

[ OUR TAKE ]

## Standards must guide Ayush

It is in the best interest of the State as well as the booming Ayush industry that therapies and medicines meet rigours of scientific testing

The traditional medicine boom of recent years in India has also seen unprecedented reach for dubious claims by marquee companies through advertisements in mainstream media and social media "virality". Against this backdrop, the Supreme Court has done well in retaining a key guardrail to protect the consumer. On Tuesday, it stayed an omission of Rule 170 of the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules 1945, notified by the government earlier this year. The rule was an effective yoke on Ayush (Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, and Homoeopathy) advertising that is often in the dock for dodgy claims of efficacy, "absolute cures", and safety. Indeed, as per data from a government programme to monitor traditional medicine systems, a total of 38,539 cases of misleading advertisements have been reported since 2021.

The ruling brings back into focus the question of whether traditional medicine can be held to a different standard for advertising if it is not subject to science-based safety and efficacy scrutiny of comparable rigour. There is certainly no case to summarily dismiss traditional medicine — Tu Youyou's 2015 Nobel win in medicine, for the discovery of artemisinin, is rooted in traditional Chinese medicine — but for Indian traditional medicine to be accorded its due credibility, there have to be defined standards of study, experimentation and trials. To be sure, the Ayush ministry published Good Clinical Practices (GCP) guidelines for clinical trials in Ayurveda, Siddha, and Unani, based on the GCP template for conventional (or modern) medicine. Registration of clinical trials of Ayush therapies and drugs under the Clinical Trials Registry-India (CTRI), which is maintained by the Indian Council of Medical Research, was also mandated. However, claims continue to be made without the requisite scientific backing, and some companies have earned judicial ire for exaggerations on conforming with testing rigour without the evidence to corroborate.

The proprietary origins (not described in the accepted texts) of a raft of Ayurvedic medicines and the principle of customising medicine as per individual physiologies in Ayurveda and Unani, often cited by practitioners, make testing their safety and efficacy a crying need. Consumers have a reasonable expectation that there is a regulatory setup that protects them from unsafe or ineffective medicine, and not just the State but also key stakeholders in traditional medicine, including the big corporations, need to ensure this is not belied.

## Shed partisan glasses in reading Meta letter

Meta founder-CEO Mark Zuckerberg's letter to the United States (US) House Judiciary Committee that says the Joe Biden administration "pressured" the digital giant to "censor" content on its platforms, including Facebook, has been weaponised by the Republicans in the election season. The Republicans have long claimed that social media companies have been colluding with liberal political persuasions and censoring conservative voices, and Zuckerberg's letter of "regret" would certainly help such claims.

Donald Trump has predictably used the letter to target not just Joe Biden but also his deputy Kamala Harris, the challenger to Trump in the upcoming presidential elections. However, there are too many dimensions underlying the contents of Zuckerberg's letter that resist the Republicans' "bare-bones" reading of a government-coerced social-media censorship regime. Platforms certainly have been under pressure to take down misinformation and fake news, especially relating to Covid. But it is also a fact that the US Supreme Court, in a 6-3 majority verdict earlier this summer, ruled that the White House and federal agencies can continue to urge social media platforms to censor content that the government deems misinformation. Given six of the nine Supreme Court judges were appointed by Republican presidents, with three appointed by Trump, the debate on social media censorship should move away from a mere partisan focus to more weighty questions of protection of free speech and regulation of the unbridled power of the platforms (with little underlying responsibility).

## Need to reach vehicular emissions right in NCR

Research shows both type-approval and pollution testing for vehicles fall short in the real world, as does the adoption of CNG as a transition fuel. Adopting remote sensing for mass monitoring could help improve air quality in the national Capital

With the winter and the festive season set to begin in around a month's time, the annual discourse on air quality crisis in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) is set to begin. Apart from meteorological considerations, over which we have little control, increasing pollution from anthropogenic activities (particularly vehicular emissions) continues to worsen the problem. But there's some new insight that can help us address the problem better. The Real Urban Emissions Initiative (TRUE), founded by the FIA Foundation and the International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT), worked with authorities in Delhi and Gurugram to complete a comprehensive remote sensing study that measured over 100,000 vehicles across 20 sites. The data presented in the report reveals ways to tackle the problem.

Importantly, remote sensing tech-

nology for pollution control is not new to India. Kolkata pioneered its use in 2009, and government agencies like the International Centre for Automotive Technology conducted pilot programmes in 2017. The National Green Tribunal has also advocated its implementation to the Central Pollution Control Board since 2015, but the technology is yet to be widely adopted. It's encouraging, then, that the Supreme Court of India recently reiterated its 2018 and 2019 directives to the ministry of road transport and highways (MoRTH) to implement remote sensing technology in the NCR.

India is the world's third most polluted country and home to the most polluted capital, according to the World Air Quality Index Report 2023 by IQAir. Over the past 25 years, various institutions, including the apex court, the National Green Tribunal, and MoRTH have implemented numerous measures to curb emissions from road transport. Despite these efforts, the rising number of vehicles has thus far largely offset the progress made. However, there was a significant leap in terms of vehicle emissions in April 2020, when India transitioned directly from Bharat Stage (BS) IV to BS VI emission standards.

The current vehicle emissions testing regime has two primary parts. The first is the type-approval stage, where the government grants (or not) approval for a manufacturer to introduce a tested model into the market.

The second is the widely known in-use compliance test, or the pollution-under-control certification (PUC). This is needed periodically and applies to every internal combustion engine vehicle on the road. There are limitations to both. The type-approval test, which now incorporates real-driving emissions testing using a



Anurudh Narula



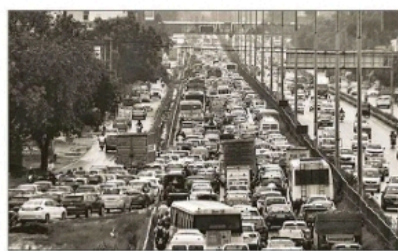
Amit Bhatt

portable emissions measurement system, is expensive for mass-scale monitoring. Meanwhile, the PUC is conducted in idle conditions and doesn't capture key transport pollutants like nitrogen oxides (NOx) and particulate matter.

Monitoring and enforcement programmes can supplement periodic emissions inspections to ensure consistent vehicle performance in real-world conditions. Remote sensing technology can non-intrusively screen tailpipe emissions on a large scale and help identify highly polluting vehicles.

The TRUE initiative helps cities worldwide develop air quality and climate policies using independent real-world vehicle emissions data. The study in Delhi and Gurugram, conducted from December 2022 to April 2023, measured exhaust emissions of NOx, carbon monoxide (CO), hydrocarbons (HC), and ultraviolet (UV) smoke, a proxy for particulate matter from two- and three-wheelers (3W), private cars, taxis, light goods vehicles, and buses.

The analysis revealed that India's leap from BS IV to BS VI norms led to significant reductions in tailpipe



Pollution-under-control testing is conducted in idle conditions and doesn't capture key pollutants like nitrogen oxides and particulate matter

emissions across all vehicle types. This underscores the benefit of promoting cleaner technologies and stricter regulations and points to the potential of introducing BS VII norms in the future. The study also found disparities in emissions across different vehicle segments, with commercial vehicles like light goods vehicles, taxis, 3Ws, and buses emitting substantially more than private vehicles.

In comparing captured real-world emissions with laboratory limits (the type-approval limits) set by MoRTH, it was found that real-world emissions can be multiple times higher (15-25 times higher in a few cases). While the vehicles in the study are not required to meet lab limits on the road, this significant difference emphasises how performance that qualifies for type-approval certification does not reflect the ultimate impacts on air quality and human health. Even the BS VI vehicles, which were the cleanest of those measured, had higher emissions during real-world operations.

The NCR has seen a major shift towards compressed natural gas (CNG) as an alternative to traditional petroleum fuels. This was done largely to reduce particulate matter emissions. However, this study's data challenges the perception of CNG as a clean fuel solution. High NOx emis-

sions are particularly concerning because NOx contributes to the formation of secondary particulate matter and ozone. Thus, relying on CNG as a transitional step towards zero-emission vehicles may not be suitable for regions like Delhi and Gurugram, where air quality is already severely compromised.

It's also clear from the study's results that PUC limits do not reflect real-world emissions. This underscores the need to complement PUC tests with real-world monitoring technologies. The Automotive Industry Standard (AIS) 170, in draft since 2020, needs to be finalised and notified by MoRTH to enable effective use of remote sensing.

Finally, accelerating the transition to zero-emission vehicles, especially in commercial segments, is crucial to combat vehicular emissions in Delhi NCR. Several policy options are available to achieve this, including implementing a supply mandate for zero-emission vehicles and establishing low-emission zones to complement existing policies. The Commission for Air Quality Management is well positioned to lead this effort in the NCR.

Anurudh Narula is researcher, and Amit Bhatt is managing director (India), ICCT. The views expressed are personal

## Bangladesh's many fault lines explain its turmoil

While there are various reasons explaining the events in Bangladesh over the past few weeks, the central narrative forwarded is the autocratic governance style of the deposed Prime Minister (PM), Sheikh Hasina. However, this narrow prism blurs the fault lines and contradictions that have existed in the society and polity of Bangladesh since its creation.

There has been an ongoing conflict between the country's Bengali culture and an Islamist resurgence, spearheaded in the mainstream by the likes of the Jamaat-e-Islami, on which a Hasina-era ban has just been revoked by the interim government headed by Muhammad Yunus. Three main identities have been vying with each other for pre-eminence in the country: One of secularist nationalism, two of Islamism and an Islamist State, and three, of the popular Bengali culture that is more accommodating and syncretic.

Approximately 90% of the population of Bangladesh practices Islam as a religion. While the amended Constitution of Bangladesh enshrines Islam as the State religion, it has also restored the Article that provides for freedom of religion and secularism.

I had the opportunity to interact with senior defence and civil services officers while attending the National Defence Course in Dhaka. Surprisingly, even some of the army officers were vocal about the paramount importance of Islam in the functioning of the State and questioned the restoration of the word "secularism" in the Constitution.

Another major fault line is rooted in how the country's history is viewed. Bangladesh is polarised into groups that either took part in the War of Liberation or stayed out of it, according to their political values, beliefs and ideology. Since India played a predominant role in creating Bangladesh, the role is central in the narratives of these groups. The nationalists felt that India's role was limited to bringing Bangladesh under its sphere of influence to further its economic interests and gain better access to Northeastern India. The pro-Chinese Left believed that India's intention was to make Bangladesh a colony for importing raw materials to cater to the jute industry in West Bengal. The radical Left perceived India as an expansionist power and believed that Bangladesh's liberation was an unfinished revolution. The Islamists propagated that India's real motive was to break up Pakistan, the Muslim homeland, as the Hindus had never reconciled to the idea of an independent Islamic State.

However, what is not well known in India is that the Mukti Bahini, consisting of diverse ideological entities, also reversed India's role. It had reluctantly fought under the overall command of India and could not reconcile to its predominant role. The surrender ceremony was perceived more as an Indian show than a Bangladesh one despite the fact that Group Captain AK Khandker, who later became Bangladesh's chief of air force, was present at the surrender. In fact, in Bangladesh, it is politically incorrect to mention the 1971 conflict as an Indo-Pak war. Furthermore, in the national museum at Dhaka, very

few displayed items reflect India's role in Bangladesh's Liberation War.

Thus, the propaganda that India's help in the liberation struggle came with a price has gained wide currency. It then became political expedient to blame India for all the problems Bangladesh has been facing ever since. Distrust of India also has a communal dimension shaped by history. The narrative of India being hegemonic has become the dominant narrative.

Bangladesh's perceptions of India are also shaped by the media there. Minor irritants like delays in getting visas for travel to India and border incidents are amplified, overshadowing the co-operative benefits. Misperceptions among the public are also in abundance, such as India carrying out a cultural invasion by beaming its TV channels, Bangladesh while blocking the Bangladeshi channels, especially in West Bengal.

Despite periodic explanations that it is merely due to commercial reasons wherein Bangladeshi broadcasters are not ready to pay any carry fee to Indian cable TV service providers, the issue is flogged periodically. Thus, the average Bangladeshi views China favourably compared to India, which is seen as antagonistic.

Bangladesh has also not been able to institutionalise stable civil-military relations despite so many years of democracy. The principal reason lies in the nature of its politics, which is characterised by deadly confrontations, revenge, and struggle for power by the two major political parties, giving rise to a dysfunctional democratic order with an abysmal record of institution-building. Due to mutual antagonism, successive regimes have wanted to keep the military on their respective sides. There is a widely-held perception that to win the elections, they need the tacit support of the army. Bifurcation of the defence ministry and placing of the armed forces division under the PM has blocked the traditional command channel under the armed forces function in other democracies. This has accelerated the politicisation of the institution.

The Bangladesh army, in particular, and the country's defence forces, in general, quite like Pakistan's, are deeply involved in controlling commercial activities. Evidence of the army's wealth and influence is not hard to find. The army's interface with civilian life is also much more than usual, to the detriment of its role as a purely militaristic institution. It is often called to perform routine civil administration tasks such as traffic control in Dhaka, and preparation of national ID cards and voter lists.

These systemic incongruities make Bangladesh more vulnerable to divisions than any external factors that may be at play in the current turmoil. They also provide context to the recent turbulence leading to attacks on minorities and the army's refusal to quell the anti-Islam protests in the country. The fault lines are recognised, there is little that can be done to change Bangladesh's course over the long term.

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[ JAKE SULLIVAN ] US NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR

We believe that competition with China does not have to lead to conflict or confrontation. The key is responsible management through diplomacy



## Time for waqf reform, with trust-building first

The Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2024, was tabled in Parliament in the last session and is now being examined by a joint parliamentary committee (JPC). Under Islamic law, waqf is a religious charity. A person can dedicate their movable or immovable property for religious or charitable purposes for Muslims. The person dedicating their property to waqf irrevocably loses ownership over it as it now gets transferred to Allah. The property must then be used for community purposes such as mosques, madrasas, burial grounds, hospitals, and other collective purposes. It is logical that a transparent and efficient system for managing these properties is required. The Waqf Act, 1995 aimed to provide a framework for the administration of these properties. Various waqf boards, which operate independently of each other under respective state governments, manage nearly 870,000 properties across India, with a collective estimated value of \$1.5 lakh crore. Disputes arise regularly and are referred to quasi-judicial waqf tribunals.

Unfortunately, over the years, some waqf properties have been left neglected, mismanaged, or encroached upon. Shockingly, the encroachment and illegal possession are often in the hands of well-known individuals. Besides, due to poor oversight, the properties are often undervalued, sold, or rented out to vested groups or persons. The objective of community well-being has been lost owing to laxity, corruption within the system, opacity, and dysfunction of some state waqf boards. No government thought it necessary to enact a genuine overhaul of the waqf management system. Sadly, the state of some boards today defeats the very purpose and intent of waqf. Therefore, a thorough examination of the system is overdue. But can this current Bill do it?

The Bill proposes 44 amendments to curb the authority of waqf boards by the government. It proposes changes in the functioning of waqf tribunals, allows non-Muslims to be members, and makes women members on the board mandatory. Some Muslim groups have opposed these on the grounds of their autonomy being eroded and also because they were not consulted in framing these amendments.

Under the new draft law, several ancient monuments, such as Jama Masjid, qualify as waqf properties and may now be required

to be registered on the portal within six months. But what documents would a 400-year-old mosque have to prove itself as a waqf property?

Some years ago, a dome at Delhi's Jama Masjid was in need of urgent repair. The matter got entangled between the waqf board, the masjid committee, and bodies falling under the authority of the Archaeological Survey of India, and work stalled. Mere transfer of control to the collector would not resolve such matters. Nor is there reason to believe that it would drastically reduce corruption. Besides, the Bill proposes to make the collector the sole authority to decide whether the property belongs to waqf or the government. Based on this decision, she can change the ownership in the revenue records, which would be binding on all sides. The fear that this provision is open to misuse cannot be dismissed.

But there is a larger context. Some concerned citizens and groups have been calling for reform in waqf management for a long time. The United Progressive Alliance government moved certain key amendments to

the law in 2013 but stopped short of an overhaul. This amendment made it possible for any Indian, irrespective of her faith, to dedicate her property for waqf. Renowned RTI activist Salim Baig from Moradabad repeatedly pursued transparency through audit and digitisation of records of waqf properties for years. In 2013, the Supreme Court issued notices to the state governments on his public interest litigation, asking them to commit to a timeline and budget for a basic audit of records. It is believed that if done correctly, waqf properties can generate an income running into hundreds of crores of rupees yearly. This money can then be utilised for education, vocational skill-building, and other relevant purposes to support children and women from such backgrounds.

The government says that it is only pursuing the recommendations of the 2006 Rajinder Sachar committee by bringing in these amendments. If the spirit of genuine welfare and well-being as demonstrated by the Sachar committee is imbued by JPC and enacted into the draft with genuine consultation and building of trust with the community, the Bill has the potential to become a milestone law.

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# 13 The IDEAS PAGE

**DIS/AGREE**  
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

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



C.R. Sasikumar

An airline has recently rolled out a feature that allows women passengers to avoid sitting next to men, in a bid to make flying safer for them. Is this the right, or wrong, way out?

## Segregation is no answer

Seating women separately won't solve problem of mid-air misbehaviour by male passengers



ASHWINI DESHPANDE

AMONG ALL the dismal statistics about gender gaps in India, there are some numbers that shine. One of these is that India is the global leader in the proportion of women pilots. With 15 per cent women pilots, India is way ahead of the global average of 5 per cent. The International Society of Women Airline Pilots released a "gender equality in the airline industry" report in 2021. The report noted that at 12.4 per cent, India ranked top in gender equality at the flight deck.

If gender equality or women's advancement is the goal, the aviation industry is getting several things right. Since this is without any special programme to train or target female pilots, it reveals the aspirations of young women to break barriers to enter traditionally male-dominated fields.

This is about the staff in the airline industry. What about passengers?

The issue of sexual safety in the skies is an important one globally, not just in India. While there are no definitive statistics, there are reports of groping, touching and fondling that women have reported to airline staff all across the globe. These are typically silent assaults, which are unwelcome, repugnant and often not reported.

Most victims are women; however, there have been incidents when young men or adolescent boys have been targeted. The perpetrators are always adult males. This has nothing to do with the class of travel: Women could be targeted regardless of whether they were travelling economy or first class.

We should also note, for perspective, that over three million passengers fly every day, and obnoxious passengers stand out because they are exceptions rather than the rule.

How do international airlines deal with misbehaving passengers? The flight staff are trained to restrain the perpetrators, stop serving alcohol to unruly passengers, and if needed, offer to relocate the woman, provided another seat is available. Incidentally, most instances on international flights involve an inebriated passenger. This was also what happened in the urination case on an Air India flight (business class) in 2023.

In the US, passengers take recourse to the legal system for redressal. In India,

with an overburdened judicial system this may not be an option.

With this context, the recent "pink seats" announcement by Indigo airlines is puzzling. A new feature allows women to see the sex of other passengers when choosing their seats. They can choose to sit next to women to avoid sitting next to men. Undoubtedly, for some women, having this choice will give a sense of temporary respite.

But what about women who choose seats for comfort – front or exit row, aisle or window seats, and end up seated next to a man? Men might assume that women who do not choose the pink seats are more "broadminded".

If the issue is sexual safety, isolating women is not the solution. Airline staff can and should isolate the perpetrator, rather than nudging women to isolate themselves. What about women's compartments in commuter trains and women's seats in buses? The logic there is different. In the short-to-medium term, we need these measures. Trains and buses are overpacked daily commute options where ensuring any kind of order is much harder than inside an airplane, unless people self-regulate, as indeed they do in several parts of the world.

Some might claim that women need freedom not just from sexual assault but also boorish and inconsiderate behaviour. Absolutely. Women deal with "manspreading" and "man-sitting" all the time, not to mention men pushing themselves ahead and breaking queues.

Many male passengers have no idea that the armrest between two seats is to be shared between both passengers, it is not their birthright to lean over and occupy the entire space.

But this will never change if women slink out of the way. At the Delhi airport recently, each security belt had three-four airport staff, catching passengers trying to break the queue (which included women too) by shoving their bags ahead of passengers who were in line. Costly but effective, and certainly worth implementing till passengers learn the protocols of civilised behaviour.

Indigo claims that it has the highest number (678) of women pilots among all airlines, thus contributing to India's top rank in this dimension. If this is indeed true, Indigo needs to demonstrate its leadership also in ensuring top-class safety protocols with a well-trained crew who are sensitised to detect and act upon instances quickly and efficiently. The last thing they should be doing is asking women to ghettoise themselves. Because, you know, "men will be men".

The writer is professor of economics and founder director, CEDA, Ashoka University. Views are personal

## Relief of escaping Mr Space Hog

We have women-only compartments in trains. What's wrong with extending the concept to aircrafts?



RAMA BIJAPURKAR

THANK YOU, INDIGO, for your customer sensitivity.

Safe Harbour Clause: For all men reading this, the caveat is "present company excluded".

Indigo Airlines' latest offering enabling women fliers to select seats next to other women is utterly welcome. Forget the gender politics, it's the joy of not having to battle an unthinking, entitled man for your share of the armrest that is just so appealing. Also, since the average male flier seems to have more body volume than the average female flier, who has also been taught through years of conditioning to "sit properly", the men tend to occupy more "airspace" around their seats. Many women avoid taking even the most convenient flight, if only a middle seat is available. Many of them also choose aisle seats despite being bumped into by service carts and people and risking brain damage from carelessly opened overhead luggage bins. It's not that they don't yearn for a quiet window seat with a place to rest their heads and sleep after a long work day before they head home for a second shift of family seva. It's just that if there is a Mr Space Hog in the next seat, you don't have the aisle to spill over into, unless you have an aisle seat. Battling on both sides is too stressful.

Truth be told, this space-hog behaviour of the male flier stems from an untested, automatic sense of entitlement, conditioned by behaviour, rather than any desire to harass anyone. Men reading this may think – are probably thinking – she's overreacting and over analysing this. But trust us, we women have to have antennae continuously on high alert to help us through the complicated machinations needed to take care of ourselves even in everyday situations, like commuting or walking in crowded – or lonely – public spaces.

We have ladies coupes in trains, ladies compartments in locals, ladies special buses and ladies-only toilets for the many reasons that don't need to be enumerated. So what's wrong with extending the concept to aircrafts? Of course the devil is in the details and one is not sure exactly how this will work. Since there's no free courtesy that Indigo extends to anyone, as in the other forms of seat selection, additional fees may be levied for this too, in the spirit of adding value to customers and extracting value from

them. Women will be free to trade off benefits and costs and choose between a seat with more leg space next to a man and a normal seat next to a woman. Whether this will be women-only rows or not is unclear, but Indigo algorithms will figure out how to efficiently get the job done. What if men use the new visibility of gender data when selecting seats to travel next to women and say to them (as they likely may) "Don't protest about my hogging space, go travel in the pink seats or shut up?" Well Indigo, with your "girl power" focus, find us a solution. The airline has been very good at disciplining us so far. In exchange for efficiency, they have got us to stand in straight lines, board in sequence, stand uncomplainingly in caged buses on hot tarmacs waiting for aircraft cleaning, dispose of our own garbage etc. So maybe they will handle this behaviour too.

Execution also reflects the difference between a good idea and a commitment that is built into the DNA of the brand. Pink colour coding for women-occupied seats? As a friend pointed out, it signals the patriarchal, stereotypical idea of the weaker sex needing protection, not empowerment via choices. As we know, purple is the new pink and maybe royal blue would work just as well.

Before other businesses rush to do the same in the name of "new trend", here are two cautionary anecdotes. One is about a five-star hotel chain that offers a "women-only" floor. "For your safety" said the young women at the check-in counter. Until then, it had not occurred to me that a five-star hotel was unsafe for a woman. Surely, it was the hotel's problem to keep me safe and not put me in a "zenana". But worse, when I needed electrical help at midnight, a burly bearded electrician appeared. They hadn't thought through the plan, clearly!

And then there was the iconic chairman of an iconic Indian company who wanted to address a European board director's struggle to follow the discipline the BJP had to be somewhat accommodating, unlike the first two terms when overweening pride was the hallmark of its leaders. It is now wary of taking decisions that may harm its prospects at the hustings. Consequently, new initiatives and ideas are being temporarily kept on the backburner. The sheen might have been worn off, but the saffron party is still set to let go of its hard Hindutva image.

Vijal Pant, Hapur

THIS REFERS TO the article 'A new governance matrix' (IE, August 29). The writer's most recent book is Lilliput Land: How "Small" is Driving India's Mega Consumption Story

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The Taliban cannot escape accountability for this unconscionable smothering of the ambitions and daily lives of half the population. Why not aim sanctions at more the leaders of Afghanistan, who have promulgated such draconian laws?"

—THE WASHINGTON POST

## When words ring hollow

Despite justified public outrage, not much has changed on the ground between Delhi 2012 and R G Kar rape and murder

ZERO HOUR  
BY DEREK O'BRIEN

TWO DAYS AFTER the Delhi gangrape, Parliament debated the "demand for severe punishment against perpetrators of gangrape of a young woman on 16 December, 2012 in the capital". Thirty-seven Members of Parliament, including this columnist, spoke in both Houses. In the last fortnight, as we witnessed the entirely understandable public outrage, one reflection on transcripts from some of those speeches. Here are a few excerpts from what, sadly, turned out to be hollow words.

M Venkatesh Naidu (BJP): "Every 18 hours, there is a rape, and every 14 hours, there is an atrocity committed against a woman. There are around 10,000 cases of atrocities on women pending in various courts in Delhi... what is required is the political will to deal with such situations and sending a strong message to perpetrators of this sort of heinous crimes that they will not be spared; they will be taken to task."

Jaya Bachchan (SP): "Everybody will forget what is going to happen to her, but she will remember for the rest of her life. It will be a scar. It is a terrible mental torture more than physical. How are you going to repay for this? Every day, women are getting raped by their fathers, their brothers, their cousins, their uncles. I personally feel very, very ashamed that I am sitting in this House and I am helpless and I am not being able to do anything."

Renuka Chowdhury (INC): "Collectively, it is a social failure. It is not enough for us to treat this as yet another statistic and that tomorrow things will finish and thereafter another incident will happen like this."

Javed Akhtar (Nominated): "We all need to think about this issue at two levels, at the level of the administration and at the level of society. We need to punish the accused with the strictest punishments. However, I don't agree that it should be death by hanging, not that I have any sympathy with the rapists, but death sentence is just a shadow that does not solve the problem."

Mayawati (BSP): "Action taken against the perpetrators must set an example for everyone so that crimes like these do not take place in the future. The actions taken by the government against the perpetrators must be publicised so that the people

who get involved in these kinds of heinous acts do not even think of committing such acts. There needs to be a change in the laws and the laws relating to crimes against women must be made stricter."

Truchi Siva (DMK): "I hope the outcomes of this discussion would send the message across this country that such heinous crimes would not happen again in this country. It means, your stringent action should send such a message across the country that any person involved in such a crime will be severely dealt with."

D Raja (CP): "Our women are not safe. Our children are not safe. It should be a collective social responsibility to protect our women and children. We should collectively think about how to address this menace."

T N Seema (CPIM): "We want strict action, we want immediate action and we want assurance. Last test cases should be set up in all districts. Young boys should be educated in school itself to treat women as equal citizens."

Sushma Swaraj, in Lok Sabha (BJP): "Madam Speaker, you used to describe the incident – 'heinous'. There cannot be a more appropriate description of the incident. I have stated multiple times that people who commit crimes like these must be hanged. After the incident, the victim is neither living nor dead, even if she survives, she will spend the rest of her life in vegetative state. Do the accused not deserve death by hanging?"

And here is what your columnist said (speaking on behalf of ATIC): "I stand here nervous and scared as the father of a 17-year-old daughter living in India. Whenever there is a rape we think that it is a woman's issue. We often want to make it a woman's only issue. I strongly believe it is much beyond being just a woman's issue. In fact, it is actually a male issue. This is about men. And I say this as a man. We men sometimes stop behaving like human beings and start acting like animals. It is time we now seriously took up this issue of preventing rape. Prevention. We first need to create effective social communication. We start with this and then spread this message through different media."

It's 2024. Twelve years, a more bestial, heinous crimes. This August we failed a young doctor in Kolkata. We failed a tribal woman in Raigarh. We failed a 15-year-old in Jodhpur, a 7-year-old in Delhi, two 4-year-olds in Badapur. Only speeches in Parliament are not enough. Let's pledge to turn words into action. Swiftly.

The writer is MP and leader, All India Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party (Rajya Sabha). Additional request by Ayashman Dey

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### WORKING TOGETHER

THIS REFERS TO the article 'A new governance matrix' (IE, August 29). Now leading a coalition government, Narendra Modi is in uncharted territory. Despite reduced numbers in Lok Sabha, he has not adjusted his excessive confidence when the need is to be more resilient and consultative with the coalition partners before making decisions. This has made him backtrack on many recent actions like lateral recruitment in the IAS. The BJP has been deserted by Muslims en masse. His "secular" welfare schemes and positions on communal violence have made Modi exclusively dependent on the majority for power. Him and his government must learn to work with allies.

Y G Chouksey, Pune

THIS REFERS TO the article 'A new governance matrix' (IE, August 29). An unanticipated electoral setback in the last elections with diminished strength in the Lok Sabha has compelled the BJP to be somewhat accommodative, unlike the first two terms when overweening pride was the hallmark of its leaders. It is now wary of taking decisions that may harm its prospects at the hustings. Consequently, new initiatives and ideas are being temporarily kept on the backburner. The sheen might have been worn off, but the saffron party is still set to let go of its hard Hindutva image.

Vijal Pant, Hapur

### NOT ABOUT RELIGION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The CM for some' (IE, August 29). Assam's Chief Minister left no stone unturned to communalise a crime and blamed the entire Muslim community in the district. He has sought to score political points, claiming that the incident is collateral damage caused by Congress's win from the Nagon constituency. He is diverting the real issue of women's safety in Assam to Delhi's failure in maintaining the law and order. It's wrong to communalise such cases. As the CM, it is incumbent on him to ensure that the rapists are identified and punished irrespective of their religious identity.

S S Paul, Nadia

Lieutenant-General has failed the aam admi by punishing citizens for voting for the "wrong party". The L-G leaves no stone unturned to prove the duly elected Delhi government is incompetent, and its ministers lack the willpower to serve its residents. His actions, which he has been duped by the BJP dispensation at the Centre to discredit the AAP government. The BJP seems to have forgotten that it was campaigning for full statehood for Delhi. It changed its tune when it found the nascent AAP coming to power. Then it quickly changed its tune, choosing to use power through undemocratic means. To cripple the government of Delhi is an affront to its voters. The undue interference of the L-G, who is not responsible to the people, in the functioning of administration, calls for a serious debate to abolish his office and the governor's as well.

SH Quadri, Bikaner

### NOT ABOUT RELIGION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The CM for some' (IE, August 29). Assam's Chief Minister left no stone unturned to communalise a crime and blamed the entire Muslim community in the district. He has sought to score political points, claiming that the incident is collateral damage caused by Congress's win from the Nagon constituency. He is diverting the real issue of women's safety in Assam to Delhi's failure in maintaining the law and order. It's wrong to communalise such cases. As the CM, it is incumbent on him to ensure that the rapists are identified and punished irrespective of their religious identity.

S S Paul, Nadia



# 12 THE EDITORIAL PAGE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## COURT'S NEXT STEP

On bail, SC has strengthened procedural safeguards.  
Now, it must review its own 2022 ruling

WHILE GRANTING BAIL to an accused in a money laundering case, Prem Prakash vs Enforcement Directorate, the Supreme Court has underlined that the legal principle "jail is the exception, bail is the rule" will apply even in cases registered under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). The underlining of this established principle is welcome — it recognises that prolonged pre-trial incarceration is a punishment in itself. The verdict by two judges who are in line to be Chief Justice of India is a significant signal that on bail, the thinking of the apex court has been shifting for some time now. That shift is welcome — and overdue. Two years ago, in the consequential *Vijay Madanlal Chaudhary v Union of India* ruling, the SC had upheld the stringent provisions of the PMLA. That ruling came amidst disquiet caused by a surge in the Centre's use of the Enforcement Directorate against political opponents — the court of last resort seemed to brush aside the fears of misuse. The *Vijay Madanlal Chaudhary* ruling is still the law of the land. However, since then, several small but significant rulings by the Court have taken the sting out of the verdict.

In October 2023, a bench of Justices A S Bopanna and P V Sanjay Kumar held that informing the grounds on which a person is arrested in writing "would be necessary, henceforth" for the ED. The court directed that a copy be furnished to the arrested person, without exception, as a matter of course. This was a departure from the *Vijay Madanlal* ruling, which had said that the sharing of the ECIR with the accused, akin to an FIR for the ED, was not mandatory. Again, in July, while granting bail to Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in the excise policy case, the SC raised crucial questions over the ED's vast powers to make arrests. Even as it referred the case to a larger bench, the Court held that the ED official's "reasons to believe" that a person is "guilty of the offence" in order to make an arrest must also be given in writing to the accused. A written record allows the accused to challenge an illegal arrest in court. These safeguards are especially crucial since the law imposes a high bar for granting bail.

On bail, too, the Court has, in recent cases, side-stepped a narrow reading of the law. In *granting bail to Manish Sisodia*, it said that delay in trial had to be read into the bail law, and that the law can be "relaxed" if the accused has undergone a long period of incarceration. In another case in May, *Ajay Peter Kerkar v Directorate of Enforcement*, the SC extended the principle that a person who has spent half of the maximum sentence as an undertrial shall be released on bail, even in money laundering offences. This was, again, a significant step forward from the 2022 ruling where the court allowed the government's argument that "it cannot be said that presumption of innocence is a constitutional guarantee". While these interventions strengthen the procedural safeguards for an accused, the Court still needs to comprehensively revisit the 2022 ruling. The Supreme Court itself has made a case for reviewing its judgment — it must do so soon.

## THE CM'S DUTY

Mamata Banerjee needs to step up to challenge after R G Kar incident. Playing victim and conspiracy theorist won't do

A DISTINGUISHING FEATURE of a competent administrator is often her ability to pull back from the brink. Instead, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's assertion on Wednesday — that "if a fire starts in Bengal, Assam will not be spared, Bihar will not be spared, it will not stop at Manipur, or Odisha, it will also reach Delhi" — is rash and reeks of desperation. The R G Kar rape and murder case is a litmus test for the Trinamool Congress (TMC) government in the state. But by playing victim and conspiracy theorist, by turns, it is not stepping up to the challenge.

Following criticism of her comments, Banerjee has said that the allegations against her are a "malicious disinformation campaign", that she stands firmly in support of the doctors' movement demanding justice for their murdered colleague and safe working conditions for all women. Her statements were against the BJP trying to cash in on the situation, she says. But as a woman and a leader who claims to engage and enable the aspirations of women voters in the state, the CM must realise this is not a time for remarks that could be seen as inflammatory, or whataboutery. There can be no denying that Banerjee's government fumbled in handling the crisis in its early days. From the failure to inform the doctor's family about her death to the registration of a case of "unnatural death" to the immediate appointment of R G Kar's principal to another prestigious Kolkata hospital after his resignation, and the vandalism at the hospital amid the Kolkata Police's floundering, there have been many instances of the administration failing in its responsibilities to take the justice process forward and to keep the calm.

In 2012, a year after Banerjee came to power, the Park Street rape incident was a flash-point. Then, her initial dismissal of the incident as an attempt to discredit the West Bengal government had backfired. In the intervening years, the CM has worked towards building a strong electoral and political base, in the 18th Lok Sabha, the TMC boasts of the highest proportion of women in Parliament. Now, the CM has asked for speedy disposal of cases of sexual harassment and stricter punishment, including death penalty. But the solution does not lie in harsher laws and punishments — it needs more painstaking and comprehensive reforms. For the CM to see that the "porbitoran" her government promotes starts closer home, she must resist the temptation to give in to the finger pointing and the self-serving outrage.

## RIGHT TO DISCONNECT

New Australian law helps separate work hours from leisure and avoid burnout. It allows for greater creativity

IF ONE WERE TO go by 21st century work culture, the most hotly-contested resource in the world is neither gold nor oil nor water — it is the ever-dwindling leisure time of the average worker. While employers try to move into the shrinking real estate of weekends and off-hours, some governments are acting in the interest of the beleaguered workers' work-life balance. The latest is Australia where, just this week, a "right to disconnect" law came into effect. Barring a few exceptions, such as genuine emergencies, employers will no longer be allowed to penalise workers who refuse to respond to work calls and texts when they are out of the office.

The arguments in favour of such laws — as enacted not only by Australia, but also France, Italy and Belgium — emerge from the larger leisure rights movement. They have even found some resonance in India — Member of Parliament Supriya Sule drafted a Private Member's Bill on the right to disconnect in 2018. While that Bill ultimately languished, it advanced the same argument as legislation elsewhere has: Even as technology has made it possible for newer, more liberating forms of work, like remote and hybrid work, to emerge, it has also allowed the dismantling of the walls that, until the invention of the smartphone, stood between work and leisure. The result is that burnout rates have been steadily rising, affecting not only employee well-being, but also, ultimately, company bottom lines.

Because the truth about leisure is this: A bit of rest and diversion not only makes workers more productive and creative, but also, more motivated. Consider what Iceland learnt from nationwide trials from 2015 to 2019, when work hours were limited without reducing pay. Not only did workers experience much less stress and burnout, their productivity remained unaffected or even improved. Australia has joined the ranks of enlightened countries in this regard. It's about time the rest of the world caught up.

# If you ask wrong questions



ANIMA ANJURI, HARSHDA BARGAL, VIVEK DIVAN, REONIA MATHEW

...you will get the wrong answers. This is what is happening in Kolkata's R G Kar Hospital case

IT HAS BEEN stunning to witness how a case of horrific sexual violence — and that is what the R G Kar hospital atrocity is — has been cast as an issue of healthcare workers' safety. Even in the hallowed portals of the Supreme Court. Let us be clear — this is a case of yet another woman being brutalised in what has seemingly become a norm in India. That it has happened in a hospital gives it another layer of egregiousness, if that were even possible, because certain locales are meant to be shelters for all. So, while it is a workplace safety issue due to the crime's location, this is essentially a case of sexual violence. Had it happened in a school, corporate office or government ministry, this would still be a case of sexual violence at its core, and not about the security of teachers, executives or government functionaries.

Let us also recall that violence often comes from within. In the last six months alone, women (a dental student, a nurse and a doctor) were at the receiving end of assault, rape and molestation in Rohtak, Muradabad and Rishikesh respectively. This is surely the case in other professions too, and as lawyers who write this, we must unsparingly look at our own ecosystem. In the R G Kar atrocity, it is still far from clear that the perpetrator was a patient, visitor, or an "outsider".

This incident should be a wake-up call to ensure that all workplaces are secure for all women, and that the culture of patriarchy within which perpetrators carry out violence with such impunity is radically altered. Not just in city hospitals but in *khaps*, within homes, in colleges, or while travelling by public transport. Particularly in relation to healthcare settings, this means protection for women who are not just doctors but also nurses, receptionists, janitorial staff or patients.

Demands from the protests have been misguided for various reasons. For one, by seeking the death penalty for perpetrators of sexual violence in healthcare settings, they fail to account for whether such measures will address systemic issues. They have also skewed the focus away from the main issue of sexual violence and the underlying systemic injustice that allows vicious crimes against women, towards safety of healthcare workers.

While it has been conveniently conflated by the Indian Medical Association and other vested interests, the issue of violence against healthcare workers is an entirely different one. It cannot be said enough — the brutalised per-

son was not targeted because she was a doctor; it was because she was a woman.

This is not to say that violence against healthcare workers can ever be condoned. This community's committed service in government hospitals during Covid-19 should never be forgotten. Even when the state went silent during the Delta phase, this community did all it could to help. A vivid image of that time is one of our more deplorable human traits — the prejudice we demonstrated against the frontline responders who returned to their homes in building societies, where they were threatened and shunned.

Demands have been made to legislate a central criminal law to prevent and deter violence against healthcare workers. They have, fortunately, been rejected by the Union government — so far. After all, the criminal law, as it is, is sufficient to cover such instances. By demanding a new law for healthcare worker protection, we overlook poor implementation of existing legal frameworks and fail to seek institutional accountability.

Not introducing new legislation does not absolve the responsibility of private and government healthcare to take measures to ensure the safety of frontline workers like ASHAs and ANMs and those in institutions like nurses and doctors. These measures must also address the sexual and gender-based violence that women healthcare workers face. Yet, demands of the IMA, such as a panopticon of airport-like security standards, including surveillance towers, armed guards and sniffer dogs, are hardly conducive to a wholesome healthcare experience. Such reactions also suggest that there are larger questions at play, which need to be answered.

We live in times where healthcare institutions are increasingly unfeeling and intimidating, mammoth corporate mazes where the user is disempowered. Their motives are so profit-centric that one enters them with cynicism, but also abject need. Resembling the stereotypical government department, when something is confusing or goes wrong it becomes almost impossible to articulate grievance, find a remedy, or pin accountability. We also live in a time where the public health system has received no attention from the state, weakening what should be the most accessible architecture to decrepitude.

In such times, the effort of all — the healthcare community, public health experts, policy-

makers, governments, affected communities — should be to find solutions that make healthcare an experience that is informed, competent, empathetic, affordable, resilient, transparent, hygienic, efficient. But when attempts to legislate the right to health are compromised due to the lobbying of doctors' associations, as in Rajasthan recently, the message sent is one of hostility. The same can be said about the resistance to implementing the Clinical Establishments Act. When medical education continues to be devoid of any substantial focus on ethical practice, or linked to a larger understanding of public health and public good, values-based medicine will remain a pipe dream.

In a context such as this, the vortex we will be swallowed in is one where patients and their families are not communicated with, corporatisation and privatisation become the dominant impersonal and avaricious character of healthcare and health insurance, and the disempowered become even more so, lashing out the only means they have left.

Much needs to be done to address the insidious nature of sexual violence. To stem that rot, an honest reckoning must take place: How we raise boys, the token and surface adulation we give women, our inability to make accountable the misogyny in our institutions, and the hypocrisy with which we approach sex and gender education.

Much also needs to be done to ensure that the healthcare system is sensitive to the needs of its users. Government budgeting to ensure a doubling of investment in healthcare is an essential start. It will lead to improved infrastructure at primary health and other levels, and more competent, sensitive and well-trained personnel. Along with this is the need for better accountability of health systems, which can only be achieved through robust monitoring, and making these systems participatory and transparent sites of engagement, feedback and improvement through community involvement and oversight.

At the heart of all of this must lie the unbridled authority to question authority and make it accountable, to feel safe in complaining of violations, and to dissent against a stagnant system.

The writers are at the Centre for Health Equity, Law & Policy, ILS Pune

## PEACEMAKER'S PREDICAMENT

Delhi must make a realistic assessment of what Ukraine and its allies want of it



VIVEK KATJU

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi's visit to Kyiv is best captured in the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the peacemakers: For they will be called the children of God" (Matthew 5:9). Modi has constantly advocated for diplomacy to end Russia's Ukraine war. He told Russian President Vladimir Putin in a meeting in Uzbekistan, in September 2022, that this was not an era of war. This was an unequivocal, though indirect, disavowal of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and a desire to uphold international law. It required courage to say this because Russia is important for India's interests.

The dichotomy between Modi's desire for peace and justice in Ukraine and the compulsions of India's deep interests in Russia has been apparent since the beginning of the invasion. These constraints can once again be seen in the Kyiv India-Ukraine Joint Statement.

The Joint Statement's paragraph 6 notes that both leaders "reiterated their readiness for further cooperation in upholding principles of international law, including the UN Charter, such as respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty of states. They agreed on the desirability of closer bilateral dialogue...". Paragraph 7 also reinforces India's commitment to international law. These positions stress the desire for justice and lasting peace.

Paragraph 11 states "Prime Minister Modi

reiterated the need for sincere and practical engagement between all stakeholders to develop innovative solutions that will have broad acceptability...".

Paragraph 11 also indicates India's willingness to get involved in a search for peace in Ukraine. It is here that the Indian foreign policy establishment needs to make a realistic assessment of what Ukraine and its Western partners want of India. This was clear prior to the Kyiv visit but it has been reinforced by its unhappy result. At least Ukraine wants India to press Russia to restore the status quo ante and stop buying Russian oil. It does not want India's mediation. The West wants likewise.

There is a historical parallel in what the West wants of India in the Ukraine context to what it wanted India to do in the mid-1980s when the Russians were in Afghanistan. India was deeply unhappy with the Russian action but like now, then too, it did not publicly criticise Russia. By the mid-1980s as India's ties warmed up with the US and it became clear that Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev wanted to withdraw from Afghanistan, the US urged Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to press Gorbachev to hold firm. However, when India wanted a say in Afghanistan post the Soviet withdrawal, the US told it to back off.

The Ukraine war has impacted the Global South adversely and has international geo-

political implications. However, at its core, it is a European war. The present era is fundamentally different from that of the Cold War and India too has fundamentally changed economically and in terms of power projection. However, the Western powers and Ukraine do not want a meaningful Indian intervention. This is reinforced by Zelenskyy's public observations after Modi left Kyiv. On the Ukraine issue, the US and its allies on the one side and China and Russia on the other have locked horns. Ultimately it is they that have to unlock them. They do not see a role for other powers, including India, in this process.

Indian-Ukrainian relations got off to a bad start. It is now perhaps forgotten that Ukraine supplied Pakistan over 300 T 80 battle tanks over India's strenuous objections. Ukraine was also one of the few countries to have used the word "condemned" for India's nuclear tests of 1998. Naturally, this cast a long shadow over the relationship. It can be argued that these should not have been allowed to have a long term negative impact on bilateral ties but they did. Besides, India's response to Russia's Crimea occupation also inhibited the Ukrainians to improve relations.

Thus, Modi's quest as a peacemaker may be "blessed" but is it, in reality, in vain?

The writer is a former diplomat

## AUGUST 30, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### TWO ABANDON NTR

THE MAJORITY GROUP in the Telugu Desam led by former chief minister N T Rama Rao suffered a severe jolt when two of its principal supporters — the Speaker, T Satyanarayana and Deputy Speaker A Bhim Reddy — joined the cabinet of Chief Minister N Bhaskara Rao. Shankar Dayal Sharma was sworn in as the 13th Governor of Andhra Pradesh at the Raj Bhavan.

### CHARAN SINGH'S PARTY

TWO SEPARATE GROUPS of Janata Party dissidents, led by Raj Narain and Subramaniam

Swamy respectively, and the Lok Dal decided to forge a new political party, the name and constitution of which was to be decided later. The new party will be led by Charan Singh, who will retain the Lok Dal flag and symbol. An eight-member committee has been set up to assist Charan Singh in finalising the details.

### GOVERNOR-NTR TALKS

THE NEW ANDHRA Pradesh Governor, S D Sharma, is likely to invite Charan Singh for discussions on the current political situation in the state. Sharma is expected to talk over the telephone with Rama Rao, who is in Nellore

as part of his statewide tour to mobilise public support for his cause.

### NEW LABOUR ACT

WORKERS WILL BE entitled to 100 per cent wages where a labour court or tribunal reinstates him, and the employer prefers proceeding against the award in higher courts. This is one of the provisions of the Industrial Disputes Amendment Act, 1982, which has come into force with immediate effect. According to the Act, during the pendency of the period of such proceedings, full wages last drawn, including maintenance allowance as admissible, will be paid to the workers.



# THE ASIAN AGE

30 AUGUST 2024

## President's powerful plea to treat women as equals

It is not very usual for the Presidents to comment on internal developments but the series of dastardly and fatal attacks on women has President Droupadi Murmu break her silence and demand justice for the victims, and respect for women. The President used the strongest possible words in saying enough is enough, not just to condemn the crimes against women but also to ask the Indian society to shed its conventional notion of women as "less powerful, less capable, less intelligent" and treat them as equals instead.

The President was legitimately "dismayed and horrified" by the recent events, including the rape and brutal murder of a post-graduate resident doctor in a Kolkata medical college and hospital. True, there was national outrage at the heinous crime but that was not enough to deter the criminals and rapists. "Even as students, doctors and citizens were protesting in Kolkata, criminals remained on the prowl elsewhere. The victims include even kindergarten girls," the President said, spotlighting a reality that Indian women face before the whole world. The immediate and specific references may have been to the rape of kindergarten children in Thane of Maharashtra or that of a teenager in Assam but her anguish had a wider context, too, considering the fact that a woman is raped in India every 16 minutes. As per the National Crime Record Bureau, more than 31,000 rapes were reported across in India in 2022.

**While the recent crimes provided an immediate context for her speech, the real message was to force Indian society to shed its mindset of treating women as secondary citizens**

The girl's question speaks to the failure of the Indian state to safeguard one half of its population from the parasites of being assaulted. In fact, the number of rapes reported in 2012 when Nirbhaya was attacked was around 25,000; but today that has increased by about 30 per cent, despite amendments to the law and providing for harsher punishment.

This brings one to the core of the President's address: While the recent horrendous crimes provided an immediate background for her to speak out, the real message was to force Indian society to shed its mindset of treating women as secondary citizens. To "those who share such views then go further and see the female as an object" she would say "we owe it to our daughters to remove the hurdles from their path of winning the freedom from fear."

In a way reminiscent of Martin Luther King Jr warning the American people about returning to "business as usual" after denying civil rights to the black people, the President reminded the nation that "as social protests peter out, these incidents got buried into a deep and inaccessible recess of social memory, to be recalled only when another heinous crime takes place". This is not done, and the fear of the girl child being assaulted one day must be eradicated, the republic's first citizen told her fellow citizens in the simplest words that they could understand. It's a wakeup call all must hear.

## Don't mess with social media

What can governments do about social media platforms? Facing the reality that the loosely regulated platforms of the World Wide Web that have hundreds of millions of followers are here to stay, there is little states can do to curb their popularity though governments have been known to act against those who use the platforms for nefarious purposes.

Amid a developing scenario in which both free-speech advocates and authoritarian governments are protesting the treatment being meted out to the CEO of Telegram who is facing the rigour of the law in France, the Uttar Pradesh government has taken an unusual stand to use the social media for boosting its popularity by paying social media influencers princely sums per month to promote its schemes, its ideas and its functioning.

At the same time, UP has threatened to take legal action against anti-national posts. Of course, they are not saying they will jail all critics, which is something that all state governments, irrespective of the alliance they belong to — NDA or INDIA — do. Tamil Nadu has even used the Goondas Act to jail one pesky critic while West Bengal and Karnataka act freely against critics of their political bosses.

There is a huge ambivalence to how the ubiquitous social media of the modern age is viewed. UP is displaying an ambition to play the spin master by paying for favourable posts. Other governments routinely advocate the free speech aspect of social media except when their leaders are targeted, which is when they drop all pretence of upholding democracy's right to free speech and act against critics, even jail them.

Of course, it is curious that states should pay individuals for singing their praises even if no one has ever objected to their regularly advertising welfare schemes in the media, both print and electronic. Where is most anxiety being caused is in bringing sweeping provisions to punish those who may post anti-national stuff. Who is to judge what is anti-national or seditious?

The less governments have to do with social media the better, save in finding ways to control the illegalities that take place through them. Tinkering with these double-edged swords is akin to inviting trouble. For instance, Telegram is banned in many countries like Iran but is still freely used there. Governments can hardly control social media and communication apps.

### THE ASIAN AGE

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Subhani

WE HAVE SAVED  
AND PRESERVED THE LAKE...  
IT IS ON THE TERRACE



## Pitfalls of 'quick results' instead of deep reforms



Sanjeev Ahluwalia

The recent, hastily terminated attempt to induce 45 specialists as senior and mid-level civil servants on contract and the earlier contractual reform legislation, hurriedly enacted without much debate in 2020 and then withdrawn a year later, both point to three generic weak spots in the government's reform strategy.

First, scoring a quick win for the reforms report card overrode the need to ensure social equity. Second, hasty formulation, without deep buy-in from key stakeholders — respectively, the Public Service Commission (UPSC), mandated by Article 320 of the Constitution to manage Union government recruitment, and the Ministry of Agriculture, which was also to induct technocrats, like R.V. Sahi, ex-CEO of HSES, as secretary, power, in 2002, during the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government. His private sector expertise was expected to be the key to unlocking power sector reforms.

Third, shrinking opportunities for the bureaucracy, across ministries, to influence decision-making, dried up ground-up feedback. Both proposals had merits. Enhancing skills within bureaucracy rather than hiring expensive, short-term consultants, to do the bureaucracy's core tasks and unleashing market forces in agriculture to enhance workforce productivity, are worthy objectives.

Ironically, the case for lateral entry in civil services was decided way back in 1952 when the All-India Services were formalised. The Indian Administrative Service, Indian Police Service and the Indian Forest Service and the Indian Foreign Service all induct bright youngsters, train them to be leaders and inject them into the wider base of civil servants in each state government and Union ministries, at a high level, generally eight service years ahead of other junior cadres, who represent the UPSC inductees as "lateral" entrants.

Today, "lateral entry" refers to recruitment outside the existing government cadres. A mechanism devised for highly specialised positions, which can't be filled by deputation from any existing cadre but derided by pro-reservation activists for pre-reservation constitutional provisions for job reservations. Consider the case of the 20 officers strong Indian Economic Service (IES), a specialised Union government cadre since 1967. But the topmost position of the chief economic adviser has never been occupied by anyone from it. Instead, it is always filled laterally. It helped that the credentials of those selected were impeccable. Dr Manmohan Singh being one such, who went on to become Prime Minister of India — a feat no other civil servant has ever equalled. This mechanism was also used to induct technocrats, like R.V. Sahi, ex-CEO of HSES, as secretary, power, in 2002, during the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government. His private sector expertise was expected to be the key to unlocking power sector reforms.

Still now, administrative smartness dictated limiting "lateral entry" to a few unique positions filled one at a time. This lulled the ire of pro-reservation activists at undermining of the constitutional provision (Article 16) for equal opportunity in employment (job reservations) for SC/ST/OBC, the main difference between previous successful lateral appointments and the recent abortive attempt is in using it for bulk, lateral hiring. This exposed the Narendra Modi administration to the potential threat of a snowballing, pro- and anti-job reservation agitation, on the scale unleashed by Prime Minister V.P. Singh's June 1990 decision to extend reservations to former Backward Castes.

Bulk lateral entry is an efficient way to quickly replace burgeoning, expensive, short-term, private consultants with in-house expertise. Not applying the reservation principle to such appointments does

more harm than good, because it vilifies what could in fact be the way government for job reservations. Conversely, in the Group A cadres, "zombie" positions (not justified by workload) exist, created to safeguard "time-bound" promotions for entire batches.

Also consider that for the all-India services and the Central services, job reservations at a higher age after even though Article 16 (4A) of the Constitution does not bar reservations in promotions. One of the consequences of social and economic backwardness is that candidates join the government at a higher age after repeated attempts at cracking the UPSC exam. Such officers also retire earlier, potentially thinning diversity (SC, ST, OBC representation) at the top. It is clear that the need for specialised lateral entry arises primarily from the inadequacies of a generalised cadre like the IAS and the Provincial Civil Services which respectively dominate the Union and state civil services.

Radical and direct HR reform would modify the existing cadre to grave employment policy. Instead, continuous, open market competition with reservation quotas for all eligible positions could be the norm. Upward career progression would be by competing for higher level positions rather than today's non-transparent, administered promotion policies. A root and branch overhaul could redefine staff functions and allocation in line with future skills requirements and the opportunities for digitisation of government procedures. The opportunities for working in the gov-

**Radical and direct HR reform would modify the existing cadre to grave employment policy. Instead, continuous, open market competition with reservation quotas for all eligible positions could be the norm.**

ernment would transform from being a "make or buy" beginning of career choice to a lifelong opportunity depending on meeting the skill requirements for each position.

This would also end the pervasive tuition services industry built around the UPSC examination, trapping many youngsters into desperately trying for a government job before they hit the age limit.

Close. The "Agniveer" scheme has started mass contractualisation of government employment at the jawan level in the armed forces. The target is 0.15 million appointments of jawans by 2028. About 43,000 candidates are selected annually (mostly in the Army) for four years of service. One-fourth will be permanently absorbed into the defence forces. The rest will exit with a package of ₹12 million each, skill development diplomas and re-employment in the Central paramilitary forces or in the private sector. For the government, this mechanism keeps the field forces young, whilst remaining cost-light.

The political objections to changes in the appointment policy arise from the apprehension that the ruling party is building a cadre of government servants personally loyal to it. To the extent that discretion prevails in recruitment, this is an ever-present risk, not restricted only to the present government.

The answer is deep institutionalisation of the recruitment process to end discretionary appointments. Close oversight by Parliament over appointments, relying on the performance audits reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General (India's supreme audit body) is one safeguard. Elevating the UPSC from being just an advisory body to assuming direct responsibility for government appointments could be another.

The top civil service (IAS) is only harming itself by resisting new practices for efficient human resources marrying competitiveness with social justice. It can either lead the change, and elitism and enhances efficiency, or decline into obscurity.

The writer is a former IAS officer, and a governance and economic regulation expert

## LETTERS SMART CITIES

It is rather surprising that Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw has made the announcement of 12 new smart cities. In the past it was the PM who did the honours. So is there something cooking? Nobody can object to the principle of smart industrial cities. But this government is great at making attention grabbing headlines, yet when it comes to actual implementation on the ground, it is quite another story. Nearly 10 years have passed since smart city projects were announced, but no one knows their current status.

Anthony Henriques  
Mumbai

## GIRLS DO BETTER

THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION'S review of the 10th and 12th Board examinations focuses on the golden stories of accomplishment authored by girls in schools. This is the second straight year that the ministry of education has presented a report assessing the results of the country's 10 school boards. The fact that there are more boys in private schools than girls in government schools across the country is a stark example of the paradox that girls must endure in society and within their families. And, too, science remains the most popular stream. However, when it comes to passing percentages, girls outperform boys in both the arts and science.

Amrapali Roy  
Jamshedpur

## KUDOS, PM & EAM

THE PRIME MINISTER'S involvement in negotiating peace in the Ukraine war is a matter of pride for us as Indians. Even the United States is expecting him to intervene in this vexed matter. Much of the background work for it has indeed been done by the external affairs ministry under the leadership of S. Jaishankar who has behind him 38 years of experience in diplomatic affairs which include his stint in both the US and Russia. He has served behind the PM in important tasks such as these. Kudos to Mr Narendra Modi for having chosen the right man for the job (in preference to seasoned politicians) who has chosen to serve the government over a plum private sector job with handsome compensation and perks.

Gopalswamy J.  
Chennai

The writer is a former IAS officer, and a governance and economic regulation expert

that were still engaged with Afghanistan to some degree. Interestingly, though, an aid worker anonymously contributed an article to *The Guardian* this month, arguing that aid must keep flowing so that she and her colleagues can keep aiding women who are desperately in need of assistance amid an epidemic of mental health challenges.

Annulahi broadly well-intentioned but ill-designed reforms in the early 20th century faced a backlash in Khost in 1924, and steady rural resistance that led to his abdication and exile five years later. Subsequent attempts at transcending the status quo, from the 'Saur revolution' in 1978 to the misguided Soviet and American occupations, failed to shift the dial — with Pakistan playing a retrograde role, in alliance with the US in the 1960s and later, on the strength of its own aspirations to "strategic depth".

The consequences cannot be disputed. Afghan women bear the brunt of the retrogressive revival. Annulahi, but men unaligned with the Taliban are not spared either. Pakistan, meanwhile, has been reaping the whirlwind for many years, yet there could be worse to come.

— By arrangement with Dawn

## As Taliban dials up anti-women terror, fingers pointing at Pak

Mahir Ali

The inspired but abortive effort a century ago by a king and his feminist queen to thrust Afghanistan into modernity offers a stark contrast with the proclivities of that nation's present rulers, whose medieval inclinations are crudely reflected in last week's codification of an ostensibly faith-based but effectively barbaric "moral code". Amir Amanullah — whose ascent to the Kabul throne in 1919 was followed by strategic success in the third Anglo-Afghan war (the Rawalpindi peace treaty in August that year removed British influence over the conduct of Afghanistan's foreign affairs, and established the Durand Line) — and Queen Soraya embarked on a reform programme that focused, among other things, on education (the literacy rate was about two per cent at the time), not least for girls, land reform, lifting the veil, and shaving of beards.

The Taliban last week formalised the denial of education to girls, reinforcing the invisibility of women, who can neither be seen nor heard (their voices apparently trigger irresistible impulses among the Taliban fraternity) without attracting penalties — and specifying the size of beards that men are obliged to sport. With the partial exception of Iran, given its absurd and

occasionally lethal obsession with the nitty-gritty of hijabs, hardly any other Muslim nation goes to the kind of lengths that the Taliban aspire to.

That, too, doesn't escape their notice. Spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid lately advised fellow components of the ummah to "take inspiration" from the Taliban's "Sharia-based system". Persuaded that the Taliban had been backed by Pakistan. After all, the Taliban in their original incarnation were spawned some 30 years ago by a grotesque ménage-a-trois emerging from Saudi-funded, disapproving indifference along Pakistan's north-western periphery some 30 years ago, and their initial conquest of an Afghanistan further torn apart following the Soviet withdrawal by the internecine tussles for power among the mujahideen — who had chief been backed by the same three nations — was aided and abetted by what are nowadays euphemistically referred to as "the agencies" and guided to some extent by the fatalist, former ISI chief Javed Gen. Gul.

Small wonder, then, that many Afghan exiles blame Pakistan for the resurgence and endless coming of the Taliban. But even supporters of the present dispensation are ill-disposed towards their neighbour. A *New York Times* report about

the celebrations marking the third anniversary of the 2021 takeover quoted a young man keen to continue the jihad as saying, "I want to go to Palestine," but he is contradicted by an even younger Taliban who proclaims: "No, it's Pakistan's turn. Our first enemy is Pakistan..."

The blowback has, of course, already been occurring for a couple of decades — and direct Taliban intervention might not be required if the likes of extremists in Pakistan have their way.

Shock and horror, rather than surprise, have been common reactions to Afghanistan's newly codified morality laws, which give vast leeway in terms of implementation to the "ministry for the propagation of virtue and prevention of vice". Who, though, would dare to do so far as the supreme leader of the Taliban, Hibatullah Akhundzada, in proclaiming earlier this year, "You may call it a violation of women's rights when we publicly stone or flog them for committing adultery... [but] you must not call it a violation of women's rights when we publicly stone or flog them for committing adultery... [but] you must not call it a violation of women's rights when we publicly stone or flog them for committing adultery..."

There's no mention, of course, of the male offenders. Likewise, the latest injunctions against singing, reciting or speaking loudly in public is restricted to women. The sheer obscenity of such rules has inevitably ruled the various agencies



## Over to AMCs

AMFI's norms place onus on funds to detect fraud

In a rare instance of asking the mutual fund industry to self-regulate, the Securities Exchange Board of India (SEBI) had asked Association of Mutual Funds of India (AMFI) to formulate an institutional mechanism for fund houses to police their employees for market abuse. AMFI has now come up with a three-tier mechanism through which Asset Management Companies (AMCs) can detect and prevent fraudulent practices such as front-running, insider trading and leakage of price sensitive information.



Under this, AMCs will be required to monitor the impact of trades on prices and trading volumes of stocks and track these metrics in the run-up to their trades. They will need to regularly scan recorded communication and CCTV footage. Trading disclosures from key employees, their immediate relatives and empanelled brokers will also be reviewed for suspicious patterns. Any red-flagged transactions from these exercises are to be shared with the regulator. This mechanism will operate in addition to SEBI's existing regulations on market abuse. SEBI has had elaborate regulations in place to prevent front-running, insider trading and other forms of fraud by mutual fund employees for a few years now. These rules restrict access to dealing rooms, require CCTV monitoring of investment activity and ban all communication devices in the dealing room, while requiring mandatory recordings of phone conversations by fund managers and dealers during trading hours. Key personnel of mutual funds are required to declare all personal trades to the compliance officer. But despite all this, cases of front-running and insider trading in mutual funds have kept cropping up, including one just last year where a dealer in Axis Mutual Fund was found to have used a large network of broking contacts to front-run the fund's trades for an extended period. In fact, most cases of front-running taken up by SEBI so far, have been brought to its attention by external whistleblowers.

The new AMFI-directed institutional mechanism puts the onus on AMCs as the first line of defence in preventing, detecting and reporting fraud. Now, top managers cannot simply pin the blame on rogue employees and carry on with business-as-usual. When alerted to instances of fraud, SEBI tries to compile corroborative evidence in the form of suspicious trading patterns. But this provides only circumstantial evidence, making it tough for SEBI to make its charges stick. Relying on whistleblower alerts can also make the money trail go cold. With the new mechanism in place, individual AMCs can devote more time and resources to detailed evaluation of their own trade data and CCTV footage than SEBI which is tasked with overseeing 44 AMCs.

But to really prevent market abuse, SEBI will also need to take more effective enforcement actions against the guilty. Soft-ball measures such as banning them from the market for a few years, levying a nominal fine or entering into settlement with them without proving guilt, do not offer sufficient deterrence.

## FROM THE VIEWROOM.

## Statemanship or posturing?

Baskar

The bonhomie seen between bitter rivals DMK and BJP at a recent event in Chennai has set the political tongues wagging in the State.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, releasing the ₹100 commemorative coin to mark MK Karunanidhi's 100th birth anniversary, called Karunanidhi a "a titan of Indian politics, a cultural stalwart and a relentless advocate of social justice." TN Chief Minister MK Stalin thanked Rajnath Singh and even Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his message. In fact, he has been effusive in his praise for BJP leaders saying that their tributes to Karunanidhi were more eloquent than that of some DMK leaders. This sudden warming up just a few months after the bitter, bruising and no holds-barred Lok Sabha election campaign did surprise many political observers. Is this just a one-off act of statemanship from leaders of both parties or is there more to it?

The most common theory being floated was that this bonhomie was done to wrong foot the common political foe — the AIADMK, which was quick to say that there was a secret pact being sewed between the DMK and BJP. But this perception does throw up more questions.

Though both these parties would like to see a diminished AIADMK, for the DMK the BJP in the medium- to long-term will prove a more formidable political opponent given that the BJP rules at the Centre and is also the biggest national party with seemingly inexhaustible resources. Another theory being floated is for the BJP keeping DMK happy is an "insurance" against either Nitish Kumar or Chandrababu Naidu withdrawing support. But there is no imminent threat for the time being to the Modi-led government as it is in the interests of both Nitish and Naidu to support the ruling NDA. With the TN Assembly elections looming, the coming months will tell us how the political alliances will shape up.

## What do past bull markets indicate about the current rally?

There have been two super-normal bull markets so far — in 1991-92 and 2003-08. The current phase resembles the 2003-08 rally



## POINT BLANK.

LOKESH WARRIS K

The raging bull market in Indian stock market over the last four years, has been baffling market analysts. The rally has remained indomitable despite multiple setbacks including the Russia-Ukraine war, raging inflation, global central banks going on a monetary tightening spree, conflict in the Middle East and slowdown in the Chinese economy. Even as other stock markets slipped and slid due to these factors, Indian stock market has been thundering higher.

This resilience is reflected in the performance of Indian stocks. The MSCI India index has delivered 260 per cent returns to investors since March 2020 while the MSCI emerging market index has been largely stagnant, gaining just 46 per cent in this period. The other market which has rewarded investors generously, the US market, has delivered a much lower 167 per cent.

The absence of deep corrections has been the hallmark of this up-move. The deepest correction witnessed since March 2020 was between October 2021 and June 2022 when the Fed began monetary tightening. But that correction led to a decline of just 18 per cent and the loss was retraced in no time, thanks to buying from domestic and foreign investors. Most other markets are still trading below their 2022 peaks. Other pull-backs since 2022 have barely corrected 10 per cent from the peak.

How long can this bull market last? What does the market valuation and psychology of the market participants indicate? We can look for some answers from the historical data of the Sensex.

## MODERATE BULL MARKETS

We analysed the long-term up and down trends in the Sensex based on the data available since 1979 (data prior to that date is not available). Up trends that gave returns of over 90 per cent have been considered as bull markets. These have been terminated by deep corrections of over 30 per cent or shallower but

## Another super normal bull market in the making?

Bull markets in India since 1979

Starting date	Sensex at start	Ending date	Sensex at end	Gain in Sensex (%)	Duration (in months)
Jul 1980	129	Mar 1982	253	96.7	20
Dec 1984	260	Jun 1986	659	153.5	18
Mar 1988	390	Nov 1988	792	103.1	8
Mar 1990	670	Oct 1990	1,559	132.7	7
May 1991	947	Apr 1992	4,546	380.0	13
Apr 1993	1,980	Sep 1994	4,643	134.5	17
Nov 1998	2,742	Feb 2000	6,151	124.3	15
May 2003	2,934	Jan 2008	21,207	622.6	56
Mar 2009	8,047	Nov 2010	21,108	162.3	20
Aug 2013	17,448	Jan 2020	42,274	142.3	77
Mar 2020	25,638	Aug 2024	82,129	220.3	53

\*The highlighted phases denote bull phases with super normal returns

long-drawn corrections.

We had 11 bull markets since 1979 (see table). In eight of these phases, the returns were normal, ranging between 90 and 160 per cent. These include the bull runs witnessed in the 1980s when the up moves were regularly interrupted by corrections, implying profit taking and lack of conviction in the uptrend.

Though the bull run from the global financial crisis low was also strong, it yielded normal gains since there was an extended sideways move between 2011 and 2013 due to the trade war, Chinese slowdown and turbulence in commodities market.

**THE SUPER-NORMAL** But there have been a few uptrends which have surprised everyone by going on and on and yielding super-normal returns. The first such raging bull market, which at least some of the current generation of investors have witnessed, was between 1991 and 1992,

The current bull-run from the Covid lows in 2020 has so far extended over 53 months. But this is only the third longest. The uptrend between August 2013 and January 2020 lasted 77 months.

also called the Harshad Mehta period.

It was a crazy market in which stocks spiralled higher with no connect with fundamentals. Sensex price-earnings multiple hit the dizzying height above 55 towards the end of March 1992, compared to PE multiple of 19.8 a year ago. This was largely a speculative market with money from banks being channelled into markets to manipulate stock prices. While this phase lasted only 13 months, the Sensex gained 380 per cent in this period.

The other super-normal bull market was witnessed between 2003 and 2008. This was a more sober phase, backed by fundamentals, though there were pockets of speculative excesses. It was a golden period for the economy with the privatisation and opening of the economy to foreign investments gaining momentum. Rapid increase in infrastructure development as well as private capital expenditure made the country clock a very healthy growth rate helping Indian corporates become their profitability considerably.

Market valuation however became very pricey towards 2007, with the PE multiple way above its long-term average and price to book value at 5.47. The Sensex gained a whopping 622 per cent in this phase, which lasted 56 months.

## THE CURRENT BULL RUN

The current bull-run from the Covid lows in 2020 has so far extended over 53

## Transmission costs shouldn't trip up RE goals

In order to meet renewable energy goals, the existing waiver on Inter State Transmission Systems charges should continue

Subrahmanyam Pulipaka

India today is home to the one of the world's largest synchronized high voltage transmission network. While transmission is at the centre of our country's energy evacuation and energy access, it also has a unique contribution to India's energy transition journey.

Through India's Inter State Transmission Network (ISTS), one can seamlessly relay renewable energy (RE) anywhere to meet the demand across State boundaries. An important enabler to India's rapid adoption of solar and wind across the country has been the 100 per cent waiver of charges for projects connected to India's Inter State Transmission System (ISTS) network since 2016, which has helped in decreasing the effective tariff rates of the projects.

As a result, today, India's solar installations stand at 87.2 GW and while wind capacity is around 47 GW as of July 2024, increasing from 5.65 GW and 5.50 GW respectively in March 2016. The ISTS waiver has also been extended to projects connecting to ISTS and serving commercial and industrial (C&I) consumers across the country.

This ISTS waiver is set to expire on June 30, 2025. RE projects will incur 25 per cent of the applicable ISTS charges if they are commissioned between July 1, 2025 and June 30, 2026 which will increase by 25 per cent annually and reach 100 per cent of charges on all RE projects commissioned after July 1, 2028.

The Indian RE industry, however, wants the government to extend this waiver till 2028. The Centre announced extending the waiver for green hydrogen until 2030, offshore wind until 2032 and relaxed the waiver for all pump storage projects that have been awarded until June 2025. Here's why it is a logical choice to extend the waiver beyond June 2025 for solar and wind projects.

**TRANSITION FROM TURBULENCE** Between 2020-22 Covid induced timeline delays followed by legacy issues on generation and evacuation infrastructure, availability of land, Right of Way (ROW), permit issues, and a continued spill of supply chain disruptions were just some of the many challenges that the industry had to witness.

As we settle into more certain times, the next five years are very crucial in India's energy transition journey.



ENHANCING. The green journey

The extension of the ISTS waiver aligns with the fundamental principle of promoting efficient inter-State transmission of RE from resource-rich States to high-demand load centres. By socialising the cost of creating transmission infrastructure in RE-rich wastelands, the overall expenditure is minimised compared to the costs associated with developing similar projects in high-density population areas. This will also help States which do not have sufficient solar or wind resources to realise their mandatory Renewable Energy Purchase Obligations.

India's 500GW RE target of 2030 warrants us to achieve a strike rate of 4GW per month to achieve this target in the next 76 months.

In other words, the next six years will witness more RE capacity addition than the conventional power generation installed within the first 60 years of our independence. Apart from accelerating the pace of RE capacity development, this will also witness a steep growth in renewable energy projects delivering firm, dispatchable renewable energy (FDRE) capacities.

Two weeks ago, in a historic moment, the country witnessed an all-time low tariff of ₹4.98/unit in SECI's FDRE bid. This can be seen as a sign of things to come.

The government launched a ground-breaking policy push to help industrial and commercial establishments in their journey towards decarbonization through Green Energy Open Access (GEOA).

Notified in 2022, GEOA allows any consumer to procure green energy via open access. The limit has been reduced from 1 MW to 100 kW thereby giving every establishment in India a shot at accessing affordable Green Power. ISTS waiver is a big enabler for rapid RE deployment.

The writer is CEO, National Solar Energy Federation of India

## LETTERS TO EDITOR

Send your letters by email to [bleditor@thehindu.co.in](mailto:bleditor@thehindu.co.in) or by post to "Letters to the Editor", The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

## Well done

Apurpos Defence Ministry cautions firms using Chinese parts for drones (August 29). The Department of Defence Production (DDP) having dashed off a letter to industry bodies asking them to sensitise manufacturers against using Chinese parts for drones, is worrisome.

What else could explain the fact that MoD has reportedly placed an order for 200-logic drones from Daksh Unmanned Systems Pvt Ltd, on hold?

Moreover, MoD's apprehensions on this count can't just be shrugged off. Since China must be fully aware of the 'end use' of its supplied parts, we need to keep constant tabs on these drones deployed at our key defence positions.

SK Gupta

New Delhi

## President's outrage

The reaction of the President calling "Enough is enough" over the horrific rape and murder of a young doctor in West Bengal is welcome. But the issue, instead of gaining a

social movement, is gaining political colour, which is not correct. The BJP taking up the issue is welcome but the same party's reaction to violence against women in Manipur and other parts leave much to be desired. Seeking political advantage over such horrific crimes speaks volumes about our political class.

AG Rajmohan

Anantapur

## Male contraception

With reference to the article 'Getting men to shoulder the

responsibility of birth control' (August 29), the emergence of male contraceptive methods is a welcome but the same party's reaction to violence against women in Manipur and other parts leave much to be desired. Seeking political advantage over such horrific crimes speaks volumes about our political class.

Kosaraju Chandramouli

Hyderabad

## Black pepper imbroglio

Refer 'Black pepper prices lose

sting on higher imports' (August 29). If one looks at the quantity of Sri Lanka pepper out of total imports during July, which is 80 per cent, the sense of alarm increases. Merely insisting on Certificate of Origin for Sri Lanka exporters may not help unless its veracity is duly ascertained. Unless steps are taken on war footing by Indian customs and MoC, domestic pepper farmers may have to bite the dust despite their hard toil. **Rajiv Magal**  
Nainital Village (Karnataka)



## Cut GST on cancer drugs

Will lower treatment costs, promote innovation

Sanjeev Panchal

The battle against cancer is long and hard and continues to be fought across the world. While some valiantly survive the disease, inspiring hope in others, several succumb to the dangerous illness, which affects millions worldwide. Globally, in 2020, there were 19.3 million cancer cases, with India bearing the third highest disease burden. In 2022, the country reported over 1.4 million cases and the Global Cancer Observatory predicted that this number would increase by 57.5 per cent by 2040.

The reduction of cancer burden primarily depends on three factors: early screening, precise diagnosis, and timely treatment. However, screening and diagnosis programmes are not as prevalent in India as compared to the rest of the world and, as a result, patients are often diagnosed at advanced stages.

An obstacle most patients face is the exorbitant cost of treatment, which can leave families impoverished. Per a parliamentary report, nearly six crore Indians are driven below the poverty line every year due to cancer-related healthcare costs. This impact is further exacerbated by the Goods and Services Tax (GST) levied on cancer drugs.

### AFFORDABILITY ISSUE

In 2021, the 45th GST Council meeting decreased the GST on cancer medicines, a drug, from 12 per cent to 5 per cent. Similarly, one of the key decisions taken during the 50th meeting of the Council (2023), was to exempt IGBT levied on dinutimab "when imported for personal use." This drug is used in the treatment of high-risk neuroblastoma, a rare cancer in children. Reduction of GST on all cancer drugs can be a compelling initiative making innovative drugs more accessible and affordable.

**Alleviating financial burden:** Cancer patients in India bear the burden of high out-of-pocket (OOP) expenditure coupled with low insurance coverage. A study showed that cancer patients (45-60 years) incurred an average OOP expenditure of ₹8,053 and ₹39,085 for each outpatient consultation and hospitalisation, respectively. The annual figure per patient was estimated to be ₹3,31,177. More than 80 per cent of this expenditure was attributed



COSTS. Need to be reduced

to medicines and diagnostics. Hence, reduction of GST can go a long way towards alleviating this financial burden. Furthermore, lowered costs can make these drugs more accessible to underserved populations. Facilitating timely treatment: In India, it is common for cancer patients to be diagnosed at advanced stages. A report from the National Cancer Registry Programme revealed that a majority of patients with breast, cervix uteri, head and neck, and stomach cancers were diagnosed at advanced stages. Similarly, in more than 40 per cent of cases, lung cancers were diagnosed after they had spread to other areas. Since the complexity and costs of treatment increase with advanced stages of cancer, reducing the GST can make treatment more affordable for such patients, and encourage the patients to go for timely consultations and consistent use of necessary medications, improving treatment outcomes.

**Encouraging innovation:** Reducing GST on cancer drugs can make newer innovations more accessible benefiting larger pool of patients, which in turn can be encouraging for pharmaceutical companies to invest more in research and development and creating newer and more advanced drugs that can effectively treat the disease.

**Aligning with global practices:** In countries such as Canada and the US, zero taxes or significantly reduced taxes are levied on prescription drugs, enhancing accessibility and affordability. The same principle must be applied in India by reducing GST on cancer drugs, thereby aligning with the global best practices of healthcare accessibility.

The call for waiving GST on cancer drugs is not merely a matter of economics, but a moral imperative. It is a decisive step towards alleviating the burden on those already facing the toughest battle of their lives.

The writer is Managing Director & Country President, AstraZeneca Pharma India Ltd

## thehindubusinessline.

### TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

August 30, 2004

#### Govt may opt for pension, insurance under IRDA

In what could alter the course of the ongoing pension reforms, the Finance Minister, Mr P Chidambaram, may veer towards making the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (IRDA) the regulator for both the pension and insurance sectors.

#### RBI to set up panel to implement Basel II norms

To strengthen the financial position of banks, the RBI will set up a "Steering Committee" to implement the new stringent international Basel II norms on capital adequacy by 2006. The RBI would consult banks on improving ways of mitigating various risks and lay the roadmap for putting in place the new norms that will bring Indian banks on a par with the best foreign banks.

#### Aptech offers to buy Canadian education co

Aptech Ltd has made an acquisition 'offer' to a Canadian education company with the aim of gaining a foothold in the North American market. "There is a Canadian firm we are looking at seriously for a takeover. We have made an offer to them after due diligence," Mr Pramod Khera, CEO and Managing Director, Aptech Ltd, said.

# Bank privatisation – best avoided

**ROBUST PATH.** The stability and certainty of banking, anchored in state ownership, will contribute more to economic growth



SHEKAR SHWAMY

The bogey of bank privatisation has been raised again, this time by Arvind Panagariya, Chairman of the 16th Finance Commission. Speaking recently at a FICCI forum, he said: "Privatisation of banks is an important part of reform that is required so that we get out of the cycle of NPAs." (*businessline*, August 8; <https://shorturl.at/CyrQ8>) While the reference to the experience of NPAs (non-performing assets) is not incorrect, this is only a part of the story. What Panagariya fails to mention is the cycle of private bank failures that is a common occurrence worldwide.

Panagariya has been in the US from the mid-1970s till now. This period is marked by the reassertion of big capital as the dominant force, the waning of the interests of labour, the primacy of shareholders' interest (Milton Friedman *et al*), globalisation at an unprecedented scale, and market domination by a few players in category after category under the guise of free markets. Intellectuals raised in this milieu recommend this ideological path wherever they go. The commentary on bank privatisation has to be seen against this background.

### PAY ATTENTION TO HISTORY

In the world of banking, the lessons of history are often missed. In 1906, the colonial city of Madras was shaken by the failure of a bank called Arbuthnot and Company. Although not identified as a bank in its name, the company fulfilled all the functions of a bank. It took deposits and invested in commercial activities.

The 100-year-old establishment, with a magnificent office, employed between 11,000 and 12,000 people. The reputation of the person who headed the firm, Sir George Arbuthnot, was legendary. The bank had nearly 7,000 depositors with over ₹3 crore deposits, a huge amount when a middle-class income was ₹100 a month.

### 10 largest US bank failures, by total assets

In constant 2023 dollars, as of April 11, 2023

Institution	Headquarters	Failure date	Total assets (\$ billion)	Total deposits (\$ billion)
Washington Mutual Bank	Henderson, NV	25-09-2008	424.4	260.2
Silicon Valley Bank	Santa Clara, CA	10-03-2023	209.0	175.4
Continental Illinois National Bank & Trust	Chicago, IL	17-05-1984	111.1	79.5
Signature Bank	New York, NY	12-03-2023	110.4	88.6
American Savings and Loan Association	Stockton, CA	07-09-1988	73.2	37.4
IndyMac Bank	Pasadena, CA	11-07-2008	42.2	26.0
First Republic Bank-Dallas	Dallas, TX	29-07-1988	41.9	18.8
Colonial Bank	Montgomery, AL	14-08-2009	35.7	28.1
Gibraltar Savings	Simi Valley, CA	31-03-1989	31.9	18.1
Bank of New England	Boston, MA	06-01-1991	29.4	20.6

Note: "Failures" include Federal assistance transactions. "Banks" include savings-and-loans and other similar insured deposit-taking institutions. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of data from Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.

On October 22, 1906, the bank shut shop. The depositors lost everything. The failure was due to three factors: a) application of depositors' funds into commercial activities that incurred losses (NPAs in today's language); b) misappropriation of funds (fraud); and c) intricate shuffling of the ledgers to cover mistakes (deception). (Source: *The Fall of Arbuthnot and Company*, by Rangaswami Srinivasan). Before one thinks that this is an odd example from history, we should review the situation of bank failures in the current context.

### BANK FAILURES IN US IN 2023

Last year was not a good one for US banking, as many big banks failed. However it was not an unusual year, since hundreds of banks have failed in that country over the decades (see Table). All the banks that failed are private banks, the very type of

**We have a system in India predominantly served by government-owned banks.**

The depositors in India rest easy without worrying if their banks will fail

ownership that Panagariya recommends for India.

Here are the banks that failed in 2023 alone:

**Silicon Valley Bank, Santa Clara, California:** With more than \$209 billion in assets, it was the second-biggest bank to fail since the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) started keeping records in 1934. The bank's large holdings of government bonds lost value as the Federal Reserve rapidly hiked interest rates.

At the same time, as funding for start-ups became scarcer, more SVB customers began withdrawing their money. The source of the problem was an investment portfolio that lost value, a common occurrence in banking.

**Signature Bank, New York:** With \$110 billion in assets, it was the fourth-largest bank failure in the US. Signature was one of the few mainstream banks to seek out deposits of cryptocurrency assets. Crypto assets lost value rapidly after the collapse of the FTX crypto exchange.

A criminal investigation followed. Worried depositors started pulling out. A greedy decision to pursue a new asset class caused the downfall.

**First Republic Bank, San Francisco:**

## The effects of being in conflict with Nature

Dharmendra Chandurkar

What do you do when hills come crumbling down and landscapes — urban and rural — get flooded?

One cannot stop but wonder: what did we do to deserve this? As much as it is about nature, it is more about the abuse by us, the living. Heavy construction in an ecologically fragile Western Ghats or Himalayan zones or encroachment of storm-water drainages in cities by the rich and poor alike. A mine, a hydel project, a tunnel, a highway or bypass, and a city built where it should not be. The centrality of human interference in accelerating and accentuating catastrophes is reiterated. One can blame climate change, but again, it is anthropogenic. Going forward, loss and damages from such man-made disasters are a reality that States and citizens must live with. How do we better protect and build resilience against these disasters?

**GRAY RHINO**  
Foremost, we must acknowledge the repetitious nature of the events. Given the frequency of extreme events, one would no longer call them rare or occasional. Along with the damage to property and life, these high-frequency,

high-impact disasters are more of what Najeb Taleb categorises as Gray Rhinos than Black Swans — rare and high-impact events. Some even classify the Covid-19 pandemic as Gray Rhino, as the signs were always there in SARS and MERS.

Therefore, it is necessary to appreciate that these disasters are more of a norm than aberration. In the new normal of living with recurring disasters, the new goal is consequence minimisation.

### LISTEN TO ELDERS

In the village of Aneyoshi, Japan, close to Fukushima, there are stone inscriptions with Tsunami warnings. "High dwellings are peace and harmony of our descendants. Remember the calamity of the great Tsunamis. Do not build homes below this point."

There are traditional practices all over the Indian countryside underlying similar ecological wisdom. The traditional dwellings, Bhungas in Kutch, withstood the 2001 earthquake. Old villages in Garhwal are still surviving amidst repeated exposure to multiple calamities, underscoring the traditional knowledge in constructing multi-disaster-resistant homes and human settlements. Acknowledging the experiential wisdom, and making it



RISK FORECASTING. Must improve

a common parlance are good ways to reinforce the demands of the ecosystem conditions that are to be honoured by the residents.

The Moken tribes of Thailand islands knew of the lesson shared across generations — when the earth moves, the ocean will also move. When the oceans recede fast, run to the hills. The traditional early warning system ensured that the tribe survived the 2004 Tsunami of the Indian Ocean.

Early warning systems and forecasting are of utmost significance in reducing damages from calamities. Over the years, our cyclone forecasting

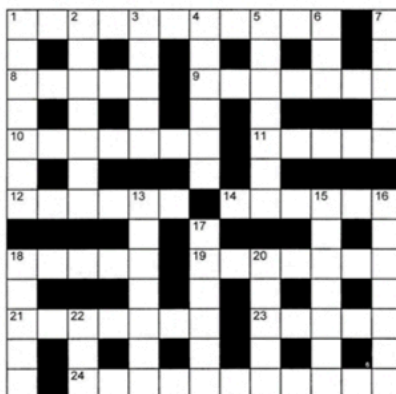
has improved tremendously, which has minimised the loss of life. Continuous investments and improvement in capabilities for forecasting extreme weather events where disasters may happen, along with timely communication, would be key to minimising losses.

All said and done, the margin of error is zero. Minor errors can translate into catastrophes for large areas and the populace. Technology-enabled innovative large-area monitoring systems can help raise red flags. Satellite surveys and digital architecture being used to classify areas at risk can also be leveraged for devising supervision protocols. And strict disincentives as deterrents to ensure adherence to the norms.

What's done cannot be undone. The development paradigm that undermined nature and human nature co-existence is increasingly showing its devastating effects. The process may not be irreversible, and it will take generations to get back to harmonious levels. Till then, living and adapting to the changed equations is the only way out. We can be wiser from hindsight.

The writer is Co-founder and Chief Knowledge Officer of Sambodhi Research & Communications, a social impact advisory

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2515



### EASY

#### ACROSS

- Seeing that (11)
- Nanny (5)
- Held tightly (7)
- Distended (7)
- Be of use (5)
- Not present (6)
- Departs (6)
- To object (5)
- Counsels, urges strongly (7)
- One with no settled home, a tramp (7)
- Not tight (5)
- Glass structures for plant growing (11)

#### DOWN

- Card game (7)
- Agitated, apprehensive (7)
- Perfect (5)
- Motor (6)
- Copy, mimic (7)
- Space between (3)
- Commemorative award (5)
- Recount, relate events (7)
- Varies, different (7)
- Nuns (7)
- Thrashed; vanquished (6)
- Underwater expert (5)
- Word of greeting (5)
- Engagement for one performance only (3)

### NOT SO EASY

#### ACROSS

- Seeing that one's thinking it over (11)
- A shark one may cherish (5)
- Was held fast by influenza at beginning of December (7)
- Enlarged by the lens, low though it may be (7)
- Make use of Virginia and be sick about it (5)
- Graduate who returns when posted isn't there (6)
- Doesn't eat the foliage (6)
- Object to one's being less than chaste (5)
- Strongly urges former partner to give short change (7)
- Vice-Admiral given an allowance for a tramp (7)
- Licentious solo written out by leading exponent (5)
- Growing places here use song for them (11)

#### DOWN

- It roughly involves Satan in a game of cards (7)
- Venus, or her turn that takes on an edge (7)
- One to lead astray who couldn't have been better (5)
- For example, nine involved in a locomotive (6)
- Get me at it, and I might be an impressionist (7)
- There's space for a family doctor who has a heart (3)
- Gong for dinner, say last round in (5)
- Tell a tale that makes ardent nonsense with energy (7)
- There's nothing in a strange virus made of different sorts (7)
- In a steamship tries to sort out the sorority members (7)
- Has been at the centre and was overcome (6)
- One replaced nothing in port for a bird of this type (5)
- A first word can be nothing more than he'll give one (5)
- Light carriage used for one-night engagement (3)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2514

**ACROSS:** 1. Vista 4. Check-up 8. Undergraduate 10. Spoor 11. Nips 12. Prod 16. Index 17. Resuscitation 19. Endgame 20. Thyme  
**DOWN:** 1. Vaulting-horse 2. Sad 3. Arrest 4. Carrot 5. Endure 6. Knackered 7. Preponderance 9. Oppressed 13. Masma 14. Advice 15. Extant 18. Icy



## Ring-fencing a challenge

Industrial parks are expected to help attract investment

The government's industrial parks policy, cleared by the Cabinet this week, is one of the most ambitious efforts to create business-friendly zones since the Special Economic Zones (SEZ) Act of 2005. The ₹28,600 crore package to set up 12 such enclaves is intended to create what Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal called a "golden quadrilateral" of industrial parks, invoking Atal Bihari Vajpayee's successful road-building project. The plan is to work with state governments and the private sector to set up "plug-and-play" integrated smart industrial cities with residential and commercial zones. The target is to attract investment of ₹1.5 trillion. The contribution from states will come in the form of land and the Centre will provide equity or debt, depending on the case. Some industrial townships will be developed with other countries that have expressed an interest in such arrangements. The overall intention of the government cannot be faulted.

The question mark, however, hangs over its implementation, not least because such ring-fencing, designed to isolate industrial activities from the standard inefficiencies of India's "doing business" environment, has had limited success in the past. The government data shows there are 4,420 industrial parks in India and 270 SEZs, most of which have not made a noticeable impact on accelerating investment. The SEZ policy had similarly proposed designated areas with initial tax breaks to encourage Chinese export enclaves. After an initial interest, enthusiasm abated when the tax breaks ended and facilities fell short of expectations, with SEZs accounting for just a third of Indian exports. The policy intention of attracting investment in manufacturing did not materialise. Instead, almost 60 per cent of SEZ investment was in information-technology (IT) and IT-enabled services.

Then came the Development of Enterprise and Service Hubs (DESH) Bill in 2023, which sought to address the weaknesses of the SEZ law. The status of this Bill is unclear, with reports suggesting it may be scrapped. The latest policy also seeks to address universal obstacles to investment in India. For instance, land acquisition has been a perpetual challenge, so much so that SEZs degenerated into a private sector real estate play. The industrial parks will comprise land already acquired by the government with environmental approvals in place. Second, a special purpose vehicle has been proposed as a single-window system for approval. Third, the location of the parks has been aligned to the industrial corridors alongside the dedicated freight corridors, addressing the key problem of logistics that bedeviled Indian industry — five along the Amritsar-Kolkata belt, two on Delhi-Mumbai, and five along southern and central routes.

That said, there are broader issues that need to be addressed if the parks are to match China in impact. One of them is size, so that manufacturers have access to global economies of scale to make them truly competitive. This could be a challenge. The average SEZ in India ranges from 0.25 square km to 14 square km. In contrast, Shenzhen, one of China's oldest and largest SEZs, sprawls across 316 square km. There is also the critical issue of the availability of dynamic and vibrant social infrastructure alongside these cities of the kind that Gurugram and Bengaluru have developed to accommodate workers in new-age businesses. Even restrictive liquor policies (Kerala) or outright prohibition (Bihar) could impact foreign investment in such parks. The latest policy is certainly an upgraded attempt to push the envelope in attracting investment. Whether it can buck the trend is open to debate.

## Stationed in space

Recent experience has lessons for Isro

The stranding of astronauts Sunita Williams and Barry Wilmore at the International Space Station (ISS) until February 2025 highlights the challenges involved in manned space missions. This highly experienced duo travelled to the ISS on the Boeing Starliner in early June. Their mission was supposed to last eight days. The Starliner had already negotiated two launches, but it was the first manned mission. Problems with its thrusters made docking difficult, and it had helium leaks, which added to the risks. While it is possible to return the Starliner to Earth unmanned, the capsule is deemed unsafe to carry humans. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) does not wish to risk a recurrence of the two space shuttle disasters, which cost many lives, including that of Kalpana Chawla in 2003. Hence, the astronauts will wait at the ISS until they can return on a SpaceX vehicle.

Nasa showed foresight when it tendered out for vehicles with life-support capsules, capable of ferrying goods and humans to the ISS. It opted to contract two designs, from Boeing and SpaceX. While SpaceX has successfully built a reusable design, Boeing has struggled. Despite decades of technical experience and its aerospace pedigree, Boeing's project has cost at least thrice as much as SpaceX, and suffered time and cost overruns. The Starliner still has severe glitches. Its thruster array is still underperforming. The vehicle had issues docking with the space station since that requires delicate corrections. Now, Starliner requires a remote software upgrade before it can uncouple for the return journey.

However, there's redundancy and the vehicle has enough propulsion capacity and manoeuvrability to return. The gas leaks are just as serious, since this may be life-threatening in itself. Without the SpaceX alternative, everyone on the ISS would be stranded. Instead of perishing in a fiery explosion, or crashing in uncontrolled descent, they would face the prospect of running out of food and oxygen. Manned space exploration carries such risks and both the Nasa-manned missions and the Soviet cosmonaut programmes have seen their share of tragedies. This is quite apart from the challenges of keeping humans healthy in space. Spaceflight requires periods of acceleration, which results in the body being subjected to 9-10 times normal gravity. There are also extended periods of zero gravity, which can lead to muscle atrophy and other ailments. Space is airless and subject to extremes of heat and cold, and there's no atmosphere or magnetic field to protect humans from solar radiation. Space stations require recycling of waste and supply of oxygen. Atmospheric re-entry results in friction with heat that can melt metals.

Design failures in unmanned missions are a disappointment; in manned missions, design failures lead to loss of life. Keeping humans healthy in space is a big ask but research has led to many insights into bodily functions. Space medicine research has resulted in telemedicine tools, gym equipment, handheld MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) machines, etc. The Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) stated plans include putting *gaganyaan* into orbit in the near future, building a long-term habitat — that is, a space station — and carrying out a manned moon mission. Boeing's failure indicates some of the pitfalls India's space agency must avoid. There are important lessons here for Isro, and they need to be grasped and an entirely new set of technologies to safely achieve its ambitions of manned missions is needed.



## Tax reform dilemmas

For a fairer, more inclusive tax system, taxing agriculture and adjusting exemptions are essential

Discussions on enhancing economic growth in the country, as well as those on fiscal sustainability, zero-in on the need to raise the tax-to-gross domestic product (GDP) ratio for India. This is based on the premise that governments need to — and can — play a larger role for the country to achieve its aspirational goals. Reduction in subsidies and the rationalisation of expenditures, too, find mention, but the political economy challenges in undertaking these changes are well recognised.

Two important tax bases to examine are: Personal income and land and property. Two contentious issues to consider in taxation of personal income are — taxation of agricultural income and effective exemptions under personal income tax. There is a need to re-examine the taxation paradigm in both these cases to effectively expand the tax base.

Consider the taxation of agricultural income. The constitutional assignment of taxation places the responsibility for taxing agricultural income in the hands of state governments. Over the years, states have not been able or willing to tax this component of their base. Arguments for not taxing agriculture can be classified into two broad categories: First, the average size of holding and, therefore, average incomes generated in the sector are small, and hence should not be subject to the fiscal and compliance cost of taxation. Second, agriculture is considered a difficult sector to tax, with limited returns for the administrative effort required.

A closer examination of these arguments reveals a few fallacies. The existing income tax regime, as it applies to non-agricultural income, includes an

exemption threshold. For farmers with income below the threshold — the small farmers — there would be no liability of tax. Given the voluntary nature of tax-return filing, there is no compliance cost either. For those with annual income above the exemption threshold, it is only fair that they be treated on a par with other tax-paying sectors in the country. Further, exemption in agriculture can create opportunities for evasion in other sectors, where incomes can be misrepresented as agricultural income. It should be mentioned that bringing agricultural income under taxation would also contribute to expanding the number of taxpayers in the country, making the income tax regime more representative of the nation's citizens.

This reform, however, might be difficult to operationalise — an agreement between the Centre and the states could be discussed. States could choose to either collect the revenues themselves or arrive at an arrangement with the central administration to collect the revenues and transfer them to the states. This could be a useful tool to expand the

tax base and the taxation autonomy of the states.

Turning to the other contentious issue — effective exemption under personal income tax. The income tax regime for non-corporate taxpayers includes an exemption threshold. Individuals with incomes less than the threshold are not liable to pay tax. The exemption threshold in India has been periodically raised. In addition, the government chooses to provide a rebate to people in the lowest tax slab, effectively raising the exemption threshold and thereby reducing the number of potential taxpayers in the country.



R KAVITA RAO

## Will Amazon ever be Apple of India's eye?

Jeff Bezos is a bonafide global celebrity. He has created companies and products that have not only disrupted and transformed their segments but also changed people's attitudes, behaviours, and lifestyle.

He has espoused his own methods of management and business philosophy. He has an interesting backstory, and his personal life is becoming of his stature as one of the richest and most successful in the history of mankind.

But will he, the head of the world's largest online shop, ever be able to buy much love in India?

We Indians love celebrities as much as the next guy. But there is something in the country's attitude towards Mr Bezos that feels just a bit off. When he came visiting about four years ago, he did the whole shebang. He donned chic Indian attire, paid homage to Mahatma Gandhi at Raigad in New Delhi, and got his hair photographed while leaning out of the driver-side door of a Tata truck that had a bright yellow bonnet.

It was not just the optics. Mr Bezos announced a mammoth investment in India. He addressed a big event dedicated to small and medium enterprises. And he made the unavoidable observation about this being India's century.

And yet, the Indian establishment was sort of cool towards Mr Bezos during his entire India sojourn. An article in the *Harvard Business Review*, dated January 22, 2020, summarised it thus: "Jeff Bezos's recent visit to India was marked by protests, an antagonistic remark by the Indian finance minister, and a refusal to meet by the Indian prime minister — all despite Bezos's promising to spend a billion dollars and generate millions of jobs by 2025."

This was in sharp contrast to the fanfare when Apple Inc's CEO Tim Cook came to India in April last year to open the technology giant's first stores in the country. Mr Cook did the usual MNC CEO things, such

as eating vada pao with Madhuri Dixit in Mumbai. He met India Inc leaders including Mukesh Ambani, the head of Reliance Industries, his son Akash, and daughter Isha. He also met Tata Sons Chairman N Chandrababu Naidu.

Most importantly, the government establishment welcomed Mr Cook to New Delhi with open arms. You can argue that Apple Inc has emerged as the poster boy of Make in India by shifting some of the iPhone assembly from China to this country, and there is more to come on that front. But Amazon's involvement in India is not to be scoffed at.

It is not just about the investments, job creation, and exports, sizeable as they are; Amazon has gone out on a limb to assuage fears about the ostensible threat it presents to small businesses. It has carried out campaigns to digitise small businesses and provide them with a platform to address not only markets in the country, but also overseas. This includes all kinds of sellers, artisans, weavers, and more. Its India website assiduously chronicles success stories of the small people — stories where Amazon was instrumental in their success.

The funny thing is that this time Mr Bezos did not even need to visit India to invite disapprobation. All it took was the release of a report on the impact of e-commerce to renege questions about Amazon's predatory pricing and practices in India. Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal, who revived the debate, clarified the next day that the government was not at all against digital businesses and was in fact keen to invite investment and technology. But he emphasised the need for transparency and fair play, and for a level playing field between offline and online.

This left Amazon sympathisers practically apoplexy with astonishment, their first thoughts being, "What did we do this time?" For some time, Amazon has kept a sort of low profile in India. It has not announced a

Taking a few selective years, the ratio of effective exemption threshold as a percentage of per capita income has remained between 200 and 300 per cent. For financial year (FY) 2000-01, it was 238 per cent. It increased to 335 per cent in 2008-09, dropped to 251 per cent in 2015-16, and in 2023-24, it stands at 236 per cent. Assuming an 8.2 per cent growth in per capita income, the ratio for 2024-25 would be 305 per cent. These ratios indicate that the proportion of individuals potentially liable for tax remains low.

The only way to reduce the ratio of exemption threshold to per capita income is by keeping the exemption levels inclusive of rebate unchanged for the foreseeable future. The challenge, however, is to convince the "tax paying" citizens that the system remains fair. The small number of taxpaying citizens — 1.2 per cent according to data presented in Parliament — is overlooked by the diminishing real value of exemptions over the years. Balancing these alternative concerns drives some of the decisions regarding income tax today. Incorporating an inflation adjustment for exemption threshold could reduce these pressures.

Apart from the need to raise additional taxes, increasing the number of taxpayers would make the tax regime fairer, both in perception and in reality. As a result, the attitude towards tax payment could receive a nudge in the right direction.

Major taxes on property include property tax collected by local bodies, applicable on ownership and use of land and buildings, as well as stamp duty and registration fees on transactions involving sale and purchase of land and building. Digitalisation of land records is a very useful step towards bringing on record all potential taxpayers. To make these taxes a buoyant source of revenue, the corresponding tax structure needs to be understood. Both property tax and circle rates for stamp duties are usually fixed in nominal terms. Changes in property prices or rentals, therefore, do not get captured unless these are revised regularly. However, such changes meet with clear resistance.

Perceptions of unfairness in civil services make increases in property tax seem unacceptable. Institutionalising inflation correction could be one way to move away from negotiated arrangements for rate increases. In addition to the above, there is a need to revisit land revenue as a source of revenue. Barely five states collect more than 2 per cent of own tax revenue through land revenue.

High density of population in urban and peri-urban areas, along with high dependence on agriculture for livelihood, has made reform in land-related issues highly contentious. The reallocation of land use from agriculture to other uses is constrained by the high dependence on agriculture. Changes in taxation regimes alone may not be enough to alter the structure of the economy, which is crucial for generating sustainable revenues to meet developmental needs of people. Any proposed reforms, therefore, need to be analysed from this perspective as well.

The writer is director, National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, New Delhi



SCENE UNSEEN

SUVIEN SINHA

## War from the banquet tables



### BOOK REVIEW

KANIKA DATTA

In 2019, Giles Milton discovered a "cache of curious letters" dated between 1942 and 1945. They were written by Kathy Harriman, the 20-something socialite daughter of the railroad millionaire Averell Harriman, USA's wartime lend-lease czar based in Britain and then ambassador to the Soviet Union. Later, Kathy's son showed him scraps and letters that his mother had preserved but which he discovered a few weeks before her death.

"Oh that," she said when her son asked her about them. Kathy never spoke of those wartime years, perhaps because she was smart enough to understand that the artless observations of a giddy girl

could scarcely be critical source material for a book examining World War II's most consequential alliance. As her father's hostess in London and Moscow, she was privy to critical negotiations during the war. Yet her diary and letters offer such observations as Churchill "has a wonderful smile and is not at all hard to talk to"; Roosevelt, with whom she dined at Yalta, was "absolutely sweet"; Stalin was "pleasant and charming"; and a "hell of a swell sense of humour" (he had ventured to make a joke about Stalin). She is constantly amazed that the Americans were more popular than the British in Russia, though she must have been aware that it was American lend-lease that underwrote Stalin's victory.

Vanity Fair captured Kathy's war best in the title of a 2011 article based on her scraps: "The War in Silk Stockings". Nevertheless, Mr Milton quotes her diaries, letters and scrapbook so extensively that *The Stalin Affair* seems to be written from her point of view, with other memoirs added for variety in a shallow, gossip-narrative. Rather than a "sizzling, high-stakes tale", the cover

endorsement vouchsafed by popular historian James Holland, this book is more in the nature of what journalists call colour copy.

If *The Stalin Affair* — the title alone suggests a Daniel D'Silva bestseller — were judged by that yardstick, it is done its job. It offers, for one, an evocative portrait of wartime London and Moscow as experienced by the elite. What a great time to be a politician. Starvation, privation, rationing and death found little place in the lives of the leaders who determined the fate of millions. Instead, champagne, pate, caviar, vodka and all manner of scarce luxuries appeared at serial banquets, tete-a-tete dinners and lunches. Several protagonists had time to conduct torrid affairs — Averell Harriman with Churchill's amoral daughter-in-law Pamela, who became his last wife years later via serial romps with other millionaires; British ambassador Archie Clark Kerr's obsession with a Russian footman, for whom he imported Stalin for an exit visa, gets detailed treatment.

The prose, too, is admirably creative.

In the Prelude, Mr Milton prepares the reader for the start of Operation Barbarossa, Adolf Hitler's ill-fated invasion of his former ally, the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. "It was the shortest night of the year... The warning moon appeared as no more than a faint silver" — you get the drift.

*The Stalin Affair* covers the essentials of the story — how Stalin was caught off-guard by the invasion, Churchill's quick thinking, Roosevelt's response, and Stalin's grudging agreement, tension over delays in opening the Second Front in Europe to take the pressure off Soviet troops and the descent from allies to Cold Warriors.

It's the nuance that's missing. Britain stood alone against the Luftwaffe in 1940, so Churchill, who had advance intelligence of Hitler's intentions, rapidly understood the "enemy's" principle and reached out to the Soviet Union with offers of support. The author suggests it was Stalin's visceral suspicions that weakened the alliance.

But the British establishment had held the regime in deep contempt since 1917. As Chris Bellamy points out in his monumental study *Absolute War*, Churchill avoided the word "ally" in his broadcast of support on the evening of June 22. Britain and Russia were "co-belligerents". Mr Milton offers a broad-brush account of the negotiations that prefaced this "impossible alliance" — but with minute details of fearsome toasts with which Russians rounded off each banquet.

He tells us that the Wehrmacht advanced to 24 km of Moscow. But readers won't find out why the Germans couldn't capture the Soviet capital or why that failure doomed Hitler. There is no appreciation for the capabilities of Russian generals, the Soviet armies and the astonishing speed with which Soviet industry relocated behind the Urals and produced material to fend off the better equipped Germans.

He concedes that lend-lease supplies accounted for a fraction of the tanks and aircraft the Soviet Union produced over

the course of the war but that specialist supplies and food played a key role in the Soviet war effort, which Stalin acknowledged. With the northern route for lend-lease supplies via Archangel frozen in the winter, Mr Milton describes how Harriman opened an alternative railway supply line via Iran but in frustratingly sketchy detail.

As to why the alliance foundered, we get Churchill and Harriman's perspectives; both "go rogue" in different ways in their dealings with Stalin. These views overlook an updated view of the alliance. The Soviet Union was a *cordon sanitaire* to ensure that his empire was never invaded again. Both viewed Roosevelt's attempts to leverage his personal charisma to woo Stalin as misguided. Since Roosevelt died before the war ended, we have no idea how his presence would have impacted post-war

Mr Milton's book follows the "scholarship lit" school of history writing. It has some swell photographs from Kathy's scrapbooks. But there are better books out there to understand that extraordinary collaboration between democracy and autocracy, and how it determines the world we live in today.



**THE STALIN AFFAIR: The Impossible Alliance that Won the War**  
Author: Giles Milton  
Publisher: Hachette  
Pages: 372  
Price: ₹999



IN THE LIMELIGHT



Living nightmare: The xenomorph in a scene from *Alien: Romulus*. AP

# The biomechanical horrors of the xenomorph in the 'Alien' movie franchise

The iconic titular hellspawn from the 'Alien' franchise is both phallic and feminine, both predator and parasite, a creature that subverts and perverts the very idea of reproduction. It is, as its creator intended, a living nightmare

Ayaan Paul Chowdhury

A Swiss artist whose name has become synonymous with the very concept of bionic horrors – Hans Ruedi Giger – forever altered the landscape of science fiction with the creation of the xenomorph. Emerging from the shadows in Ridley Scott's 1979 sci-fi cult classic, the titular alien has since become a symbol of primal terror, its grotesque elegance and relentless carnage tapping into the darkest recesses of the human psyche. But to understand the xenomorph, one must first delve into the mind of its creator, whose distinct biomechanical art style gave birth to one of the most iconic monsters in cinematic history.

## Origin story

Born in Chur, Switzerland, in 1940, Giger was raised in the aftermath of the war. His early years were marred by vivid nightmares. But rather than succumb to these fears, Giger embraced them, channelling his anxieties into art that defied convention and embraced the bizarre. These early experiences laid the foundation for what would become his signature style. His work, which he termed "biomechanical," was a macabre vision of a future where the boundaries between flesh and machine had all but dissolved in disturbingly erotic ways, leaving behind a surreal world that had a strange beauty to its menace.

Giger's influences were varied. The surrealist master Salvador Dalí recognised a kindred spirit in the Swiss man and was

instrumental in bringing Giger's talents to the attention of the Chilean filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky, who in turn enlisted him for the infamously ill-fated *Dune* project. Though the film never came to fruition, Giger's concept art for *Dune* remained testament to his ability to conjure unsettling realities.

However, it was Giger's 1977 book *Necronomicon* – a collection of his most disturbing and evocative works – that would ultimately catch the eye of Ridley Scott as he was preparing to bring Dan O'Bannon's script for *Alien* to life. One look at the dark, elongated being with an oblong head in Giger's lithograph *Necronom IV*, and Scott knew he had found his monster.

The original xenomorph that terrorised the crew of the *Nostromo* in 1979 was a creature of elegance and efficiency, straddling the line between the organic and the synthetic. The creature's sleek, black, phallic exoskeleton, dripping with a glistening sheen, and brought to life by Italian special effects designer Carlo Rambaldi, was just as beautiful as it was terrifying – a stark contrast to the clumsy bug-eyed invaders of previous genre films. It was a creature that did not need to be understood – only feared.

**The evolution of the xenomorph**  
Giger's original design, however, was only the beginning. Over the years, as the franchise expanded, so too did the xenomorph's many forms. Each new iteration of the alien, while retaining the core elements of Giger's original design, introduced new variations that reflected

the changing themes of the films.

In James Cameron's 1986 sequel *Aliens*, the xenomorphs were reimagined as part of a eusocial hive, led by a towering Queen – a regal matriarch whose sole purpose was to propagate her species by any means necessary. This Queen, with her massive egg-laying ovipositor and crown-like crest, was an unholy fusion of insect and machine, of motherhood twisted into something horrifying.

The xenomorph's next evolution came in David Fincher's *Alien 3* (1992), where it took on the traits of its host. The "Runner Alien," also known as the "Dog Alien," was born from a quadrupedal host, and as such, it adopted a more animalistic form. Sleek, fast and feral, this version of the xenomorph was a predator that hunted on all fours, its movements fluid and graceful, yet no less deadly. It was here that the xenomorph began to show its versatility, a creature that could adapt, becoming whatever it needed to survive.

But it was in *Alien: Resurrection* (1997) that the xenomorph underwent its most radical transformation. Genetic tampering had given rise to a new breed of alien, one that bore disturbing traces of its human creators. The Newborn, as it was called, was a grotesque parody of humanity – a creature with pale, translucent skin, a skull-like face, and eyes that stared with unsettling intelligence. Born of scientific hubris, this creature was a reminder that the xenomorph, like Giger's art, was constantly evolving and pushing the boundaries of what was possible – and what was terrifying.

The evolutions of course, were far from

over. In Scott's prequels, which began with *Prometheus* (2012) and continued with *Alien: Covenant* (2017), the creature was reimagined yet again, this time as a precursor to the xenomorph we know today. The Deacon, a creature birthed from a race of god-like beings known as Engineers, was a pale, elongated entity characterised by eel-like jaws. Its life cycle closely mirrored that of the xenomorph, but with a more streamlined and less biomechanical design. *Covenant*'s Neomorph was even more divergent, its pale-white skin, pointed head and spiny back, a stark contrast to the sleek black of the original xenomorph.

In Fele Álvarez's latest *Alien: Romulus*, a horrifying climactic reveal bore us what has since been dubbed "The Offspring," a fusion of xenomorph DNA and human genetics that's unleashed when an ill-fated character injects a sinister Newtonian serum into their neck. The towering Romanian basketball phenom Robert Bobroczkyi, donned prosthetics, animatronics, and just a touch of CGI to bring this violently birthed creation to life, which rapidly evolves into an eight-foot terror with fleshy skin, obsidian eyes, a tail, and that signature xenomorph tongue – dorsal tubes and all.

Yet, despite these many variations, the core of Giger's design has remained intact. Having endured more than four decades of cinematic evolution, Giger's mesmerising incubus continues to adapt, its many forms a reminder of our mortality, of the fragility of the human body, and of the horrors that lie beneath the surface of our conscious minds.



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

# Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

"Congratulations. I hear you've been made captain of the cricket team."  
"Who told you that?"  
"Your grandfather."  
"I'm sorry to say this, you've been disinform." "  
"You mean 'misinformed,' don't you?"  
"Disinformed or misinformed. They mean the same thing, don't they?"  
"First of all, the word is 'disinformation' not 'disinformed.' It is only the noun form 'disinformation' that is generally used."  
"Well, I know the meaning of 'misinform'; so tell me what 'disinformation' means."  
"Before I do that, you tell me what you understand by 'misinform.'"  
"It means giving somebody the wrong information about something."  
"Excellent. But that's only part of the meaning."  
"What do you mean?"  
"You see when you misinform someone, you can give him the wrong information either intentionally or unintentionally."  
"In other words, I can give you the wrong information deliberately or unintentionally. Now tell me, what does 'disinformation' mean?"

"The act of spreading false information deliberately."  
"Spreading false information deliberately! But who would do that?"  
"Spies."  
"Spies! You mean secret agents like James Bond?"  
"Exactly. One of the jobs of secret agents is to give false information to foreign agents so that it confuses or misleads them. In fact, the word 'disinformation' was once mainly used in the spy business."

"Really? That sounds really exciting."  
"But things are beginning to change now. The word 'disinformation' is beginning to be frequently used in the world of business and politics."  
"Business and politics, eh? That's understandable. Disinformation would certainly come in handy there. There are so many lies being told in business and politics that no one really knows what the truth is."

"By the way, 'disinformation' is not found in all dictionaries. And the ones that contain it define it as 'deliberately false information especially given out by governments or services.' You generally talk about the 'disinformation campaign' by governments or political parties."

"Well my grandfather doesn't work for the government or the secret service. So I guess he misinformed you about my being made captain."

"Was I misinformed deliberately or unintentionally?"

"I have to ask my grandfather."

"Where will you find him?"

"Where else? In the bedroom, watching TV."

"Your grandfather is a couch potato, isn't he?"

"Couch potato? What do you mean?"

"A couch potato is a very lazy person. Someone who prefers to sit down and watch TV, rather than do something."

"That does sound like my grandfather." Published in *The Hindu* on March 23, 1993.

## THE DAILY QUIZ

Today marks the ninth anniversary of the assassination of scholar and rationalist M.M. Kalburgi by suspected fundamentalists. Here's a quiz on famous rationalists

Srinivasan Ramani

### QUESTION 1

Founder of the Committee for the Eradication of Blind Faith (Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmooolan Samiti) after leaving his medical practice, he was also the editor of the Marathi weekly magazine *Sodhana*, which promoted scientific temperament and liberal thought. Name this rationalist who took up cudgels against religious superstition and was also assassinated in 2013.

### QUESTION 2

Name the Indian philosopher who lived in the 6th century BC and is considered the first known proponent of "Indian materialism," also understood to be the forerunner of the Charvaka school of materialist

philosophy.

### QUESTION 3

Lokayata philosophy (otherwise known as Charvaka) was propounded by a prominent atheist school in ancient India. Although there has been a loss of original works in the tradition and is quoted largely through secondary texts or critiques, there have been contemporary assessments. Name the Indian Marxist whose book, *Lokayata: A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism* is widely quoted.

### QUESTION 4

One of the foremost proponents of rationalism in public life and the forerunner of a successful political movement in India, this person led a nonagenarian leader, K. Veeramani. Name him.



**Visual question:** Name this prominent scientist, one of the authors of *A Statement on Scientific Temper*. THE HINDU

**Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:** 1. The predecessor of the Paralympics was called this. The first Paralympics was held in this year and this place.

**Ans: The Stoke Mandeville Games; Rome in 1960.**

2. The only sports in the Paralympic programme that do not have an Olympic counterpart. **Ans: Boccia and goalball**

3. The unique distinction of Pal Szekeres. **Ans: Only athlete to win both Olympic and Paralympic medals**

4. This athlete is the most decorated Paralympian of all time. **Ans: American swimmer Trischa Zorn**

5. Since this edition, the Olympic and Paralympic Games have been held in the same city. **Ans: 1988**

6. Agitos in the context of the Paralympic Games. **Ans: It is the symbol of the Games made up of three waves**

7. This is special about the category of medalists in para athletics, para triathlon, and para cycling. **Ans: The guides and pilots are also awarded medals**

8. Apart from para swimming, these two disciplines are open to athletes with an intellectual disability. **Ans: Para athletics and para table tennis**

**Visual:** Identify this man. **Ans: Murlikant Petkar in 50m freestyle swimming**

Early Bird: Seema Das

## Word of the day

**Insalubrious:** detrimental to health

**Synonym:** unhealthy

**Usage:** The area was deemed insalubrious, so tourism there is quite slow.

**Pronunciation:** bit.ly/insalubriouspro

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /ɪnsəˈluːbrɪəs/

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# When physics merged with biology to revolutionise ophthalmology

Ophthalmologists, deeply familiar with the intricate workings of the eye, do not typically have the leisure time to spend in a physicist's lab studying theories behind laser; yet these two seemingly disparate fields combined to modernise vision correction in refractive errors and cataract surgeries

C. Aravinda

**R**ecently, I underwent femtosecond laser surgery, a procedure that promised to correct my vision with incredible precision. While the results were astounding, I couldn't help but wonder – how did physicists, who typically aren't versed in the anatomy of the eye, end up creating a technology so pivotal in ophthalmology? After all, the physics of lasers and the biology of the eye seem like worlds apart. Ophthalmologists, deeply familiar with the intricate workings of the eye, don't typically have the leisure time to spend in a physicist's lab studying LASER. So how did these two seemingly disparate fields merge to revolutionise vision correction in refractive errors and cataracts?

The word 'laser' is actually an acronym for 'Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation', a phrase that encapsulates the physics underlying this transformative technology. The fundamental concept of stimulated emission was first introduced by Albert Einstein in 1917. He theorised that when an electron in an excited state drops to a lower energy level, it can release energy as a photon. If this photon interacts with another excited electron, it can stimulate the release of a second photon of identical energy, phase, and direction – a process that amplifies light.

It wasn't until 1960, however, this theory was practically realised. Theodore Maiman, a physicist at Hughes Research Laboratories, built the first working laser using a ruby crystal as the gain medium. The ruby laser emitted light at a specific wavelength (694 nm) in the red part of the spectrum and was the first of its kind to produce a concentrated beam of light with unique properties – coherence, monochromaticity, and the ability to be focused to a very small spot.

## Chirped Pulse Amplification

Another breakthrough came in the 1980s with the development of Chirped Pulse Amplification (CPA). This technique revolutionised the field of laser physics. Working at the University of Rochester, Gérard Mourou and his student Donna Strickland (the third woman to win a Nobel prize in physics) introduced CPA to amplify ultrashort laser pulses without damaging the amplifying material. Their innovation later earned them the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2018.

But here the question still remains alive: how did physicists, who likely had little knowledge of eye anatomy, create a tool that would become vital in eye surgery?

The answer lies in an accidental discovery that bridged the gap between the physics lab and the operating theatre.



The lasers work by emitting pulses of light that last only a few quadrillionths of a second, making them extraordinarily precise. GETTY IMAGES

A research assistant in Gérard Mourou's lab was accidentally struck by a laser beam in his eyes without wearing the goggles he was supposed to wear – a potentially dangerous situation. Seeking medical attention, the assistant visited an ophthalmologist.

But instead of focusing on treatment, the doctor who saw him became intensely curious about the physical qualities of the laser that had caused the injury, hitherto not witnessed in the clinic. The ophthalmologist was intrigued by the 'perfect' or precise damage to the retina in his eyes. This unusual interaction sparked a deeper investigation into the laser's potential, leading to the development of femtosecond ophthalmology.

This cross-disciplinary serendipitous accident – where a medical professional's inquisitiveness about a physics tool met the physicist's quest for practical applications – made room for perfect innovation. CPA allowed for the amplification of laser pulses in a previously-impossible way, opening the door to medical applications requiring extreme precision, such as in eye surgery.

Today, CPA-based lasers are at the heart of femtosecond laser procedures, like the one I underwent for refraction correction. These lasers work by emitting pulses of light that last only a few quadrillionths of a second, making them extraordinarily precise.

The high-intensity, ultrashort pulses produced by CPA-based lasers allow for precise cornea reshaping with minimal damage to surrounding tissues, resulting

## The high-intensity, ultrashort pulses produced by CPA-based lasers allow for precise cornea reshaping with minimal damage to surrounding tissues

in improved patient outcomes and faster recovery times.

This has also transformed cataract surgery, one of the most common surgical procedures worldwide. In traditional cataract surgery, a surgeon manually makes incisions in the eye and uses ultrasonic energy to break up the cloudy lens before replacing it with an artificial intraocular lens (IOL).

In laser-assisted cataract surgery, a femtosecond laser is used to create precise incisions and soften the lens, reducing the need for ultrasonic energy and allowing for more accurate placement of the IOL. This technology has improved the precision and safety of cataract surgery, leading to better outcomes and faster recovery times.

A femtosecond laser is an infrared laser with a wavelength of 1053nm used in eye surgeries, especially for its precision. It creates tiny, rapid bursts that break apart the tissue without damaging surrounding areas. Compared to the Nd laser, which operates in nanoseconds (10<sup>-9</sup> second), the femtosecond laser's pulse duration is much shorter – measured in femtoseconds (10<sup>-15</sup> second). This shorter duration significantly reduces the risk of damaging nearby tissues, making the femtosecond laser much safer for delicate

procedures like corneal surgery. The femtosecond laser causes a million times less collateral damage than the Nd laser, allowing for extremely precise and safe surgeries. More than 10 million femtosecond surgeries have been performed globally so far using laser technology.

## Lasers in cancer therapy

Moreover, the future of high-intensity lasers holds promise in cancer therapy. Researchers are exploring using these lasers to target and destroy cancerous cells with extreme precision, minimising damage to healthy tissues. By focusing the energy of an ultrashort laser pulse onto a tiny area, it's possible to induce a localised effect, such as generating shockwaves or heating, that can selectively destroy cancer cells. This approach is still in its experimental stages. It could one day lead to new, non-invasive treatments for cancer patients.

## A bright future ahead

Reflecting on my experience with femtosecond surgery, I am grateful for the improved vision. From accidental discoveries to intentional innovations, the story of laser technology continues to unfold whether in the operating theatre, the physics lab, or beyond. It's a reminder that sometimes, the most impactful innovations come from the unlikely of collaborations – where the physics of light meets the biology of sight, and curiosity knows no disciplinary bounds.

(Dr. C. Aravinda is an academic and public health physician. aravindaaimsjr10@hotmail.com)



FDCs are medicines that have two or more active ingredients in a single pill or shot. GETTY IMAGES

## Why the Union govt. banned 156 'irrational' fixed dose combinations

Bindu Shajan Perappadan

The Union Health Ministry has recently banned 156 "irrational" fixed dose combinations (FDC) medicines which include antibiotics, painkillers, and multivitamins. FDCs are medicines that have two or more active ingredients in a single pill, capsule or shot.

As per a gazette notice issued under section 26 A of the Drugs and Cosmetics Act 1940, the Ministry said that the production, marketing, and distribution

**The move, according to the Centre, is aimed at safe guarding the public, ensuring that resistance to certain drugs do not develop in large numbers due to irrational use, and to also curb misuse of drug administration where not warranted**

of these drugs are now prohibited due to their associated health risks.

Speaking about the need to bring in such measures, a senior Health Ministry official explained that most of the drugs that made it to the banned list were approved by various State authorities but had no research or trials to backup its safe use in humans. "The new drugs and clinical trial rules of 2019 make it clear that fixed dose combinations are to be considered as new drugs and as such must be approved by the central drug regulator," he said.

The move, according to the Union government, is aimed at safeguarding the public, ensuring that resistance to certain drugs do not develop in large numbers due to irrational use, and to also curb the misuse of drug administration (knowingly or otherwise) where not warranted.

## Expert committee

Meanwhile, as per the government notification, the matter was examined by an expert committee appointed by the Central Government and other related authorities, with them recommending that there is no therapeutic justification for the ingredients contained in the said FDCs. "The Central government is satisfied that the use of the FDC drug is likely to involve risk to human beings whereas safer alternatives to the said drug are available," notes the Health Ministry.

Mefenamic acid + Paracetamol injection, Cetirizine HCl + Paracetamol + Phenylephrine HCl, Levocetirizine + Phenylephrine HCl + Paracetamol, Paracetamol + Chlorpheniramine Maleate + Phenyl Propanolamine and Camylofin Dihydrochloride 25 mg + Paracetamol 300 mg are some of the FDCs on the list.

Speaking about the ban, Anil Bansal, member of the Delhi Medical Association, said that irrational combination drugs can pose significant health risks in a community that is known to buy over-the-counter drugs. "The lack of knowledge and awareness can work against the patient's welfare," he said.

Dr. Bansal added that since these medicines are being introduced into the market without proper research and randomised controlled trials, their safety does come under scrutiny. (bindu.p@thehindu.co.in)

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## Why disconnecting from work is important for mental health

Zubeda Hamid  
CHENNAI

It used to be a point of pride: working round the clock, at all hours and being known in the family as the workaholic. But increasingly over the last decade, employees, backed by health professionals and research, have begun to say 'enough'. Being the first to arrive and last to leave the workplace is no longer seen as behaviour to be modelled; constantly taking calls and emails after office hours is frowned upon and being able to enjoy days off, without work intruding upon personal time, is the goal.

And in line with this, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic where the work from home culture was often blamed for blurring personal and professional boundaries, Australia, this week, became the latest in a list of countries that give employees the right to disconnect.

What does this mean? It means that workers in Australia can now refuse to respond to work-related communication outside of their working hours, unless doing so is unreasonable. This does not mean employers cannot contact employees outside work hours, but it does mean that the employee can choose to ignore this communication.

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is reported to have said: "We want to make sure that just as people don't get paid 24 hours a day, they don't have to work 24 hours a day. It's a mental health issue, frankly, as well, for people to be able to disconnect from their work and connect with their family and their life."

But how seriously is work impacting mental health taken in India, where CEOs/



Average work week lasts 47.7 hours in India, 13 hours more than that in Germany. GETTY IMAGES

founders of companies have extolled the virtues of working long hours and eschewing weekends, where around 90% of the workforce is in the unorganised sector, where a gig economy thrives, often putting its workers at risk physically and mentally, and where a State government had considered extending daily work days to 14 hours?

According to data from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) India ranks among the top 10 countries when it comes to the number of hours worked per week, at an average of 47.7 - over 13 hours more than average work week in Germany, at 34.3.

Long hours of work, combined with other factors can impact a person's mental health, says Paulomi Sudhir, professor of clinical psychology, NMIMS. "What you do and what your workplace is like also play a role in this. There are both systemic

and individual factors - for some people there may not be a choice as to how many hours they work or how long they stay in office. For others there may be factors such as how much responsibility their role involves or how they plan their day," she said.

## The need to switch off

Overworking can decrease productivity and lead to burnout and the inability to switch off can lead to exhaustion and poor mental health, Dr. Sudhir pointed out.

"Most of us don't practise this but switching off, both physically and mentally from work is very important. It's part of self care - if you can't switch off from work, and this perhaps affects your sleep and your eating habits, then all of these can affect your mental well being," she said.

Leisure and breaks are crucial - studies have shown for instance that in high-stress

jobs such as the military and paramilitary forces, not being able to get leave is a critical factor contributing to stress, she said. "Breaks play an important restorative function for positive mental health outcomes." Long, unsocial or inflexible hours is listed as one of the risk factors to mental health, by the World Health Organization.

As much as disconnecting from work is healthy and vital, cultural constraints in India, where workers are trained to work long hours, pose a barrier, said Sona Mitra, principal economist at IWWAGE, a Delhi-based organisation that aims at facilitating the agenda of women's economic empowerment.

"While the hybrid work model is great for flexibility, the expectation to respond immediately in order to show accountability that developed during the pandemic, has persisted even now. This means there is no 'off' time for employees. Women especially, are disproportionately affected as they are still expected to be primary caregivers of the household. In India, women spend almost five hours per day more than men on unpaid work at home. Imagine the length of the work day plus the time spent doing household work - where is the rest? This is how their mental health begins to get impacted," she said.

The right to disconnect apart, Ms. Mitra pointed to the fact that several countries have now moved to four day weeks, recognising the importance of weekends and time away from work. "Studies have shown that when these sort of arrangements are in place, it not only raises productivity, it boosts the mental health of the entire workforce. Why can't the global south begin to think about this," she asked. (zubeda.h@thehindu.co.in)



## Editorial



## By another name

Courts should act against fake medicine, not just control advertising

On August 27, a Bench of the Supreme Court of India found itself reaching, once again, for idioms over a matter involving misleading advertisements of ayurveda, sidha, and unani products. Earlier this year, another Bench had concluded proceedings against Patanjali Ayurved over its defiance of an order to not publicise unproven or unprovable medicinal claims attached to its products. Towards the end of that matter, various State-level regulatory agencies were finally roused to act against Patanjali Ayurved over these claims while the Court ordered it to publish media advertisements apologising for its actions. While the responses of the State bodies to the company are still evolving, the Court's own verdict seemed to embody a belief that nothing more could be done – and this belief casts the Court's current ire against the Ministry of AYUSH in a particular light. India's drug manufacturers and regulators are caught between ensuring high quality, which leads to higher manufacturing costs, while keeping consumer prices down so that patients can access the drugs they need. Unfortunately, neither regulators nor manufacturers have navigated this tension in the patients' favour. The AYUSH Ministry's actions have further complicated this scenario by allowing businesses to register all sorts of products as "Ayurvedic" (as illustrated in the case of its licence, and later cancelled, to a Bengaluru-based company to sell milk as "Ayurvedic proprietary medicine") and by attempting to evade existing quality rules, presumably to grease the wheels of businesses.

With the Ministry's cynical attempt now to sidestep Rule 170 of the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules 1945, which penalises misleading advertisements of ayurveda, sidha, and unani products, the Court confronts an old tendency in a new disguise. Public apologies and *post facto* action by regulatory bodies may have been the end of the line against one company. The Court may also seem sated by a demand, as it spelt out in its May 7 order, that all advertisers self-declare that they will not publish misleading advertisements. But similar concessionary measures will falter against a Ministry. Medicine quality and manufacturer inspections are disuniform, more so in the alternative medicines space, and regulating advertisements has emerged as a last-ditch backstop against bad products entering the market. In the face of progressively weakening protections against what is ultimately fake medicine, the most preferred outcome in the present matter would be for the Court to look at past declarations – self-made or otherwise – and into rectifying the quality-control regime, particularly to empower it, protect it from political capture, and bring alternative medicines under its purview.

## Biotech enigma

Biotechnology initiatives need long-term capital investments

Earlier this week the Cabinet cleared a proposal, though without specifying a budget, called BioE3 or Biotechnology for Economy, Environment and Employment. Its thrust is to boost manufacturing in the biotechnology sector. Since 1986, India has had a dedicated department for biotechnology, and which deserves substantial credit. For instance, the progress in vaccine development, diagnostics and biologicals, that has bolstered India's reputation as a "vaccine factory", is due to the initiatives of this department. However, biotechnology did not quite spawn the equivalent of the IT revolution. There is much more to an industrialised biotechnology sector beyond vaccines. There are billion-dollar conglomerates today that rest on high-value microbes, gene-modification technologies, bio-plastics, bio-materials, and high-precision medical devices. However, despite the know-how and human resource capital, only a few Indian biotech have global resonance, as there are few local manufacturers who can supply Indian laboratories/startups with the ingredients and devices to make products. The reliance on imports means that India loses its international competitiveness. The BioE3 policy aims to correct this.

In the last four decades, India has funded biotech research institutions but now sees that it needs to be going beyond and setting up companies, in public private partnership mode, to bolster biotechnology manufacturing. There are six verticals that this initiative envisages: bio-based chemicals and enzymes; functional foods and smart proteins; precision biopharmaceuticals; climate-resilient agriculture; carbon capture, and futuristic marine and space research. Futurists have been saying that the era of fossil-fuel industrialisation is over and humanity will have to rely on the natural world – for food and for making consumer products. This is to solve the global problem of non-biodegradable waste and carbon emissions. Future industries must be grounded in environmentally benign products, and this is impossible without sophisticated biotechnology. By setting up bio-foundries and bio-artificial intelligence hubs, the policy hopes there will be avenues for a variety of biotechnologists to congregate. Well intentioned this may be, but India's woes with manufacturing have chronic causes. Without establishing enabling grounds for long-term capital investment – and these have little to do with biotechnology per se – top-down initiatives will have limited impact. The BioE3 policy must be a deeply collaborative effort between Centre and States. Rather than expect quick returns, the government must provide financial and infrastructural support over the long term.

## Connecting the dots in the Kyiv visit



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In a historical and widely publicised meeting, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv, drawing significant attention from academics and journalists worldwide. While India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) emphasised that the meeting was not intended as an effort at mediation, the timing and the nature of this visit raise several questions, especially considering India's traditionally cautious approach to foreign policy. Although the MEA was careful not to attract press attention due to the nature of the visit, much of the discussion in post-meeting briefings by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar centred around the potential role of India in mediating the conflict. The visit came at a difficult time for any immediate peace initiative by India as Ukraine opened a new front of war with a surprise incursion in the Kursk region.

## A consistent foreign policy approach

Historically rooted in non-alignment and strategic autonomy, India's foreign policy has always sought to balance its relationships with global powers and a peaceful negotiation of territorial disputes. Since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022, India has avoided taking sides, much to the ire of the western states, which have wanted India to condemn the Russian role in the conflict. This approach is consistent with India's broader strategy of managing complex geopolitical landscapes without compromising its national interests. India has always advocated respect for the United Nations charter and peaceful settlement of disputes through institutions such as the UN.

In February this year, Mr. Jaishankar, in an interview with the German economic daily, *Handelsblatt*, hinted at the possibility of India's interest in playing a mediating role in the conflict if approached. However, he emphasised that New Delhi would not take the initiative on its own.

Given this backdrop, Mr. Modi's visit to Ukraine had some sort of peace initiative on the agenda. The possibility of enhancing bilateral relations with Ukraine appeared slim. India is not dependent on Ukraine for trade, defence, or technology. Opening a new front of bilateral engagement with Kyiv at this point would be risky and fraught with danger. However, if we carefully connect the dots, a possible rationale for the visit begins to appear.

The visit is being interpreted by many analysts as a balancing act by India, especially after Mr. Modi's recent visit to Russia, which attracted criticism from western powers. By engaging with both Russia and Ukraine, India could position itself as a neutral player in the conflict, reinforcing its image as a responsible global actor committed to peace and stability while also projecting sovereignty in dealing with issues of international politics. This approach aligns with

India's historical role as a mediator in international conflicts, dating back to its involvement in the Korean War armistice negotiations and the Colombo Plan.

A possible broader strategy, the interests Moreover, the visit could be part of a broader strategy to play a more active role as a mediator or "communicator" in the language of the MEA. During his visit to India in March, Ukrainian Foreign Affairs Minister Dmytro Kuleba explicitly requested India's help in restoring "just and lasting peace" in Ukraine. This appeal allows India to step into a more active role in the negotiation, leveraging its unique position as a country that maintains strong ties with both Moscow and Washington. This attempt is also being seen by analysts as putting weight to the already ongoing effort from Global South countries in the negotiation. India, as one of the prominent members of the Global South, is trying to play its role in achieving peace in this conflict.

To understand the full implications of Mr. Modi's visit, it is important to consider the interests of key international stakeholders in this war, particularly the United States and European countries. The U.S. has consistently emphasised that any negotiations over the Ukrainian conflict should only occur from a position of strength. The recent advances by Ukrainian forces, particularly in the Kursk region, could be considered as a part of this broader strategy to negotiate from a position of strength. A temporary cessation of hostilities or a limited peace agreement facilitated by a neutral party such as India might serve the interests of all parties involved. For the U.S., such an outcome could provide relief from the escalating conflict/war while allowing U.S. President Joe Biden to focus on other pressing foreign policy challenges such as the one in West Asia.

European countries, meanwhile, are desperate to see a resolution to the conflict, especially as the war continues to hurt their economies and increases energy security concerns. With winter approaching, European countries face the prospect of further economic hardship due to energy shortages and inflationary pressures. A temporary peace, even if not a comprehensive solution, would alleviate some of these challenges and provide breathing room for European policymakers. Among all the stakeholders, Mr. Biden may be the most desperate for an end to the war. Since announcing his decision not to seek re-election in 2024, Mr. Biden has focused on solidifying his foreign policy legacy, particularly in areas where former U.S. President Donald Trump might diverge significantly. Mr. Biden's decision to step back from the presidential race could free him from domestic political constraints, allowing him to pursue important diplomatic initiatives. One such initiative could be brokering a solution to

the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Taking this forward, Mr. Modi also spoke to Mr. Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin, probably to apprise them of his visit. For Mr. Biden, bringing Russia to the negotiation table before the end of his tenure would represent a significant foreign policy achievement, particularly in light of Mr. Trump's stated intention to withdraw support from Ukraine unless it agrees to negotiate with Russia. Mr. Biden's reliance on India, which enjoys good relations with Russia, could be crucial in achieving this objective.

From Moscow's perspective, India represents the best option for mediation. The long-standing friendship between Russia and India, forged during the Cold War and maintained through decades of military and economic cooperation, provides a level of trust that would be difficult to replicate with other potential mediators, even not so with China. For Mr. Putin, engaging in negotiations through a neutral party such as India could offer a honourable exit from the conflict/war without appearing to surrender to western pressure.

## Impact on India

For Mr. Modi, this diplomatic initiative could be a legacy-defining moment. Despite his considerable achievements on the international stage, he has faced significant challenges on the domestic front, including a disappointing performance in the 2024 general election and growing economic concerns. A successful mediation effort in the Russia-Ukraine conflict could bolster his reputation as a global statesman and enhance his standing both at home and abroad.

Mr. Modi's involvement in resolving the conflict would align with his broader vision of India as a "Vishwamitra", a country that contributes to global economic and technological advancements and plays a central role in maintaining international peace and security.

Despite the potential benefits of India's involvement, the path to achieving even a temporary peace in Ukraine is fraught with challenges. Both the parties to the war have taken maximalist positions, with either side refusing to budge from its stand. The geopolitical interests of the U.S. and Russia are deeply entrenched, and both powers are unlikely to agree on a peace deal proposed by the other. Moreover, the involvement of various international actors in this war, make any negotiation process highly complicated.

However, India's unique position as a trusted partner of both Russia and the West could allow it to facilitate a temporary ceasefire or a limited peace agreement that serves the immediate interests of all parties involved. Such an outcome, while not a permanent solution, would be a significant step towards de-escalating the conflict and providing much-needed relief to all the parties involved.

## Moving the spotlight to grassroots democracy

The Election Commission of India (ECI), with its track record of conducting free and fair elections, and on time, to Parliament and State legislatures, has emerged as one of independent India's most credible institutions. Yet, there are 34 State Election Commissions (SECs) that need serious attention and strengthening.

## Systemic disempowerment of SECs

The SECs were brought into existence by Articles 243K and 243ZA of the Constitution (introduced by the 73rd and 74th amendments in 1993), which vested them with the superintendence, direction, and control of the preparation of the electoral rolls for, and the conduct of, all elections to panchayats and urban local governments (ULGs). In reality, however, SECs are increasingly disempowered and, in certain cases, even in litigation with their State governments.

In a recent case, the Karnataka SEC filed a contempt petition against the Government of Karnataka for reneging on its commitment to the High Court in response to an earlier petition filed by the SEC to allow it to proceed with the delimitation of panchayat raj institutions and conduct elections (already delayed by over three and a half years). The Karnataka government had assured the High Court in December 2023 that it would publish the delimitation and reservation details within two weeks to enable the SEC to conduct elections. In another set of cases filed by the Andhra Pradesh SEC and several others in 2020, the Supreme Court struck down an ordinance of Andhra Pradesh, which hindered elections to the panchayat raj institutions.

Our analysis of the performance audits of the implementation of the 74th Constitutional (Amendment) Act by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India across 18 States



**Srikanth Viswanathan**  
CEO at the Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy



**Santosh Nargund**  
Head, Participatory Governance at the Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy

Empowering and reforming the State Election Commissions are crucial steps

shows that 1,560 out of 2,240 urban local governments (70%) did not have an elected council at the time of the CAG audit. The CAG, in its Karnataka report, observed that the disempowerment of SECs is, more often than not, the cause for delays in on time elections. Such delays undermine local governments and erode the trust of citizens in these important public institutions.

Janaagraha's Annual Survey of India's City Systems (ASICS), 2023 shows that only 11 out of 34 States and Union Territories have empowered SECs to conduct ward delimitation. These States and Union Territories (namely, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Daman and Diu, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala, Ladakh, Maharashtra, and West Bengal) account for only 35% of India's population, as in the 2011 Census.

## Electoral reforms to strengthen third tier

Regular and fair elections to local governments are non-negotiable for meaningful grass-roots democracy and ensuring effective first-mile service delivery in the cities and the villages of the country. The requirement to conduct elections before the expiry of the five-year term of elected local governments is a constitutional mandate and must be as sacrosanct as the elections to the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabhas. To ensure this, SECs must be fully empowered on all matters of local government elections, on a par with the Election Commission of India, as observed by the Supreme Court in *Kishan Singh Tomar vs Municipal Corporation of the City of Ahmedabad and Others* (2006). The following reforms are a must in order to bring about this change:

First, there is a need to bring SECs on a par

with the Election Commission of India in terms of transparency and independence in constitution and appointment. Notwithstanding the recent dilution in the case of the Election Commission of India, we can not aspire to a three-member SEC which is appointed by a committee that comprises the Chief Minister, Leader of Opposition in the Legislative Assembly (Vidhan Sabha), and the Chief Justice of the High Court? A State government-appointed SEC is just not working. The Union government should amend the 74th Constitutional (Amendment) Act in this context.

Second, the delimitation of ward boundaries and reservations of seats must be mandated only at fixed intervals, say once in 10 years. The absence of this check can lead to State governments acting arbitrarily, causing undue delays in elections to local governments.

Third, the powers of ward delimitation and reservation of seats for local governments must be vested in the SECs. Further, the SECs must be entrusted with reservations to the positions of mayors/presidents, deputy mayors/vice-presidents of the local governments, say once in 10 years, where applicable. Elections to these positions are delayed inordinately after local elections as State governments fail to publish the reservation roster to these positions on time.

Finally, malpractices by presiding officers appointed by the State governments have also emerged – an example is the election of the Mayor in the Chandigarh Municipal Corporation Council in 2024. SECs, therefore, should possibly be entrusted with the election of mayors, presidents, chairpersons, and standing committees.

The views expressed are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## President's anguish

The rape and the murder of a trainee lady doctor at the R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital, Kolkata is an unpardonable crime. It is heartening that the President of India (Page 1, "Counter mindset that sees women as less capable: Murmu", August 29) has declared that "enough is enough". However, could the ruling party at the Centre be gunning for the

ouster of the Mamata Banerjee-led government in West Bengal? This is an unanswered question in the minds of the people.

**Tharicus S. Fernando,**  
Chennai

Rising crimes against women are a jolt to society. We have a fundamental duty to contribute towards bringing order to ensure dignity and respect for women, so that they can

live with a sense of pride, freedom and confidence.

**R. Sivakumar,**  
Chennai

Rarely does an incumbent first citizen of the country express his/her concern over incidents that have an adverse impact on the well-being of society. The phrase 'enough is enough' is apt and cogent.

**V. Johan Dhanakumar,**  
Chennai

The remark made by the President that 'enough is enough', has not come a day too soon. But her words would have carried greater moral authority had she referred to the atrocities in Manipur and crimes in BJP-ruled States.

**G. David Milton,**  
Maruthanadu, Tamil Nadu

**Mental health on campuses**  
Mental health on college campuses has become a

prominent issue as students face rising academic, social, and financial pressures. There is stress. There are burnouts. According to the American College Health Association, 60% of students were reported to have felt anxiety and 40% experienced depression that was severe enough to impact daily college life. Academic pressure, a lack of support, personal challenges and financial

stress contribute to depression. There is a need for comprehensive mental health-care systems that can support students holistically. Institutions must invest more in mental health resources to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness and create an environment where students feel comfortable seeking help.

**Jessica Olive,**  
Chennai



# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

**Net worth of Adani, the wealthiest Indian as per Hurun 2024 list**

**11.6** In ₹ lakh crore. Gautam Adani's net worth shot up 95% to ₹11.6 lakh crore last year, which helped him replace Mukesh Ambani to become the richest Indian. **PH**

**Number of Afghan refugees living in Pakistan: UN**

**2.18** In million. Pakistan will soon launch the second phase of repatriation of Afghan refugees. It had launched the first round of repatriation of "undocumented aliens" in November last year. **PH**

**The SIM cards seized during ATS telephone exchange bust**

**3,788** The Maharashtra police's Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) busted an illegal telephone exchange in Pune, which caused revenue loss to the Telecom department. **PH**

**The number of people who have died in the Gujarat floods**

**28** Of those who died, some were hit by falling trees. Rivers have burst their banks and more than 30,000 people have fled their homes. About 1,856 people were rescued by disaster and army officials. **APP**

**Fine on Air India for not redressing flight cancellations**

**10** In ₹ lakh. The Director General of Civil Aviation imposed this penalty on Air India Express for non-payment of compensation to passengers of cancelled flights. **PH**

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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# Analysing the Gender Budget of 2024-25

What are the different components of the Gender Budget Statement? Have instances of missing allocations been reported by experts with respect to the Gender Budget? How should these anomalies be rectified by the government?

## EXPLAINER

Sona Mitra  
Sonakshi Chaudhry  
Sruthi Kutty

### The story so far:

**W**omen-led development remains at the core of announcements made by the Finance Minister (FM) in this year's Budget. This commitment to women empowerment was reflected in Budget allocations to pro-women programmes, as reported by the Gender Budget Statement (GBS). The GB reached 1% of GDP estimates in 2024-25 for the first time, and overall allocations currently stand at more than ₹3 lakh crore for pro-women programmes.

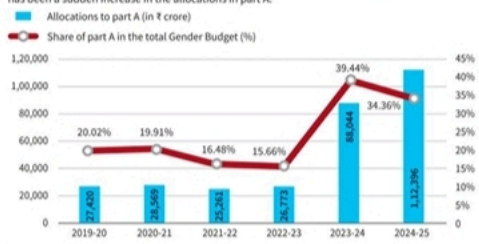
**What is the reason for the increase?** The GBS, since it was first introduced in 2005-06, consistently reported an average share of 5% of the total budgetary allocations, with marginal ups and downs. This year is special as the share of allocations to pro-women schemes stands at approximately 6.8% of the total budget expenditure for 2024-25, which is way above the usual trends and marks a positive departure from status quo.

The increase in GB allocations are driven by two factors. A part of this increase has been on account of the newly included Part 'C', a third part in the GBS that reports pro-women schemes with less than 30% provisioning for women. The PM Kisan scheme in the agriculture sector has been reported in part C with an outlay of ₹15,000 crore. This is 25% of the total outlay of the programme. The second factor driving the overall increase is the increment in part A of the GBS. Part A reports expenditures in schemes with 100% allocation for women.

Part A had previously constituted 15-17% of overall allocations reported in the GBS till BE 2023-24. Since BE 2023-24, there was a sudden increase in the

Figure 1: The allocations under part A and the share in the total Budget

Part A reports expenditures in schemes with 100% allocation for women. Since BE 2023-24, there has been a sudden increase in the allocations in part A.



allocations in part A that raised the share of pro-women schemes with 100% allocations for women to almost 40% (figure 1). This was mainly due to a change in the reporting where the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) – rural and urban – started getting reflected in part A instead of part B. Part B of the GBS reports programmes with allocations of 30-99% for women. Hence, only a part of PMAY was reported earlier. Beginning last year, the entire allocation of ₹80,670 crore in PMAY for 2024-25BE has been reported under part A thus driving the up allocations. Such reporting of PMAY may not be entirely accurate as not all beneficiaries are women.

**Have there been other instances of over-reporting/under-reporting?** Over-reporting may also be found in other instances such as the PM Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP), which aims to assist entrepreneurs in setting up micro businesses in the non-farm sector. The GBS reported an allocation of ₹920 crore or 40% of the total allocation to PMEGP, without providing any

**The Gender Budget Statement consistently reported an average share of 5% of the total budgetary allocations, with marginal ups and downs. This year is special as the share of allocations to pro-women schemes stands at approximately 6.8% of the total budget expenditure for 2024-25**

explanation for such reporting.

On the other hand, missing allocations often deflate the amount spent by programmes on women's needs. For example, this year for the first time the entire allocation to the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) is reflected in part A of the GBS, indicating that 100% of its outlay is dedicated to women and girls, which is technically correct and should have been done earlier. In 2023-24BE, only 50% of the scheme's total outlay used to be reflected in part B of the GBS. The GBS this year has also correctly reported increased allocations for the Ministry of Electronics & IT. But it missed

out reporting pro-women allocations in the schemes for women entrepreneurs such as PM Vishwakarma, SVANidhi, and Stand-Up India.

In another instance, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), which has the third highest allocation among schemes for women in the GBS, is currently reported under part B with ₹28,886.67 crore which is 33.6% of its total outlay. It is important to note that women constituted 59.3% of all person days under MGNREGA as of December 2023, and should have received commensurate wages from the total MGNREGA budget, yet only 33.6% gets reflected in the GBS.

### What next?

These anomalies can be minimised by incorporating explanations for the entries made in the GBS. Incorporating explanations for allocations in GBS would not only ensure accounting accuracy but will help in gender audits and provide pathways for improved gender outcomes in government programmes. Several years of advocating for improved reporting in the GBS by experts is reflected in the inclusion of a third part. The above anomalies in reporting are reflections of the GBS still not having a scientific and systematic approach.

Efforts to reduce misreporting and improve the quality of the GBS is evident, but there is still a long way to go. The need for including rationale is also to maintain that detailed reporting is not a mere exercise in increasing the quantum of allocations reported for women's development – it is to ensure actual spending for women in all government programmes, that are well planned and designed to include women's needs from its inception. Gender responsive budgeting is a powerful tool to close the gender gaps in an economy.

Sona Mitra and Sruthi Kutty work with IWGAGE, an initiative of LEAD at Krea University, and Sonakshi Chaudhry works at The Quantum Hub (TQH Consulting).

## THE GIST

▼ The GB reached 1% of GDP estimates in 2024-25 for the first time, and overall allocations currently stand at more than ₹3 lakh crore for pro-women programmes.

▼ The increase in GB allocations are driven by two factors. A part of this increase has been on account of the newly included Part 'C', a third part in the GBS that reports pro-women schemes with less than 30% provisioning for women.

▼ The second factor driving the overall increase is the increment in part A of the GBS. Part A reports expenditures in schemes with 100% allocation for women.

# On the controversy over lateral entry into the civil services

Why did the Prime Minister's Office intervene and withdraw the advertisement regarding lateral entry for different positions in government? What is a spoils system and how does it work?

Rangarajan, R

### The story so far:

**T**he Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) had withdrawn its advertisement pertaining to lateral recruitment for 45 posts of Joint Secretaries (JS), Directors and Deputy Secretaries (DS) in the government. This follows objections raised by coalition partners and the Opposition as well as the intervention of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) about the need for reservation in such lateral recruitment.

### What is merit versus spoils system?

Merit system entails appointments to government posts after a rigorous selection process by an independent authority. In India, this commenced in the year 1858 when the British introduced the Indian Civil Service (ICS) to select officers for administering the country. After independence, the UPSC conducts

exams to select officers for IAS, IPS and other central services. The merit system is aimed at building career bureaucrats who are expected to function without any political leanings and provide independent advice to the incumbent political executive.

The spoils system on the other hand works on the adage 'to the victor belong the spoils'. It is a system where the incumbent political executive appoints its supporters to various posts in the government. It has its origins in the U.S., and continued until 1883 when it was replaced largely by a merit system. At present, out of more than 2.8 million federal government posts, only around 4,000 senior posts are directly appointed by the President.

### What is lateral entry?

IAS and other central service officers with more than 15 years of experience are generally posted as JS to head various departments. It is a cutting-edge post

where the officers prepare cabinet notes, handle parliamentary questions, liaise with officers of other ministries and State governments.

Lateral entry is when executives from the private sector, public sector undertakings and academia are appointed to senior and middle management positions in the government. There have been instances of lateral entrants who were technocrats being appointed at secretary level posts since independence. Notable examples include former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, economist Montek Singh Ahluwalia, agriculture scientist M.S. Swaminathan etc. The Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2005) and the NITI Aayog in 2017 had also recommended lateral entrants to bring specialised knowledge and skills into government.

### What are the pros and cons?

Lateral entry brings with it certain

tangible benefits. First, it brings much needed specialisation for niche areas of governance like emerging technologies, semiconductors, climate change, digital economy, cyber security etc. Second, it results in infusion of fresh ideas from experts to revitalize the system. Third, it also has the potential of making career bureaucrats more responsive thereby bringing in a positive change.

However, it has its own set of significant limitations. The domain expertise and specialisation of IAS officers in their field experience that is hard to match by outside entrants. There can be coordination issues with career bureaucrats. It may also result in opaqueness and conflicts of interests while hiring recruits from private sector.

### What can be the way forward?

Notable lateral entrants in the past have been appointees at the secretary level which is the highest position in government departments. At this level, the lateral entrant will be capable of influencing policy decisions. Their performance will also be subjected to greater scrutiny. Even if appointments are to be made at more operational levels of JS, Directors and DS posts, it should be in line with public policy.

In his book *The Tyranny of Merit*, political philosopher Michael Sandel discusses the flaws of placing too much emphasis on merit without pursuing equity. Hence, appointment at these levels should coalesce technical

competence with reservation and social justice. Therefore, the intervention from the PMO in the recent episode is welcome.

However, excessive focus on lateral entrants is missing the larger picture. The issues plaguing the system cannot be set right with just a handful of lateral recruits. While there can be genuine grievances about the red-tapism, inefficiency and corruption in administration, it is equally true that career bureaucrats work in a challenging environment. Since governments deal with public money, the system is bound by a plethora of rules. Government performs various roles where the objectives are intangible, which the private sector would not do. Compounding these operational challenges is excessive political interference. A merit system being morphed into a spoils system is a serious threat to Indian bureaucracy and various institutions headed by career bureaucrats.

Autonomy of career bureaucrats is essential for their effective functioning. This includes reasonable independence with respect to postings, tenures and transfers. In this regard, as per Supreme Court judgment in the *T.S.R. Subramanian case* (2013), Civil Service Boards headed by top bureaucrats should be effectively constituted and strengthened at the Centre and States.

Rangarajan, R is a former IAS officer and author of *Polity Simplified*. Views expressed are personal.



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## On wings of microlight aircraft, helping birds find lost routes

ARJUN SENGUPTA  
NEW DELHI, AUGUST 29

HOW DO you teach a migratory bird where to fly to? This was the question facing conservationists trying to re-establish the northern bald ibis — known for its distinctive black-and-green plumage, bald red head and long curved beak — in the wild in Europe.

These birds — known in German as Waldrapp — once soared over much of Europe, the Middle East, and northern Africa. By the 17th century, they were effectively hunted to extinction in the wild, with only a few colonies surviving in Morocco and Syria.

Over the last two decades, breeding and rewilding efforts have borne fruit. Biologist Johannes Fritz and his Austria-based conservation group Waldrappteam have brought the bird's population in central Europe from zero to almost 300 since 2002.

But these birds, born of ancestors raised in zoos, do not instinctively know where to

migrate to in winter. Early reintroduction attempts failed because they did not go to suitable wintering grounds, and perished in the cold. This led conservationists to adopt a fascinating new strategy.

## Flying with birds

Inspired by the 1996 film *Fly Away Home* in which the protagonist pilots a tiny airplane to show orphaned geese their migratory path, Waldrappteam's scientist "foster parents" use ultralight aircraft to lead young birds down long migration routes.

To prepare for the journey, days-old chicks are removed from their breeding colonies and brought to human foster parents with whom they bond and develop a trusting relationship.

"We take good care of them and see that they are healthy birds... Also, we interact with them," Barbara Steininger, a Waldrappteam foster mother, told *The Associated Press*. Steininger and other foster parents sitting in the aircraft wave at the birds and encourage them as they fly over alpine meadows and foothills.

The migration in 2022, supported by airborne foster parents. *The Associated Press*

"It's an almost surreal experience, to be up there in the sky with these birds, experiencing them in the air, perfectly shaped for flying. It's a touching and extraordinary experience," Fritz told *The Guardian*.

## Climate challenge

Initially, the birds were taught to fly from Bavaria to Tuscany in central Italy. This was the route that wild Waldrapps in central Europe historically flew. The first independent migration took place in 2011, and many birds have since flown on the roughly 550-km route.

But the effects of climate change have meant that these birds are now flying later in the season. This leads them to cross the Alps in colder, more dangerous weather, and without the help of warm currents of air that rise upward and enable flying birds to conserve energy.

This is why Waldrappteam pioneered a new, albeit much longer route last year, from Bavaria to Andalusia in southern Spain. This year's route is roughly 2,800 km, about 300 km longer than last year's. Fritz set off earlier this month with a flock of 36 birds from

an airfield in Paterzell in upper Bavaria. The journey will be completed in early October.

## Blueprint for others

Global warming threatens plant and animal species around the world. For migratory birds that undertake lengthy journeys to find ideal ecological conditions and habitats for feeding, breeding, and raising their young, climate change poses particular challenges. Studies show global warming is altering migration patterns, both routes and timing, exposing birds to new environments and conditions, affecting availability of food and habitat, and disrupting interactions between species. Some bird species have chosen not to migrate altogether, or to migrate to locations where they become invasive species, posing threats to others.

This is why the conservation of the northern bald ibis is significant. "This method which we've developed with the bald ibis is urgently needed for an increasing number of other migratory bird species," Fritz told *The Guardian*, adding that this is "a flagship project which indicates what is possible".

WITH INPUTS FROM THE AP

## THESE WORDS MEAN

## JIU-JITSU, AIKIDO

Two martial arts which trace their origin in Japan, and are popular around the world for self-defence

RAHUL GANDHI, the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha, on Thursday said that he had "a daily routine of practising jiu-jitsu every evening" during his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra which saw him interact with young boys and girls.

"Our goal was to introduce these young minds to the beauty of the 'Gentle Art' — a harmonious blend of meditation, jiu-jitsu, Aikido, and non-violent conflict resolution techniques," he posted on X.

Rahul Gandhi during one of his yatra's martial arts sessions. *PTI*

## Jiu-jitsu, the 'gentle art'

A family of martial arts originating in Japan, jiu-jitsu translates to "gentle art" — "jiu" means "soft/supple/gentle" and "jitsu" means "art/technique". Jiu-jitsu is a somewhat inaccurate (in terms of pronunciation), albeit popular romanisation of the Japanese word.

Jiu-jitsu likely originated in late 16th century Japan, during the age of the samurai — Japan's warrior class which held significant political power between the 12th and 19th centuries. Samurai warriors developed various grappling and self-defence techniques for situations in which they were disarmed during battle.

Since striking with bare hands against armoured samurai was ineffective, practitioners came up with efficient ways of neutralising the opponent in the form of pins, joint locks, and throws. At the heart of these techniques was the principle of manipulating the opponent's energy against them, rather than directly opposing it.

## Aikido, a jiu-jitsu derivative

Aikido is an offshoot of jiu-jitsu, which was developed by martial artist Morihei Ueshiba in the early 20th century. Aikido literally means the "way of harmonising energy", and its goal is to defend oneself without hurting the opponent. Aikido practitioners, thus, deflect strikes rather than overpower their adversary, and try to "match the opponent's force".

According to Ueshiba's teachings, an aikido practitioner's primary goal is to overcome oneself rather than cultivating

violence or aggression. This is why there are no aikido competitions. Rather, practitioners carry out demonstrations, and engage in a number of practices for their holistic mental and physical growth.

Some have criticised aikido's worth as a real-world fighting technique, arguing that aikido practitioners cannot hold their own against other, more violent forms of fighting. Others say that the techniques and discipline that it inculcates are important not just for self-defence but also as life skills.

## Jiu-jitsu's many offshoots

Jiu-jitsu also boasts many other offshoots, both originating in Japan and elsewhere in the world. These include:

■ Judo, which was developed in the late 19th century from several traditional styles of jiu-jitsu, and became an Olympic sport in the 1964 Tokyo Games;

■ Sambo, developed by the Soviet Red Army in the 1920s to improve soldiers' hand-to-hand combat abilities;

■ Brazilian jiu-jitsu was developed in the 1920s, and is today one of the most popular self-defence styles, which revolves around the principle of a smaller, weaker person defeating a bigger, stronger opponent with the help of leverage and weight distribution; and

■ Mixed martial arts (MMA), the most popular combat sport today, borrows heavily from jiu-jitsu and other styles which it has influenced. **ENS**

## EXPLAINED POLICY

## Assam's Muslim marriage law

Bill passed by the Assembly seeks to prevent child marriage, check polygamy, and end the role of kasis in the process of registration of marriages. Some have called the new procedure needlessly complex

SUKRITA BARUAH  
GUWAHATI, AUGUST 29

THE ASSAM Legislative Assembly on Thursday passed the Assam Compulsory Registration of Muslim Marriages and Divorces Bill, 2024, a proposed law with the stated objectives of preventing "child marriages" and "marriages without the consent of the parties", and to "check polygamy".

The Assam Assembly also repealed an existing 89-year-old Act for the registration of Muslim marriages and divorces in the state, confirming an Ordinance promulgated five months ago.

## The now-repealed law

The registration of marriages and divorces between Muslims in Assam had been taking place under the colonial-era Assam Muslim Marriage and Divorce Registration Act, 1935.

This Act was in line with Muslim personal law, and authorised the state to grant a licence to "any person, being a Muslim" to register such marriages and divorces. There were 95 such Muslim registrars or kasis across the state, and they were deemed to be public servants.

## Govt's rationale for repeal

The Cabinet decided to scrap the law in February this year. In March, the government notified an Ordinance repealing the 1935 Act with immediate effect. There has been no legislation governing the registration of marriages and divorces between Muslims in Assam since then.

On Thursday, the Assembly passed the Assam Repealing Bill, 2024 to replace the Ordinance.

The government's main argument for doing away with the 1935 Act was that it allowed the registration of marriages of and between minors.

It had in particular pointed to Section 8 of the repealed Act that lay down the procedure to make an application to the registrar, which said, "...provided that if the bride and groom, or both, be minors, application shall be made on their behalf by their respective lawful guardians..."

Section 10 of the Act, which laid down the procedure for making entries in the marriage register, had the same provision.

## Features of the new law

The Bill passed by the Assembly on

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma in Guwahati on Wednesday. *PTI*

Thursday regulates marriage between two Muslim persons which "includes 'nikah' or any other ceremony by which two persons are made husband and wife following Muslim personal law and Islamic rituals".

■ There is no role for kasis in registering marriages under the new law. The registering officer shall be the government's Marriage and Divorce Registrar in that jurisdiction, who is the Sub-Registrar.

■ For a marriage to be registered under the new law, seven conditions must be fulfilled. Important among these conditions: the woman should have attained 18 years of age and the man 21 years of age before the marriage; "the marriage has been solemnized on free consent of both parties"; at least one of the parties must be resident within the district of the Marriage and Divorce Registrar for 30 days before giving notice of registration to the officer; and the parties shall not be within the prohibited degree of relationship as per Muslim law.

■ The parties are required to give the registering officer at least 30 days' notice before the intended registration, with documents attesting to their identities, age, and place of residence. This provision is similar to one in the Special Marriage Act.

■ Objections to the marriage are allowed within the 30-day period on grounds of violation of any of the conditions laid down in the Bill, which will then be inquired into by

the Registrar. If the Registrar after inquiry refuses to solemnize the marriage, the Bill provides for two stages of appeal, to the District Registrar and then, the Registrar General of Marriages.

■ The registering officers must act if they find that either of the parties is underage. If the officer makes this discovery during the scrutiny of documents, she must immediately report it to the jurisdictional Child Marriage Protection Officer appointed under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, and transmit all relevant records "for the effective prosecution of persons contravening the provisions of the... Act and for initiating appropriate legal action".

■ An officer who "knowingly and wilfully" registers a marriage that violates any of the conditions is liable to be imprisoned for up to a year and fined up to Rs 50,000.

■ The Bill states that its provisions "shall be in addition to and not in derogation of the provisions of the prevailing Muslim personal law". However, under Muslim personal law, the marriage of a bride who has attained puberty is considered valid — and puberty is presumed, in the absence of evidence, on completion of the age of 15 years. Earlier this month, the Supreme Court agreed to an early hearing of a plea by the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights seeking an authoritative pronouncement on whether Muslim personal law allowing child mar-

riages will prevail over the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006. This is a question on which different High Courts have made differing observations.

## Debate in the House

Aminul Islam, MLA of the opposition AIUDF from Mankachar, questioned the need to repeal the 1935 Act if the primary objective was to prevent child marriages — this objective could have been achieved by amending Sections 8 and 10 of the old Act, he said.

Islam argued that the 1935 Act had been amended as recently as in 2010 to make registration under the Act compulsory; it had been voluntary originally.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma responded that these amendments would not have sufficed, and that the government's intention was also to end the role of the kasis. He referred to the government's crackdown against child marriages last year, in which more than 4,000 people had been arrested — mostly men who had married underage girls, and their relatives and religious functionaries who had solemnized these marriages.

"We found that the kasis register child marriages. When the cases came up in the High Court, they said that they have the power to register child marriages... and the High Court gave them bail because kasis have the power to register child marriages under the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Registration under the Act. It means that they (kasis) are not opposed to child marriage in principle," the chief minister said, adding that registration by a government officer will increase accountability.

Sarma referred to the Supreme Court's 2006 verdict in *Seema vs. Ashwani Kumar* in which the court had directed the central and state governments to ensure compulsory registration of marriages. "That means that the state has been given the responsibility of getting marriages registered. The state can't rely on a kazi arrangement for this," he said, referring to kasis as "private entities".

Islam also said that the simpler process of registering under the older Act had been replaced by a more complex one, drawn from the provisions of the Special Marriage Act.

"Most of the provisions have been drawn from the Special Marriage Act which is an option for inter-religious marriages... It can be terrible... to make the registration of marriages between two Muslims so difficult," he said, pointing out that "lakhs of people" would be impacted.

law preventing us from applying for the sites" he said.

According to Priyank, applications were received for 43 of the 193 sites. "Where other applicants for the site, and were we under the BJP? We have been running the trust for the past two decades. There is the *quid pro quo*?" he said.

He alleged that the BJP was targeting the Kharge family for opposing the RSS, and the controversy had been "pre-scripted" to destabilise the government.

It has been pointed out that in the last days of Basavaraj Bommal's BJP government last year, Nirami Sugars Ltd, which is owned by then Industries Minister Murugesu Nirani, received approval for a Rs 86.91 crore project to expand the capacity of its sugar plant in Bagalkot district.

The in-principle approval came on March 29, 2023, the day the Model Code of Conduct came into effect.

with February 23 as the last date to apply — according to Narayanansamy, this small 14-day window was to "make sure no one knew about it".

The State Level Single Window Clearance Committee reviewed the applications on March 4, and the list of allottees was cleared a day later at a meeting chaired by Industries Minister M B Patil. According to Narayanansamy's complaint to the Governor, allocation to the Kharges when Priyank is a minister amounted to a conflict of interest, "a criminal breach of trust", and a "breach of (the minister's) oath".

What is the Kharges' defence?

At a press conference on Wednesday, Priyank challenged the BJP to identify any illegality in the allocation of the CA to the trust for a skill development centre.

"We have not sought any subsidy, nor deferred payment for the sites. Is there any

spread across industrial areas in 12 districts. The CA site at the centre of the controversy is a 5-acre plot at the Hi Tech Defence and Aerospace Park Phase-1 (Hardware Sector) in Bengaluru Urban district. The land parcel is part of 45.94 acres set aside for civic amenities at the park, to be allocated under the SC quota.

What is the Siddhartha Vihar Trust, and why did it ask for a CA site?

Apart from Mallikarjun Kharge's sons Rahul and Priyanka, the Congress president himself is a trustee, as is his son-in-law, Radhakrishna, who is the Congress Lok Sabha MP from Gulbarga. The Siddhartha Vihar Trust built the popular Buddha Vihar complex, a Buddhist spiritual centre spread over 24 acres off Sedam Road outside Kalaburagi (formerly Gulbarga) in northern Karnataka.

## EXPLAINED POLITICS

What has the BJP alleged?

The BJP has pointed to several alleged irregularities in KIADB's allocation of CA sites. Applications were invited on February 8

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**AKRAM M**  
BENGALURU, AUGUST 29

LEADER of Opposition in the Karnataka Legislative Council Chidambaram Narayanansamy on Wednesday asked Governor Thawarchand Gehlot to dismiss state minister Priyank Kharge for allegedly "snatching away yet another opportunity from deserving SC (Scheduled Caste) entrepreneurs".

Kharge, the son of Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, is Karnataka's minister for IT/BT and Rural Development and Panchayat Raj. The BJP has alleged a "scam" in the allotment of a five-acre parcel of land identified for civic amenities (CA) in an industrial park near Bengaluru airport to a trust run by the Kharge family.

Priyank is a trustee of the beneficiary Siddhartha Vihar Trust, and his brother Rahul Kharge is the chairman.

## What is this piece of land, and how was it allotted?

In February this year, the Karnataka Industrial Area Development Board (KIADB) issued a notification for allotment of civic amenities (CA) plots in industrial areas set up by it. The applicants had to satisfy various criteria to be eligible for the allotment of these sites.

The CA sites were meant for centres of research and development, innovation, and excellence; skill development/technical institutes; educational institutions; offices of government or public sector units; etc. As per a government order issued in November 2023, the CA plots were to be given on a 10-year lease-cum-sale basis.

A total 24.1 per cent of the total sites area developed by the KIADB is reserved for ST entrepreneurs from the state. This year, applications were sought for the allotment of 193 CA sites reserved for SCs/ STs,

## BJP allegations against Kharge family: the land and the row in Bengaluru





# Opinion

FRIDAY, AUGUST 30, 2024



## ● ADDING TEETH

Union defence minister Rajnath Singh

“Along with economic prosperity, we need a strong military. Our government is working on mission mode to ensure that our soldiers possess top-quality weapons and platforms made on Indian soil”

## Tales from the hinterland

Signs of rural recovery still feeble, a sustained pick-up needs policy push

**A**FTER REMAINING SUBDUED for over two and a half years since the pandemic, private consumption seems to have got a push from rural demand. However, the strength and durability of this “revival in rural consumption”, as acknowledged by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in its August bulletin, is still to be gauged and verified. Certain data points like a sustained contraction in work demand under the national rural employment guarantee scheme (NREGA) in recent months, and even the relative stickiness of rural food inflation (demand) compared to the urban variety, which the optimism is based on, have frailties. For instance, the year-on-year decline in NREGA demand for nine months in a row to July may have something to do with the higher transfers (doles) from the Union and state governments during the prolonged election phase, besides the kharif sowing season.

The rural revival could well prove to be transient and fortuitous. In Q3 and Q4 of last fiscal, private final consumption expenditure (PFCE) grew by 4% each on year, compared with 1.8% and 1.5% respectively in the year-ago periods. This signifies that the broader consumption segment have seen a slow recovery since the second half last fiscal, but high-frequency indicators like sluggish passenger-car and fast-moving consumer goods sales may be already indicating a slowing of urban consumption. The “primary sector” comprising farming and mining grew at an anaemic rate of 1.1% in the second half of last fiscal. So, while rural demand recovery is feeble and could be short-lived, urban consumption may be about to show renewed weakness. It would be unrealistic to expect the rural demand to be strong and abiding, without ensuring that the terms of trade remain in favour of farmers for longer periods by addressing the structural issues of the economy that constrict the rural sector.

While the handlers of monetary policy would want more effective supply-side interventions to come to their aid and rein in the recalcitrant rural inflation, government policies must keep the longer-term objective of balancing the interests of farmers and consumers. Export restrictions on raw and processed food including many rice varieties where India is an influential global supplier are out of sync with the larger economic goals, as it undermines the rural purchasing power. The share of PFCE in the GDP declined from 58.1% in 2021-2022 to just 55.8% in 2023-24. The structural shift of demand towards the high-income and urban segments needs to be reversed via fiscal and other policies, for consumption to regain its lost share in the economy.

FE reported recently that corporate India's inventory levels are yet to reach pre-pandemic levels. Inventory-to-sales ratio rose to 65.4% in Q4FY24, even higher than the year-ago level of 64.1%. This is surely not a sign of buoyant demand. Policymakers ought not delude themselves into believing that the medium-term economic trajectory is assuring for the country. Even a 6% growth might not be sustainable, unless profits are allowed to be widely dispersed, and income stagnation among larger sections of population is resolved. This is especially true since foreign trade is not adding to domestic value creation given the uncertain external world. Micro, small and medium enterprises in export-oriented, job-intensive industries are bearing the brunt of this. The RBI staff's optimism that “high capacity utilisation, healthy corporate balance sheets, and sustained credit demand” would stimulate private corporate investments doesn't look fully justified at this juncture.

## Industrial nodes, cities to propel next leap forward

**THE MANUFACTURING SECTOR** has been identified as a critical spoke in India's journey towards Viksit Bharat. Over the past few years, the government has embarked on a holistic approach to strengthen the domestic manufacturing capabilities. The Make in India initiative, the performance-linked incentive scheme, the focus on both ease and cost of doing business, one nation, one tax, and easing of infrastructure bottlenecks are all geared towards enabling a seamless manufacturing ecosystem. Further, one of the most important aspects of this strategy has been the development of industrial corridors in collaboration with state governments. The Cabinet approval to 12 industrial nodes/cities under the National Industrial Corridor Development Programme will propel us to take the next leap forward. This is indeed a welcome step. The move is in line with the area-focused development approach of the government and is also aligned with the principles of Gati Shakti.

With a planned cost of ₹28,602 crore, these announcements indicate an investment potential of ₹1.5 trillion and could create about 10 lakh direct and 30 lakh indirect employment opportunities. The intent of the government is clear – develop world-class industrial cities to transform the manufacturing landscape of the nation. In fact, several Indian cities are already on the global map today and the announcements will enable many more to join them over the next few years. Hyderabad, for instance, accounts for one-third of the global vaccine production, Raipur in Patiala or Digliport could be the next in line. Bengaluru is among the largest start-up hubs in the world and houses over 400 global R&D centres; it is time we explore the potential of Bengaluru in Telangana. Noida/Greater Noida has emerged as a bustling electronics manufacturing space, and the next in the pipeline could be Orval in Andhra Pradesh.

The government has set the ball rolling to transform many more such cities at speed and scale. This will not only position India as a stronger player in global value chains but also ensure a more balanced regional development.

The approach of cluster-based industrial development has been tried and tested across regions/countries and has proven to be a significant economic accelerator. Countries like Vietnam and Taiwan have been successful examples of attracting substantive investments by developing new economic and industrial zones.

The development of these greenfield industrial cities could help accelerate the production shifts towards India. Developed land parcels will make it easier for domestic and international investors to set up manufacturing units in India. The focus on concepts including plug-and-play and walk to work with planned urbanisation are bound to be game changers. This approach ensures that the cities are equipped with advanced infrastructure that supports sustainable and efficient industrial operations and minimises labour migration.

To achieve the vision of becoming a manufacturing hub, we must aim at a global share in the sector of 12% from the current 3.1%, which would require a 16x increase in manufacturing GDP. We need to aim to boost overall manufacturing productivity fivefold by 2030. Nonetheless, there are no qualms about the fact that we are on the right path. Both the central and state governments are playing a facilitative role and have established mechanisms to draw investments into the country.

It is imperative to work on the next set of ease of doing business reforms, especially those related to factors of production. Incorporating sunset clauses in policies, laws, rules and regulations, introducing regulatory impact assessment road map to ensure regulations achieve their intended objectives, and decriminalising minor offences remain critical. Also, deepening the quality ecosystem and bringing down logistics costs will enhance manufacturing competitiveness in the country.

Effective implementation will be the key to translate the vision of India as a manufacturing prowess into reality.



**ANISH SHAH**  
President, FICCI

**T**HE ROLE of data in India's increased GDP and economic growth has led to the enactment of the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023. This legislation aims to safeguard citizen's data, including cross-border sharing. But it presents a paradox by simplifying regulations, yet increasing businesses' accountability and responsibility, particularly through Sections 8(7) and 8(8) which mandate the deletion of personal data either when the user withdraws consent or for the purpose for which the data was collected is no longer relevant. This raises a crucial question: Does the DPDP Act, in pursuit of individual privacy, overlook the needs of the fast-evolving digital realm?

Social media platforms, functioning as both communication channels and advertising hubs, have transformed the advertising landscape, offering targeted reach. However, obligations for data deletion, even if well-intentioned, pose challenges for businesses. They overlook the utility of existing data in driving the industry and ensuring a consistent, user-friendly experience. This can erode unique benefits, affecting influencers, advertisers, and consumer acquisition costs.

### Impact of data deletion on user experience

In the digital landscape, a robust user experience is crucial, driving engagement, customer loyalty, and sales. Data plays a key role in enhancing user-friendliness and utility. The mandated data deletion, say in the case of CX, risks diluting the rich tapestry of shared experiences, thoughts, and opinions, potentially diminishing the platform's value. Even accounts not actively managed by their owner, but which continue to engage the community via likes, comments, and shares, face interruptions due to data deletion policies.

### Costly challenge for digital advertisers

Social media platforms have revolu-

**GV ANAND BHUSHAN SURABHI BHANDARI**  
Respectively, visiting professor and Fulbright Scholar and assistant dean, Faculty of Law, Indira Gandhi National Law School

tionised advertising by offering targeted reach and personalised message tailoring. However, data deletion poses a threat to influencer relationships, disrupting long-term connections and brand collaborations. Consider an influencer with a substantial following. Over the years, she builds a strong brand and cultivates a loyal audience. Due to regulatory changes, her platform is required to enforce mandatory data deletion, leading to removal of historical content, including posts, collaborations, and interactions. As a result, she loses access to content which impacts the storytelling aspect of her brand, the history that helped establish her authenticity and connection with the audience. If content is erased, and brands that she collaborated with now find it challenging to trace the success of past campaigns or assess the long-term impact of their association, leading to reduced opportunities.

This impact extends to industries with slow-moving goods or services or sectors with longer sales cycles. For a wedding planning company, sharing videos of its successful clients, engaging with clients through comments and using social media for client acquisition are a part of its marketing strategy. Data deletion obligations could erase a valuable portfolio that potential clients rely on to assess a company's capabilities; besides, client testimonials are lost and the company loses valuable leads and accumulated audience data which otherwise helps to target specific demographics effectively.

### Mandating data erasure could hinder journalists' ability to access vital information, impeding the flow of authentic news

Indian courts accept electronic documents as admissible evidence, including digital evidence like instant messaging histories and audio-visual files. The Regional Forensic Science Laboratory in Nagpur has experienced a surge in analysis requests, particularly for mobile phone data and audio and video clips that are critical to criminal investigation. However, limited infrastructure and manpower result in prolonged periods of analysis. Extended data retention periods are crucial for preserving digital crime footprints and aiding law enforcement, while deleting data hampers cyber crime probes, compromises security, and reduces users' trust in online platforms.

### Complications in account recovery

The complications in account recovery, aggravated by data deletion obligations, frustrate people, including senior citizens, who are internet users. The two-factor authentication process, which allows users to add another layer of defence to their platform's use in the form of one-time passcode sent to mobile phones, fingerprints or generated keys, has become popular. Erasing data may complicate account recovery, reducing user engagement and retention.

### Challenge for investigative journalism

The wealth of digital information has



**Erosion of digital crime footprint**  
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**Challenge for investigative journalism**  
The wealth of digital information has revolutionised investigative journalism. Journalists frequently start their research by delving into an array of online reports and social media content. They analyse data from social media profiles of key figures and public reactions to major issues, drawing on historical data to add depth to their stories. This helps uncover complex stories and present them in engaging ways, through infographics and social media analytics. Long-standing web information not only saves time but also fosters transparency and builds trust. Mandating data erasure could hinder journalists' ability to access vital information, impeding the flow of authentic news and undermining public trust.

In the digital era, balancing user privacy with the needs of technological innovation is imperative. The challenges posed by privacy-related regulations, such as the DPDP Act, underscore the need for a more nuanced approach that preserves privacy while supporting the vibrant dynamics of the digital economy, including areas like advertising, investigative journalism, and user-centric platforms.

To achieve this balance, we need to focus on three key areas. First, we should use better technology that keeps personal information safe without losing its usefulness. This means using methods that hide personal details through anonymisation or encryption but let us understand data trends. Second, we need to make it easier for people to understand and control how their data is used. This means clear choices about sharing personal information and making sure people know what they're agreeing to while providing consent. Lastly, the rules about data privacy should be flexible and able to change as technology evolves. This way, our approach to privacy stays effective and up-to-date. Safeguarding digital privacy requires a united effort: constant diligence to protect personal information while nurturing the growth of innovative technologies and ideas for the future.

## The politics of pensions and savings

**NIRVIKAR SINGH**  
Professor of economics, University of California, Santa Cruz

**INDIA IS SET** to grow consistently at about 7%, which is enough to double GDP every decade. That is exceptional compared to historical averages, but short of East Asian miracle growth rates. To achieve those growth rates, and meet aspirations of reaching advanced country income levels, India has to grow faster. That, in turn, requires some combination of higher rates of investment and greater growth impacts of investment expenditures. The latter may require more innovation, both technological and institutional, which presents specific challenges. More investment requires more domestic saving, especially in a world where foreign capital is becoming more cautious in its deployment, as evidenced by falling foreign direct investment (FDI) levels.

Thinking about saving, particularly household saving, turns attention to the government's recently announced plan to reconfigure the National Pension Scheme (NPS). The NPS was formulated over two decades ago, in response to the projected explosion in government pension liabilities, identified in the late 1990s. The Old Pension Scheme (OPS) promised fixed benefits, with no contribution from employees. It was therefore a form of (very generous) deferred compensation, implemented as forced long-term savings for employees, but not reflected in current budgets. Its exemption from taxes applied its generosity. Households could also save in other ways, mostly through various savings accounts that offered fixed interest rates, where the household saving was invested in government bonds or life insurance policies that promised

annuity payments.

The NPS replaced the OPS, making several changes to the design. Employees now had to contribute towards their future benefits, with the government matching these contributions. Thus, a current savings element was made more explicit in the NPS, rather than being notional and not clearly defined. The NPS also expanded the range of options for investing these explicit savings, in an India that now had modern financial asset markets. Most important of all, the NPS shifted from the defined-benefit system of the OPS to a defined-contribution system. This meant that the returns to the contributions were no longer guaranteed, but depended on the performance of the assets in which the contributions were invested.

The NPS was implemented slowly, and in a somewhat piecemeal and incomplete fashion. It dealt with the looming fiscal disaster of the unsustainable OPS, but it also meant that the deferred compensation it offered was less generous and more uncertain, leading to unhappy employees – especially since those hired earlier under the OPS continued to be covered by their more favourable scheme. Recently, some states have bowed to pressure from their employees, and begun reverting to the OPS, which is constitutionally their prerogative but threatens to bring back the threat of fiscal disaster, which would ultimately be the Union government's

### UPS is clearly a political response to a political problem that emanates from India's economic structure

responsibility to handle. The Centre has responded with a new Unified Pension Scheme (UPS), which is supposed to exist alongside the NPS. It retains the matching contributions, albeit with a higher government match. But it shifts back to defined benefits, and has generous indexation provisions. These features can also create fiscal problems down the road, if not as severely as the OPS.

Many details of the UPS are unclear, including aspects of its design and implementation. It is clearly a political response to a political problem that emanates from India's economic structure, where government jobs are valuable because good jobs are scarce, and holders of those jobs have disproportionate power as an interest group, as well as India's federal structure which is baked into the Constitution. The UPS is clearly a short-term response to an immediate political issue. But this can be an occasion to recall some of the thinking behind the original NPS plan, which was meant to lay the foundations of a pension and savings system that could serve a much larger proportion of the population than the small slice that has government jobs.

Sustainable systems for long-run savings require good options for investing those savings, across a range of assets with different risk-return characteristics, good low-cost options for choosing among institutions and managers who will guide households in their choices, a

Pensions are just one form of long-run savings; the real need for gov't policy is to take a comprehensive look at the institutional landscape for such savings

great deal of education and information transparency to enable households to make choices, and careful regulation for protecting small investors. None of this is easy. Well-off households, whether they are employed by the government, by private corporations, or run their own businesses, already have many more saving options than they did two decades ago. The challenge is to extend these opportunities to a larger proportion of the population, in a manner that keeps their institutional costs and risks down in an appropriate manner. Employer contributions for such savings are another component of distorting systems that incentivise long-run savings, as well as enabling those savings to be channelled to productive uses.

Ultimately, pensions are just one form of long-run savings, and the real need for government policy is to take a comprehensive look at the institutional landscape for such savings (including financial products such as life insurance) to incentivise them without promoting disavowing elsewhere in the economy, and to channel these savings into growth-enhancing investment, as opposed to going disproportionately into assets such as real estate and gold. It is almost a decade since the report of the committee on household finances, headed by Tarun Ramadorai, which provided a comprehensive analysis of these issues, including pensions, insurance, and financial assets in general. With India's household savings having declined to a five-year low, returning to this approach ought to be a priority for policymakers.

announced smart cities. There cannot be any objections to the smart city concept and the benefits to the people and nation could be immense. It would be good if the government announced the status of any project it undertakes at least once a year so the public knows what is happening on the ground.

—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### 10 years of Jan Dhan

The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY), which completed 10 years of its launch on Wednesday, has had an intense impact in every corner of the country. It has proven to be the foundation stone in bringing over 80% of Indian women under financial inclusion. The bank account ownership of women has gone up from 26% in 2011 to 78% in 2021. Out

of the total 53.13 crore Jan Dhan accounts, 30 crore are of women. The scheme has also bridged the gender gap in access to financial services. It was 20% in 2011, and it has been reduced to 6% in 2021. The PMJDY has garnered global praise for its transformative impact on financial inclusion in India. In 2023, a World Bank report revealed that India achieved its financial inclusion goals in just six years, a feat that would have

taken 47 years without its advanced digital public infrastructure.

—Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

### Smart cities

This government does very well at announcing headline-grabbing projects, but implementation is quite another matter. The cabinet note to 12 new industrial smart cities falls into such a category. We are completely unaware of the status of the previously