market that may not be of the desired quality.

As the samples are tested at random and the results are made public, it is also a way to tell drug manufacturing companies that their products are under constant watch.

Why drugs fail tests

Drugs that fail quality checks broadly fall into three categories.

SPURIOUS DRUGS: These are essentially fakes — products that pretend to be popular brands of medicines, which mislead people into buying them. These

fakes may or may not contain the active ingredient, and are not manufactured by the company that makes the drug of that brand name.

For example, samples of telmisartan (used for the treatment of hypertension) and pantoprazole were found to have been not manufactured by the companies whose branding they carried. Glenmark and Sun Pharma respectively. **POOR QUALITY:** Drugs that may contain a faulty description, or may not dissolve in the proper way, or may have a lesser quantity of active ingredient, etc. are considered to be not of standard quality. These medicines may not actively harm the person who consumes them, but the patient may suffer because the drug fails to do what it is meant to.

Metformin, which is on the recently released list for August, failed the dissolution test, which means that the medicine, once consumed, would not dissolve properly and work in the way it is supposed to. **AUTOTERATED DRUGS:** These contain contaminants or adulterants that can cause direct harm to the person who consumes them. The entire batches of these drugs are usually recalled by the regulator; the company too, could initiate a recall on its own.

What you should do

The drug regulator's alerts are not intended to cause alarm or panic. They are mainly in the nature of flags to companies to self-correct, or to regulators to take necessary action.

That some randomly picked samples of a drug have been found to be NSQ does not mean every pill or capsule of that drug available in the market is fake or dangerous. You can continue to consume these medicines if they have been prescribed to you.

However, the fact that a sample was found to be NSQ in theory also means that there could be other, undetected fakes in the market.

EXPERT EXPLAINS

SHAHZAD GANI

On Wednesday, air quality in Delhi slipped into the 'poor' category (AQI 200-300) for the first time since mid-June, signalling the imminent arrival of North India's bad air season.

The Delhi government announced a 21-point Winter Action Plan, including using drones to monitor pollution hotspots, deploying anti-smog guns, and exploring the possibility of creating artificial rain.

The Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM), which issues orders to combat air pollution in NCR under the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP), said it was watching the situation.

Nature of the problem

As the southwest monsoon season officially ends this month, India's already dangerous air pollution is set to worsen. The post-monsoon months will bring stagnant air and a weather pattern called temperature inversion — which occurs when a layer of warm air traps cooler air near the ground.

This prevents pollutants from rising and dispersing, causing levels of fine particulate matter (PM 2.5) and other air pollutants to reach extremely hazardous levels. Although smog becomes more visible and severe in winter, poor air quality is a year-round, nationwide issue that demands sustained and comprehensive action.

A deepening economic inequality worsens this crisis. While wealthier citizens can afford air purifiers and even move to cleaner places (perhaps by the sea), poorer communities remain exposed to the full brunt of toxic air. Indeed, the question of who gets to breathe clean air — and who is left to bear the burden of pollution — is an issue of equity and justice. India's air pollution crisis stems from multiple, overlapping sources. Year-round contributors, such as biomass burning for cooking, trash-burning, vehicular emissions, and industrial activity combine with episodic events such as farm stubble burning and festival firecrackers.

Meteorological conditions such as temperature inversion and low wind speeds during the post-monsoon and winter months result in pollutants getting trapped close to



(Left) Cloud seeding above Modak Sagar in Maharashtra in September 2009; smog tower at Baba Khadak Singh Marg in New Delhi in October 2021. Express Archive

the surface, exacerbating the problem, particularly in the Indo-Gangetic plain.

The scale of the problem demands long-term solutions, but the response has often been characterised by short-term, optics-driven measures.

Chasing shadows of ideas

"Among the superficial solutions such as smog towers, water guns, and odd-even road sharing, cloud seeding has emerged as the latest 'silver bullet'. This technique, which involves dispersing chemicals to induce rainfall, has garnered attention as a way to temporarily clear the air.

But cloud seeding is more about appearing to do something spectacular than about getting to the root of the problem. It offers a fleeting reprieve at best, while diverting attention from systemic changes that are truly needed.

Besides its limited impact, cloud seeding raises serious environmental and ethical concerns. The water vapour used in the process would have naturally precipitated elsewhere, and it potentially deprives other regions of rainfall. This artificial manipulation of weather patterns could even lead to droughts in areas which would have received this rainfall otherwise.

In a country like India, where water resources are already strained, aggravating regional disparities is a dangerous gamble. Additionally, the chemicals used — such as silver iodide — pose potential long-term risks. While deemed safe in small quantities,

their accumulation in soil and water could impact agriculture and ecosystems in ways that are not yet fully understood.

Smog towers, which are supposed to act as giant air purifiers that would clean the surrounding air, is another flawed solution being pursued. While these structures provide a visible symbol of action, their effectiveness is limited to the immediate vicinity, leaving the broader cityscape unaffected. Moreover, the energy required to operate these towers can contribute to emissions, potentially rendering them counterproductive.

Concrete steps that matter

Both cloud seeding and smog towers distract from the real, science-based solutions that are needed to tackle air pollution at its source. These are some of the things that we should be doing instead.

Coordination among various agencies: Air pollution is a complex, multi-sectoral problem that requires coordinated action across government bodies. Effective collaboration between agencies responsible for transport, industry, agriculture, and urban planning is crucial to ensure that policies are aligned, and efforts are not duplicated.

For instance, addressing crop stubble burning in rural areas requires cooperation between farmers, agricultural policymakers, and environmental regulators. No single agency or sector can tackle this problem in isolation; a unified, multi-sectoral approach, transcending city and state boundaries, is essential.

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Israel and Hezbollah: A short history of a long conflict in Lebanon

MIRAPATEL & RISHIKA SINGH
MUMBAI, NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 27

PRIME MINISTER Benjamin Netanyahu said on Thursday that Israeli forces would continue to strike Lebanon with "full force" until the Shiite militant group Hezbollah stops firing rockets at Israel. On Friday, the AP reported that Israeli military vehicles were transporting tanks and armoured vehicles toward the northern border with Lebanon, indicating an imminent escalation of hostilities.

Israeli attacks on Lebanon have killed 700 people in the last week alone, and the exchange of fire between Israel and Hezbollah, which began soon after the October 7, 2023 attacks by Hamas in southern Israel, has led to the displacement of thousands.

The Israel-Hezbollah conflict has deep roots in the history of southern Lebanon.

Wars in 1970s, 1980s

The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 was accompanied by the violent displacement of more than 750,000 Palestinian Arabs in the event known as the

Nakba, or catastrophe. Many of those who were displaced settled in south Lebanon. Lebanon had a large Christian population (it is estimated to be more than 40% at present), and conflicts between the Palestinians and Christian militias were fuelled by Soviet support for the Arabs and US backing for the Christian coalition.

In the 1960s and 70s, militants affiliated with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) also began to build a base in south Lebanon, which they used as a launchpad for attacks on northern Israeli towns during this period.

In March 1978, in response to a massacre of Israelis near Tel Aviv by Palestinian militants based in Lebanon, Israel invaded south Lebanon. In a short war that followed, Israeli forces pushed the PLO back from south Lebanon, creating a buffer north of Israel.

But the PLO attacks from Lebanon continued. Four years later, Israel mounted another invasion, intending this time to drive the PLO out of Lebanon altogether. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF), along with their Lebanese Christian allies, laid siege to Beirut, forcing the evacuation of PLO leaders.

By 1985, Israel had withdrawn from most of Lebanon but maintained a 15-20-km wide security zone in south Lebanon to prevent cross-border attacks. This area was patrolled by the South Lebanon Army (SLA), a Christian militia allied with Israel. However, this occupation became a lengthy entanglement that fuelled resistance from various groups and led to the rise of Hezbollah.

Emergence of Hezbollah

Hezbollah, the "Party of God", was formed in the early 1980s in response to the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. The group was founded with support from Ayatollah Khomeini's regime in Iran, which saw an opportunity to export the ideals of the Islamic revolution and challenge Israel's dominance.

The group's initial goal was to resist Israeli occupation, but as it strengthened, its objectives expanded to establishing a theocratic state in Lebanon, similar to the one in Iran following the revolution of 1979. It also aimed to oppose Western influence in the region, wrote Augustus Richard

Norton in *Hezbollah: A Short History* (2007).

In 1996, a 17-day campaign by the IDF codenamed Operation Grapes of Wrath became a key moment in the Israel-Hezbollah war. Israel advanced militarily, but the campaign resulted in major civilian casualties. In the village of Qana in Israeli-occupied south Lebanon, more than 100 Lebanese civilians were killed after a UN compound was shelled, fuelling support for Hezbollah.

In his paper "Hezbollah and the Arab Spring" (*Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 2014), political scientist Joseph Alagha wrote that Hezbollah's ability to deliver social services such as healthcare and education won it substantial support among Lebanon's marginalised Shiite population, particularly in the south.

Researcher Daniel Byman noted that Hezbollah's use of civilian areas for military operations made it difficult for Israel to retaliate without collateral damage. (*Ah! History: The Triumphs and Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism*, 2011)

Later conflict and legacy

By the late 1990s, Israel's presence in south Lebanon had become politically and militarily unsustainable. The Israeli public had grown weary of its costs. Hezbollah, meanwhile, carried on a war of attrition. Despite Israel's superior firepower, the group's resilience left the Israeli government with limited options — and its forces unilaterally withdrew in 2000.

The last major conflict took place in 2006, after Hezbollah killed three Israeli soldiers and abducted two others, demanding that Israel return Lebanese prisoners in exchange.

After Israel launched an attack, around 1,200 Lebanese and 159 Israelis were killed. The high human cost, and the fact that Hezbollah could not be eliminated, drew criticism within Israel. The government-appointed Winograd Commission said that the government had not considered options for de-escalation, and some of its goals for the military offensive were unclear.

The long Israel-Hezbollah conflict has shaped the Middle East in multiple ways. Hezbollah, the crown jewel of Iran's over-

seas military operations, has developed significant military capability, and has become, in the words of Norton, "the spearhead of resistance against Israel". It has come to dominate Lebanon's national politics, and is a powerful factor in Tehran's strategy in the region.

Hezbollah's success has inspired other militant groups. In *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (2013), Matthew Levitt described how its tactics, particularly its guerrilla warfare and rocket attacks, were adopted by Palestinian groups and other Iran-backed militias.

The experience with Hezbollah has shaped Israeli military and political strategies as well. The long occupation and the difficulty of fighting a non-state actor made it hesitant to reoccupy Lebanese territory, and to instead rely on airstrikes and short-term incursions.

But all this might be about to change. As Netanyahu's government moves the focus of the war away from Gaza, and IDF tanks line up in northern Israel, seemingly in preparation for another ground invasion of south Lebanon.

THE IDEAS PAGE

Some hard land questions

Government must recognise that digitisation, while important, is not a substitute for the hard work of reforming India's complex and often conflicting land laws



NIMAI MEHTA, ARJUN KRISHNAN AND DIYA UDAY

INDIA'S LAND GOVERNANCE framework is a complex maze of laws that have long hindered the country's economic and social development. The Economic Survey 2023-24 highlighted the challenges — unclear titles, insecurity of tenure, and limited access to economically viable land as barriers to multiple development goals. These goals include raising rural household incomes; employment generation through private and public investment projects; removal of gender-based handicaps in the ownership of land and property titles; improved securitisation of land for credit; regularisation of benami properties; and better targeting of farm input subsidies.

Budget 2024 had proposed to address these challenges through digitisation and technological solutions. Specifically digitising land records, establishing land registries, assigning unique identification numbers to land parcels, and integrating land records with digital platforms such as Agri Stack. While these may assist in modernising India's land administration system, they fail to tackle the root causes of land-related problems. These problems are deeply entrenched in the legal and institutional framework. The uncertainty surrounding rights to land and its use, along with insecure property titles, and poor quality of land records in India have less to do with the administrative form they exist in — paper-based or digital. Instead, they originate in the mix of conflicting laws and regulations that have handicapped land ownership, transfers, and use for all stakeholders.

For instance, digitisation of urban land records and updating of property records, while important, may not guarantee improved land ownership or greater access to formal credit. Further, the de-recognition of property ownership as part of the original set of fundamental rights granted by the Indian Constitution has meant that legislation in this area along with the corresponding legal jurisprudence, administrative rule-making, and enforcement procedures that impact land have evolved without the benefit of a "natural constraint" that could impose some semblance of fairness and efficiency. The exclusion of many of these laws from judicial review through the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution means owners do not have judicial recourse against political and administrative whims.

As a result, the value of land holdings is inevitably subject to risk based on laws that impose multiple restrictions on the transfer of land; that discriminate between types and size of land holdings while employing subjective, identity-based discrimination across different land holders; laws that restrict land use, including leasing and the ability to convert land across different sectors. Many states continue to prohibit leasing of agricultural land. Even in states where leasing is not entirely prohibited, land remains subject to the risk of full or partial expropriation without fair compensation under terms set by various tenancy, lease, use, and land conversion laws and complex administrative procedures.



C R Sasikumar

This has weakened land markets by pushing land transactions into the shadows, and segmented markets. This has made land consolidation costly, while increasing the reliance on the state for land acquisition. Fragmentation of land has, therefore, over time proven to be one of the most pressing challenges with severe implications for agricultural productivity and investment (90 percent of farm households own less than 2 hectares of land, leading to suboptimal economies of scale). Digitising land records alone will not solve this problem; instead, legal reforms are needed to facilitate land consolidation and enable more efficient land use.

This complexity extends to procedures as well and undermines both equity and efficiency in enforcement, while encouraging rent-seeking. Our current work on a systematic assessment and scoring of land laws in India reveals that land ceiling laws in just the one state of Gujarat list more than 40 different types of land quality and household characteristics, each subject to a different level of land ceiling. This is but one example of the complexity that has created limitless possibilities for rent seeking and administrative difficulties.

India's land records system faces significant issues beyond just assigning unique identification numbers. Slow digitisation has delayed infrastructure projects, and land ownership data remains outdated in some respects. A comprehensive overhaul of the legal and administrative framework is needed to incentivise accurate reporting and improve land record management. Current proposals, like integrating land records with the Agri Stack platform, fail to address these deeper legal and institutional challenges. For instance, Point of Sale (PoS) devices for fertiliser subsidies are not integrated with land record data, leading to inefficient targeting. Effective reform requires updating tenancy laws and land use regulations for accurate reporting.

Land banks, intended to address land availability for renewable energy, infrastructure, and industrial projects, face legal hurdles. While land constraints hinder renewable energy projects, simply promoting land banks will not be effective without addressing un-

derlying legal and regulatory issues. In conclusion, while the proposed reforms for digitisation are a step towards addressing some administrative capacity challenges, they fail to address the underlying legal and institutional challenges that perpetuate India's land-related problems. A piecemeal approach focused on technological solutions is insufficient to tackle the deep-rooted issues of land fragmentation, informal tenancy, gender inequality, and suboptimal land use. Further, even if technological solutions are being adopted, states must adopt a systematic approach to evaluate technology before its adoption. To unlock the potential of India's land resources and support inclusive and sustainable development, a comprehensive overhaul of the country's land laws is necessary.

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By prioritising fundamental legal reforms, India can create a more enabling environment for agricultural productivity, infrastructure development, renewable energy expansion, and social equity. The government must recognise that digitisation, while important, is not a substitute for the hard work of reforming India's complex and often conflicting land laws. Only by addressing the root causes of the challenges facing land management can India truly harness the power of its land resources for the benefit of all its citizens.

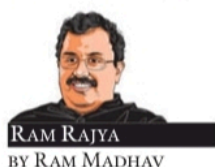
Mehta is Hirst Senior Professorial Lecturer, Department of Mathematics and Statistics, at American University, Washington DC and scholar at the Center for Civil Society, Delhi. Krishnan is an independent researcher, Uday is Research Lead at NCDR Forum. Views are personal. This article is based on ongoing research by the writers on the quality of land laws and procedures across 20 Indian states

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The lesson for New Delhi is clear: Stop trying to pick favourites in the neighbourhood. A better course of action... would be to continue to engage all democratic constituencies... and let the democratic process take its own natural course — be it in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka or Nepal." — THE KATHMANDU POST

Not just the Valley

Ongoing election in J&K is being fought on issues of development, political unity and prominence for Jammu region



BY RAM MADHAV

TWO PHASES OF elections to the Jammu & Kashmir UT legislature are over. These elections — the first since the erstwhile state was reorganised into two Union territories five years ago — are being watched closely by many in the world. A delegation of diplomats from 16 countries, including the US, South Korea, Mexico, Singapore, South Africa and the Philippines, visited Srinagar on the day of the second phase of polling, and appreciated the transparent election process and enthusiastic participation of the people. A senior US diplomat described the polls as "very healthy and very democratic."

The final phase on October 1, when the remaining 40 seats of the 90-member legislature will go to the polls, will be the most critical for the parties in the fray. In this phase, 24 seats of the pro-Unionist Hindu districts of Udhampur, Kathua, Samba and Jammu will go to the polls. The BJP has high stakes in these areas. The remaining 16 seats in the hill districts of Kupwara, Baramulla and Bandipora in North Kashmir will also vote. Elections in North Kashmir will be intriguing with the entry of Engineer Rashid. Seen as a spoiler, this dark horse with a penchant for soft-separatist prospects is certainly upsetting the probabilities of established regional parties.

In this high-stakes election, the Valley-based parties chose to harp on old themes like the restoration of Article 370. Voters, however, seem less interested in such aversments. After the categorical assertion by Union Home Minister Amit Shah that no force on earth can bring the decreed Article back, it no longer remained an election issue. Sensing the lack of response to their appeal in the name of Article 370, the Valley parties and their national allies like the Congress changed their tune and tried to take up the issue of restoration of statehood. However, even that issue lost its steam soon after Prime Minister Narendra Modi categorically reiterated at a rally in Srinagar that his government was committed to fulfilling the promise given in Parliament about granting statehood to the newly-created UT soon.

In the Kashmir Valley, the participation of a number of political parties, including those like the Jamaat that traditionally boycotted polls, and a large number of independent candidates, many of them prominent leaders, indicates that the people of this troubled region no longer want to be prisoners of the politics of a bygone era. Good governance is the theme of the election narrative, overshadowing calls for the restoration of the pre-2019 status. The Lt Governor's focus on providing efficient administration in the last five years has resulted in a qualitative transformation in the lives of the 15 million people of this region. J&K became the first UT to implement a comprehensive District Good Governance Index (DGGI), under which assessments are made and district-wise rankings published

across 10 sectors and 58 parameters. Several schemes targeting the youth — such as the Munkim Scheme, which provided full funding for commercial vehicles to 5,000 youth, and the Tejaswini Scheme, which has supported 4,000 young women with up to Rs 5 lakh for entrepreneurship — have been implemented. The UT administration undertook a massive recruitment drive, providing jobs to 60,000 youths through a transparent and merit-based system. Under the PARIVAZ scheme, civil service aspirants received free coaching. Programmes like the Ladli Beti scheme and Marriage Assistance Scheme have benefited lakhs of women.

Agriculture and horticulture, a sector that provides livelihood to over 60 per cent of the UT's population, received a major boost in the last few years, resulting in the doubling of production of vegetables, oilseeds, and mushrooms. Trout production has tripled. Geo-tagging of seven agri-products has resulted in huge profits for farmers in the UT. Tourism, the mainstay of livelihood for lakhs of people, saw a huge jump with annual numbers crossing 20 million. The annual Amarnath Yatra saw the participation of an all-time high number of 5.1 lakh pilgrims this year.

A recent Household Consumption Expenditure Survey concluded that the average per capita in J&K spends more than the average citizen in the rest of India. In a Muslim-majority region, the data shows that members of the community are better off in terms of monthly per capita expenditure compared to their coreligionists in the rest of the country.

It is this story of good governance and development that is the dominant theme in this election. For the people of Jammu, this election has come as an opportunity to assert their equal status. Historically, the Kashmir Valley-based leadership played a dominant role in the state's politics and governance, denying the Jammu region its due, so much so that the state used to be called Kashmir instead of Jammu & Kashmir. The state's civil services used to be called KAS — Kashmir Administrative Services — until the Modi government renamed it recently as the JKAS — Jammu & Kashmir Administrative Services.

With more than 26,000 square km, Jammu constitutes 62 per cent of the UT's territory. In terms of population, Jammu accounts for approximately 53 per cent as against 47 per cent in the Valley. It contributes significantly to the UT's economy in terms of revenue and tax collection. Yet, the politics of the state always revolved around the Valley with the Jammu leadership hardly ever getting any prominence. In the last more than six decades, the state was always ruled by chief ministers from the Valley-based parties with the brief exception of a two-year stint of Giani Nishi Azad.

One major reason has been political disunity in the Jammu region. In 2014, voters displayed a strong sense of unity by giving 26 seats to the BJP, catapulting it to power for the first time. A similar show of unity on the part of Jammu's voters in this election would lead to the rise and assertion of the patriotic people of the region for an equitable and dignified share in UT's politics and development.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP. Views are personal



DEVAPRIYA ROY

A poet of grace

Keki Daruwalla was an original writer, and a man of extraordinary generosity

I MET KEKI DARUWALLA in 2007. It was an autumn much like this one, the days being light, the air unexpectedly flirty. I had heard him before of course — at poetry readings and book launches that we JNU students sometimes trooped into town for, asking impossible, jargon-rich questions at the end. Like thousands of others, I had also read him. But this was different. I was meeting him and I had a bona fide task.

That August, I had joined the Sahitya Akademi as an assistant editor. It was my first job, straight from an MA in English literature, and I spent the days surrounded by old issues of *Indian Literature*, that remarkable literary journal that has been publishing translations as well as original writing and criticism in English, from 1954. I assisted the editor, AJ Thomas, in various tasks, and the one involving Keki was a curious one. At the time, the Akademi published new poets, and Keki, who was on the English language board, had placed a certain selection in the rejection pile. My editor felt it deserved another look. Keki was willing to oblige. My task was to bear the manuscript across. "Take Sauroor with you," my editor said.

If you think it was unprofessional for a young employee to show up at a great poet's doorstep with her also-young and very new husband in tow, you misunderstand the specific culture that had engendered this: the grace that underpinned even editorial quib-

bling of a certain generation; the grace that included us, young people, in the ongoing conversation on literature and ideas.

There we were, at the appointed hour, in Mount Kalash. His ground-floor apartment that we would get to know so well in the years to come had a tiny patch of lawn in front and its hallways were full of books and photographs. He ushered us into the drawing room. We were not writers yet and there was no reason at all for the interaction to not get over in five minutes. Instead, a roaring odia was soon underway. How kind he was, I think now. How much interest he took in two people he had never met before.

Very soon, it was established that there were to be two parallel tracks to the odia. As tea came and came again, I spoke to the great poet about poetry. The manuscript I had brought along, his own work, and the generation of great Indian poets he belonged to. But the poet was equally interested in what Sauroor wanted to talk to him about — his time in the Indian Police Services and, more excitingly, his time in the Cabinet Secretariat. They went back and forth in time — to 1962, when the young Keki had volunteered to join the SSB that had only just been established by B N Mullick, the controversial figure who headed IB; to 1993, when he had become chief of the Joint Intelligence Committee. "When will you

write the reminiscences of your intelligence days?" Sauroor twiddled.

"I don't kiss and tell," he had chuckled. Eventually, we took our (reluctant) leave and he gifted us each a book. Sauroor got John Le Carré's *The Little Drummer Girl* while he inscribed my copy of *The Keeper of the Dead* to "Demopriya". "Your Devas are our Asuras," he pointed out. I was Demopriya to him since.

In the years to come, though, we met him at literary gatherings, we still liked to be the ground-floor apartment at Mount Kalash, soft in the diffuse light. We went over to give him our books when they came out, he fed us dinner and told us stories. Sometimes when Balkrishna, his old faithful, wasn't around to make his famous kebabs, he would get sandwiches from Wenger's or samosas from Anupama. We took other writers to meet him too, and he fed them dinner and told their stories too. During Covid, we emailed him because, as his hearing declined, he didn't like speaking on the phone so much. Later, I once went to meet him with the writer Namita Gokhale, a meeting full of sweetness. "Finish your memoirs," I would tell him bossily. "I am writing everyday," he'd say. Everytime, I returned home with an armful of books from his shelves. Every time, I admired his resilience and the writing he

continued to produce, valiantly, brilliantly, originally. In his 60s, he had written his first novel. In his late-70s he began to write a novel with a female protagonist for the first time. Most recently, he wrote a novella and he continued to write short fiction.

The day I hear of Keki's passing, I wake up to poetic blue skies, brilliant sunlight and the sense of autumn in the air. This last year of his illness had coincided with my father-in-law's terminal illness, and the news of his loss jolted me out of our mourning over Daddy's death in July. Grief upon grief split something open inside: It allowed me to find words again.

During one of our last odas at Mount Kalash, we had talked of the memoir again. My friend, the publisher Kartika V K, was really keen to publish it. He smiled and said, "Let me read the foreword to you. It is in verse. About the first decade of my life." As Kartika recorded it on her phone, I closed my eyes trying to memorise — not the lines — but the moment, how his voice rose and fell. The memoirs remained unfinished. Great poet that he was, he was also one of India's great intelligence men. He chose not to kiss and tell after all.

Roy is a Delhi-based author. Her most recent book is *Cat People*, an edited anthology

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

HOLD TO ACCOUNT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'A fraught encounter' (IE, September 27). There is suspicion that the killing of the prime accused in the case of the sexual assault of two minor girls was a deliberate, faked encounter. Maharashtra is due for assembly elections shortly. The killing could be seen as instant justice and benefit the ruling party. There cannot be any punishment without due process in a society governed by the Constitution and rule of law. The Thane case deserves a court-directed investigation. The police are have to be held to account.

SS Paul, Nadia

BALANCE HEALS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Imagine the world beyond your office' (IE, September 27). Annu Sebastian is rightly dying due to alleged work stress highlights the toxic culture that pervades the corporate world. It is sad that no one from the organisation she worked laboriously for had the courtesy to turn up at her funeral. New entrants are full of energy and dreams to make it big in life. The corporate bigwigs, paying heed to her mother's wise words, must not take undue advan-

tage of their zeal. They need to stop burdening newcomers with backbreaking work. Employers must understand that a balance between personal and professional life helps in the mental and physical development of employees.

SH Quadri, Bikaner

FOR TIMELY JUSTICE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Delayed and denied' (IE, September 27). Often an overlooked aspect in justice delivery, court hearings face undue delays, undermining the right to life of the accused. This is especially true for those charged under PMLA and UAPA. Recent Supreme Court rulings have, in clear words, spoken in favour of safeguarding individual rights. The interpretation of discretion should be approached with a lighter tone to protect the innocent while considering variables such as flight risks, severity and the presumption of innocence. It seems like the high court is not necessarily keen on closely following the 2020 Delhi riot case. These procedural delays serve as punishment and must be dealt with in a timely manner for the sake of justice. Ultimately, four years of indecision reflect a clear failure.

Shawad Jena, Ghaziabad

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The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

THE SHIMLA STAIN

A Congress minister echoes a BJP dogwhistle. Rahul needs to figure out how to translate Bharat Jodo to governance

THE FLUP FLOP in Shimla on the issue of eateries and food stalls displaying owners' names shows an attempt at quick damage control by the high command of the Congress. At the same time, it also makes public the dissonance within, which must surely be embarrassing for the party and its government. On Thursday, when the Suldwind Singh Suddu government moved to distance itself from a statement made by its own PWD and Urban Development minister Vikramaditya Singh on Wednesday, it was already too late to dispel the impression that, on a divisive issue, the Congress, or a section of it, wanted to take the BJP's cue. Minister Singh had said that the decision had been taken that every business establishment selling food must display the ID card of the owner in Himachal Pradesh — his statement came on the heels of the Yogi Adityanath government's announcement making such a display mandatory in Uttar Pradesh. Though the UP government sought to package its directive as a broader concern for food safety and as an intervention to guard against food contamination and adulteration, it raised apprehensions that its underlying motive, and almost certainly its effect, would be to encourage discrimination and segregation on religious lines in the state.

In the backdrop of the BJP government's decision in UP, and of the Congress minister's announcement in Himachal, were incidents that had stoked minority anxieties and insecurities recently. In UP, a police order in July, subsequently stayed by the Supreme Court, asking eateries along the Kanwar Yatra route to display the names of their owners, ostensibly to promote transparency and informed choice of Kanwaris regarding the food they eat, was seen to be targeting Muslim-owned businesses. And Minister Singh's statement in Himachal came only days after the eruption of communal tensions earlier this month in the so-far tranquil hill state. Protests and threats of economic boycotts by Hindu groups after a local squabble over an allegedly unauthorised portion of a mosque in Sanjauli district had billowed and spread. In this context, the questions raised by the Congress bid to take a leaf from the BJP's playbook, linger on.

They point to a long-playing Congress dilemma. It has often seemed that, for all its loud accusations of playing divisive politics against the BJP, the Congress has not hesitated to pander to majoritarian sentiment in the pursuit of electoral gain. The party has also seemed internally divided on the larger issue — in times of BJP dominance, should it play me-too and borrow the BJP's idiom, or challenge it? Now, in the wake of the general election result, when it seems to be more sure-footed and confident than before, the Himachal drama is a reminder of a persisting irresolution. For its own sake, the Congress needs to work towards clarity. For the people's sake, it needs to unequivocally abandon a politics that deepens divides, instead of mimicking it and contributing to its ill effects. Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra was a politically imaginative project. But for its message of inclusiveness to travel beyond an Insta reel, Gandhi needs to translate it for his colleagues like Vikramaditya Singh who, clearly, haven't understood it.

A LAST-MINUTE PLAN

It ticks a few right boxes, but Delhi's Winter Action Plan for pollution appears unconvincing. It will need reworking

LIKE IN THE past three years, the Delhi government has framed an action plan to deal with the pollution that engulfs the city in the festival season and continues almost all winter. Some of the additions to last year's Winter Action Plan are welcome. The deployment of drones for real-time monitoring of pollution hotspots and the setting up of a task force comprising representatives of the environment, transport, revenue and traffic departments, for instance, are steps in the right direction. This is especially because air quality control often suffers because of the want of accurate real-time data and poor coordination between government agencies. But like in recent years, the authorities appear to have left it too late. Awareness programmes envisaged in the plan, for instance, could have nudged Delhi's residents to take ownership of the city's annual public health emergency. However, creating behavioural changes takes time. The latest Action Plan appears riddled with a short-term perspective. For a city with a high baseline pollution, a seasonal plan will work well only when it feeds into an all-year pollution control project.

The plan talks of bringing the chief ministers of neighbouring states to the negotiating table to reduce stubble burning. Here too, the Delhi government has got off the blocks late. Early reports indicate that farmers in Delhi's neighbourhood have started putting fire to crop residue. It would be unfair, however, to lay all the blame on Delhi and its neighbouring states for the failure to resolve the problem. The Union government's Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) has not proved an effective mediator. The panel, as the Supreme Court pointed out on Friday, has extensive powers "but needs to be more active and must ensure that its efforts and directions actually translate into reducing the problem". That the panel, by its own admission before the Court, meets only once in three months, shows that it is yet to get its act together three years after it was set up. The agency has functioned more like a regulator whose primary responsibility is to enforce the Graded Action Plan, which comes into play when pollution becomes an emergency.

Experts have underlined the need to focus on localities freed by geography to trap polluting particles — the ashraed method. Despite a mention of local hotspots, Delhi's Plan does not have much by way of deploying this state-of-the-art approach. The city's past experiences have shown that authorities and policymakers need to course-correct midway in the pollution season. This year, the least they can do is discard the inflexible ways of the past.

IT WASN'T ME

At the heart of the row between Spain and Mexico, a refrain of the privileged when confronted with historical injustice

IT WASN'T ME" apart from being a hit song about getting away with adultery, is also the essence of privilege, the refrain of those who still reap the fruits of exploitation of years past. The upper-caste rich boy in India, the wealthy White male in the US, and the conservative Englishman who celebrates the Raj — each, when confronted with the idea of historical injustice and the advantages it has given them, echo Shaggy, the king of all unearned privilege, the OG Neco Babies are, tautologically (and accurately) kings. King Felipe VI, monarch of Spain, is at the centre of a diplomatic row between his country and Mexico over a letter and an invite.

The Spanish government is angry because its royal head of state has not been invited to the swearing-in ceremony of Claudia Sheinbaum as Mexico's first woman president on October 1, Mexico has, however, invited Spain's elected PM Pedro Sanchez. The reason for the slight is that Felipe has not even replied to a letter — as best diplomatic practice requires, according to the president-elect — written by Sheinbaum's predecessor in 2019 asking him to apologise for "crimes of conquest". Spain conquered large parts of South America in the 15th and 16th centuries, accompanied by atrocities against indigenous people. In response to the letter, the Spanish foreign ministry said, "The arrival of the Spanish on Mexican soil 500 years ago cannot be judged in the light of contemporary considerations."

Judging the atrocities of history by contemporary standards is indeed a fraught exercise. Guilt, after all, is not passed on. Wealth and entitlement, though, can be. Felipe may not be culpable for colonialism or even feudalism. But he can certainly answer a letter, acknowledge that injustices were committed. Of course, it is easier to say, "It wasn't me".



SUHAS PALSHIKAR

FOR SOME TIME now, but particularly during the campaign for the Lok Sabha elections, it was argued that the BJP will change the Constitution. This writer had held the view that the BJP might not do that — not because it had any real faith in the Constitution, but because it had developed a technique of bypassing the Constitution, as in the case of determining what is a "money bill" or in the case of overturning the Supreme Court ruling on appointment of Election Commissioners. The BJP government has done greater damage over the past decade through its subterfuge rather than through upfront changes to the Constitution. But besides practising various methods to downgrade constitutional morality, the current government now seems poised to deal a more drastic blow to the Constitution.

This new assault has come in the form of the Prime Minister's pet project, One Nation, One Election. It would be a waste of the diligent reader's time to repeat oneself ("Polls Apart", *IE*, November 24, 2017), but as the government gears up to push the plan, it is necessary to summarise the earlier argument and explore the larger implications beyond simultaneity of elections.

The implementation of the plan will involve "changes" in the Constitution in at least three key areas. These will be presented as amendments but their scope will be far wider. The first pertains to the parliamentary form of the government. In whatever form the idea of simultaneous election is sought to be implemented, it will inevitably signal a death blow to the parliamentary system. While we await more specific and detailed legislative proposals, they will certainly involve an arrangement whereby the right of the legislature to bring no-confidence motions will be curtailed. It is also not clear if the chief executive will continue to have the power to dissolve the legislature and force an early election.

The second major attack will be in the arena of states' autonomy. That's the only way assemblies will have fixed elections along with the Lok Sabha. The much-touted 1952-1967 precedence of so-called simultaneous election is a classic instance of misleading public opinion. During that phase, states were not forced or required to have

Politics of simultaneous elections prioritises neatness over constitutional skills of negotiating complexities

This determination to hold elections on a specified date, come what may, looks so neat and American. As an aside, a government that has failed to hold the decennial Census long after the pandemic subsided, should not strive for such a pre-determined calendar. That apart, this calendar precludes any federal tweaking to the election schedule. Thus, by officially presidentialising the election, the current proposal runs the risk of jeopardising the federal structure.

elections simultaneously with the Lok Sabha. But the elections coincided because after the passage of the Constitution, all elections were held together. Subsequently, there was relative political stability as a by-product of single-party dominance. Therefore, by another accident of that party system, governments in the state did not fall due to no-confidence motions or party factionalism.

But now, it is being mandated that all states must have an election only with the Lok Sabha (or at a pre-determined "election event") to be held twice every five years. Indeed, this determination to hold elections on a specified date, come what may, looks so neat and American. As an aside, a government that has failed to hold the decennial Census long after the pandemic subsided, should not strive for such a pre-determined calendar. That apart, this calendar precludes any federal tweaking to the election schedule. Thus, by officially presidentialising the election, the current proposal runs the risk of jeopardising the federal structure.

Thirdly, in this enthusiasm to have a neatness to the election cycle, the deeper constitutional promise of representation is pushed to a secondary place. As mentioned above, representatives will not be empowered to unseat the executive and hence, they would no longer be the voters' agents to decide whether the executive enjoys trust or not. Besides, if election events are fixed in a five-year cycle, there is every possibility that at times, voters will have no representatives — either state assemblies will be dissolved or/and even the national representatives may have run out of their terms. The ideas of representative government and representation will thus be compromised.

In the months to come, more specific proposals may unfold and enable more informed debates, but the unavoidable message as of now is that this government does not care if key aspects of the Constitution have to be changed in a fashion that hurts its very identity. The willingness of the regime to undertake this overhaul should alert us.

Such an overhaul sets two processes in motion. First, it delegitimises the idea that there is anything fundamental or sacrosanct about the Constitution. Already, it is being ar-

gued that the previous governments made so many amendments and hence, a few more won't matter. This argument seeks to trivialise the entire history of legislative/executive confrontations with Courts on the question of the scope and meaning of the term "amendment". The basic structure doctrine is already under attack. So, the older arguments about people's representatives being supreme and the Constitution being only an instrument of the present generation are bound to surface.

The second process that will be unleashed will be to prioritise neatness, uniformity and sameness over the constitutional skills to negotiate complexities. Even as India's federal experiment began to be appreciated for its pragmatic asymmetry globally, India seems set to reject that very feature. With the attack on Article 370, the process of transforming the asymmetry into a formal symmetry has commenced. With the push over the language issue and the de facto erosion of states' autonomy through agencies of the Union government, federal pluralism is already sidelined. Now, uniformity and a rejection of complicating diversity of formal and institutional mechanisms will be popularised as an instrument to undermine the essence of the Constitution. Thus, over and above the fundamental flaws in the proposal for simultaneous elections, the most critical danger it portends is to transform the democratic logic into a logic of "oneness".

Debates about changing the Constitution have so far centred around the question of Hindu rashtra. While I have argued that its pragmatic asymmetry globally, India seems set to reject that very feature. With the attack on Article 370, the process of transforming the asymmetry into a formal symmetry has commenced. With the push over the language issue and the de facto erosion of states' autonomy through agencies of the Union government, federal pluralism is already sidelined. Now, uniformity and a rejection of complicating diversity of formal and institutional mechanisms will be popularised as an instrument to undermine the essence of the Constitution. Thus, over and above the fundamental flaws in the proposal for simultaneous elections, the most critical danger it portends is to transform the democratic logic into a logic of "oneness".

The writer, based in Pune, taught Political Science



KAUSHIK DAS GUPTA

AMONG THE DEBATES in which almost every Bengali who wears gastronomy on their sleeve has a say is one about the hilsa, *ilish*. At odds, Durga Puja pandals and even in media, that perennial question requires no provocation: Which is the river that best nurtures the silver-headed bony fish? The Hooghly — the Ganga — or the Padma in Bangladesh? Even the generation on which the Radcliffe Line does not always weigh heavy can go to great lengths arguing, sometimes parroting received wisdom, about how address is the greatest determinant of how only the *ilish* is, or whether it's plump or lean.

The trouble, however, is that markets in the country do not always sparkle with the silver crop during the hilsa season. Ecological reasons and overfishing have meant that Bengalis in India have to rely on goodwill gestures from the Bangladesh government to whet their appetite. The Sheikh Hasina government would usually ease export restrictions during the festival season. Fears that the Muhammad Yunus-led ministry, which has taken charge after Hasina's ouster in August, would be less generous have proven unfounded. With Bangladesh's Ministry of Commerce approving shipments, Bengalis can look forward to a *puro* fare replete with the *Padma ilish*, *bhapa* (steamed) or with the *shorsho* (mustard/gravy or fried, sort out the bones in their mouth, let the large concentric circles of fat unravel to reveal the sweet salty taste of the fish, while sparring over

FOR THE LOVE OF HILSA

Bengal's favourite fish merits a conversation on responsible dining

For those displaced from their homes because of politics and nationalism, the fish harkens back to days spent amidst rivers, when hilsa did not just mean a fancy fare; smeared with turmeric, salt, a dash of mustard oil along with a few chopped chillies, and fried in hot oil, the *ilish* would reveal its flavours on a plate of steaming rice. With Partition came poverty, the demands of feeding often large families. Hilsa is a delicate fish, and needs to be handled carefully, but Bengalis also found that it gives generously. Fish head, with a medley of vegetables — brinjals, pumpkin, potatoes and *pui* leaf or *kochu shank* — cooked in mustard oil in which mustard and black cumin had spluttered, leaving behind a mild bitterness, is a meal in itself. Fleishy strips from its tail, after sorting bones, were mashed, combined with green chillies and mustard oil into a *bharta* that could feed families in times they needed to use every part of the fish. *Ilish bharta* remains a delicacy in homes and in parts of rural Bangladesh.

which variety is the best. Only those who can afford it, though — a kg of the *Padma hilsa* can cost thousands of rupees. The *Narmada* and the *Godavari* also provide hilsa, but these fish are deemed interlopers and play no part in the debate.

Padma ilish is an umbrella term for the fish from Bangladesh. It can be from the *Meghna* or the *Karnaphuli* or a number of other small rivers as well. For those displaced from their homes because of politics and nationalism, the fish harkens back to days spent amidst rivers, when hilsa did not just mean a fancy fare; smeared with turmeric, salt, a dash of mustard oil along with a few chopped chillies, and fried in hot oil, the *ilish* would reveal its flavours on a plate of steaming rice. With Partition came poverty, the demands of feeding often large families. Hilsa is a delicate fish, and needs to be handled carefully, but Bengalis also found that it gives generously. Fish head, with a medley of vegetables — brinjals, pumpkin, potatoes and *pui* leaf or *kochu shank* — cooked in mustard oil in which mustard and black cumin had spluttered, leaving behind a mild bitterness, is a meal in itself. Fleishy strips from its tail, after sorting bones, were mashed, combined with green chillies and mustard oil into a *bharta* that could feed families in times they needed to use every part of the fish. *Ilish bharta* remains a delicacy in homes and in parts of rural Bangladesh.

Culinary history shows that food mem-

ories and nostalgia often blend seamlessly with brand making. For long, Bengalis adhered to a practice — hilsa would disappear from kitchens a few days after the *puro*, to reappear four to six months later. This moratorium, which respected breeding cycles, was discarded with the fish becoming a part of high cuisine. Brand hilsa, especially the *Padma hilsa*, has meant the fish is no longer a preserve of Bengali kitchens, or the odd *pice* hotel. Restaurants today do excellent versions of dishes that spare the eater the labour of deboning the fish. But discarding gastronomic shibboleths is one thing. The culture that has created brand hilsa is also complicit in overfishing.

Bangladesh has research departments for hilsa. It has put in place fishing moratoriums. Export restrictions are part of this revival effort and so are conversations on means to enforce that markets don't run out of stock in peak season. Most of West Bengal is an outlier to such conversations. The question about which hilsa tastes the best will go on. But given the high price it commands, *Padma hilsa* seems to have established itself as the bigger brand.

During this Durga Puja, as *ilish* aficionados go back to their never-ending debate, perhaps they could also celebrate the fish with a message on sustainable fishing, and responsible dining.

kaushik.dasgupta@expressindia.com



SEPTEMBER 28, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

AKAL TAKHT NOW OPEN

IN AN APPARENT bid to assuage the hurt sentiments of the Sikh community, President Zail Singh paid a visit to the Golden Temple, offered prayers at Harmandir Sahib, held an hour-long discussion with the five head priests, addressed a congregation and formally opened to the public the Akal Takht which has been completely restored to its pristine glory.

SECOND INDIAN IN SPACE

THE SECOND INDIAN to go into space will be a space department specialist who will be launched on board an American space shuttle

when it takes India's third multipurpose satellite Insat-1C into orbit. The Department of Space has accepted an offer by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration of the US to fly an Indian payload specialist from the Indian space research organisation.

BANGLADESH CLASHES

AT LEAST THREE persons, including a former member of parliament, were killed and about 200 injured during violent clashes in various parts of Bangladesh when 23 opposition parties called for a country-wide general strike demanding the lifting of martial law before the parliamentary elections in Dhaka, no mo-

tor vehicle or cycle-rickshaw was seen on the road, and attendance in government and commercial offices was very low.

PRICES DAMPEN SPIRIT

DESPITE "PRESSURE TACTICS" by the government which has asked some nationalised banks to sell tickets to their clients in bulk, the general response to the India-Australia day-night cricket match has not been encouraging. This is because the admission charges are exorbitant. Tickets for the upper deck of the Jawahar Nehru stadium have been priced at Rs 25 each, East and North enclosures at Rs 50 and West enclosure tickets cost Rs 250.