



Above all Mr. Modi's visit sends a geopolitical message given the contrast to another summit in Washington. On Tuesday, U.S. President Joseph Biden will welcome leaders of NATO countries for the transatlantic grouping's 75th anniversary. With Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Indo-Pacific leaders who are part of the western sanctions present, it will be a show of strength supposed to demonstrate Russia's "isolation". Mr. Modi has attempted a balance with his presence at the G-7 summit outreach in Italy last month and meeting Mr. Zelenskyy, and later sending an official delegation to the Peace Conference in Switzerland. The government has also shown its enduring commitment to traditional ties with Russia that stem from the 1971 Soviet Union Peace and Friendship treaty, by refusing to condemn the war at the UN and other multilateral forums, while continuing to engage with Russia bilaterally and at groupings such as the SCO, BRICS and the G-20. All eyes during Mr. Modi's visit will then be on how he uses India's particular multi-polar, unaligned perch to further the cause of "dialogue and diplomacy" and help hasten an end to the conflict that has divided the world.

The rest of the world must do more to engage with reformists in Iran

In recent years, a growing number of Iran's voters have stayed away from elections as a protest against the system. In the first round of the presidential election, the 39.9% turnout fuelled debates about the legitimacy crisis of the semi-representative system. But the possibility of a reformist victory brought more voters in the runoff. The nearly 50% turnout helped Mr. Pezeshkian defeat Mr. Jalili despite a conservative consolidation behind him. This also means that the voters have high hopes about Mr. Pezeshkian, who in the past has spoken out against the way protests were handled by security personnel. He also backs dialogue with the West to revive the 2015 nuclear deal, which was sabotaged by Washington in 2018. It is to be seen how far he can go in a system tightly controlled by the Shia clergy. Iran's President, the highest elected official, has limited powers in the country's theocracy which is commanded by the Supreme Leader. But with his strong mandate, Mr. Pezeshkian should not shy away from pushing for change. The clerical establishment should see his victory as a message from the public. This is an opportunity to promote gradual reforms at home and careful engagement with the world. If Mr. Pezeshkian and the clergy reach common ground, Iran has a chance to ride out the storms engulfing it.

Earlier, we had suggested that a patchwork of judicial interventions would fall short of the encompassing and systemic approach climate change requires. There is, therefore, a strong case for climate legislation, but only if it is tailored to the Indian context. Taking this issue forward provides an opportunity, but also a challenge, for the new government.

However, these laws vary, and India's approach must be tailored to our context. Starting from a low base of per capita emissions – less than half the global average – India's

The 'M.K. Ranjitsinh' judgment must be used to pass a climate law that is well suited to the Indian context

What we arrive at, then, is a law that helps navigate developmental choices. It must create the basis for thoughtful decision-making toward achieving a low-carbon, resilient society. For example, since Indian cities are still growing and changing rapidly, what could low-carbon, climate resilient cities of the future look like? And what levers exist to shape those cities? How can city planning minimise the risk of floods and vulnerability to heatwaves? How should transport needs be met through technology shifts such as electric vehicle adoption and greater attention to public transport and lifestyle shifts?

A whole-of-government approach will also

require dedicated coordination mechanisms for implementation. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change should continue to play a central role, but it needs to be complemented by higher-level coordination. Here, the pre-existing Executive Committee on Climate Change (made up of senior bureaucrats from multiple Ministries), provides a useful template but only if it is reinvented with clearly specified legal powers and duties.

The Court's historical pronouncement in *M.K. Ranjitsinh* opens the door to legal and governance changes that make possible an actionable right against the adverse effects of climate change. But to realise this promise, this open door has to actually be used to pass a climate law that is well suited to the Indian context, that steers Indian development choices toward a low-carbon and climate resilient future, and that also advances justice.

The composition of the Anusandhan National Research Foundation's governing board and executive council shows that it could become just another government department

The lack of adequate industry representation and diversity is one of the most glaring omissions from the current board and council, especially when the ANRF plans to raise more than 70% of its funding from non-government sources and industry. The sole industry representative, Romesh T. Wadhvani, is an Indian-American businessman based in Silicon Valley, U.S., and the sole woman representative is the Secretary of the DSIR. There is no representation from Indian industry or any entrepreneurs from the country or eminent academics from the Central and State

universities on the committee.

The ANRF must function unlike any other current government science department. It should have more diverse representations of practising natural and social scientists from the university system, with more women and young entrepreneurs in its committee. Additionally, the future chief executive officer of the ANRF must have a background in both industry and academia, and be someone who can raise money for the ANRF and understand the global innovation ecosystem. A complete overhaul is required for the ANRF to avoid becoming like any other government department and to bridge research and teaching in our universities.

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam government in Tamil Nadu appears to be slipping in governance ("11 persons held for T.N. BSP leader's murder", July 7). Unlike what it was under the Jayalalithaa regime, crime fighting and law and order appear to have taken a back seat now. The drug menace appears to be a major issue too.

Girija Venkataraman,
Chennai

Left of centre shifts
Departing from the existing winds favouring right of centre ascendancy in many countries, the wins of Labour party leader Keir Starmer as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and reformist leader Masoud Pezeshkian as Iran's new President-elect are reasons for subdued cheer for the left of centre ecosystem everywhere. The noticeable difference is that while Mr.

It is a welcome change for Iran that a reformist has been chosen as the new

Good initiative
Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu's initiative to hold parleys with his Telangana counterpart, A. Revanth Reddy, to sort out all issues on hold since the

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Chief Secretary and Adviser to West Bengal, and not the Chief Secretary of India, “₹2 lakh aid, job for kin of lynching victims, July 3, 2024).”

“I refuses to meet Bengal Governor” said Governor, C.V. Ananda Bose, “took a flight to Gurugram.” It should have been a flight to Delhi.

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The problem of special packages

Coalition politics is back at the Union level in a substantial way. The Bharatiya Janata Party is dependent on the Janata Dal (United) of Bihar and the Telugu Desam Party of Andhra Pradesh for its parliamentary majority. This is in contrast to 2014 and 2019, when *de facto* single-party governments came to office. With single-party majority becoming a thing of the past, demand for State-specific discretionary grants, or ‘special packages’, are back with a bang in public discussion.

The positive aspect of single-party dominance being tempered by the presence of coalition partners that can act as a check if unitary trends surge cannot be underestimated. Nevertheless, this is the time to test the hypothesis that when single-party dominance at the Union level fades, federal tendencies bloom and when a single-party majority under a strong leader at the Union level prevails, federal tendencies wilt.

If a healthy federal structure is to be nurtured, the fiscal boundaries, principles of assignment of taxes, and the basis for grants have to be transparent and objective. A federal setup can be asymmetric in a country that is characterised by linguistic, cultural, and economic diversity. But issues of asymmetry should be addressed by means of constitutional provisions that have both transparency and stability.

The Constitution has provisions that address the issues of specific States, or States that have a special status with regard to certain matters mentioned in the Constitution. These provisions are covered, for instance, in Articles 371A to H (Article 370 for the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir, of course, is abrogated).

Purely discretionary

On the contrary, special packages are purely discretionary. They may be need-based, but the need is not the proximate reason for granting a special package, which



R. Mohan

a former Indian Revenue Service officer

is an additional grant under Article 282, which falls under ‘Miscellaneous Financial Provisions’. More often than not, they are the result of the bargaining power of some State-level political parties that can tilt the scales of parliamentary majority. What does this augur for the health of our federal set-up?

That the outcome of an election can determine the fiscal distribution of national resources to a State or States goes against the grain of fiscal federalism (or, more correctly, of federal finance). Some States may be justified in their demands for funds, but allocation has to be through the mechanism of the Finance Commission. The Commission is constituted by the President every five years or earlier to make recommendations regarding the distribution of a share of taxes collected by the Union to the States, and how this is to be distributed among the States, as per Article 280; and disbursement of grants to States in need of assistance, as provided in Article 275. The 16th Finance Commission, which is already in existence, cannot be bypassed solely on account of partisan political exigencies.

When the same political party is in power at the Union and State levels, it is called a ‘double-engine sarkar’. The main engine has lost the power to run on its own and the owners of smaller engines that are needed to pull the train along are making their own demands. While individual States may well need special packages, process is of the utmost importance. How have these events impacted the political and fiscal relations between the Union and the States?

Federal tendencies

The first issue here is the extent to which our polity is federal. The Constitution has been famously described as having a quasi-federal framework. C.H. Alexandrowicz, however, disputed this description in his work *Constitutional Developments in India* (1957),

stating that in situations other than an Emergency, it assumes a federal character. The Supreme Court has made the succinct observation that our polity is amphibian – it can assume unitary and federal characters depending on whether or not there is an Emergency under Articles 352 and 356 in force (*State of Rajasthan and Others v Union of India*, 1977).

Be that as it may, it is often argued that the prevailing political environment crucially determines whether federal tendencies bloom or wilt. Keeping this proposition in mind, the hypothesis stated above can be put to test.

How fiscal distribution is done is cardinal in the test of whether or not federalism is strong. In the recent past, some States raised concerns about their share in the divisible pool of Union taxes facing a decline. Tax distribution is formula-based, and it is for the 16th Finance Commission to address this issue and undertake the delicate task of balancing the interests of the States *inter se*, and with those of the Centre.

The focus here is on grants, in the disbursement of which scope for discretion is wider. In our constitutional framework, the primary task of recommending grants to States in need of assistance is that of the Finance Commission, until Parliament makes legislation in this regard.

But the fact now is that the flow of discretionary grants to the States through Article 282 have far overtaken (by almost a factor of four) that of the grants recommended by the Finance Commissions. Acceding to demands for special packages which are raised by State-based parties, holding the key to parliamentary majority, will weaken the foundations of fiscal federalism, as it will result in diverting national resources away from other States, which too may have pressing needs. If this is allowed to happen, we will see the paradox of federal tendencies wilting instead of blooming when single-party dominance fades.

That the outcome of an election can determine the fiscal distribution of national resources to a State or States goes against the grain of fiscal federalism

Congress has no room for complacency

In the 2026 Assembly polls, the UDF could face a stronger BJP and LDF

STATE OF PLAY

Biju Govind

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The Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) delivered an impressive performance in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in Kerala. It won 18 seats – just one short of the 19 seats it had won in the 2019 elections – out of the total 20 seats.

In 2019, its success was attributed to the massive protest in Kerala against the Supreme Court order allowing women of all ages to enter the Lord Ayappa temple at Sabarimala, as well as the candidacy of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi in Wayanad. This time, the strong anti-incumbency sentiment against the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) government, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), helped the UDF.

In 2019, the Congress leadership believed that the UDF would regain power in the Assembly polls in 2021. They assumed that anti-incumbency against the the LDF government would suffice for the coalition. However, this did not happen, largely because of the party’s complacency.

On the other hand, the LDF won thanks to its various social security measures, its distribution of food kits through ration shops post-COVID-19, and the successful experiment of a rainbow coalition of 11 constituents. The Left made history by winning the 2021 Assembly polls in the State, disrupting the nearly four-decade alternation of power between the LDF and UDF.

Chalking out a plan

Though the Assembly elections are still two years away, the Congress has begun to

chalk out a plan. The party has announced its national general secretary, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, as the candidate for the Wayanad by-election after her brother, Mr. Gandhi, vacated the seat to retain the Rae Bareilly constituency. The by-election is expected to coincide with the by-polls in the Palakkad and Chelakkara Assembly seats, which were vacated by Shafi Parambil from the Congress and K. Radhakrishnan from the CPI (M), respectively, after their win in the Lok Sabha elections.

The UDF will have to contend not just with its traditional rivals, but also with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance, which has emerged as a formidable force in the Lok Sabha polls by securing 19.25% of the votes and winning the Thrissur constituency.

Shaken by its electoral debacle, the CPI(M) has begun to carry out corrective measures both within the party and government. These rectifications may prompt Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, who has faced criticism for his style of governance, to reshuffle the portfolios in Cabinet and introduce measures to monitor the bureaucracy.

The CPI(M) leadership has realised that its poor showing in the Lok Sabha elections stemmed primarily from the arrogant attitude of its party leaders. Other factors that contributed to its woes were

the State’s financial crisis, the LDF’s failure in delivering existing welfare schemes and providing dearness allowance for teachers and government employees, as well as delays in paying lakhs of pensioners.

CPI(M) State unit secretary M.V. Govindan pointed to the influence of capitalist tendencies on party cadres as a factor contributing to the LDF’s defeat. The serious allegations against the Chief Minister and his daughter, the frequent man-animal conflicts, and campus violence made matters worse for the party.

Moreover, the CPI(M)’s attempt to woo the Samastha Kerala Jem-iyathul Ulama, a powerful body of Muslim scholars with ties to the Indian Union Muslim League, backfired. It not only failed to yield results but also led to an erosion of Hindu votes, particularly in south Kerala.

The Congress should be equally wary, as the BJP is set to tighten its grip in the State by focusing on 40 of the 140 Assembly seats. The induction of George Kurian from the Syro-Malabar community into the Modi Cabinet will certainly reinforce the BJP’s efforts to appeal to Christians.

Drawing inspiration

It is also crucial for the UDF to recognise that most of its sitting MPs were elected not based on their performance, but as a consequence of a negative vote against the LDF government. The CPI(M) continues to retain a solid vote bank, and the Left ecosystem in Kerala has not withered away. To sustain momentum leading up to the 2026 Assembly polls, the UDF leadership needs to draw inspiration from the INDIA bloc at the national level and assert itself strongly as an opposition to the CPI(M) in Kerala.

Representation of women in the Lok Sabha

Not only did the Trinamool Congress field a large number of women but most of them also got elected

DATA POINT

Sanjay Kumar
Yashodhara Ranjan

Representation of women in the Lok Sabha has increased significantly since the first parliamentary election in 1952 (**Table 1**). In the first Lok Sabha, there were 22 women MPs out of a total of 489, constituting a share of 4.5%. In 1957, of the 494 MPs, 27 were women (5.5%). In the 17th Lok Sabha, which had 543 MPs, 78 were women (14.4%). The 18th Lok Sabha constituted after the 2024 election has 74 women MPs out of a total of 543 (13.6%).

There was barely any difference among political parties between the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections when it came to fielding women candidates. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) gave a slightly higher proportion of tickets to women candidates in 2024 (15.7%) compared to 2019 (12.6%). The Congress fielded 41 women candidates in 2024 compared to 52 in 2019, but the share of women fielded was the same in both years (12.3%). This is because it contested fewer seats in 2024 compared to 2019. The Trinamool Congress fielded fewer candidates (12) too compared to 2019 (23) (**Table 2**).

The success rate of BJP women candidates declined to 44.9% in 2024 from 74.6% in 2019. The party fielded more women in 2024 compared to 2019. But the number of women who got elected in 2024 declined from 41 to 31. On the other hand, the success rate of Congress women candidates increased to 18.8% in 2024 from 11.5% in 2019. Of the 41 women candidates of the Congress, 13 got elected to the Lok Sabha in 2024. The Trinamool Congress fielded 12 women of which 11 got elected to the Lok Sabha (91.6% success rate). It is important to note that five of the 14 women contestants from the Samajwadi Party also got elected to the Lok Sabha (**Table 3**).

Women constituted 40.9% of all the Trinamool’s MPs in 2019. In 2024, the share is 37.9%. This is much higher than any other political party. Women constitute 12.9% of the total number of BJP MPs in the current House, which is not very different from the 2019 share of 13.5%. Similarly, women MPs comprise 13.1% of all the Congress MPs in the current Lok Sabha election. Though the actual number of Congress MP was far less in 2019, the share was only marginally less at 11.5% (**Table 4**).

Many commentators have said that a large number of women voted for the BJP because they benefited from the party’s welfare schemes. The National Election Study 2024 conducted by Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) show that this is an overstatement. Women voters have voted for different parties in different States.

Among women voters in West Bengal, 53% voted for the Trinamool while only 33% voted for the BJP. This resulted in a stunning victory for the Trinamool. In Karnataka, 52% of the women voters voted for the Congress, while 46% voted for the BJP/National Democratic Alliance (NDA). In Bihar, 50% of the women voters voted for the NDA and only 37% voted for the INDIA bloc. In Haryana, 49% of women voters chose the Congress/INDIA while 42% voted for the BJP/NDA. In Madhya Pradesh, 60% of women voters chose the BJP compared to only 34% who choose the Congress. In Delhi, 57% of women voters chose the BJP, while 41% voted for INDIA. In Rajasthan, 55% of the women voters chose the BJP while only 39% chose the Congress. The women’s vote was slightly tilted in favour of the INDIA bloc in Uttar Pradesh and Telangana, but marginally in favour of the NDA in Maharashtra.

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Women in the Lower House

The data for the tables were sourced from the Election Commission of India and the National Election Study (NES) 2024

Table 1: Representation of women from the 1st to the 18th Lok Sabha

LS	Women MPs	% Women MPs
1st	22	4.50%
2nd	27	5.47%
3rd	34	6.88%
4th	31	5.96%
5th	22	4.25%
6th	19	3.51%
7th	28	5.17%
8th	44	8.13%
9th	36	6.81%
10th	42	7.87%
11th	40	7.37%
12th	44	8.10%
13th	48	8.84%
14th	45	8.29%
15th	58	10.68%
16th	62	11.42%
17th	78	14.36%
18th	74	13.63%

Table 2: Party-wise proportion of women candidates in the Lok Sabha elections of 2019 and 2024

Party	2024		2019	
	Women	% Women	Women	% Women
BJP	69	15.7%	55	12.6%
Congress	41	12.3%	52	12.4%
Trinamool	12	25.5%	23	37.1%
SP	14	21.9%	6	16.2%
AAP	0	0.0%	3	8.6%
JD(U)	2	12.5%	2	11.8%
RJD	7	29.2%	3	14.3%
TDP	1	5.9%	3	12.0%
DMK	3	14.3%	2	8.7%
SHS(UBT)	2	9.5%	1	4.3%
BSP	38	7.8%	24	6.3%
CPI	2	6.7%	4	8.2%
CPI(M)	7	13.5%	10	14.5%

*Data for Maharashtra is for undivided Shiv Sena.
Source: Data compiled by authors from the Election Commission of India

Table 3: Party-wise success rate of women candidates in the Lok Sabha elections of 2019 and 2024

Party	2024			2019		
	Women candidates	Women who won	Success rate	Women candidates	Women who won	Success rate
BJP	69	31	44.9%	55	41	74.6%
Congress	41	13	18.8%	52	6	11.5%
Trinamool	12	11	91.6%	23	9	39.1%
SP	14	5	35.7%	6	0	0.0%
DMK	3	3	100.0%	2	2	100.0%
JD(U)	2	2	100.0%	2	1	50.0%
RJD	7	1	14.3%	3	0	0.0%
TDP	1	1	100.0%	3	0	0.0%

Table 4: Party-wise women elected in the Lok Sabha polls of 2019 and 2024

Party	2024			2019	
	Women MPs	% Women MPs		Women MPs	% Women MPs
BJP	31	12.9%		41	13.5%
Congress	13	13.1%		6	11.5%
Trinamool	11	37.9%		9	40.9%
SP	5	13.5%		0	0.0%
DMK	3	13.6%		2	8.7%
JD(U)	2	16.7%		1	6.3%
RJD	1	25.0%		0	0.0%
TDP	1	6.3%		0	0.0%



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 8, 1974

Ordinances expected to immobilise Rs. 500 crores

New Delhi, July 7: The two Ordinances promulgated by the President late last night to impound profits, D.A. and wage increases were expected to immobilise during the current year a total of Rs. 500 crores – Rs. 450 crores accruing from increases in dearness allowance payable to the employees of the Central and State Governments, public and private sector undertakings and Rs. 50 crores representing dividend payments from profits after taxation – Mr. B.D. Pande, Union Cabinet Secretary, said here to-day. Mr. Pande, who was briefing newsmen on the two Ordinances, said that the total estimated increases in dearness allowance during the current year would be Rs. 900 crores out of which 50 per cent would have to be credited to a special fund of the provident fund accounts of the employees while the estimated dividend payments that would be impounded would be around Rs. 50 crores. Mr. Pande was not in a position to indicate the amount by way of wage increases that would also be impounded into compulsory deposits. He said that the schemes would be operative from July 1. The two Ordinances have come after prolonged deliberation by the Union Government on how to combat the continuing rise in prices. Mr. Pande said that the Government would review the position if the measures taken under the Ordinances were found to have had no impact on the price situation.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 8, 1924

Trial by Jury

Lahore, July 8: An important decision has been reached by a full bench of the Lahore High Court consisting of Justice Broadway, Florde and Campbell, with reference to trial by jury or assessors. An application was made on Monday by Mr. D’Connor; Bar-at-law; on behalf of a British soldier charged under Section 388 I.P.C., for causing grievous hurt to an Indian. The soldier was committed to Sessions for trial where a jury was claimed. The Sessions Judge held the Jury could not be claimed and the High Court was moved for appeal. The Lordship decided that in cases of this nature, where a question of racial consideration arises, a jury consisting of majority of the defendant’s countrymen can be claimed.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The groundwater lost in north India from 2002 to 2021

450 cubic kilometres. Further, using on-site observations, satellite data and models, it was found that across north India, rainfall in the monsoon season has reduced by 8.5% during 1951-2021. PTI

FPI investments in equities in the first week of July

7,900 in ₹ crore. Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPI) infused the amount in Indian equities amid a healthy economic and earnings growth momentum. PTI

The increase in India's coal imports from April to May

5.3 in per cent. India's coal imports rose to 52.29 million tonnes (MT) in the first two months of the ongoing fiscal as against the year-ago period. The country's coal import was 49.62 MT in April and May in FY24. PTI

The share of Indians to read ingredient lists: Farmley

73 in per cent. Based on a survey of over 6,000 people across India, the Healthy Snacking Report 2024 by Farmley aims to examine the ever evolving consumption trends in India. PTI

Sri Lankan schools to which India donated digital equipment

200 India donated digital equipment, including 2,000 tabs, worth ₹300 million for use by schools in the southern province of Sri Lanka. PTI

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On expunction powers in Parliament

Why did the Opposition engage in a war of words with the government over expunging certain remarks? What is the process to expunge remarks in Parliament? Can a member of the Lok Sabha direct a remark against a Minister? What do the various rules state?

EXPLAINER

Sumeda

The story so far:

The first special session of the 18th Lok Sabha witnessed heated discussions, with the Opposition clashing with the government over a range of issues, ultimately concluding with a war of words over the expunction of the remarks of the leaders of Opposition in both Houses. Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar removed portions of Leader of Opposition (LoP) Mallikarjun Kharge's speech, which was critical of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Meanwhile, in the Lower House, parts of Rahul Gandhi's remarks on the PM and the BJP were expunged from the records on the orders of Speaker Om Birla, sparking allegations of different yardsticks being applied for different MPs.

When are remarks expunged?

Parliament maintains a verbatim record of everything that is spoken and takes place during proceedings. While Article 105 of the Constitution confers certain privileges and freedom of speech in Parliament on MPs, it is subject to other provisions of the Constitution and the rules of the House. On the orders of the presiding officer, that is, the Chairman in the Upper House and the Speaker in the Lower House, words, phrases and expressions which are deemed "defamatory, indecent, unparliamentary or undignified" are deleted or expunged from records. For this purpose, the Lok Sabha Secretariat maintains a comprehensive list of 'unparliamentary' words and expressions.

The rules of parliamentary etiquette, which are laid out to ensure discipline and decorum in the Rajya Sabha, say, "When the Chair holds that a particular word or expression is unparliamentary, it should be immediately withdrawn without any attempt to raise any debate



War of words: Leader Of Opposition in Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge speaks in the House. ANI

over it. Words or expressions held to be unparliamentary and ordered to be expunged by the Chair are omitted from the printed debates."

There have been recorded instances where the scope of expunction has been broadened. Speakers, at their discretion, have ordered the expunction of words deemed prejudicial to national interest or detrimental to maintaining friendly relations with a foreign State, derogatory to dignitaries, likely to offend national sentiments or affect the religious susceptibilities of a section of community, likely to discredit the Army, not in good taste or otherwise objectionable or likely to bring the House into ridicule or lower the dignity of the Chair, the House or the members, authors M. N. Kaul and S. L. Shakhder note in their book *Practice and Procedure of Parliament*. For instance, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru once

objected when a member referred to the President of Pakistan while asking a supplementary question about the international situation. Mr. Nehru said it would "not be proper" for the Head of a foreign state to be mentioned in the language the member had used. The objectionable words were then expunged.

Members must withdraw objectionable remarks deemed irrelevant to the debate upon the Chair's request and failure to comply may lead to expunction. Similarly, quoting from an un referenced document or speaking after being asked to desist can result in an expunction.

What about remarks against an MP?

If an MP makes an allegation against their colleague or an outsider, Rule 353 of the Lok Sabha outlines the procedural framework to be followed. "The Rule does not prohibit the making of any allegation.

The only requirement is advance notice, on receipt of which the Minister concerned will conduct an inquiry into the allegation and come up with the facts when the MP makes the allegation in the House," former Lok Sabha Secretary General P.D.T. Achary says. If the allegation is neither defamatory nor incriminatory, the above rule would not apply, he adds.

"The rule does not obviously apply to an allegation against a Minister in the government. Since the Council of Ministers is accountable to Parliament, the Members of the House have the right to question Ministers and make imputations against their conduct as Ministers," Mr. Achary adds.

How do officers expunge remarks?

The Chairman and Speaker are vested with the power to order the expunction of remarks under Rule 261, and Rule 380 and 381 of the Rules of Procedure of the Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha, respectively.

Rule 261 states, "If the Chairman is of opinion that a word or words have or have been used in debate which is or are defamatory or indecent or unparliamentary or undignified, he may in his discretion, order that such word or words be expunged from the proceedings of the Council." The Lower House has a similar provision.

The expunged portions are marked by asterisks with an explanatory footnote stating 'expunged as ordered by the Chair.' If the Chair directs that nothing will go on record during a member's speech or interruption, footnote 'not recorded' is inserted. A comprehensive list of words and phrases is circulated to media outlets at the end of the day's proceedings. Once expunged, these words or phrases cease to exist on the official record. However, the relevance of the practice of expunging remarks has lately come into question, in a digital age where expunged content remains accessible due to the live telecast of proceedings and wider circulation of screenshots and videos on social media.

THE GIST

Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar removed portions of Mallikarjun Kharge's speech, which was critical of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the RSS. Meanwhile, in the Lower House, parts of Rahul Gandhi's remarks on the PM and the BJP were expunged from the records on the orders of Speaker Om Birla.

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On Kerala's four-year undergraduate programme

What is the intention behind the FYUGP? Can a student leave the programme after three years? What are some of the concerns raised by academics and activists?

G. Krishnakumar

The story so far:

On July 1, institutions of higher education in Kerala rolled out the Four-Year Undergraduate Programmes (FYUGP). Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan launched the academic reform that "intends to provide opportunities that can enable students to acquire competence in using digital technologies, computational methods, data analytics, and other skills essential to participate in the knowledge economy".

What is the FYUGP?

The FYUGP began with the formulation of the Kerala State Higher Education Curriculum Framework by the Kerala State Curriculum Committee headed by Suresh Das, former executive vice president of the Kerala State Council for Science, Technology and Environment. The programme has been introduced in affiliated colleges of the Kerala, Calicut,

Kannur and Mahatma Gandhi Universities for the 2024-25 academic year. These five-year integrated programmes directly run by the Cochin University of Science and Technology and Mahatma Gandhi University have also been restructured to provide a four-year exit option. Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, and Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University, Tirur, are also offering these programmes.

What are its key features?

The Kerala State Higher Education Curriculum Framework for FYUGP is formulated with a student-centric approach and provides maximum flexibility in terms of choice of disciplines of study. It also allows a student to move from one discipline of study to another, according to the Kerala State Higher Education Council (KSHEC). Students will have the chance to determine their semester-wise academic load, and be allowed to learn at their pace, to the

extent possible.

The framework also offers flexibility for students to move from one institution to another as per their choice. It also offers flexibility to switch to alternative modes of learning (offline, distance learning, online and hybrid).

What are the pathway options?

The programme offers three pathway options. For the three-year undergraduate degree, students who wish to exit after three years will be awarded an undergraduate degree in the major discipline after securing a specific number of credits (133 or above) and satisfying minimum course requirements.

A four-year undergraduate honours degree in the major discipline will be awarded to those who complete a four-year degree programme with the specific number of credits (177 or above) and after satisfying minimum course requirements.

Additionally, students who are highly

motivated to opt for research as their career can choose honours with research stream in their fourth year. They should do a research project or dissertation under the guidance of a faculty member of the university/college. Students who secure 177 credits, including 12 credits from a research project/dissertation, are awarded the undergraduate degree (Honours with Research).

What are the concerns?

The core objective of the undergraduate curriculum stemmed from the government's intent to build a strong knowledge society that can help develop and sustain a knowledge economy. The Department of Higher Education hopes that the reform will equip students with the knowledge base and intellectual abilities that will make them effective citizens in a knowledge society and offer them multiple employment options.

However, a group of academic experts and cultural activists, have issued a joint statement against the 'unilateral' roll-out of the FYUGP, warning that that the reform could "dismantle" the existing structure of arts and science courses including BA, BSc and BCom that have been in existence for several decades. They also alleged that it lacked in-depth study in any subject. A section of teachers have also pointed out the gaps in infrastructure in campuses and the lack of adequate training for teachers on various aspects related to the programme's implementation.

THE GIST

On July 1, institutions of higher education in Kerala rolled out the Four-Year Undergraduate Programmes.

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However, a group of academic experts and cultural activists, have issued a joint statement against the 'unilateral' roll-out of the FYUGP, warning that that the reform could "dismantle" the existing structure of arts and science courses.

CACHE



GETTY IMAGES

What is the Internet Archive and why is it facing backlash from book publishers?

Why are traditional publishers such as Hachette, HarperCollins, Wiley, and Penguin Random House suing Internet Archive? How does the Archive save and store web pages? How has removing books from the Archive affected students?

Sahana Venugopal

The story so far: Internet Archive (IA), a non-profit that aims to digitise, preserve, lend, and share multi-media content, is embroiled in a major legal challenge as it faces off against traditional publishers accusing it of copyright violations. The free digital library is fighting the forced removal of around half a million books from its platform, which it argues functions like a library.

What is the case against Internet Archive? While a great number of books digitised and uploaded by Internet Archive were already in the public domain – such as historical sources, old classics, etc. – many traditional publishers have alleged that Internet Archive violated their copyrights and illegally made their books available to the public, by scanning physical copies and distributing the digital files. In the case *Hachette vs Internet Archive* that began in 2020, traditional publishers Hachette, HarperCollins, Wiley, and Penguin Random House sued Internet Archive. On March 24 last year, District Judge John G. Koeltl issued an order in favour of the publishers. “IA’s Website includes millions of public domain ebooks that users can download for free and read without restrictions,” noted the order, adding, “Relevant to this action, however, the Website also includes 3.6 million books protected by valid copyrights, including 33,000 of the

Publishers’ titles and all of the Works in Suit.” In particular, traditional publishers were against IA’s temporary ‘National Emergency Library’ (NEL) initiative that it launched during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was to allow more users to access the e-books in its collection while physical libraries were locked down. “During the NEL, IA lifted the technical controls enforcing its one-to-one owned-to-loaned ratio and allowed up to ten thousand patrons at a time to borrow each e-book on the Website,” stated the 2023 order. In general, IA uses a system known as “controlled digital lending” to limit the number of people who can access an e-book. It ended its emergency library system after being hit with the lawsuit. Internet Archive used the doctrine of fair use to defend itself in the case, but this did not hold up. The organisation said it would appeal, but did so after some delay. The case is ongoing, with the oral argument stage of the appeal taking place on June 28.

Why are books being removed? As a result of the lawsuit, IA was forced to remove over half a million books from its database, with the Director of Library Services at Internet Archive, Chris Freeland, calling out the “profoundly negative impact” on users. According to testimonies collected by IA, the mass removal hurt students who could not access books for academic research. While IA identifies itself as a library, it has been compared to a shadow library or a piracy database by traditional publishers, who disagree with its

“controlled digital lending” approach. Despite the removal, however, Internet Archive is still home to a rich collection. As of late June, the web archive said it contained 835 billion web pages, 44 million books and texts, 15 million audio recordings, 10.6 million videos, 4.8 million images, and 1 million software programs. Live concerts and television programs also make up part of this collection.

What is Wayback Machine? While Internet Archive buys physical books, digitises them, lends them to users, or makes them available for download, it has since 1996 also focused on preserving web pages. The platform claims users can explore over 866 billion saved web pages through its own search service. “We began in 1996 by archiving the Internet itself, a medium that was just beginning to grow in use. Like newspapers, the content published on the web was ephemeral – but unlike newspapers, no one was saving it. Today we have 28+ years of web history accessible through the Wayback Machine and we work with 1,200+ library and other partners through our Archive-It program to identify important web pages,” noted Internet Archive on its website. Users can help IA archive parts of the internet at no cost, or they can reach out to the platform to make their own work publicly available.

How can one use Wayback Machine? Using Wayback Machine is easy and free

of cost, though results are not always guaranteed. To begin, navigate to the Wayback Machine web page, where you will see a bar in which you can enter a URL/keywords relevant to the web page or content you are looking for. Then, hit ‘enter’ and wait for the results to be shown. If the content was new, rarely viewed, or deleted a very long time ago before being captured for the archive, you may not get many results or any at all. However, you have a good chance of finding content such as old websites that no longer exist today, earlier versions of existing websites, deleted social media posts, archived versions of paywalled articles, and archived versions of content that is blocked or censored in your jurisdiction. A graphic will show you how many times Internet Archive “crawled” the content in the past months or even years, allowing you to click on the calendar bubbles to pick out “snapshots” of the web content from different periods of time. However, the service can be patchy at times and not all content might have been perfectly saved; broken links, missing media, or pages that won’t load are often the end result. While Wayback Machine is useful for personal research or to access information sources, users should be cautious about relying on the data obtained through such sources, as the saved information can sometimes be outdated or inaccurate.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Indian cricketer Mahendra Singh Dhoni was born on July 7, 1981. A quiz on the legend

Vembu Shankar

- QUESTION 1**
In which city was M. S. Dhoni born?
- QUESTION 2**
Which division of the south east Railways was M. S. Dhoni initially stationed as a ticket collector?
- QUESTION 3**
M. S. Dhoni has taken only one wicket in his international career. Who was the batter whom Dhoni got out bowled?
- QUESTION 4**
Which battalion of the Parachute Regiment is Lt Col (Honorary) M. S. Dhoni assigned with?
- QUESTION 5**
Apart from M. S. Dhoni, who is the cricketer who appears as himself in

- the biopic *M. S. Dhoni: The Untold Story* playing the character of a national selector?
- QUESTION 6**
The wedding of M.S. Dhoni and Sakshi Rawat was held at Vishranti Resorts in 2010. The resort is owned by which former Ranji Trophy player?
- QUESTION 7**
What name did M.S. Dhoni sport in his jersey while appearing for the India vs New Zealand match at Visakhapatnam, on October 29, 2016?
- QUESTION 8**
Which Indian cricketer made his debut alongside M.S. Dhoni playing against Bangladesh at Chattogram on December 23, 2004?
- QUESTION 9**
What is M. S. Dhoni’s test cap number?



Visual question: Apart from Chennai Super Kings, M. S. Dhoni has captained this team as well in the Indian Premier League. Name it. AFP

Questions and Answers to the July 5 edition of the daily quiz: 1. This book written in Latin by a science genius was authorised by the noted diarist Samuel Pepys. **Ans: Sir Isaac Newton's Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica** 2. This country in North Africa got its independence from Spain on July 5 in 1962. **Ans: Algeria** 3. This legendary crooner's debut single was recorded on July 5, 1954. **Ans: Elvis Presley** 4. This person made history by winning the Gentleman's Singles title at Wimbledon 49 years ago. **Ans: Arthur Ashe dethroned Jimmy Connors to become the first black man to win the coveted title** 5. Dolly, the first mammal to be cloned, was this kind of animal. **Ans: Sheep** 6. Name the online giant founded on July 5. **Ans: Amazon** Visual: This is the currency of this South American country. **Ans: Venezuela** **Early Birds:** Varghese Joseph| Jyot Prakash| Akshansh Thakur| Aaryaman Thakur| Sunil Kannada *The writer is an Indian Army veteran.*



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Its the start of a burgeoning romance

She has ants in her pants as she has been waiting for a call from the university

S. Upendran

What is the meaning of ‘have ants in one’s pants’? (Anu Mittal, Gurugram) This is an expression frequently used in American English in informal contexts. When you say that you have ‘ants in your pants’, what you mean is that you are so excited or anxious about something, that you are unable to sit still even for a little while. Even when you stand, you are full of nervous energy; as a result, you pace up and down. Whether you are standing or sitting, you are unable to stay still. You are restless and constantly fidgeting. All this makes sense, I suppose. After all, if you had a lot of ants crawling up your pants, you wouldn’t be sitting or standing still, would you? Being very anxious about the prospect of being bitten in the wrong places, you might contemplate removing your clothing and doing everything possible to get rid of the insects. The expression is frequently used with children who have energy to spare! *Please take the dog for a walk. She’s had ants in her pants all day.* *Tomorrow is Deepak’s birthday. It’s not surprising he has ants in his pants.*

What does ‘burgeon’ mean? How is the word pronounced? (R Viswanath, Chennai) First, let us deal with the pronunciation of the word. It consists of two syllables; the ‘bur’ in the first, rhymes with the words ‘fur’, ‘her’ and ‘sir’. The ‘g’ that follows sounds like the ‘j’ in ‘juice’, ‘jam’ and ‘jump’, and the final ‘eo’ is like the ‘a’ in ‘china’. The word, which comes from the Old French ‘barjoner’ meaning ‘to bud or sprout’, is pronounced ‘BUR-jen’ with the stress on the first syllable. Dictionaries often label the word ‘literary’, and today, it is mostly used to mean ‘to grow or increase rapidly’. Anything that burgeons, expands and flourishes. The word can be used with living and non-living things. *After a rough start to the profession, Atul burgeoned into an excellent teacher.* *It was obvious to all that love was burgeoning between the two classmates.*

Which is correct? Pay in cash or pay by cash? (S. Mangalam, Vellore) Although ‘pay by cash’ is sometimes heard nowadays, careful users of the language would say ‘pay in cash’. They would consider ‘pay by cash’ incorrect. These individuals would prefer to say ‘pay in cash’ or ‘pay cash’ *I’d just paid cash for the groceries when the store alarm went off.* *I don’t know why, but Usha always prefers to pay in cash.* The expression ‘pay by’ is used when you make use of credit cards, cheques. *When Shiva bought an expensive car, he paid by cheque.* Nowadays, we talk about ‘online payment’ and ‘paid online’ – we do not say ‘paid by online’ or ‘paid in online’. *upendrankye@gmail.com*

Word of the day

Mogul: a very wealthy or powerful businessman
Synonyms: king, baron, big businessman, top executive, tycoon, magnate
Usage: *The media mogul said he wanted to buy his company.*
Pronunciation: bit.ly/mogulpro
International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈmɒɡʊ(ə)l/, /ˈmoʊɡəl/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to **letters@thehindu.co.in** with the subject ‘Text & Context’

Lite is good

SEBI's push for passive funds is welcome

Passive funds have been big beneficiaries of the record inflows into mutual funds since Covid market lows. This category accounted for about 16.5 per cent of the assets managed by the industry in May 2024, more than double the 7 per cent share four years ago. In developed markets such as the US, passive funds have already nudged past actively managed funds.

Considering cheaper costs and the lower risk associated with these funds, the Securities and Exchange Board of India's (SEBI's) move to frame 'MF Lite' regulations to encourage passive products is a step in the right direction. A nudge towards passive products is good for mutual fund investors on many counts. For one, with over 30 categories of actively managed products on every AMC's (Asset Management Company's) menu, investors who are new to mutual funds are often befuddled by a problem of plenty and are unable to make informed choices on the right categories or fund managers to select. Passive funds narrow down the choices as they mirror known indices. They also shield investors from excessive dependence on fund manager skills and the success or failure of a fund house's investment style or thesis. Passive funds are also an option for investors with lower risk appetites, as the downside is capped to the extent of the fall in the index when market conditions turn hostile.

More importantly, active funds in India are finding it a tough task to beat their benchmarks. A paper put out by SEBI last year showed that be they direct or regular plans, only 27-66 per cent of the active funds were able to match or outperform their benchmarks over 1 to 10-year timeframes. Passive funds are already far cheaper for investors to own than active funds. While index funds and exchange traded funds charge a maximum TER (total expense ratio) of 1 per cent, TERs on active funds can go as high as 2.25 per cent. While SEBI has been grappling with the issue of trying to reduce TER caps for active managers, encouraging more passive funds may be a simpler way to achieve such reductions through competition. The entry of more AMCs into the field, enabled by lower net worth requirements under MF Lite could aid competition and benefit investors too. Existing AMCs — who can hive off their passive schemes under MF Lite — may also be able to rejig their cost structures.

That said, a few aspects of the MF Lite regulations need fine-tuning. The regulations seek to introduce a new category of hybrid passive funds, but try to micromanage how exactly these indices should be constituted. This could stifle innovation as the risk appetite of investors seeking hybrid funds can also vary. While existing AMCs are allowed to hive off their passive business, separating shared resources may be easier said than done. The move to encourage passive products must also go with fostering further innovation in index construction itself, currently vested with the exchanges. SEBI should also go for uniform applicability of MF Lite across all passive schemes.

POCKET



CAPITAL IDEAS.



RICHA MISHRA

At a discussion session on gastroenterologist Dr Shiv Kumar Sarin's book, *Own Your Body: A Doctor's Life-saving Tips*, most experts felt that coffee — two cups — was actually not bad for health.

If coffee is good for health, why is it still not the favoured drink of Indian households? It is still not a popular drink for most Indians despite two of the prominent beans, Arabica and Robusta, being grown here.

Arabica has a sweeter, smoother taste to it, while Robusta is generally more bitter and harsher on the taste buds. Is coffee's lack of mass appeal due to it not being promoted sufficiently or is it because it is still seen as a premium drink?

Yes, the cafe culture has brought in a shift, but still coffee has not become a popular household drink. There are two reasons for this, according to those who are into coffee plantation business.

One, India has always been a tea consuming country and it is difficult for any other beverage to make a mark. And, two, coffee is produced only in the South. In fact, the three southern States — Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh — account for most of the coffee drinkers.

STAPLE BEVERAGES
According to Harish Bijoor of Harish Bijoor Consults Inc., "Coffee and tea are both staple beverages and both are plant outputs. Coffee has lagged because it is seen for a niche audience and is dominant essentially in South India. Tea, on the other hand, has always been promoted across the country and is omnipresent across areas. Besides, it is easy to prepare, while coffee is that much more complicated in its preparation mechanism."

"Today as we speak coffee has gone far beyond the pathetic consumption levels 30 years ago when I was in the sector. Coffee needs to be promoted much more vigorously," he said, adding that "the liquid coffee movement which was promoted essentially during the cafe revolution that hit India has really done wonders to its consumption. People drink a great cup of coffee in a Starbucks or Cafe Coffee Day and get back home and want to make something similar. If they cannot make something similar, they at least try to pick up an instant coffee packet that is as close as possible to the one they had."

But coffee remains the drink of South India and for the rest of the Indian market it is a drink to be had in a cafe where it is made best, says Bijoor, adding that "when it comes to home



Taking coffee to the masses

Popularising this beverage, which is produced and largely consumed in the South, requires vigorous promotion, reducing the chicory content, changing the labelling norms

consumption, everyday consumption or multiple cups of consumption it remains to be cups of tea. Coffee is served for special occasions."

According to Coffee Board Secretary, KG Jagadeesha, "Coffee Board takes up lots of generic promotions at its end. In fact, on the policy front, in our proposal for the new Coffee (Promotion and Development) Bill, which will replace the over 80-year-old existing Act, we have proposed that the role of the Coffee Board should be that of a facilitator and not a regulator."

The push to coffee is pretty evident in terms of number of campaigns that have been coming up.

Says R Sanjith Secretary-General, UPASI (United Planters' Association of Southern India), "As per a recent study on coffee consumption, the per capita

Coffee remains the drink of South India and for the rest of the Indian market it is a drink to be had in a cafe where it is made best.

consumption declined marginally during the last decade, while there was a small increase in the absolute coffee consumption figures. The reason for this static growth in coffee consumption could be due to blending of chicory with coffee at a maximum of 49 per cent. This could potentially mask not only the taste and flavour of coffee but also dilute the stimulating effects of coffee. Globally, mixing of chicory with coffee is confined to a couple of regions/countries and as per ICO (International Coffee Organization), the member countries should promote coffee that contains at least 95 per cent green coffee as the basic raw material."

PACKAGING MATTERS
"The ideal case scenario for growth in coffee consumption is reduction of chicory content in coffee to a minimum. That being the case, UPASI supports the Coffee Board's initiative to amend the labelling norms to indicate the coffee and its content on the front cover of package, as it will enable the consumers to make an informed choice for purchase of coffee," Sanjith adds.

Clearly, if consumption of coffee has to be increased, the consumer should be

made aware of how pure the coffee is. Apart from awareness, price is an important aspect. Coffee is expensive, largely because the entire production process is cumbersome. According to Nadikerianda Bose Mandanna, former Vice-Chairman Coffee Board, "Preparation of filter coffee is a laborious process in India — beans have to be roasted, ground and decoction made, whereas in the West machines are used more frequently. Indians still prefers the South Indian filter coffee."

Mixing of chicory prevents the consumer from tasting real coffee, he said. There is a demand to reduce the percentage of chicory in coffee.

"Coffee powder and coffee beans may be the cheapest in India. But the problem is in making. The process is cumbersome that it becomes difficult for the families to make it their home product." This leads to the next question: what could be the role of government in all this?

A set of rules have to be in place which would ensure that the percentage of chicory mixed in coffee is much lower and the labelling must depict the same. To make coffee popular, all stakeholders need to work together to ensure the demand grows.

Biden show is getting Democrats all worked up

Agitated Democrats want the President to quit the race, and name dropping of potential candidates has already begun

Sridhar Krishnaswami

Somehow things are not going right for President Joe Biden even if he tries to put the best spin. First was his disastrous debate in Atlanta, when his fumbling and mumbling rattled the wits out of the Democrats. And a group of Democratic Governors heard the President saying that he needed more sleep and that he would have to stop scheduling events after 8 pm.

The saving grace as of now is that Biden seemed to have held his own in his Friday interview with ABC News, but not many have been convinced of an incumbent having to repeatedly defend his ability to lead the United States for another four years. And the clamour has started within the Democratic Party and top-flight donors that in the interests of himself, party and country, Biden should leave the race.

But an embattled Biden who has not faced a defeat in polls in his long innings in Washington DC has increasingly been striking a defiant tone. "... if the Lord Almighty came down and said, 'Joe, get outta the race; I'd get outta the race,'" he told ABC's George Stephanopoulos. But

he was quick to add, "The Lord Almighty's not comin' down." Agitated Democrats who are looking at the national polls and battleground states showing the incumbent trailing former president Donald Trump, have started looking for options.

"The President is rightfully proud of his record. But he is dangerously out-of-touch with the concerns people have about his capacities moving forward and his standing in this race. Four years ago at this time, he was 10 points ahead of Trump. Today, he is six points behind," David Axelrod, former advisor to President Barack Obama has been quoted.

SOUNDING OUT COLLEAGUES
What started as a quiet murmur has now openly surfaced into a movement among Democrats with at least four in the House of Representatives and Senator David Warner said to be quietly sounding out colleagues in the Senate. Aside from ruthlessly putting down President Biden's debate performance on CNN, neither Trump nor his campaign have joined the oust-Biden movement perhaps for one or two reasons: watching from the sidelines with glee Democrats themselves taking



REGAINING MOJO. Running out of time

apart their candidate; or worried that their entry could hasten the process and produce a candidate who is not only much younger than the 78-year-old challenger but far more aggressive in taking down the falsehoods that Biden gave a pass or failed to respond in the June 27 encounter.

The name dropping has already begun even if every one of the potential candidates are publicly rooting for President Biden to stay on. And heading the list is Vice-President Kamala Harris who is 19 years junior to Trump in age as also a feisty and no-nonsense debater who will have the biggest advantage of campaign funds currently available. But

at least six other Governors are being spoken of as possible replacements: Gavin Newsom of California; Illinois' JB (Jay Robert) Pritzker; Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan; Wes Moore of Maryland; Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania and Roy Cooper of North Carolina. All this is not to forget the name of Michele Obama that gets dropped every now and then. And if a replacement is indeed found, who is the Vice-Presidential nominee on the ticket?

The one thing that Biden and Democrats do not have is the luxury of time, both by way of seeing how things unfold at the National Convention starting August 19 in Chicago or waiting how President Biden performs in the next debate on September 10.

Privately senior Democrats and donors will be hoping for the issue to settle even through a fractured convention, for at stake on November 5 is not only the Presidency, but in the Democrats' hope of re-taking the House and improving their fortunes in the Senate. Biden may be hedging his bets on The Almighty who may not be interested to get into the mess.

The writer is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North America and United Nations

BELOW THE LINE



All eyes on the Budget

TDP Supremo Chandrababu Naidu's reported \$12 billion aggregate aid request from Central Government is a hefty sum, but the Central Government might consider it small change to avoid a political collapse, due to the compulsions of a coalition government. For a \$3.5 trillion Indian economy, the fiscal support

packages sought are not much, one may argue. Nitish Kumar, another key ally, has reportedly joined the fray, asking for additional financial assistance running into few billion dollars besides special category status for Bihar. Combined, their demands exceed the total allocations to all States put together as loan assistance for the current fiscal. All eyes are on the upcoming Budget to see how Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will manage the fisc to accommodate these massive requests from key allies. **Comedy of errors**
The Chief Ministers of the two Telugu speaking States on Saturday met to resolve pending issues post

bifurcation at Praja Bhavan in Hyderabad. So what is the big deal about the venue one would ask? Almost around the same time nine years ago, K Chandrashekara Rao had given the go-ahead for a sting operation against Telugu Desam Party. The episode also caught Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister and TDP President N Chandrababu Naidu talking to the MLC concerned promising to honour all the promises made to him. This operation put Naidu in a spot politically, making him go to Vijayawada with bag and baggage, while A Revanth Reddy, now Telangana Chief Minister, was arrested. Nine years later, Reddy,

who subsequently quit TDP to join Congress in Telangana, and Naidu, have become Chief Ministers. In a week of quick developments, Naidu wrote to his protégé Reddy, offering to settle several unresolved bifurcation issues. Reddy responded positively and offered to host the talks in Hyderabad. The meeting went off well with the two sides agreeing to set up two high-level committees to study and resolve the issues. What everyone missed was that the venue of the meeting — Praja Bhavan (it used to be called Pragati Bhavan) — is the same place from where KCR gave his consent for the the sting operation. **Spirit of Mumbai**
Mumbai, which records the lowest

turnout in any election, was in full force to celebrate the victory of cricket World Cup champions despite the wet weather. The day after the victory lap, the Bombay Municipal Corporation-appointed workers collected 9,000 kg of waste along the Marine Drive, a VIP stretch frequently used by MLAs and bureaucrats heading for the ongoing State assembly session at Vidhan Bhavan. Having found scores of discarded *chappals* and shoes collected from the waste during the morning walk, an avid stock investor went on to buy stocks of Bata and Campus Shoes. Is that called the spirit of the city that never sleeps? **Our Bureaus**

More than just money

Health and happiness imperative for true wealth

BOOK REVIEW.

GR Balaji

Mark Mobius strongly believed borrowing was never a good option, a big virtue learned from his father. This led him to work in local bars and clubs to keep his college dream alive. According to Mobius, real wealth is beyond money. It has intellectual growth, emotional strength, social connections and so on. It's the richness of your life as a whole which is true wealth. He admires billionaires living modestly like Warren Buffett and Mark Zuckerberg.

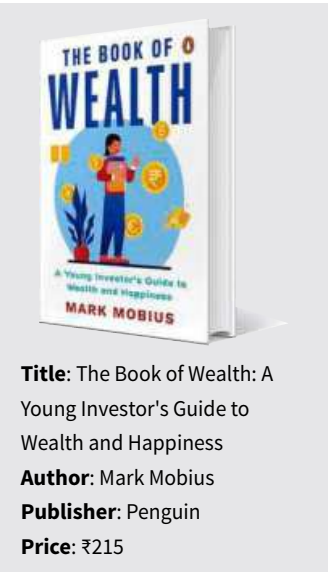
Wealth covers more than just money and includes happiness, knowledge, health, fame. Mobius refers to some financially successful people like Alexander Winston who died unhappy as his luxurious lifestyle separated him from society. People around him got interested in his wealth and not him. Mobius believes health is the real wealth and without health, wealth is meaningless. The longer you live you have a better chance of creating and enjoying wealth. Warren Buffet is one such living example; Rakesh Jhunjhunwala died early due to a poor lifestyle. To gain more in life you need to sustain yourself first.

YOUR BEST ASSET IS YOU Fortune begins with investing in your best asset — you. Your earnings power depends on how good your health is which allows you to perform your duties best which can result in better outcomes. Always give importance to invest in your skills, education and health, he emphasises.

Endless learning will help you to be top of your chosen field which can aid one to create strong material wealth. Buffett invested approximately 80 per cent of time reading and thinking about investment which led to his huge investment success.

Connection is another important source of wealth. It is not what you know but who you know that can help one climb the ladder of success. Every turn of your life is dependent on other people and to build strong relationships first become genuinely interested about them and their interests.

Mobius discusses various investment asset classes like cash, stocks, bonds, property, precious gems, cryptos and so on and substantiating each class' merit and disadvantage. No currency, he says, holds value over time and is the biggest risk of cash as an asset.



Title: The Book of Wealth: A Young Investor's Guide to Wealth and Happiness
Author: Mark Mobius
Publisher: Penguin
Price: ₹215

Mobius prefers equity for long term investment as the return tends to be 2x better than bonds. One dollar of equity in 1801 resulted in \$8.8 million by 2001 vs \$13,975 in bonds over a 200-year period.

Both, a steep bull market and bear market, are not representative of the long term potential of the equity asset class. He shares the example of Jesse Livermore, who was called Great Bear of Wall Street, who made a big fortune during the 1929 Depression by shorting the market. Bonds are also very effective tools in managing portfolios. During the period between 1870 and 1940, both bonds and equities delivered equivalent return reflecting the importance of bonds in certain economic circumstances.

Mobius' last chapter is devoted to investment strategies to put all assets together to create one's own unique portfolio. Mobius believes emotion controls everyone's behaviours more than anyone realises and we are subject to such behaviours like herd mentality, which results in selling stocks in panic or buying voraciously in panic to grab stocks whose price is rapidly rising. People attempt to move to a decision faster than normal and suspend reason and become irrational and start following what others are doing rather than considering the alternative strategies.

To conclude, there are many paths to wealth and people can take different routes to achieve the same but wealth has all the meaning when it results in happiness, which is the ultimate need of every human being.

The reviewer is Head of Research, itthought Financial Consulting

Demystifying the world of RBI

An insider's account of how RBI Governors dealt with crises, as also the personal initiatives launched by them

BOOK REVIEW.

S Adikesavan

Midway through her 220-page book *A Fly on the RBI Wall*, Alpana Killawala, former head of Communication at RBI, recounts how a policy on communication was crafted during the tenure of the legendary Dr YV Reddy as Governor. Alpana, who started as a professional journalist and joined RBI at the behest of the late S Venkitaramanan, the 18th Governor, describes this document more as a “dissemination” policy rather than true “communication.”

The book offers a breezy yet insightful read, delving into the communication (read dissemination) styles of six Governors, all men of significant scholarship and intellectual prowess, from 1992 to 2019. For those interested in financial regulation and policy, how these leaders formulated policy and communicated with the media and public will be particularly engaging.

PIVOTAL EVENTS

The author revisits pivotal events such as the securities scam, the rupee's two-step devaluation, the South-East Asian currency crisis, the Ketan Parekh episode, the 2008 financial turmoil, the taper tantrums, the Asset Quality Review, and demonetisation. Through an insider's perspective, it provides a detailed narrative of the Governors' responses to these crises.

What is engaging is the sidelight that she provides. Most of us know the way the RBI Governors dealt with these crises. Mostly, the gentlemen got it right. We can cavil at certain decisions with the benefit of hindsight. But their copybook is largely unblotted. What went on behind the scenes even as these

decisions were taken is the stuff of the book.

With a blend of flourish and sensitivity, Alpana adds colour to RBI Governors, otherwise perceived as pedantic and ivory-towerish. For instance, she recounts how Dr Rangarajan, a distinguished monetary economist, was forced to speak in Hindi (a language he barely managed) by the Chairman of a parliamentary committee, despite two Hindi-fluent Deputy Governors offering to substitute. This incident, although resolved, was a poignant moment illustrating language chauvinism. Such tendencies persist with equal vehemence even now.

‘JAMES BOND’

Another time, a celebrity author sensationalised Raghuram Rajan's image as “James Bond”, punning on “bond” and suggesting that the “guy has put sex back into the “limp sensex”. It was embarrassing. The communications team at RBI then asked the Governor whether he was okay with such type of coverage. He emphatically said he was not. “I have a wife and a young daughter,” he said. Alpana and her team then saw to it that the Governor's bespectacled visage became the norm for his newspaper pictures, in a bid to mitigate his “appeal”.

Alpana, with her front-row seat and active role in shaping RBI's communication, weaves a captivating tale that avoids becoming dull despite the arcane subject matter. She also highlights the personal initiatives launched by the Governors.

For example, Governor Duvvuri Subbarao was dedicated to demystifying the RBI, initiating outreach programmes where top executives travelled to villages for first-hand feedback. One recalls that the RBI website used to put out the weekly programmes of outreach



Title: A Fly on the RBI Wall: An Insider's View of the Central Bank
Author: Alpana Killawala
Publisher: Rupa Publications India
Price: ₹462

MEET THE AUTHOR

Alpana Killawala, a former journalist, led the RBI's communication function for 26 years. She transformed it from a Press Relations Division into a Department of Communication.

and forthcoming speaking engagements with the tagline, “The weekly schedule of the top executives of the Reserve Bank of India is aimed at demystifying the offices of the Governor and the Deputy Governors.”

Subbarao introduced other innovations like “village immersion,” incognito visits to bank branches by senior executives, and “outbound”

programmes to enhance staff interaction. These initiatives, if sustained, could have fostered genuine two-way communication for the RBI, beyond mere media relations.

Today, the central bank practises substantially what Alpana describes as a “dissemination” policy, focusing on media and analyst meetings.

What was press relations has now turned into media relations. Media meets remain dominated by dense policy discussions on “stance on liquidity”, cues on reading between the lines of the Governor's statement and so on, the daily bread of the English business media.

DIRECT ENGAGEMENT

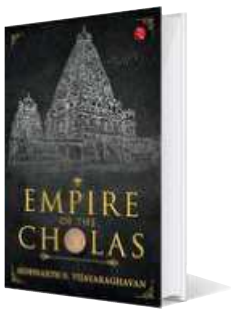
There is still no platform for direct engagement with ordinary citizens affected by MPC and RBI decisions. Ordinary people do not know that there is a committee in Mumbai which “believes” that its bi-monthly meetings and resultant decisions control the prices of the pulses, vegetables, rice, wheat, edible oil, milk, sugar, fish, chicken and eggs that they consume daily using promissory notes signed by the Governor.

And that the buck for price rise stops with this committee, as legislated by Parliament, elected by them. Unless there is communication with the person at the last mile on these livelihood issues, we will have only “dissemination”.

A Fly on the Wall is a valuable addition to the literature on central banking. It will be judged by posterity not just as a collection of anecdotes but as a discerning record of how “communication” policies are taking shape within the central bank. This effort is a work in progress as the author also acknowledges.

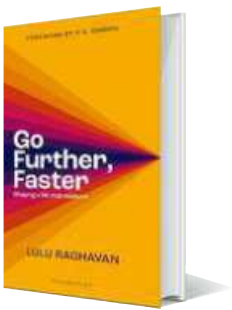
The reviewer is a commentator on banking and finance

NEW READS.



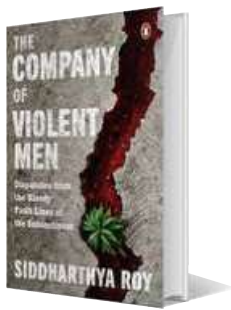
Title: Empire of the Cholas
Author: Siddharth N Vijayaraghavan
Publisher: Rupa Publications India

Weaving together the fictional and the factual, the book narrates the legend of the construction of the Big Temple in Thanjavur and the Chola Empire



Title: Go Further, Faster: Shaping a Life that Matters
Author: Lulu Raghavan
Publisher: Bloomsbury India

With actionable strategies and heartfelt encouragement, the book equips you to soar to new heights professionally and personally.



Title: The Company of Violent Men: Stories from the Bloody Fault lines of the Subcontinent
Author: Siddharthya Roy
Publisher: Penguin

The author, an investigative journalist, takes us on a deeply personal journey into reporting violent political conflicts in South Asia.

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

July 8, 2004

Survey hints at bold moves to sustain growth

“The economy appears to be in a resilient mode in terms of growth, inflation and balance of payments” and there are “signs of improvement in the investment climate in recent months,” the Ministry's Economic Survey for 2003-04 has said, referring to the 8.2 per cent growth in real GDP registered in the previous year.

TRAI mandates 6-month validity for all tariff plans

In a move that would protect mobile and fixed line users from any increase in tariff hike soon after taking a connection, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India has made it mandatory for operators to put a six month validity period on all tariff plans. This means that if a subscriber takes a tariff plan today, the operator cannot bring about any increase in the tariff package for the next six months.

Alstom to make India global production hub

French engineering giant Alstom is planning to set up a research and development (R&D) centre in Bangalore and upgrade its Vadodara and Delhi operations as part of plans to make India its global manufacturing hub and exports base.

Short take

Budget challenges amidst a robust economy

K Srinivasa Rao

The expectations of every sector of the economy from the upcoming full Budget FY25 are increasing. The resilience of the economy when seen with the robust contribution of a dividend of ₹2.1 trillion by RBI adds to the fiscal strength.

As against the fiscal deficit of 5.1 per cent envisaged on February 1, 2024, in the Interim Budget, the deficit may go down to 4.5 per cent by the end of next fiscal — 2025-26. During April-May 2024, government expenditure was low due to the model code of conduct and the capex was at a six-month low. No new projects were funded.

The fiscal deficit during April-May

stayed at 3 per cent of GDP.

The GDP is expected to surpass the RBI estimate of 7.2 per cent. According to the IMF, the nominal GDP of India is expected to reach \$4.339 trillion by 2025 while Japan's GDP is predicted to reach \$4.310 trillion when India will be the 4th largest economy on its way to become the third-largest by 2027. India alone is contributing 15 per cent of the global growth now.

MIDDLE-CLASS WOES

Even when the economy is doing well the pain points of middle- and low-income groups have increased. They seek income tax relief by further rationalising taxable slabs. It should create more space for health insurance protection. As interest rates are set to go

down, some exemptions from TDS on interest on fixed deposits could be expected. Despite diminishing inflation, the lifestyle cost of middle-income and retirees are going up. The higher longevity with shrinking savings is putting pressure on elders amid the waning joint family culture.

Budget time is funding time for various social welfare programmes. The prominent among them are — MGNREGA, Digital India, Skill India, Swatch Bharat Mission, Bharat Mala, PM Gram Sadak Yojana, and PM Awas Yojana where 4 crore houses were built and allotted and 3 crore new houses are proposed to be built.

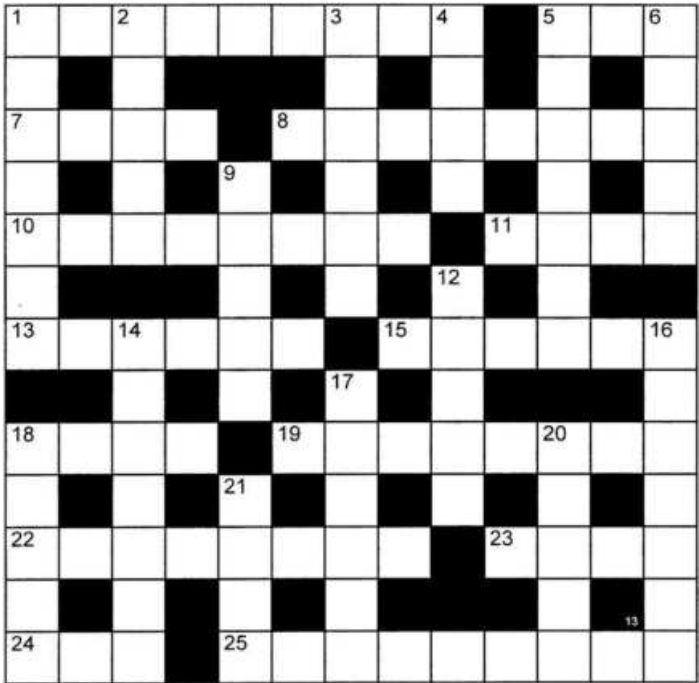
It will be a tough challenge to support the social sector schemes by fixing the proportionality of budgetary flows

among them. The broader focus continues to be on key sectors such as semiconductors, solar, electric vehicles, green hydrogen, batteries, and the aviation sector to increase manufacturing and unleash growth. Balancing the budgetary allocations between different sectors of the economy while maintaining focus on infrastructure development with a long-term vision calls for foresight and a knack for prioritisation.

Maintaining a balance between fiscal prudence amid the various forces drawing government resources calls for collaborative efforts.

The writer is an Adjunct Professor, at the Institute of Insurance and Risk Management, Hyderabad. Views are personal

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2477



EASY

ACROSS

- 1. Unmoved in feelings (9)
- 5. Gratuity (3)
- 7. Work with wool (4)
- 8. Schooled (8)
- 10. Meant (8)
- 11. A drama (4)
- 13. Sandy-haired (6)
- 15. Orison (6)
- 18. Words of book (4)
- 19. Daredevil (8)
- 22. Look for gold (8)
- 23. Supply finance (4)
- 24. Type of lettuce (3)
- 25. Replace (9)

DOWN

- 1. The least suspicion (7)
- 2. Apply coat (5)
- 3. Certainly (6)
- 4. Every one, separately (4)
- 5. Completely (7)
- 6. Growing rice (5)
- 9. Beneath (5)
- 12. Slow vehicle (5)
- 14. Hurtful (7)
- 16. Amount left (7)
- 17. Crockery item (6)
- 18. Matter for discussion (5)
- 20. Escape by stratagem (5)
- 21. Work (mus) (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- 1. Little devil and fool I've followed without emotion (9)
- 5. It is the very end of a hand-out (3)
- 7. Do something needling to make one furrow brows (4)
- 8. East of the French, acted strangely though not ignorant (8)
- 10. Bride-to-be, perhaps, had something in mind (8)
- 11. Give money to about fifty to be instrumentalists (4)
- 13. Make spirited hair colour (6)
- 15. What's offered up, proper first and last, as year changes (6)
- 18. No drinker holds a previous spouse, as printed word shows (4)
- 19. Rash of freckles hasn't begun with sun's first appearance (8)
- 22. A view of what's in store: go out and get gold (8)
- 23. Money provides enjoyment on the day (4)
- 24. Firms long recognised among lettuce-growers (3)
- 25. Take place of first-class tournament player who changes (9)

DOWN

- 1. A dim notion of fish after the cuttlefish fluid (7)
- 2. Colour in and dab around (5)
- 3. Where fin is defined, of a surety (6)
- 4. Every one way for a bet being placed (4)
- 5. A small child, one on one's side – completely! (7)
- 6. Rice in the husk shown by child in a rage (5)
- 9. Not up to one in France with the German version (5)
- 12. Sort of vehicle one may bring to a halt (5)
- 14. Six, on our unfinished version, could be harmful (7)
- 16. Regret including the wrong side if the remainder is there (7)
- 17. What one has chain when separated? Storm-centre! (6)
- 18. Talk about it when there's a spinner on the ice endlessly (5)
- 20. Artfully escape, and we'll muddle even characters (5)
- 21. Invocation to a Manx cat (work of a composer) (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2476

ACROSS 1. Embody 4. Ascend 9. Contact 10. Llama 11. Main 12. Slot 13. Elm 15. Grew 16. Draw 19. Ill 21. Tail 22. Ages 24. Alien 25. Vertigo 26. Easily 27. Adages
DOWN 1. Excommunicate 2. Bending 3. Deal 5. Solitary 6. Erase 7. Dead men's shoes 8. Stall 14. Sentinel 17. Wagging 18. Sieve 20. Lairs 23. Arid

Information asymmetry

GST data must be released

Gross goods and services tax (GST) collection for June 2024 came at ₹1.74 trillion, a year-on-year increase of 7.7 per cent. The information, however, was not made public through the usual press release with details as has been standard practice. The headline tax collection number was disclosed to reporters informally this time. It has also been reported that this would now be the norm. The shift is clearly disturbing and must be avoided. At a time when transparency and disseminating timely information are becoming crucial — especially given India's intent to attract more global investment — discontinuing a practice that had become routine can be counterproductive. Notably, this comes within days of Indian-government bonds being formally included in one of the global indices for the first time.

While it is correct that the GST system still needs a fair bit of adjustment to attain its intended potential, it serves as an important high-frequency indicator for a variety of stakeholders. It is regularly tracked by many, including financial-market analysts and investors. Given the official numbers like the gross domestic product (GDP) data come with a significant lag, monthly GST collection gives a broad sense of how the economy is doing. Interestingly, one of the reported reasons for discontinuing the release is said to be buoyant tax collection, which arguably gives an impression that the government is collecting too much tax. To be fair, the official reason for discontinuing the monthly release is not known, but the level of tax collection cannot be the reason. It is incorrect at various levels. First, gross GST collection is not for the Centre alone. It includes the share of the states. It also includes the compensation cess, which is being used to repay the loans taken to compensate states for their revenue shortfall during the pandemic. Second, the general government Budget deficit remains elevated and is likely to be 7.5-8 per cent of GDP in the current year. This means the government is not collecting enough taxes to meet its expenditure. Thus, either the level of tax collection has to go up or the expenditure needs to come down.

Finally, and more importantly, the GST system has underperformed in revenue collection. GST collection, net of refunds, last financial year — based on the provisional GDP estimate for the year — was just 6.1 per cent of GDP compared to collection worth about 6.3 per cent of GDP from the taxes subsumed in GST in 2016-17. It is also worth noting that gross collection includes the compensation cess, which was expected to be discontinued after the completion of five years. The government is collecting lower taxes than it used to in the pre-GST system. Further, as economist Arvind Subramanian and others have shown, the Union government has lost significantly in terms of revenue after the implementation of GST. Thus, what is needed at this stage is to significantly reform the GST system with adjustments in both rates and slabs, which will help improve tax collection. The immediate focus of the government should be to work with the states on improving the GST system. If there is uneasiness among the general public regarding GST collection, the government should work on improving its communication. Discontinuing the official release will only increase the information gap.

Labour gains

Hopes for an India-UK FTA improve

The British Labour Party's return to power after 14 years following a victory that surpassed expectations is seen as a vote for stability after the chaotic years of Conservative rule, marked by serial scandals, a cost of living crisis, failing public services, and sluggish economic growth in the post-Brexit era. But disaggregated voting patterns in this low-turnout election suggest that despite winning 412 seats, 64 per cent of Parliament's 650 seats, the Labour party's popular victory is a qualified one. The party won 34 per cent of the vote, only 2 percentage points more than its poor showing in the 2019 elections. Though the Conservative party lost 250 seats, it has a 24 per cent vote share; the far-right anti-immigration Reform UK gained four seats but a 14 per cent vote share. The Liberal Democrats, which had once allied with the Conservatives, won 71 seats, 60 more than in 2019, and a 12 per cent vote share. A chunk of Labour's gains came from Scotland, where disarray in the Scottish National Party cost it 38 seats. These numbers may explain why the stock and currency markets were neither shaken nor stirred by the landslide victory.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, 61, a former public prosecutor who entered Parliament in 2015 and has never served in government, appears to have understood the need for brisk progress on his party's ambitious centre-left agenda. This includes restoring economic and social stability by raising taxes and spending more on public services — health, education, and police — renationalising British Rail as private contracts expire, ending sales of petrol and diesel cars by 2030, and closing grants of new oil exploration licences in the North Sea. Within days of the results being declared, Mr Starmer, who was knighted in 2014, made Cabinet appointments, most of them from the Shadow Cabinet, and held meetings. He has sought to set the tone of his government by declaring as “dead” the Conservative government's plans to ship undocumented immigrants to Rwanda. Despite having voted against Brexit, he ruled out a reversal. He will make his debut on the international scene on Tuesday, flying to Washington for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's 75th anniversary summit. His government has pledged to continue support for Ukraine and to increase the United Kingdom's (UK's) military spending. He will, however, be tested on the UK's stance on Israel's war on Hamas; four independent pro-Palestinian candidates wrested seats from Labour in these elections, including former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn.

India has good reason to view Labour's victory with hope, especially on its ambitious foreign-trade agreement (FTA), which has been in the works since 2022. The Labour manifesto contained a commitment for a new strategic partnership with India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has moved quickly to establish cordial relations with the new government, including extending an invitation to Mr Starmer to visit India. The two countries have completed 13 rounds of FTA negotiations and made substantial progress under former prime minister Rishi Sunak. Much depends on how negotiators approach the sticking points — lower duties for Scotch and electric vehicles, temporary visas for Indian service providers, and environmental standards. Foreign Secretary David Lammy aimed to have the FTA wrapped up by the end of 2024. It is to be hoped that this deadline does not suffer the same fate as the earlier “Diwali” timelines committed by the Conservatives.

NEET's problems: Look deeper

We should not just solve the proximate symptoms

ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY



Failures in the operations of the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) have aroused much ire. It is possible to think about the NEET problem statement and improve its implementation. We should peel the layers of the onion and go deeper. Why should every medical college in India be subject to central control of how it admits students? Why is there so little medical education?

Our first instinct is: We have a failure of operations, so let's go do the operations better. We can add more policemen and armoured cars to protect the papers from leaking. This is a bit of a mug's game, given the extreme supply-demand imbalance in medical education and the high incentive in favour of examination fraud. There are too many civil servants involved at too many points in the process. It is not wise to ask flawless performance of government organisations in India. As with most policy problems that we see in India, we need better thinking and not mere execution of poorly thought out concepts. How could we do better than the worm's eye view?



AJAY SHAH & VIJAY KELKAR

A better centralised examination

Why should there be a high-stakes examination, organised in person all over the country, on one date? In fact, putting an identical question paper in front of multiple different candidates is well known to be an inefficient statistical estimator of the candidate quality.

Computerised testing based on “item response theory” obtains a better estimator of each candidate. This is how the GRE (Graduate Record Examination) works. If there was any one fixed exam, there would be a bunch of people with a perfect score (and the

people slightly behind would not be materially different from the bunch at the top). Modern statistical methods tease out the difference between the 95th percentile and the 99th percentile by probing them with difficult questions. These are administered from a large bank of questions, each of which is the subject of research and measurement based on the past performance of the *question*.

In this arrangement, testing would take place all through the year, with the test taker making an appointment to take the test. This avoids the bad luck of flood, a heat-wave, or illness. It is operationally easier: Instead of having 2.5 million people being tested on one day in a year, we break up the problem into 10,000 persons being tested every day. From a management point of view, it is more feasible to establish a process of data release, research, criticism, and then iterative policy modifications, so as to learn how to do 10,000 tests per day correctly,

250 times a year.

This requires organisational capability at the level of the Educational Testing Service, the private American firm which runs the GRE. It would be good to build the policy reforms to get testing activities out of the Indian state.

This would help, but can we do better?

A better college-admission process

How should a university choose from many applicants? This is the legitimate choice of the managers and the board of the university. The purpose and strategy of each university would shape the mechanisms that it uses to choose students. There is no one-size-fits-all. Some universities might like to take

A matter of life and death

We know that climate change impacts weather, which, in turn, devastates lives and livelihoods. But what we don't discuss enough is how these extremes in weather impact human health. In this season of despair, when temperatures spiralled beyond endurance, we learnt how heat could kill. We also learnt how the rise in minimum temperatures — the night-time heat — could be a cause of deaths. It is critical that we join the dots between what seems like a faraway crisis of a changing climate and what it can do to our health.

This year, the world has seen scorching temperatures. And this heat has taken lives — in Delhi till the end of June, it was estimated that some 270 people had died because of extreme heat. But I repeat this number with caution. We don't know how many died of heat alone, because heat is an exacerbating factor to existing health ailments like cardiovascular or kidney diseases. Many more may have succumbed to heat this summer, but doctors would have written it down to underlying conditions. We know that the most vulnerable are those exposed to heat because of their work conditions — from construction workers to farmers. It is also the poor who do not have access to electricity and cannot use appliances to cool themselves. But their deaths are not recorded as ones owing to heat stress; only that they are either poor or old, and died of “unknown causes”. Heat is not listed among the notified diseases of the country, which also means that it is not required to be recorded or to provide information for further action. So, we must recognise that we know little

about the health burden and deaths because of the ferocious burn we saw of late.

However, research is now pointing to the dynamics of deadly heat. First, it is being understood that the rise in night-time heat is the cause of the maximum number of mortalities. A 2022 paper in *The Lancet*, a British medical journal, found “that the relative mortality risk on days with hot nights could be 50 per cent higher than on days with cooler night temperatures”. The reason, the authors explain, is that heat affects sleep and does not allow the body to repair itself; and this, in turn, exacerbates the health stress. Second, we know that evaporation is the method for our bodies to cool; but this becomes ineffective when humidity increases beyond 75 per cent — also known as the wet bulb phenomenon. So, thermal discomfort, not just temperatures, is what needs to be understood.

The worry is that we are seeing an increasing trend in all three killer factors, particularly in urban centres. Here, temperatures are rising beyond human tolerance; humidity is increasing; and so is the night-time heat. A recent report by my colleagues at the Centre for Science and Environment tracked heat trends across major cities of India and found that ambient air temperatures were increasing in cities, as against the average for the country. Hyderabad, Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Chennai are seeing a more humid summer — 5-10 per cent increase in the last decade (2014-23) as compared to 2001-10. Only Bengaluru has not shown any increase in summer humidity level and this needs further investigation.



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in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) propeller heads, some might emphasise multiple personality traits, some might like to use allocation based on lotteries. It might surprise us in India, but a significant portion of doctors in the US have backgrounds outside of science majors. Doctors require strong communication capabilities, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, which are fostered by a liberal arts education. A wise leadership of a medical college is best placed to choose an admission algorithm that is consistent with its strategy.

Medical-college admission is, then, one of a piece with the array of situations all across the Indian landscape, with excessive centralisation and excessive government control. There is no reason for Union government control of medical admission: Each medical college should do as it pleases. We need the policy reforms to get the Union government out of medical admissions.

This would help, but can we do better?

A better medical-education system

There is a massive shortage of doctors, e.g. to the point where Indian students are going to China or Ukraine. Domestic requirements, medical tourism, and telemedicine services delivered to overseas users: All these imply that a 10- or 20-fold increase in the number of doctors would be readily absorbed by the economy.

There are no shortages of telephone connections or scooters in modern India. What happened to those queues and corruption? The solutions lay in injecting superior ideas, not superior execution, into the policy process. The root cause of conflict around admission to medical college is the shortage of seats. This shortage is caused by mistakes in the rules made by the government, which hold back entry.

There is an analogy in this field. The emergence of the Indian software industry was threatened by a shortage of engineers. This was solved by policy reform with the entry of private educational organisations. The education market and the labour market know how to distinguish “good” from “bad” in the colleges; we don't need government involvement in helping students or employers combat asymmetric information. The Indian private sector knows how to build and run educational organisations, what is needed is a large dose of removal of restrictions. Government restrictions hold back myriad universities in India from launching medical schools, which many could do in partnership with private hospitals.

It is efficient for the best private hospitals to add medical education alongside their core operations. A medical university must have faculty members who are not just practitioners: They need to be researchers. This is good for the private hospital as they would command more respect and be sought after. This requires a way of life different from that of conventional private hospitals. The role of the government is to establish a research-funding mechanism through which grants go to such researchers.

Shah is a researcher at XKDR Forum and Kelkar is vice-president, Pune International Centre

Spin doctoring for the rich and corrupt



BOOK REVIEW

JIM WINDOLF

Late in their careers, journalists with well-known bylines tend to write memoirs. These books are all the same. Early on, they have plenty of entertaining character studies of the scamps and scoundrels who populate newsrooms. That is followed by scenes of boozy evenings in exotic locations, usually with some gunfire in the distance. On page 100 or so comes the step-by-step narrative of how the reporter, despite some deep-seated personal failings, plays a key role in exposing this or that corrupt politician, business leader or institution.

All the Worst Humans, a pithy, anecdote-rich memoir by Phil Elwood, has a lot in common with those books.

But it tells a story from journalism's shadow side, the realm of high-level public relations. And so, while the book has plenty of scoundrels, cocktails and guns, it comes with no cathartic recounting of how the author exposed wrongdoing. That is because Elwood has devoted himself to the dubious pursuit of drumming up positive news coverage for dictators and other malefactors.

It starts with the crack of a Jack Reacher thriller. It is 2018, and FBI agents are about to knock on Elwood's door. Nearly 20 years into a career of shaping public opinion, he has served so many bad guys that he cannot be sure just what the investigators are after.

“It could be the Israelis,” Elwood writes. “Or Muammar Gaddafi. Or Bashar al-Assad. Or the Iranians. Or because of what I pulled in Antigua. Or the bank transfers to accounts in tax havens all over the world. Or Project Rome.”

The author will describe his many misadventures — but first he lays out how his desire to be counted as even a minor player in world events, along with

a penchant for thrill-seeking and a dash of cynicism, led him to specialise in the dark art of massaging the truth for fun and profit.

A character who comes to life in these pages is Peter Brown, a onetime manager of the Beatles who, in 1983, founded the company that became the powerful international public relations firm BLJ Worldwide. Brown's dealings with John, Paul, George and Ringo have been chronicled in countless books and articles. Thanks to Elwood, interested readers can learn of his lucrative sequel career as a behind-the-scenes image-maker and string-puller. If *All the Worst Humans* is a hit, Brown might consider assigning one of his charges to do some reputational clean-up work on his behalf.

Elwood becomes a foot soldier for BLJ Worldwide after making a name as an aggressive and creative spin doctor in Washington. He is impressed, at first, by Brown's polished demeanour, and his habit of unspooling Beatles anecdotes between sips of Campari and soda. Nor is Elwood put off by the firm's

client list, which comes to include the Libyan dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi, President Bashar al-Assad of Syria and Russia Today, a news outlet started by the Kremlin to improve Russia's standing beyond its borders.

“Everyone deserves representation,” Brown says, in Elwood's account. “And anything is possible with the right amount of money.”

Elwood, the son of a minister, feels he has arrived when he finds himself among Yoko Ono, Donald Trump and Barbara Walters at a Christmas party in 2008 hosted by Brown in his grand apartment on Central Park West in Manhattan. But like the protagonist of a 20th-century movie starring Charlie Sheen, Elwood begins to lose his bearings, not to mention what is left of his innocence, as he tries to please his demanding boss and his more

demanding clients, one of whom is a son of Qaddafi. Increasingly, he quiets his moral qualms with alcohol.

Journalism professors will weep when they come across Elwood's analysis of the media ecosystem. As he tells it, news gatherers are simply “outgunned” by their counterparts. There are 300,000 public relations employees in the United States, he writes, most of whom are much better paid than the nation's estimated 40,000 journalists.

“My industry is worth \$129 billion,” he adds. “We will do anything to earn those billions.”

Rather than trying to muscle reporters into writing propaganda or puff pieces, Elwood is savvy enough to go with a soft-sell strategy, heavy on charm, nuggets of exclusive information and expense-account dinners, in the hope that a mere 50.1 per cent of a published article will favour the people whose images he is trying to burnish or whose misdeeds he is hoping to bury. This

approach keeps his clients happy enough, while encouraging scoop-hungry reporters to come back for more.

The book has its longueurs but picks up narrative steam when Elwood describes how the grind of providing cover for bad actors takes its toll. Filled with regret about some of the things he has done, and finding himself the potential target of a federal investigation because of public relations work he's performed for a group of ex-spies, he becomes suicidal. After being diagnosed with bipolar II disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder, he undergoes a lengthy ketamine treatment.

In the book's mostly happy ending, Elwood does not suddenly switch teams to join the ranks of righteous journalists. He's no sap. But now, he throws himself into further campaigns. One of them comes in the service of Ukrainians fighting Russia's invasion. Another is an effort to change the public perception of ketamine from a good-time party drug to an effective treatment for people suffering from depression.

The reviewer is a features editor for the Style section of The New York Times ©2024 The New York Times News Service



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

NEET needs a total makeover

Stop-gap measures won't help regain public trust in the discredited medical entrance exam

The controversy over the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) refuses to die down even as more worms continue to crawl out of the woodwork. The deferment of the counselling session, expected to start on July 6 (“never officially notified” is not an excuse in this case, unfortunately) is the latest shock to the system. The limited issue of the validity of this year’s test (given concerns that the paper may have been leaked), and the way it was conducted, is before the apex court, but it is important to acknowledge the three fundamental issues with the test that explain why the noise around it refuses to fade.

The first is the concept itself. Medical education is not like any other education — imagine if the functioning of the lower courts was dependent on attached law colleges. All medical colleges, government and private, are attached to hospitals, and some southern states, especially Tamil Nadu, have invested significant resources in building their health infrastructure at the district level — considered by some to be the most crucial — by setting up medical colleges-plus-hospitals. Given the almost prohibitively high cost of medical education in private colleges, much of the competition in NEET is for seats in government colleges, and states such as Tamil Nadu naturally believe they have received a raw deal with admissions being routed through a national exam.

The second is the agency mandated to conduct the test, the National Testing Agency (NTA). The IITs run the Joint Entrance Exam, taken by around 1.5 million students last year, and do a good job of it. The IIMs run the Common Admission Test, taken by around 300,000 students last year, and once again do a good job of it. NTA, if its track record is any indication (NEET UG isn’t the only test it administers that has become controversial), is still on a learning curve.

The third is the process itself — from the paper itself being leaked, to proxy candidates appearing, to organised cheating, there are far too many vulnerabilities in the process. A completely online test will remove many of them, but this should not come at the cost of making the test inaccessible to poor students, or students from rural areas.

A complete rethink may be what is needed — even if it means delaying the current academic session by a few months.

Budget and political priorities of new govt

The NDA government will present its first budget on July 23. While the government is maintaining that the budget will signal continuity with the economic approach of the last government, the devil will lie in the details.

Here is what the economic approach of the second NDA government was in a nutshell. It faced three back-to-back economic shocks in the pandemic, the war in Europe, and global inflation and monetary tightening. Its response, once the challenge of preventing catastrophic human suffering during pandemic was over, was to protect macroeconomic stability more than anything else. The endeavour helped to boost India’s standing in the eyes of investors but did little to correct the skewed growth trajectory that the economy went into after the pandemic. While counterfactuals always require a leap of faith, this might have played a big role in generating headwinds for the BJP’s election campaign. Will the budget make a pivot to rebuild this lost political capital, even if it comes at the cost of fiscal consolidation, both in terms of quality (revenue over capital) and quantity of spending? Prudence will suggest that the government should stagger such a pivot to maximise its impact over state elections due at different points in time between now and 2029.

Two things will test such a recalibration of the government’s economic programme. Taking things to the other extreme in terms of capital expenditure to revenue expenditure and fiscal prudence to more spending in a knee-jerk manner isn’t going to take care of India’s structural economic challenges. Any political re-evaluation of the past government’s approach should be done objectively. The global economy, given the ongoing political upheaval in Europe and America, might become more unpredictable in the future. This increases the need for a more cautionary approach to policymaking.

Friendship founded on mutual interests

Pragmatism and respect for each other’s core concerns can form the nucleus of a new compact between India and Russia at a time when the global order is in a churn

The bilateral visit of Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi to Russia beginning Monday is an emphatic reaffirmation of the importance of Russia in Indian foreign policy. This is a relationship that has stood the test of time, but has today acquired a larger-than-life image in some circles because of the Ukraine conflict. This need not be so because there is nothing extraordinary about the relationship. It is a normal inter-State relationship that is conducted as all relationships are between friends. For it to have been otherwise would have been the surprise.

Friends also have the ability to speak to each other openly and sincerely. This is epitomised in the comment made to President Vladimir Putin by PM Modi in 2022 that this is not an era of war but of dialogue and diplomacy. Engagement and discussion are needed most when tensions are high and even bigger conflagrations seem imminent. India has been a leading advocate of this approach

towards global conflicts. If talks between the two leaders can pave the way to peace and de-escalation, they would serve a cause that goes far beyond the bilateral. The visit does not signify India’s support to Russia’s actions just as India’s interactions with the West do not constitute a stand against Russia.

Questions have been asked about India’s commitment to the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, international law, and the rules-based order. India’s response to these questions is to reaffirm these norms but to equally assert that dialogue and diplomacy are even more crucial to preserve these norms. It is a well-accepted fact that international institutions have failed to anticipate, pre-empt or resolve any of the major ongoing conflicts. In such circumstances, State behaviour of temperance and responsibility emerge as the only way to prevent Armageddon.

From a bilateral perspective, the visit marks the restoration of the practice of India-Russia Annual Summits that was interrupted after the Ukraine conflict and other internal developments in both countries. Historically, this is one relationship that has been driven top down. Both sides agree that the foundation on which the relationship rests provides the platform for its reconfiguration and reinvention. Signs of this are visible in emerging sectors of cooperation such as energy security, food security, min-

eral resources and raw materials, health and pharmaceuticals, infrastructure such as railways and steel, science and technology, including nuclear, space and digital, skilling and education and tourism, culture, and people-to-people contacts. The Russian Far East and its long Arctic coastline are futuristic areas of interest to India. The bilateral investment target has been revised to \$50 billion by 2025. Delhi will capitalise on this friendship to align it with India’s temporary and long-term needs.

For Russia, a growing India is a geostrategic and geo-economic asset. The Indian market can create virtuous cycles of returns for Russia. A ready example is the explosion in India’s import of Russian oil from \$2 billion in 2022 to over \$61 billion in 2024. Strategically, Russia sees India as an indispensable partner for the success of its balancing and hedging policy in Asia. India too views Russia through the prism of its Eurasia policy. Both countries can reinforce each other’s actions to meet new and emerging threats, protect the global commons, and build a more stable world order.

The relationship is not without challenges. Some predate the Ukraine crisis, and some are its consequences. The former include the knowledge deficit, unfamiliarity with each other’s political and cultural systems and poor physical connectivity. The latter are factors beyond India’s con-



The visit does not signify India’s support to Russia’s actions just as India’s interactions with the West do not constitute a stand against Russia

REUTERS

trol, originating from Russia’s confrontation with the West. Unilateral sanctions against Russia as part of the policy to punish Russia and cut it off from the international system are having a perceptible impact on India-Russia economic cooperation. Defence cooperation is also under stress, but India has no option but to maintain serviceability of the existing stock of Russian military equipment. The domination of oil in the trade basket has resulted not only in a huge adverse and unsustainable trade balance for India but also a payments problem.

India and Russia share a common neighbourhood, but not a common border. The threat from terrorism and radicalisation is common to both. They both speak of multipolarity but interpret it differently. India is a non-Western country but it is not anti-

West. These different approaches will be tested in the BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) groupings. There is acceptance of each other’s historical experiences and little desire to shape one in the image of the other. The goodwill at the popular level for each other combined with pragmatism and respect for each other’s core concerns can potentially form the nucleus of a new compact between the two countries that fits in with the era of fluidity in today’s global order.

For good reason, there is mutual advantage and interest in keeping the relationship on an even keel despite the headwinds.

Pankaj Saran is a former Indian ambassador to Russia and deputy national security advisor. The views expressed are personal

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



Don’t use Parliament to settle political rivalries

The afternoon of November 8, 1793, was marked by a tragic event in the history of France. Marie Roland, the French revolutionary, philosopher, politician, and writer, was guillotined that day. “O Liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name!” were her final words. I recall these words of Madame Roland while observing the proceedings in Parliament; O democracy, what are they doing in your name?

How can our MPs conduct themselves in such a manner in Parliament?

The general election concluded last month. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which had been in power for two terms, was denied a thumping majority for a third term, though it had everything on its side: Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s capable leadership, the largest party organisation, and vast resources. The Congress, the largest Opposition party, was not in the reckoning. No one expected regional parties to be strong enough to challenge the BJP, but they proved to be the biggest obstacle to a sweeping victory for the party.

What message does this mandate give both parties?

To the ruling party, the clear message was that it will need to revisit its style of functioning. The lesson for the Opposition was to not be boastful. They have made progress, of course, but they have to put in significantly more effort to return to office.

The first test of whether these parties have learnt these lessons came in Parliament. So who passed, and who failed the test?

Perhaps you, like me, were shocked by the debate over the President’s address to the joint session of Parliament. The ruling party appeared to be contemplating an

attack as a defensive measure after failing to achieve the desired results. For the first time, the ruling party passed a censure motion against the conduct of the Opposition in the opening session itself.

The Opposition, too, appeared to be in the mood for retaliation rather than resistance. A speech given by Trinamool Congress MP Mahua Moitra, a skilled orator, is an example. Her style is outstanding, and her articulation sharp. She spoke logically and pointed out that the government had paid a high price for its mistake of expelling her from the House the last time. Moitra said, “The last time I stood here, I was not allowed to speak. But the ruling party has paid a heavy price for throttling the voice of one MP. “*Mujhe baithane ke chakkar me, janta ne aapko 63 seats par permanently baitha diya*” (Termination of my House membership cost you 63 seats in the general election). Similarly, more than a hundred MPs who were previously suspended or disenfranchised for alleged “indecent conduct” were retaliating. As a result, Opposition members of both Houses were targeting the treasury benches.

Shouldn’t the leaders of the ruling alliance and the Opposition engage in some serious thought in this House during the next five years?

They have many matters to discuss. They live in New Delhi, and until last week, the Capital was parched. Now rains have brought devastation rather than respite to the Capital. In just hours, the Capital became a reservoir. More than half a dozen people died and property worth crores of rupees was destroyed. This was the same metropolis where, in the summer, blood was shed for water.

If the city where our parliamentarians dwell is in such a state, how can we expect the Parliament to weave visions of happiness for their constituents? Many issues of national concern require both sides to reach a consensus. How can this be expected when personal grudges and animosity have gained the upper hand?

The trend of retribution and retaliation is not limited to within the House. Politics is evolving in different ways across the country. An example is the action taken by the new regime of Andhra Pradesh against the deposed Jagan Mohan Reddy in June. Reddy once imprisoned Chandrababu Naidu, who is currently the chief minister. Naidu is now hellbent on destroying Reddy. Similarly, in Karnataka and Telangana, there have been charges that the Congress is dealing with its opponents the same way that it has accused the Centre of doing.

The behaviour of our politicians, both within the House and outside, does not augur well for the future of our democracy. This trend needs to be halted. However, the pressing question remains: Who will take the initiative to put an end to it?

The answer is that, actually, it is the job of none other than our “honourables”.

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



Many issues of national concern require both sides to reach a consensus. Is this possible when animosity has gained the upper hand?

PIB/AFP

{ MASOUD PEZESHKIAN } PRESIDENT-ELECT, IRAN



It’s been many years after the revolution that we come to the podium, we make promises and we fail to fulfil them. This is the biggest problem we have

The right reform path to achieve renewable goals

India aims to have 500 gigawatts (GW) of renewable energy capacity by 2030. As of April 2024, it has successfully installed ~192GW, indicating significant progress. That said, achieving the 2030 target requires more than 2.5-3 times the installation compared to the previous fiscal year.

There are inherent complexities in the renewable energy sector, hindering the tripling of renewable energy installation and investment inflow. The new government must focus on eight key areas for reform.

Easing of import barriers: To reduce the price gap between domestic and imported modules, the enforcement of the Approved List of Models and Manufacturers (ALMM) in solar modules should be relaxed for open access projects (and rooftop solar projects (without government subsidy). Further, the ALMM should include leading global manufacturers until March 2026. It should also include cells and other solar value chain components.

Tax breaks: The Goods and Services Tax (GST) on hydropower components should be lowered to 12% (as in the case of solar and wind projects) from the current 18-28%. Further, the GST on wind projects should be reduced from 12% to 5%. To improve the commercial viability of Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS), a lower GST rate should apply to the sale of BESS-integrated systems and BESS-components for the next five years. That apart, electricity duty and cross-subsidy surcharge should be avoided for input power of storage projects.

Subsidy support: Instead of a combined production linked incentive (PLI) scheme for integrated photovoltaics (PVs), there should be stage-wise output-based disbursal. PLI should also include ancillary components production. The Pradhan Mantri Kisan Urja Suraksha evam Utthaan Mahabhiyan (PM-KUSUM) scheme should be customised to fit the local energy-water-agriculture nexus. States where KUSUM has underperformed must offer enhanced financial support to the farmers. For solar rooftops, ensuring a suitable feed-in tariff for surplus units post-settlement is necessary.

Regulatory reforms: The 100% exemption in Inter-State Transmission System (ISTS) should be extended until 2030 for all segments of renewable energy. Stricter enforcement of the Renewable Purchase Obligations (RPOs) and Energy Storage Obligations (ESOs) by electricity distribution companies (discoms) is needed. The same should apply if transmission losses

exceed a pre-fixed target across states on all obligated entities. For solar rooftops, a specialised agency should bridge customers and discoms on awareness, outreach and handholding. Varying net metering regulations of states have led to complications. Streamlining these regulations, including an annual settlement cycle to address seasonal fluctuations, is crucial. Special environmental and forest clearance windows, as also prior clearances, can help reduce the lead time and the bid price for pumped hydro storage. The Union and state governments must collaborate on a detailed pan-India land adequacy study for wind projects to address land acquisition challenges.

Long-term regulatory clarity: All key national-level policies must have a five-year lock-in period before they can be extensively modified.

The RPO trajectory must be fixed for at least the next five years.

Market reforms: States must adopt the time-of-day tariff for commercial and industrial (C&I) consumers from 2025 and extend it to residential consumers from 2026. All generating resources should be shifted to the Security Constrained Economic Dispatch (SCED) system for more efficient utilisation and price discovery. Market coupling of power exchanges is needed for better price discovery. The power ministry should consider a pilot exchange-based Contract for Difference (CfD) project for a small renewable energy capacity for demonstration purposes. Peer-to-peer power sales and virtual net metering would facilitate energy exchange and distribution for houses with limited rooftop space.

Financing reforms: Financing structures, such as InvITs or aggregated bond, must be implemented to unlock the developers’ capital. Government-owned energy funders should also increase their debt exposure to open access renewable energy projects. The government must offer incentives to financial institutions for rooftop solar lending.

Emphasis on research & development (R&D): To increase the competitiveness of the domestic players, PV manufacturers with an annual production capacity of more than 1GW must be encouraged to invest at least 3-5% of their gross revenue (other manufacturers, 1-3%) in R&D activities.

Vibhuti Garg is director (South Asia), Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis. The views expressed are personal



Vibhuti Garg

OUR VIEW



India-UK ties: Jettison the baggage of history

Starmer's Labour victory offers Britain a chance to shake off the last vestiges of a misguided India-view. The relationship should go beyond trade to mutual interests in world affairs

Keir Starmer finally has the mandate and credentials to shake off the historical burden which has dogged ties between India and Britain's Labour Party since the 1930s, a long arc that began with the jaundiced view taken of Mahatma Gandhi by Ramsay MacDonald, Labour's first elected prime minister, and terminated in former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's apparent positions on Indian policy. Starmer, who took his Labour Party to a historic landslide win in Britain's Parliamentary elections, now has the tailwind to re-imagine London's ties with India, which is the world's fastest growing major economy and gaining heft. Mutual ties need not be burdened by the weight of MacDonaldisms, which viewed the Congress Party's call for independence through imperialist lenses. It should also not be held hostage to constituency pandering, as was the case when a former Labour foreign secretary abandoned objectivity in the UK's foreign policy towards India to please a section of voters. Our bilateral engagement is robust and multifaceted, spanning trade and economy, defence and security, climate change, science and technology, among other fields. Two areas that could benefit both nations need renewed focus. The first is trade ties, which should be strengthened through a free trade agreement (FTA) that has been in the works for some time now. After 14 rounds, talks remain inconclusive; senior British trade negotiators unsuccessfully tried a "last gasp" attempt in January 2024 before elections began in both India and the UK. Former Tory prime minister Boris Johnson had spiritedly promised to wrap the deal by Diwali 2022, but is unlikely to be finalized by even this Diwali, given that London's new

regime will need time to grasp details. But hope springs eternal, and, going by comments made by Labour representatives, the agreement may well get signed by next Diwali. Thankfully, the Starmer government seems to have invested considerable hope in the FTA materializing. While some sticking points have held it up, no whiff of MacDonaldisms should get a chance to stymie the pact. Starmer's finance minister Rachel Reeves has inherited a sluggish economy laden with debt; she should view the FTA as a stepping stone to a comprehensive agreement that will help revive investments and jobs. One possible way of achieving that is offering Britain as a gateway to European markets, allowing Indian businesses to take advantage of the UK-EU trade deal of 2021. The second—unexplored—area of cooperation lies in jointly reviving multilateralism and multilateral institutions. Since 2004, London has consistently backed India's claim to permanent membership of the UN Security Council. But there are many other areas in which both nations seem to have adopted conflicting stands. Britain, which has traditionally sided with industrialized countries on certain issues, would do well to review its stance to boost its own economy. One example is trade in agriculture, in which Britain has unfailingly joined the chorus of rich nations against farmer subsidies in poor economies, while unconscionably ignoring higher farm subsidies in advanced. The other area is climate-change talks, in which the UK, again, has let the principle of fairness down: while launching broadsides against developing nations, it overlooked the West's excess emissions. Starmer now has a popular mandate to shed all vestiges of distasteful MacDonaldisms from India-UK ties.

THEIR VIEW

We need a data-driven strategy to plug our skill gaps

AMIT KAPOOR & SHEEN ZUTSHI



are, respectively, chair at the Institute for Competitiveness and lecturer at Stanford University, and research manager at the Institute for Competitiveness.

India's rapidly growing youth population is a double-edged sword for its economic aspirations. While the demographic dividend presents a tremendous opportunity for growth, capitalizing on it calls for equipping the workforce with skills in line with the changing demands of the global economy. World Bank data shows a concerning trend: India's labour mobilization rates have fallen from over 70% in 1990 to 56% in recent years. This represents an alarming weakness in India's economy and threatens to undermine its demographic advantage. As India strives to position itself as a global economic powerhouse, its ability to transform this demographic bulge into a true dividend through targeted skill development and labour market reforms will be critical. A skilled and educated workforce is critical for increasing productivity, fostering innovation and attracting investment, all of which in turn contribute to enhancing national competitiveness. An analysis of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data

provides more insights. The data shows that workforce growth rates vary across skill levels, offering an insight into the changing composition of India's skilled workforce and its implications for overall competitiveness. It also showed a disturbing trend: a declining growth rate of highly skilled individuals (skill levels 3 and 4). Between 2017 and 2022, the growth rate for these skill levels fell by more than 5 percentage points in at least 22 of India's 36 states and Union territories. States such as Sikkim, Karnataka, Nagaland, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Goa have had an over 10-point fall in the growth rate of their highly trained workforce. On the positive side, the semi-skilled workforce (skill level 2) has grown significantly, with a national compounded annual growth rate of 59.5% between 2017-18 and 2022-23. More than 45% of the workforce across states falls into this category, showing a growing demand for individuals with intermediate-level abilities. The Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) has made a substantial contribution to this positive trend by offering skill training and certification. During the same period, skill level 1, which comprises low-skilled workers, increased by 24.8%. This tendency indicates a continuous reliance on skilled labour

across industries, potentially driven by construction, manufacturing or services. Despite progress, PLFS data also shows that a sizeable proportion of the workforce aged 15 to 59 still lacks formal vocational or technical training. While the proportion has dropped from 91.9% in 2017-18 to 72.6% in 2022-23, it still indicates a major gap in formal skill development for a sizeable segment of the Indian workforce. The PLFS statistics suggest that semi-skilled and low-skilled workers are likely to dominate the workforce, while the growth of high-skilled workers lags. This may have implications for India's competitiveness. We are also able to spot skill intensity as a fundamental distinction between rural and urban areas. On average, rural regions have much lower skill intensity than their metropolitan counterparts. However, this disparity is mostly attributable to cluster composition. In India, metropolitan districts host skill-intensive trade clusters. Cities such as Mumbai, Bangalore, Delhi and

Hyderabad have evolved as centres for IT services, financial services and other knowledge-intensive businesses. These industries often require a higher number of skilled individuals such as software engineers, data analysts and financial professionals. As a result, these urban zones naturally attract a more skilled workforce. In contrast, rural districts specialize in agriculture, small-scale manufacturing and traditional crafts, which typically demand a smaller number of highly qualified people. The presence of these businesses in rural areas helps explain the observed lower skill intensity. Addressing this disparity necessitates not only skill development, but also the establishment of skill-intensive clusters in rural areas, which may result in more balanced growth across India. The government has aimed to address this through its Skill India Mission, which resulted in expansion of the skill level 2 workforce. But more coordinated efforts are required by state governments. The Chan-

drababu Naidu-led government in Andhra Pradesh proposed a 'skill census', which can assess current skill levels across regions and sectors. Other states emulating it could promote competitive federalism by leveraging the detailed data thus collected. By mapping the current skill landscape, policymakers can pinpoint specific areas with shortages of skills and devise targeted actions. State governments can create specialized skill-building programmes to address the demands of their unique workforces and industries. This data-driven strategy can result in improvements in skill-development projects. By addressing the talent gap through targeted measures, India can realize the full potential of its demographic dividend. The road ahead for India's skill development efforts is difficult, but the rewards are significant. By investing in human capital and utilizing data-driven initiatives, India can turn its demographic advantage into a meaningful economic dividend. A skilled and productive workforce will not only drive innovation and increase productivity, it will also significantly contribute to the overall competitiveness of the nation, accelerating India's journey towards becoming a developed economy by 2047.

America's actions have brought Tibet back under the spotlight

Beijing has itself to blame for the firmer stance adopted by the US and India on the Tibetan cause

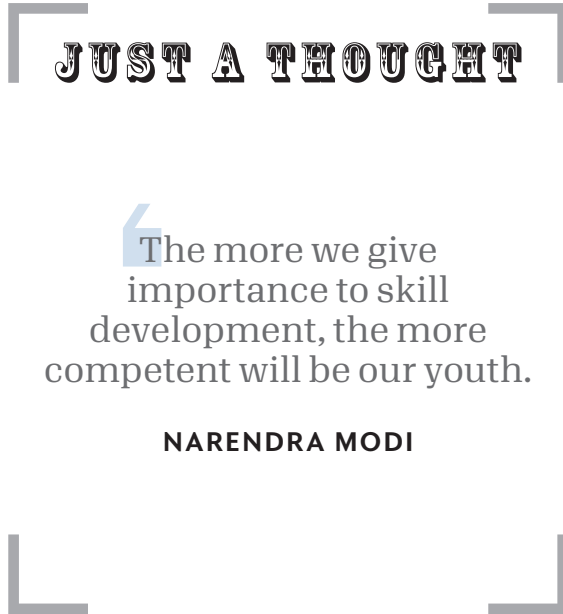


are, respectively, vice president for studies, Observer Research Foundation (ORF); and fellow, China studies, ORF

The issue of Tibet is back onto the international centre-stage with the visit of a seven-member US Congressional delegation to Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh, this month to meet the Dalai Lama and members of the Tibetan government-in-exile. During the visit, former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi lashed out at Chinese President Xi Jinping saying that the Dalai Lama's contribution will live on in perpetuity while Xi Jinping will fade into obscurity. Pelosi had earlier made a trip to Taiwan, which China claims is a breakaway province, following which Beijing launched military drills around the island. The American activism on Tibet comes close on the heels of the US clearing new legislation that pushes Beijing to re-engage with the Dalai Lama and elected representatives to resolve the standoff over Tibet's future. The new law directs the US government to coordinate multilateral initiatives to bring about a negotiated settlement on Tibet. Importantly, it also stipulates funding by the US for the purpose of countering disinformation spread by the Communist Party of China on Tibetan history and traditional institutions like the Dalai Lama. India has also begun to recalibrate its policy on Tibet, albeit slowly, over the past decade. For his swearing-in ceremony in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra

Modi invited the political head of the Tibetan government-in-exile, Lobsang Sangay, along with heads of state from neighbouring countries in South Asia. The June 2020 clashes in Galwan were an important inflection point in relations between India and China, following which a tense standoff continues between the two armies along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) to this date. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sent a senior representative to attend the funeral of a soldier from the Special Frontier Force (a clandestine unit comprising mostly Tibetans) who was martyred during military operations against the People's Liberation Army along Pangong Tso in August 2020. This was followed by Modi tweeting birthday greetings to the Dalai Lama in 2021. In the current instance, the fact that the US delegation met Prime Minister Modi and foreign minister S. Jaishankar after the interaction with the Tibetan spiritual leader demonstrates that this was not a personal outreach by US lawmakers. The Indian foreign ministry also stated that the Dalai Lama was a religious figure and was at liberty to conduct his spiritual activities, while countering China's outburst over the Dharamshala interaction. This foray shows that there is close coordination between New Delhi and Washington on the issue of Tibet, thanks largely to convergent interests. The 1951 Chinese annexation of Tibet led to the Dalai Lama seeking refuge in India. Over the years, China consolidated its hold over Tibet, resulting in the suppression of religious freedom there, and several Tibetans came to India as refugees, drawn by cultural affinity. The Indian government's Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy (2014) document puts the number of Tibetan refugees living in 45 settlements across the country at over 100,000 (as on 2009). Moreover, the government acknowledges that many Tibetans live outside these official settlements too.

The Dalai Lama is revered by Tibetans and has acquired international stature. Given that the Dalai Lama is an octogenarian, the issue of succession looms large in the strategic calculus. As a large Tibetan population resides in India, there are apprehensions over how the community would be influenced in the future. Chinese propaganda has tried to smear the institution of the Dalai Lama, dubbing the current spiritual head a separatist. China will seek to assert itself on the question of succession. There is significant global awareness of China's designs. The US Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020, cleared by the Donald Trump administration, stipulates that only those adhering to the Tibetan Buddhist faith must decide on the Dalai Lama's successor. Media reports suggest that the Indian government discussed the succession issue at the highest levels in 2021. To conclude, Xi's rise and consolidation within China has led to the nation stoking territorial disputes with neighbours like India, Japan and Taiwan. However, China may not be left unscathed by its project to redraw borders. India okaying the US delegation's meeting with the Dalai Lama also bursts the notion that a reduced majority in the Lok Sabha may lead to greater caution in Modi's foreign-policy dealings. On the contrary, by replying to the greetings of Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te with respect to Modi 3.0, and reaffirming support to the Tibetan cause, India is pushing the envelope on China's red lines. Modi's decision not to attend the SCO summit this year in Astana was also aimed at avoiding a direct meeting with the Chinese leader. The message from New Delhi seems to be categorical: If China does not respect India's sensitivities with respect to its core interests, India too should not be expected to be mindful of Beijing's red lines. And unless Beijing addresses India's core concerns on border clarity and national security, New Delhi is in no hurry to mend fences.



The Indian

EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

FOOD FOR A RAINY DAY

Creating a buffer stock of essential food items can help in evening out extreme price fluctuations

THE RESERVE BANK of India (RBI) maintains foreign exchange reserves, now at over \$650 billion, not to interfere with the normal functioning of the currency market. It seeks, instead, to ensure that exchange rate movements, while market-determined, are “orderly” and there is no “excessive volatility”. A similar approach is arguably required in food. The government must consider building a buffer stock not just of rice and wheat, but even pulses, oilseeds, sugar, skimmed milk powder (SMP) and staple vegetables. The idea, again, is not to set prices or supplant the market, but to curb too much volatility that's neither in consumer nor producer interest and also makes the RBI's job harder: When “core” inflation (that is, exclusive of food and fuel) is at a record low of 3.1 per cent (year-on-year for May), but retail food inflation stays elevated at 8.7 per cent, does the central bank cut or raise interest rates? Or leave them unchanged, as in the current uncertain scenario?

The increasing volatility and unpredictability of food prices has primarily to do with climate change — fewer rainy days and extended dry spells, interspersed with intense precipitation, and also shorter winters and heat waves. The latter's effects have been felt this time in poor crops of rabi pulses, tomato, potato and even wheat in central India. Such supply shocks — whether induced by climate, war or pandemic — typically engender very large price spikes. Farmers respond by massively ramping up production that, in turn, leads to steep price declines. Take milk. Last year, in February–March, dairies were paying farmers Rs 37–38 per litre for cow milk. The same dairies have today slashed procurement prices to Rs 26–27 because of SMP realisations crashing to Rs 200–210 per kg, from their February–March 2023 peaks of Rs 315–320. These low prices, discouraging dairies from procuring and farmers from feeding their animals properly, could be a precursor to milk shortages and inflation next year.

Creating a buffer stock of essential food items — procuring from farmers/processors during years of surplus production and offloading the same in times of crop failures — can go some way in evening out such extreme price fluctuations. The fiscal cost shouldn't be much, as the stocked commodities (potato, onion and tomato can even be stored in dehydrated form such as flakes, paste and puree) are to be disposed of during scarcity/inflationary periods at near-market rates. The government did undertake such open market sales of wheat and chana from its previously accumulated stocks, which helped moderate cereal and pulses inflation. A buffer stocking policy in food items will also do away with the need for regressive anti-farmer measures such as banning exports or imposing stock limits on private traders and processors.

RETURN OF REFORMISTS

Pezeshkian's victory on a moderate plank holds out hope for Iran and the region. Delhi must seize new bilateral openings

IN A MAJOR surprise, the reformist candidate, Masoud Pezeshkian, won the second round of voting last Friday to become the ninth president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The elections were held after the previous president Ibrahim Raisi died in a helicopter crash in May. Unlike his predecessor Raisi and his electoral rival Saeed Jalili, both of whom pursued hardline policies at home and abroad, Pezeshkian offers a different path. He has promised to make peace with the world, free the internet, and lift social restrictions, especially on women. For the people of a country that has been locked in a prolonged conflict with many of its Arab neighbours and the West, and endured endless censorship and repression at home, Pezeshkian could bring a breath of fresh air.

The first round of elections was marked by a small turnout of less than 40 per cent that reflected a growing apathy towards the political process and mounting pessimism about the possibility for positive change. Pezeshkian appears to have enthused the urban voters to come back to the polling booths in the second round. His rival, Jalili, in contrast, was threatening to double down on social control at home and intensify the confrontation with the world. Besides the higher turnout, the squabbles within the conservative camp may have facilitated the victory of Pezeshkian. Although he has rekindled hope for much desired change, he knows that the elected president is not the master of the Iran polity. That privilege belongs to the “Supreme Leader”, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who heads Iran's “rule by clerics”. Pezeshkian served under two liberal presidents — Ayatollah Khatami and Hassan Rouhani. Both had promised reform at home and reengagement with the world but could not deliver. But politics is the art of the possible and if he is lucky opportunities could open up for Pezeshkian in the days ahead as the ageing Khamenei struggles to manage the multiple crises enveloping Iran. Cynics might even argue that Khamenei could give Pezeshkian a longer rope to govern as part of an effort to restore the fading legitimacy of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Iran's geopolitical orientation has a powerful impact on the prospects for peace and stability in the world. Iran has the potential to become a swing state in the deepening great power conflict between the US and Europe on the one hand and the Sino-Russian alliance on the other. To its west, Tehran is at the heart of multiple conflicts, including the war in Gaza, Lebanon, and Yemen. To the north, Iran is a critical factor in the Caucasus, Caspian, and Central Asia. Tehran is also a critical player shaping the turbulent frontiers of Afghanistan and Pakistan and the balance between Kabul and Rawalpindi. Delhi, which has cultivated a productive relationship with Iran's deep state in recent years, must be prepared to seize new possibilities for advancing bilateral ties with Pezeshkian.

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



SANJAYA BARU

THE APPOINTMENT OF a new Additional National Security Advisor (ANSA) along with a restructuring of reporting relationships both within the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) and between the National Security Advisor (NSA) and the Union ministries has not attracted the attention it deserves. While the NSA now presides over a much bigger organisation, with an ANSA and three deputy NSAs, his new role appears more advisory and less operational. The NSA would deal with advisory outfits such as the National Security Advisory Board and the Strategic Policy Group. While the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and the three service chiefs, the Union defence, home, foreign and other secretaries are also required to report to the NSA, each of them also reports to a minister in their daily functioning.

How the ministerial bosses of the relevant officials view these changes remains to be seen. Given that the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister normally deals with the civil bureaucracy, turf issues are bound to arise if the NSA becomes an activist, convening meetings with the Cabinet Secretary and secretaries to the government of India.

Second, it appears the ANSA would now be the gatekeeper in the communication chain between six mid-level unit heads (three Dy NSAs and three service officers) and the NSA. This also means an additional bureaucratic layer has been created between the PM and those monitoring national security on a daily basis. Will the PM's daily security briefings be done by the NSA or the ANSA or both? What of the relationship between the intelligence czars and the PM, and the CDS and PM?

The changes made to the security architecture have raised many questions down the line, both within the civil and military bureaucracies. They have also prompted speculation about the future of the incumbent NSA, Ajit Doval. Is his elevation a precursor to honourable retirement? Will the ANSA, Rajinder Khanna, succeed him? Will someone from the outside replace both in due course? Lack of clarity on such questions would impact the efficiency of the new arrangement.

One can see that a quarter century after the creation of the office of NSA, the institu-

What an NSA does

A restructuring of the office is an opportunity to look closer at role and remit of the National Security Advisor

One can see that a quarter century after the creation of the office of NSA, the institution, its place within the national government and its responsibilities and remit, are still evolving. While there is a lot of published material on the history of the evolution of the office of NSA, the question raised by K Subrahmanyam — the strategic affairs guru intimately associated with the creation of the office, along with KC Pant and Jaswant Singh — in a 2010 article, “Does India Need an NSA?”, has not yet been satisfactorily answered. Subrahmanyam himself answered that question in the affirmative but I believe he would have preferred an institutional separation between ‘thinkers’ and ‘actors’, as well as direct access to the PM for intelligence chiefs and the military leadership.

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Both in 2005, after the demise of the then NSA JN Dixit, and in 2014, before the appointment of Ajit Doval, there was much discussion on who ought to fill that post. The turf war was between officers of the foreign service and police service. In the event, on both occasions, an IPS officer and former head of internal intelligence was finally chosen. The absence of any clearly laid out criteria and qualifications for the post and, worse, clearly specified duties and chain of command, has left the question open as to who should be made NSA — a diplomat, a spook, a soldier or a scholar?

When Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee first created the post he chose to name the Principal Secretary to the PM as the NSA. From 1998 to 2004 the late Brajesh Mishra defined the work of an NSA by living that role. His successor, JN Dixit, had to redefine the role because Prime Minister Singh separated the two posts, appointing an IAS officer, TKA Nair, as Principal Secretary and Dixit as NSA. Dr Singh further complicated the matter by appointing Narayanan as an internal security advisor. By the time the internal turf wars between the IAS, IFS and IPS ended, Dixit passed away and Narayanan took over. He was succeeded by Shivshankar Menon of the foreign service.

While both Doval and Narayanan have similar professional backgrounds, PM Modi has not only elevated the rank of NSA to that of cabinet minister, but has also widened the remit by integrating national security management with higher defence management. This, too, is an experiment whose advisabil-

ity and experience have not been adequately and professionally evaluated so far.

Finally, given the recent and ongoing controversy about the activities of R&AW, brought into global focus by charges levelled by state agencies in Canada and the United States, as well as the controversy around the decision-making process with respect to the Agniveer initiative, the role and remit of the NSA have once again come into focus.

Should the NSA have a diplomatic, bureaucratic, military, police or intelligence background? Is national security management about intelligence gathering or processing? Should those processing intelligence belong to organisations gathering intelligence? Indeed, should the priority for national security management be experience in internal security or external security for a country like India? So on and so forth. The role and responsibility of the NSA and of the National Security Council have evolved with time and changing circumstance. The material in the public domain remains limited for any informed comment on these questions.

A restructuring offers an opportunity for a fresh look at these questions. The Kargil Review Committee chaired by K Subrahmanyam had suggested that the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) should directly report to the PM. By giving the NSA a cabinet rank and the CDS the rank of a secretary to the Union government, the political leadership has done a disservice to the armed forces. The CDS is not even a permanent member of the cabinet committee on security. Given the challenges being faced with respect to defence modernisation and organisation, and given the security environment in our neighbourhood, the CDS must report directly to the PM and only maintain a consultative relationship with the NSA.

The fact is that successive NSAs have been learning on the job in dealing with national security challenges ranging from the border problem with China to handling political challenges in border states, and these challenges have only grown with time.

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BHUMIKA SHARMA

A BEND IN THE RIVER

Indus Waters Treaty must enlarge focus, recognise shared vulnerabilities

THE 1960 INDUS Waters Treaty (IWT) is a landmark transboundary water-sharing mechanism between India and Pakistan. But disagreements persist. In an unprecedented move, India called for amendments to the agreement last year due to its dissatisfaction with the dispute resolution process. It blamed Pakistan's continued “intransigence” in implementing the treaty — particularly its material breach. Pakistan sought arbitration at The Hague for resolution of its differences and objections over India's Kishenganga and Ratle hydroelectric projects, bypassing the treaty-compliant Neutral Expert proceedings.

Changing realities such as climate change also fuel the need for amending the treaty. In 2015, the Indus basin was ranked by NASA as the world's second most over-stressed aquifer. An estimated 31 per cent of the net basin flow originates from climate-impacted glaciers and snow melts, making mean annual flows more volatile and seasonal. Other factors like unpredictable monsoons also contribute to increased variability of flow volume.

Irrigation and cultivation in the Indus plains are central to both economies. The Indus is responsible for over 90 per cent of Pakistan's agricultural output. Given the ballooning population and corresponding consumption, deteriorating water quality poses an additional threat to food and nutritional security, human health and biodiversity.

Contentions within the framework of the IWT mostly revolve around the perceived impacts of infrastructure development on down-

A nuanced understanding of climate-change induced impacts and increased population pressures on the hydrology of the rivers is needed. This could be done by developing a mechanism for real-time data-sharing between the two riparians and evaluation of water quality and changing flow magnitudes in numeric terms.

stream flows, and Pakistan's concerns as a lower riparian state. Matters are exacerbated by the massive trust deficit between the two neighbours. A case in point is Pakistan's accusation of “water terrorism” against India for the Shahpurkandi barrage project. But Ravi's water-flow from India into Pakistan is not substantial in the first place, and the dam would streamline the river's flow — as legally permitted within the IWT — to support power supply and agricultural growth in Punjab and J&K.

The politics of “upper vs lower riparian” goes beyond transboundary river governance, stirring inter-provincial tensions even within Pakistan. There is a need to go beyond this insular approach — a simplistic partitioning of the Indus river system — and to look at the basin as a cohesive geographical unit.

Firstly, it is pertinent to integrate an ecological perspective into the governance framework of the treaty. This includes institutionalising the adoption, allocation and implementation of Environmental Flows (EF) within the IWT. According to the Brisbane Declaration and Global Action Agenda on Environmental Flows, EFs refer to the quantity and timing of freshwater flows and levels necessary to sustain aquatic ecosystems which support human cultures, economies, sustainable livelihoods, and well-being.

There is a need to harmonise EFs with the principles enshrined in the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention, forming the international legal framework on the non-navigational uses of water. These include the princi-

ples of equitable and reasonable use, and duty to prevent significant transboundary harm.

Concepts of minimisation of environmental harm and ecological flows in transboundary rivers find mention in instruments of international customary law — the 2004 Berlin Rules on Water Resources, in particular. In the dispute over India's dam construction on the Kishanganga tributary of Jhelum river, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ordered in 2013 that India was under obligation to release environmental flows downstream of its project into Pakistan. This watershed verdict serves as a precedent for maintaining EFs in transboundary river basins.

Secondly, a nuanced understanding of climate-change induced impacts and increased population pressures on the hydrology of the rivers is needed. This could be done by developing a mechanism for real-time data-sharing between the two riparians and evaluation of water quality and changing flow magnitudes in numeric terms. A legally binding, World Bank-supervised data-sharing framework within the IWT would ensure accountability and enhance policy community's understanding of the water-quality challenges.

Recognising climate change as a common vulnerability, and shifting focus to holistic basin management would re-establish the treaty as a bright spot in Indo-Pak relations.

The writer is with Asia Pacific Consulting and advisory, The Asia Foundation

JULY 8, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

IA HIJACKING MYSTERY

THE MOTIVES OF the nine men, who hijacked the Indian Airlines Airbus to Lahore, remain unclear. Prolonged questioning of the crew failed to shed much light. Captain CSP Singh said the hijackers demanded that the plane be refuelled. He believed they wanted to fly to another destination.

AIRPORT-IA BLAME GAME

WHILE THE BIG question about how the hijackers of the IA Airbus managed to smuggle arms onto the flight at Srinagar remains unanswered, the security personnel at Srinagar and

Indian Airlines have started blaming each other. IA thinks it was lax security checking at the airport. The Srinagar security staff says that the arms were probably already aboard.

SRINAGAR CURFEW

INDEFINITE CURFEW WAS imposed in Srinagar as “a precautionary measure” after rumours that the present government led by Chief Minister G M Shah had been “reduced to a minority.” The rumours were, however, scotched by Farooq Abdullah himself at Mujahid Manzil, where he had shifted to start a “full-fledged” agitation against the new government headed by G M Shah.

PUNJAB AND CHANDIGARH were declared disturbed areas for another three months under the Armed Forces (Punjab and Chandigarh) Special Powers Act, 1983 in the wake of increasing terrorist activity. Under this Act, the security forces are vested with powers to search premises and arrest people without warrant.

NAVRATILOVA'S WIN

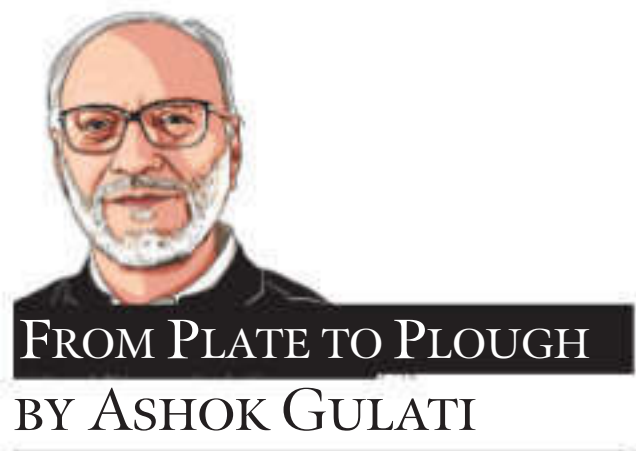
MARTINA NAVRATILOVA WON her fifth Wimbledon women's singles crown and her third in a row, defeating Chris Evert-Lloyd.



9 THE IDEAS PAGE

A trust deficit with farmers

Agriculture minister must take steps to bridge it in order to create space for agriculture reform. In the short run, fix the crop insurance scheme



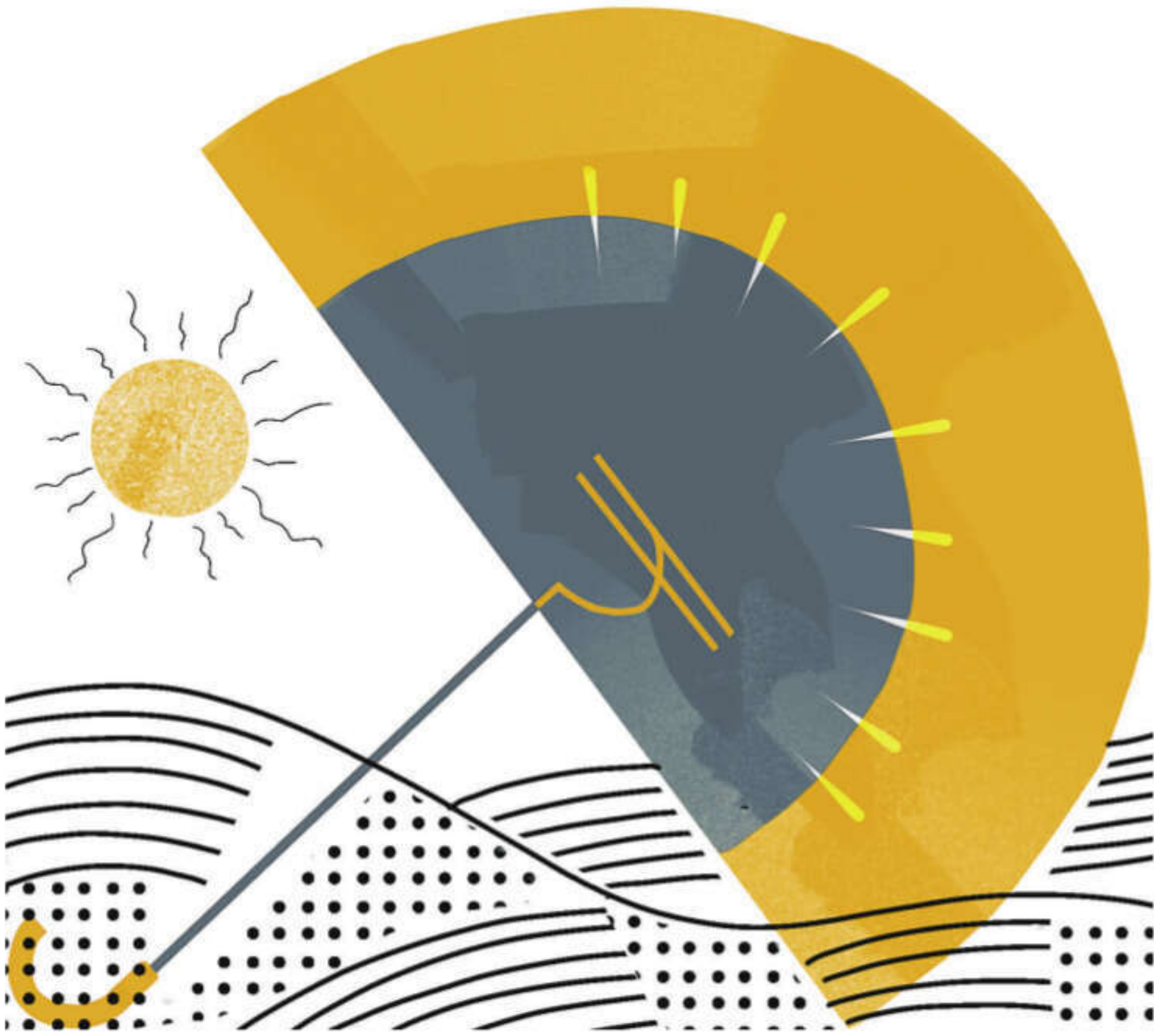
FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
BY ASHOK GULATI

TRUST IS THE foundation of any relationship, be it in a family, between friends or between farmers and policymakers. But trust building requires transparency in actions. Without it, any action by any party can be misconstrued, leading to the collapse of relations and policies. I am talking in the context of farm policies and the trust deficit that widened between some segments of the farming community and the agri-policy makers.

If agriculture in the country has to be put on a fast and sustainable track, first and foremost, the agriculture minister, Shivraj Singh Chouhan, has to bridge this trust deficit with farmers. The best way to do it is to form two agri-councils, one with representatives of farmers from each state, say two per state, one owner cultivator and one tenant. Let us call it the Farmers' Council. The second council will comprise agri-ministers of each state, somewhat on the lines of the GST council. Both these councils must meet at least twice a year, at the beginning of the kharif and rabi conferences that the Centre holds each year. This will go a long way to converge on some important reforms in the agri-sector, which is crying for change.

Second, climate change is already knocking on our heads and farming will be impacted in a big way unless we take some bold steps. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) claims that they have produced more than 2,000 seed varieties that are climate resilient for different crops. If that is the case, how does one explain the drop in agri-GDP in 2023-24 to just 1.4 per cent compared to the previous year's high of 4.7 per cent? There was the El Nino impact in 2023. That means that either we are still way behind in creating a climate-resilient agriculture or our innovation in seeds has not moved from the scientists' labs to the lands of the farmers. In terms of the forthcoming Union Budget, this also means that ICAR's funding needs to go up significantly, say from less than Rs 10,000 crore today to about Rs 15,000 crore. The marginal returns in investing in climate-resilient agriculture, and also promoting climate-smart agriculture are very high. The latter requires the resurrection of the agri-extension work in a way that promotes farming practices which can withstand extreme heat waves or bursts of rain, etc. The extra funding of ICAR should be exclusively focused on creating a climate-resilient and climate-smart agriculture. But this is not going to happen overnight. In the short run, we need to fix the crop insurance scheme, the PM-Fasal Bima Yojana (PM-FBY).

PM-FBY was started in 2016 after back-to-back droughts in 2014-15 and 2015-16. Agri-GDP had collapsed and suddenly the farming community was under deep stress. PM-FBY was a bold step in the right direction. But the success of any such scheme depends on how efficiently it is implemented. It started with a big bang. In total 26 states, 16 insurers came forward to join this scheme. But the scheme was somewhat premature as the



CR Sasikumar

spade work was not done, and the infusion of technology was meagre. The All-Weather Stations (AWS) were not fixed, continuous monitoring of plots was not done through high-tech Low Earth Orbits (LEOs), algorithms for crop losses were not properly designed, and so on. In brief, the scheme was open to human manipulation. No wonder many of our states, with the help of some leaders, took undue advantage. There were several cases of corruption. As a result, after a good initial start, the graph of its adoption, instead of going up started coming down. Re-insurers who are the real risk-takers in the crop insurance business were not satisfied as there was not enough transparency in crop losses and claims made. By 2021-22, there were only 20 states and 10 insurers willing to participate in PM-FBY. It was feared that this scheme may fail. But there was no better alternative to compensate the farmers in case of crop failures. It was at that time that a major push for technology re-booting was made. In the last two years, there seems to be a turnaround in PM-FBY. The number of states and insurers participating in the scheme has gone back to 24 and 15, respectively. The improvements in the yield estimation system based on technology (YES-TECH), and the Weather Information Network and Data System (WINDS) have raised hopes and reduced human intervention. Though still not perfect, it has an all-time high enrolment of farmers at about 40 million.

Interestingly, first-time, non-loanee farm-

PM-FBY was started in 2016 after back-to-back droughts in 2014-15 and 2015-16. Agri-GDP had collapsed and suddenly the farming community was under deep stress. PM-FBY was a bold step in the right direction. But the success of any such scheme depends on how efficiently it is implemented. It started with a big bang. In total 26 states, 16 insurers came forward to join this scheme. But the scheme was somewhat premature as the spade work was not done, and the infusion of technology was meagre.

ers who opted for this scheme comprised 55 per cent of the total farmers insured. The area covered under PM-FBY in 2023-24 was about 61 million hectares which was roughly 40 per cent of the gross cropped area of the states who opted for PM-FBY. This has raised hopes that the technology infusion has earned the trust of insurers, re-insurers, as well as farmers. But the litmus test for the success of crop insurance depends on the premium rates. They had peaked at 17 per cent in 2021-22, but since then they have sharply come down to roughly 10 per cent in 2023-24 as per provisional figures. This is a commendable revival of the scheme at the all-India level. But there is no time for complacency.

A state-wise picture throws some interesting results: The actuarial premium was just 3.4 per cent in Andhra Pradesh, 5.7 per cent in Uttar Pradesh, and 7.5 per cent in Madhya Pradesh. But many other states attracted much higher premiums. For example, Chhattisgarh (14.8 per cent), Haryana (11.7 per cent), Karnataka (19.2 per cent), Maharashtra (13.5 per cent), Odisha (13.1 per cent), Rajasthan (9.7 per cent), Tamil Nadu (12 per cent), and so on. There is a need to study its reasons and bring the all-India premiums below 7 per cent. Chouhan can do it, provided he fixes the system based on technology with the least human manipulation. Can he deliver on this?

The writer is a Distinguished Professor at ICRIER. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"To avoid the social instability that the politicians have voiced their concerns about, it would be better if the proposed counterterrorism operation starts only after a political consensus has been reached. It should be left to parliament to decide how the country must proceed on the matter." — DAWN, PAKISTAN

Cautionary tale for our times

In the aftermath of his release, it is time to focus not on Julian Assange as a person but the ideas that he embodies



NISHANT SHAH

JULIAN ASSANGE IS not a person. He is an idea. Ever since he catapulted into uncertain fame in 2010, when as the founder of WikiLeaks, he was accused of leaking thousands of documents that betrayed American military national security, he has been a figure of public scrutiny and legal contestation. While his direct "co-conspirator" Chelsea Manning was released from prison after seven years when President Obama commuted her sentence, Assange has been mired in a protracted battle for freedom. From the now-dropped charges of sexual assault brought in by the Swedish government, to him being dramatically dragged out of the Ecuadorian embassy in the UK, where he spent 42 months in isolated prison since 2019, stories of Assange have often been produced as a modern-day *Odyssey*, albeit of a not very likeable protagonist.

Assange is a person of interest not only for the American justice and political systems but also for a global understanding of what constitutes freedom, liberty, and access to information in our digital networks. Assange was perhaps one of the first icons of global internet activism, who showed the challenges of geo-territorial sovereignty when it comes to governing the internet. The distributed nature of the internet means that the origin of the information, where it is leaked from, where it is stored, what country the intermediary platforms are registered in, and the location and citizenship of the people identified as the leakers can all be different. The truly extraterritorial nature of Assange's activities has long since been studied as both a narrative of hope for information activists who fight for freedom of speech and expression to hold truth to power, as well as a warning tale for internet regulators to develop inter-operable frameworks of regulating something that is truly post-national.

However, in the aftermath of his historic release, it is time to focus not on Assange as a person but the ideas that he embodies. His supporters and networks are celebrating his return to his native country of Australia, having fought the extradition attempts of the US government. But I want to take the time to recognise that Assange and the political theatre that has surrounded him signifies a much more fundamental set of questions about access to knowledge and freedom of information. These questions become significantly important in a world that is increasingly shifting towards authoritarian clampdown and persecution of people, especially journalists and information service providers.

There are two things at stake when thinking about Assange's case and the long-drawn ordeal that he has gone through at the hands of multiple governments who chose to punish him, not just for what he has done but for what he has inspired oth-

ers to do. WikiLeaks was the OG of the internet, serving as a whistleblower medium. It was one of the most visible and pioneering spaces that showed the power of decentralised, collective, civic-interest space that could call out, expose, and threaten the almost unlimited power of militarised countries and their shaping of global territories.

The capacity to take confidential information that obfuscates human-rights violations and abuses of different governments, and naming those who are complicit in this, has been the most spectacular show of the power of collective action organised through internet technologies. WikiLeaks was a resistance like the one no country, especially the highly militarised and regulated countries, had ever seen. Assange's ideological position that information for the public good should be in the hands of the public might have polarising responses, but there is no denying that he is emblematic of the whistleblowing that the internet has enabled, sending states scrambling to figure out how to contain, regulate, and govern in these new systems.

Second, and perhaps more tellingly, Assange is the figure of public distrust in legacy systems globally. Across the world, especially since the COVID pandemic, there is a growing mistrust in governments and authorities, leading to misinformation, radicalisation, and apathy in different forms. Containing Assange was also a way of ensuring a chilling effect, warning the disaffected people about the consequences of their actions if they choose to challenge power.

This is particularly visible in the young people's movements around the world right now, where those who seek to challenge state information, produce counter-narratives and have dissenting opinions are being tried, imprisoned for similar charges of espionage and domestic terrorism. Assange did not just pay the price for his own ideological convictions — he paid the price for everybody who believed in his doctrine of free information. He has been made a martyr to the cause; a cautionary tale of what happens if you expose those in power. It is because of this that I insist that we cannot think of Assange as a person. We might dislike him or disagree with him, but we have to accept that he takes on the global state of information authoritarianism that we are living through.

It remains to be seen whether Assange will continue fighting for his beliefs or become an exemplary case of somebody broken by the system. He has done more than an individual can, to advocate for fundamental freedom of information, and he has been supported by and inspired generations of internet activists who continue to take the risk and leak information that is otherwise shrouded in silence in the name of national security. Even if Assange doesn't do anything more, we owe him gratitude for what he has started, as we continue to appreciate the extraordinary role that journalists, information activists, and whistleblowers play in making more transparent, equitable, and open societies.

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SOMIT DASGUPTA

Hoping for a miracle at COP29

Why consensus on resource transfer for climate change remains elusive

We are back to where we had left off during COP28. In the recently concluded Bonn talks, a precursor to COP29 (to be held in Baku in November), there was no consensus regarding resource transfer for climate change. This, however, is not surprising given the fact that the world community has been labouring over the transfer of \$100 billion per year since the last 15 years, without success. This kitty, however, has been given a new name — New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG) — though without any flesh and blood in the form of money. The developed world is engaged in who all should contribute to this fund and the latest missive is that countries like China and Saudi Arabia should also be viewed as donors rather than recipients.

When we talk about the quantum of money actually required, it is in trillions of dollars and not billions. The figure of \$100 billion was arrived at more than 15 years ago without due diligence. The actual requirement can be anything between \$1 trillion to \$6 trillion annually. The reason why China is being singled out is because it is the largest polluter and because its gross domestic product and per capita income has grown manifold in the last two decades. For the record, it may be mentioned that when the Kyoto Protocol was finalised (1997), China's GDP per capita was 25 per cent of the world's figure and, by 2020, the two figures

were almost equal. China, on the other hand, has opined that it is still a developing country according to the guidelines of the UNFCCC and that Article 9 (of the Paris Agreement) says that resource transfer has to take place from the developed to developing countries. Mercifully, India has not yet been called out, though there is a good probability that India, too, may be asked to contribute instead of being a recipient of climate funds. There is little doubt that the real intention of this debate as to who all should contribute to the fund is to delay matters further when it comes to resource transfer. Sorting out this issue could take years and at the receiving end is the developing world, the small island states in particular, as their land mass is fast disappearing due to the rising sea level. While we are grappling with the newborn baby, the NCQG, we still have to nurse the severely undernourished infant — the Loss and Damage Fund. The irony is that while we have not been able to provide \$100 billion over all these years, we now have to take care of the infant as well. The procrastination in providing this paltry sum has ensured that the requirement has gone up. The required sum is so large today that contributions from the developed world only will not suffice. Some contribution has to come from the relatively well-off developing

countries. That apart, the real nuts and bolts of the Loss and Damage Fund are yet to be finalised. All we know is that we have a committed sum of a meagre \$800 million but who all will get access to it is still a contentious issue. Discussions on this will take place in Baku in November and one can make an intelligent guess regarding the outcome of these discussions. We keep talking about the lack of resource transfer from the developed world, pointing out that this lack has ensured that suitable action could not be taken to combat climate change. This is a rather simplistic view. There are several actions that each country is expected to take in order to reverse the adverse effects of climate change but has faltered. The first thing which comes to one's mind is the preparation of national adaptation plans (NAPs). The NAPs are nothing but action to be taken to respond to impacts of climate change. This is especially required for developing nations. Unfortunately, only about 57 countries have submitted their NAPs so far. It, however, may be recognised that some of the poorer countries don't have the capacity to make such plans. Incidentally, India too is yet to submit its plan. In the meantime, matters are getting from bad to worse. The World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) had termed the year 2023 to be the hottest year

ever. The WMO has further predicted that in the next five years, there is 80 per cent likelihood that the average annual global temperature will exceed 1.5oC for at least one of the years. As it is, with whatever rise in temperature that we have experienced so far, there are enough calamities happening around the world. Take the case of Southern Asia itself — we had the Remal cyclone in Bangladesh which created havoc in the country. In India, too, we are facing a severe heat wave, perhaps, due to climate change. It must be said that COP29 is not really taking place at an opportune moment. With the US presidential elections due in November, one is not sure what their stance would be post elections. The previous US administration had pulled out of climate-change negotiations only to be brought back by the current administration. In addition, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the war in the Gaza region and the trade hostilities with China have ensured that geopolitics will rule the roost when it comes to climate negotiations. One will have to go through the motions as one has done for several COP negotiations in the past and hope for a miracle.

The writer is senior visiting fellow, ICRIER, and former member (Economic & Commercial), CEA. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

HOPE FOR DELHI

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Landslide foretold' (IE, July 6). The Keir Starmer-led Labour Party's emphatic win heralds a new era for Britain. Political change and the "inconsistency" of PMs led to the downfall of the Conservative Party. Labour now has a challenging run ahead of it. The nation's tax burden is set to touch its highest, while the net debt is almost equivalent to the annual economic output. With domestic trouble, the government may struggle to maintain continuity in foreign policy. Delhi hopes that the FTA pact will be finalised this year.

SS Paul, Nadia

FLOOD ACTION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'When waters rise' (IE, July 6). It's distressing that heavy flooding has wreaked havoc in Assam. Almost 24 lakh people have been affected, with major rivers flowing over their danger marks. In Guwahati, landslides claimed one life. However, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said that the flood situation was getting better. The power supply has been cut for the safety of the people, and that needs to be restored soon. And all stakeholders cutting above the political lines should come forward to find a permanent solution to the perennial problem.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'When waters rise' (IE, July 6). Terrain and climatic conditions in Assam attract excessive rains frequently. Dwelling on both banks of the mighty Brahmaputra adds to the flood fury. Both the Centre and state governments have failed to implement effective measures to reduce loss and damage. Erosion of embankments, reduction in forest cover, encroachments and lack of drainage must be probed urgently. Strengthening of embankments, dredging the rivers and tributaries, plantation and other methods suggested by experts must be adopted on priority to save precious lives and avoid damage.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi

MANDATE MESSAGE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Don't misread the mandate' (IE, July 6). It is incorrect to assume that the electorate's message this time was intended just for the Opposition: The BJP has more to reflect on its dismal performance. It is hypocritical to declare that our country must have "constructive opposition" when a "Congress-mukt Bharat" has been the overarching theme of its politics for years. The people have voted in ways that protect both their and the country's best interests. Hence, the fragmented mandate is a clear message to both alliances.

Kamal Laddha, Bengaluru

10 The World

TOP OF THE WORLD



(From left) Heads of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso in Niger's Niamey on Saturday. Reuters

WEST AFRICA

Junta-led states rule out return to West African economic bloc

Niamey: Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, three military-led West African states, signed a confederation treaty on Saturday, underscoring their determination to chart a joint course outside the regional political and economic bloc that has been urging them to return to democratic rule. The signing took place at the first summit of the Alliance of Sahel States and signals an ever-closer alignment between the neighbours in the insurgency-torn central Sahel. Niger's General Abdourahamane Tiani described the summit as "the culmination of our determined common will to reclaim our national sovereignty". **REUTERS**

BRAZIL

Argentina's Milei to speak at Bolsonaro's rally

Brasilia: Argentinean President Javier Milei is set to speak on Sunday at a right-wing event in Brazil, after having met conservative politicians in the country, potentially placing a further strain on relations between the two neighboring nations. Milei arrived on Saturday at the beach resort of Balneario Camboriu in southern Brazil, where the CPAC Brasil 2024 event is being held. He was received with a hug by Brazil's former president Jair Bolsonaro, who lost the last presidential race to Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. **REUTERS**

NEPAL

Rain triggers landslides: 11 killed, 8 missing

Kathmandu: Heavy rains triggered landslides and flash floods killing at least 11 people in the last 36 hours in Nepal and blocking key highways and roads, officials said Sunday. Eight people were missing, either washed away by floods or buried in landslides, while 12 others were injured, police spokesperson Dan Bahadur Karki said. "Rescue workers are trying to clear the landslides and open the roads," Karki said. **REUTERS**

MACRON'S CENTRISTS IN SECOND PLACE, FAR RIGHT FALLS TO THIRD

France exit polls project shock win for Left bloc, no absolute majority

Disappointment for Le Pen's party as disparate Leftist groups come together to keep it out of power

REUTERS
PARIS, JULY 7

FRANCE WAS on course for a hung parliament in Sunday's election, with a leftist alliance unexpectedly taking the top spot ahead of the far right, in a major upset that was set to bar Marine Le Pen's National Rally from running the government.

The outcome, if confirmed, will leave parliament divided in three big groups with hugely different platforms and no tradition at all of working together.

The leftist alliance, which gathers the hard left, the Socialists and Greens, who have long been at odds with each other, was forecast to win between 172 and 215 seats out of 577, according to pollsters' projections based on early results from a sample of polling stations. These projections are usually reliable.

Cries of joy and tears of relief broke out at the leftist alliance's gathering in Paris when the estimates were announced. At the Greens' headquarters activists screamed in joy, embracing each other. By contrast there was stunned silence, clenched jaws and tears at the far-right party headquarters, as young National Rally (RN) members checked their phones.

The result would in any case be humiliating for Macron, whose centrist alliance, which he founded to underpin his first presidential run in 2017, was projected to be narrowly second and win 150-180 seats. But it will also be a major disappointment for Marine Le Pen's nationalist, eurosceptic National Rally.

The RN, which had for weeks been projected to win the election, was seen getting 115 to 155 seats.

Sri Lanka to lift ban on foreign research ships from its ports

Colombo: Sri Lanka has decided to lift from next year a ban on the visit of foreign research ships imposed after strong security concerns raised by India and the US following frequent docking requests from hi-tech Chinese surveillance vessels, the Japanese media reported.

The change in position was conveyed by visiting Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ali Sabry to the NHK World Japan. With the increased movement of Chinese research vessels in the Indian Ocean, New Delhi had expressed concern that those might be spy ships and urged Colombo not to allow such vessels to dock at its ports.

Sabry said his government cannot have different rules for different countries and only block China. He added that his country will not take sides in a dispute between others, the NHK World Japan said in a report on Friday.

The moratorium is till January next year. Sri Lanka will then no longer ban foreign research ships from its ports next year, Sabry said. **PTI**



Supporters of the French far-Left party France Unbowed celebrate in Paris on Sunday. Reuters

The first official results were expected later on Sunday, with the results from most, if not all, constituencies likely to be in by the end of the day or the early hours of Monday.

Voters have punished Macron and his ruling alliance for a cost of living crisis and failing public services, as well as over immigration and security.

Le Pen and her party tapped into those grievances, spreading their appeal way beyond their traditional strongholds along the Mediterranean coast and in the country's northern rust belt.

But the leftwing alliance managed to edge them out of the first spot. That was in part thanks to some limited cooperation by Macron's centrist Together alliance and the left, designed to block the far right's ascent to power.

Le Pen's rivals pulled more than 200 candidates out of races in the second round in a bid to create a unified anti-RN vote.

The constitution mandates that there can be no new parliamentary election for another year, so an immediate repeat vote is not an option.

EXPLAINED

Macron stays on, but turmoil ahead

THE LACK of majority for any single alliance has plunged France into political and economic turmoil. The deeply unpopular Macron has lost control of parliament, according to the projections. The far right National Rally drastically increased the number of seats it holds in parliament but fell far short of expectations. France now faces the prospect of weeks of political machinations to determine who will be prime minister and lead the National Assembly. And Macron faces the prospect of leading the country alongside a prime minister opposed to most of his domestic policies.

Israeli strike kills 16 at central Gaza school, Palestinian cops killed in Rafah

REUTERS
CAIRO, GAZA, JULY 7

AT LEAST 16 people were killed in an Israeli strike on a school sheltering displaced Palestinian families in central Gaza on Saturday, the Palestinian health ministry said, in an attack Israel said had targeted militants.

The health ministry said the attack on the school in Al-Nuseirat killed at least 16 people and wounded more than 50.

The Israeli military said it took precautions to minimize risk to civilians before it targeted the gunmen who were using the area as a hideout to plan and carry out attacks against soldiers. Hamas denied its fighters were there.

At the scene, Ayman al-Atounh said he saw children among the dead. "We came here running to see the targeted area, we saw bodies of children, in pieces, this is a playground, there was a trampoline here, there were swing-sets, and vendors," he said.

Mahmoud Basal, spokesman of the Gaza Civil Emergency Service, said in a statement that



Aftermath of an Israeli airstrike on a school in central Gaza's Nuseirat on Sunday. Reuters

the number of dead could rise because many of the wounded were in critical condition.

Meanwhile, Israeli forces, which have deepened their incursions into Rafah, in the south of the enclave near the border with Egypt, killed four Palestinian policemen and wounded eight others, in an air strike on their vehicle on Saturday, health officials said.

WORKED CLOSELY WITH DIRECTOR JAMES CAMERON

JON LANDAU, PRODUCER OF TITANIC, AVATAR, DIES

Jon Landau, an Oscar-winning producer who worked closely with director James Cameron on three of the biggest blockbusters of all time, "Titanic" and two "Avatar" films, has died. He was 63. Landau's family announced his death Saturday. No cause of death was given. **AP**



FOCUS ON I.T., TELECOM, ENERGY, MINING

Dawn of new era of Pakistan-China ties: PM Sharif after Beijing visit

SAJJAD HUSSAIN
ISLAMABAD, JULY 7

PRIME MINISTER Shehbaz Sharif has said a new era of Pakistan-China cooperation in the information technology (IT), communication, mining, and energy sectors has dawned and will lead to economic development and deepening of the time-tested bilateral relationship.

Sharif's remarks came as he chaired a review meeting in Islamabad on Saturday on the implementation of agreements and MOUs reached during his visit to China, *Radio Pakistan* reported.

The prime minister said that the promotion of Pakistan-China cooperation in these fields will lead to economic development, strengthening of regional ties, and deepening of relations between the two countries. "China has emerged as the strongest economic power and Pakistan can emulate its development," he added.

The 72-year-old Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader said that no disruption will be tolerated in the implementation of agreements and MoUs signed during his visit to China, announcing to personally monitor the implementation of these agreements.

Regarding the agriculture sector, he was apprised that 12 leading companies of China will



Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif

participate in the Food and Agri Expo to be held in Pakistan this year. Sharif also reviewed the progress regarding sending 1,000 students from Pakistan to China on government scholarships for advanced training in the agriculture sector.

Besides, the meeting was told that over 100 Chinese companies are in contact with Pakistani companies for business and investment. The meeting was also briefed about the progress on the technical training of 3,00,000 students by Huawei, a one-stop operation to facilitate business, smart governance and smart city.

The prime minister was also apprised of the progress made by China on various communication, infrastructure, and electricity projects in Gwadar. Sharif advised expediting measures for the development of Gwadar Seaport, Airport, and Industrial Zone to make Gwadar the hub of trade corridor in the region. **PTI**

New US plan aimed at Russia's oil revenue causes angst over fuel price hike before polls

THE NEW YORK TIMES
WASHINGTON, JULY 7

OFFICIALS IN President Biden's Treasury Department have proposed new actions aimed at crippling a fleet of aging oil tankers that are helping deliver Russian oil to buyers around the world in defiance of Western sanctions.

Their effort is aimed at punishing Russia but it has stalled amid White House concerns over how it would affect energy prices ahead of the November election. In an attempt to drain Russia of money needed to fight its war in Ukraine, the US and its allies have imposed penalties and taken other novel steps to limit how much Moscow earns from selling oil abroad. But Russia has found ways around those limits, raising pressure on Biden administration to tighten its enforcement efforts.

Treasury officials want to do that, in part, by targeting a so-called shadow fleet of oil tankers that is allowing Russia to sell oil above a \$60-per-barrel price cap that the United States and its allies imposed in 2022. **REUTERS**



Officials are looking to block 'shadow fleet' of tankers that helps oil sale amid sanctions

While officials want to knock these tankers out of commission, advisers in the White House worry that would risk inflaming oil prices and push up US fuel prices, which could hurt Biden's re-election bid.

The debate reflects a tension that has always been at the core of US efforts to restrict Russian oil sales: How to weaken Moscow's war machine without inflicting pain on American drivers. White House officials describe the process as routine but the delays have confounded them elsewhere, who have been unable to get a straight answer from National Economic Council about what is holding up the action. **NYT**

RACE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE



PROLIFERATION OF CANDIDATES REFLECTS FATIGUE WITH POLITICS

96-year-old inventor to 'the Joker': 56 candidates in race for Tokyo's top office

MOTOKORICH
& KIU KONOTOYA
TOKYO, JULY 7

WHEN VOTERS in Tokyo cast their ballot for governor of the world's largest city Sunday, they will be spoiled for choice.

Fifty-six candidates are contending for the office, a record. One who styles himself "the Joker" has proposed legalizing marijuana and says polygamy can address the nation's declining birthrate. Another is a pro wrestler who hides his face on camera and vows to use AI to complete governmental tasks. There's a 96-year-old inventor who says he will

deploy gas-fueled cars that do not emit carbon, and a 31-year-old entrepreneur who took off her shirt during a campaign video and promised "fun things."

It might look like democracy run amok. But in fact, the race is profoundly status quo and the incumbent is projected to win a third term. The proliferation of candidates reflects fatigue with politics as usual, and many of them are unassuming attention seekers, creating a farcical, circuslike atmosphere and putting real change further out of reach.

"I wonder if this is democracy in action, or whether it's like an 'up yours' to democracy," said Emma Dalton, a senior lecturer

in Japanese Studies at La Trobe University in Melbourne. Multiple candidates have criticized the incumbent, Yuriko Koike, said Dalton. "Because they know she's going to win."

The Tokyo election is emblematic of Japanese politics, where at the national level the Liberal Democratic Party has governed for all but four years since 1955. The party, which is backing Koike, has held an iron grip on Japan's parliament, despite numerous scandals and widespread voter dissatisfaction that is expressed in polls but rarely at the ballot box.

Koike, 71, has been dogged by questions about her university credentials and has refused to



Voters in Tokyo are casting ballots Sunday to decide whether to reelect conservative Yuriko Koike as governor. AP

address accusations that she is connected to a large real estate developer involved in several controversial projects.

Despite some widening inequality and pockets of poverty, "most middle-class citizens are satisfied with their lives in Tokyo," said Jiro Yamaguchi, a political scientist at Hosei University in Tokyo.

Although Koike has not entirely delivered on promises to eliminate day care waiting lists, reduce commuter train congestion and abolish overtime among municipal workers, she has used a budget surplus to provide subsidies for families with children and free tuition to private high schools in the city.

Koike did not grant an interview request. Mitsui Fudosan, the developer involved in the building projects, said in an email that it had "no close relationship" with the governor and had not "been provided any special favors."

At first, the Tokyo governor's race seemed to promise a referendum on the Liberal Democratic Party, when one serious challenger emerged to oppose Koike: Renho Saito, 56, a former leader of Japan's largest opposition party, who stepped down from her parliamentary seat to run. But the lineup of so many candidates has distracted from her campaign.

As the first woman to lead the opposition Democratic Party,

Saito is well known in Japan. She has sought to distinguish herself from Koike by emphasizing the need to raise wages for young workers and to rein in government spending.

Other candidates have taken swings at the national government. Yusuke Kawai, who appeared in a campaign video on NHK, the public broadcaster, with stringy hair, face whitened and lips smeared red in a caricature of the Joker from the Batman franchise, lambasted Prime Minister Fumio Kishida for his plans to raise taxes. "Prime minister, before you raise taxes, make sure you sell that Rolex on your wrist!" he screamed. **NYT**



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EXPLAINED CLIMATE

WHY ARCTIC WILDFIRES ARE BAD NEWS FOR THE WORLD

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, JULY 7

SMOKE FROM raging wildfires has once again darkened the skies over the Arctic. It is the third time in the past five years that high intensity fires have erupted in the region, Europe's Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) said earlier in July. A majority of fires are in Sakha, Russia, where more than 160 wildfires charred nearly 460,000 hectares of land up until June 24.

The June monthly total carbon emissions from the wildfires are the third highest of the past two decades, at 6.8 megatonnes of carbon, behind June 2020 and 2019, which recorded 16.3 and 13.8 megatonnes of carbon respectively, C3S added.

Wildfires have been a natural part of the Arctic's boreal forest or snow forest and tundra (treeless regions) ecosystems. However, in recent years, their frequency and scale have increased, primarily due to global warming. And these blazing wildfires are fueling the climate crisis.

Why have Arctic wildfires become worse?

The Arctic has been warming roughly four times as fast as the world. While the global average temperature has increased by at least 1.1 degree Celsius above the pre-industrial levels, the Arctic has become on average around 3 degree warmer than it was in 1980.

This fast paced warming has led to more frequent lightning in the Arctic, which has further increased the likelihood of wildfires.

Speaking to CNN, Robert H Holzworth, a professor of Earth and Space Sciences at the University of Washington, said, "Thunderstorms occur when there is differential surface heating, so an updraft-downdraft convection can occur... You need a warm moist updraft to get a thunderstorm started, and that is more likely to occur over ice free land than land covered with ice."

Soaring temperatures have also slowed down the polar jet stream — responsible for circulating air between the mid- and northern latitudes — due to less of a tem-



A wildfire in Yakutia, Russia, in 2021. Reuters

perature difference between the Arctic and lower latitudes. As a result, the polar jet stream often gets "stuck" in one place, bringing unseasonably warm weather to the region. This can lead to intense heatwaves, which can cause more wildfires.

All three factors — rising temperatures, more frequent lightning and heatwaves — will most likely worsen in the coming years, thereby causing more wildfires in the Arctic.

How can Arctic wildfires spike global warming?

When wildfires ignite, they burn vegetation and organic matter, releasing the heat trapping greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide (CO2) into the atmosphere. That is why the rising frequency of wildfires around the globe is a matter of concern as they contribute to climate change.

In the case of Arctic wildfires, the biggest worry is the carbon stored underneath the region's permafrost — any ground that stays frozen for at least two years straight. Scientists estimate that Arctic permafrost holds around 1,700 billion metric tons of carbon, including methane and CO2. That's roughly 51 times the amount of carbon the world released as fossil fuel emissions in 2019.

Wildfires make permafrost more vulnerable to thawing as they destroy upper insulating layers of vegetation and soil. This can cause ancient organic materials to decompose and release carbon into the atmosphere. In case a large-scale thawing of Arctic permafrost is triggered, it would be impossible to stop the release of carbon.

The vital importance of Putin

Modi's visit to Russia showcases the importance New Delhi accords to its relationship with Moscow. It will seek to strengthen historical ties, and ensure that Beijing does not become a factor in the relationship



SHUBHAJIT ROY

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi will be in Russia to meet President Vladimir Putin on Monday and Tuesday. The two leaders have met a total 16 times since Modi became Prime Minister, but not since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, provoking wide-ranging Western sanctions. Modi last went to Russia for the Eastern Economic Forum meeting in Vladivostok in September 2019; Putin last visited India in December 2021 for the annual bilateral summit.

Underlining a priority

In choosing Russia for his first bilateral visit after being sworn in, Modi has broken with the tradition of India's new Prime Minister travelling first to a neighbouring country, a template that he followed in both June 2014 (Bhutan) and June 2019 (Maldives and Sri Lanka). He travelled to Italy last month, but that was for a multilateral meeting of G7 leaders.

The visit to Russia is a statement of the importance New Delhi accords to its relationship with Moscow, and an underlining of this foreign policy priority. Modi will be meeting Putin around the same time as leaders of the 32 nations in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) gather in Washington DC from July 9-11 to celebrate 75 years of the anti-Russia military alliance.

India's relationship with Russia is seven decades old. Veteran Indian policymakers carry fond memories of the generosity and friendship of the USSR, a goodwill that has been transferred to the relationship with Russia — even though the transactional approach of the Kremlin today is qualitatively very different from the worldview and priorities of the leadership of the erstwhile Soviet Union.

Over the years, as India has diversified its relationships in a multi-polar world, the India-Russia relationship has stagnated in some areas and atrophied in others. Defence is the strongest pillar of the strategic partnership by far, with nuclear and space cooperation also occupying an important place.

Critical defence interest

The USSR was India's main supplier of defence equipment during the decades of the Cold War, and even now, between 60 and 70 per cent of India's defence equipment is estimated to be of Russian and Soviet origin. The defence cooperation has evolved over time from a buyer-seller framework to one involving joint R&D, co-development and joint production.



PM Narendra Modi met President Vladimir Putin in New Delhi in 2018. Anil Sharma

India and Russia have signed agreements for the supply of S-400 Triumf mobile surface-to-air missile systems, MiG-29 fighter aircraft, and Kamov helicopters, and for the licensed production of T-90 tanks, Su-30MKI fighters, AK-203 assault rifles, and BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles. The INS Vikramaditya, one of the Indian Navy's two aircraft carriers, is the former Soviet and Russian warship Admiral Gorshkov.

Over the last 25 years, India has sought to look beyond Russia — especially to the United States, France, and Israel for the supply of defence equipment. However, it still cannot afford to alienate Moscow, particularly at a time when Indian soldiers are in a standoff with the Chinese People's Liberation Army along the Line of Actual Control in eastern Ladakh. It is essential for India to have a regular and reliable supply of equipment and spares from Russia, and for Moscow to not share its sensitive defence technologies with Beijing.

P S Raghavan, chairman of India's National Security Advisory Board and a former Indian Ambassador to Russia, wrote in 2022, "President Putin has said that Russia does not transfer to any other country the military technologies shared with India. This is an assurance that India must constantly verify in respect of the weaponry and technologies that Moscow supplies to Beijing, as also the nature of their intelligence-sharing arrangements." (Russia and Eurasia in India's Calculus', in 'Strategic Challenges: India in 2030', ed. Jayadeva Ranade)

War and oil boost to trade

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, India has been buying large amounts of Russian oil at a discount to cushion the inflationary impact of rising crude prices. In the face of international criticism, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar reiterated during his visit to Moscow in November 2022

that India would continue to buy Russian oil in the interest of Indian consumers.

The purchase of Russian crude has pushed bilateral trade volumes beyond expectations and targets. Before the war, the bilateral trade target was set at \$30 billion by 2025. However, bilateral trade reached an all-time high of \$65.70 billion in FY 2023-24, according to data from the Department of Commerce. The balance of trade was heavily in Russia's favour, and India's \$61.44 billion imports were made up mostly by Russian oil and petroleum products, fertilisers, mineral resources, precious stones and metals, and vegetable oils.

Walking diplomatic tightrope

The war has, however, put India in a delicate diplomatic position with its Western allies. New Delhi has walked the diplomatic tightrope, not explicitly condemning the Russian invasion but calling for an international probe into the Bucha massacre in the early weeks of the war, and expressing concern over threats of nuclear war issued by Russian leaders. India has abstained from voting against Russia in several resolutions at the United Nations Security Council.

On his November 2022 visit, Jaishankar had conveyed that India is on the side of "peace, respect for international law and support for the UN Charter", and "strongly advocates a return to dialogue and diplomacy". New Delhi has reiterated that respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states is an essential element of the international order, which has been perceived as a euphemism for telling Russia that it has violated these basic norms.

At their last in-person bilateral meeting in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, on the sidelines of the SCO Summit in September 2022, Modi had told Putin that "this is not the era of war" — a line that was later used in the G20's Bali declaration that November, and by Western leaders and interlocutors to press Russia to end the war.

Lines open to Moscow and Kyiv

There is a perception that India is positioning itself as a neutral player that could be a mediator between the two sides. Modi is one of the few world leaders who have had phone conversations with both Putin and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine. Zelenskyy invited Modi to visit during their meeting at the G7 in Italy, and there has been some talk of the Prime Minister possibly travelling to Kyiv. However, Modi stayed away from the peace summit on Ukraine hosted by Switzerland last month, and India did not sign the joint communique. Russia called the summit a "waste of time" and did not attend, and India took the position that "only those options acceptable to both parties can lead to abiding peace".

Back in September 2022, Mexico had proposed that a committee including Modi, Pope Francis, and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres should try to mediate in the crisis. Guterres had reached out separately to India for help in defusing the situation — Jaishankar had disclosed in September 2022 that India had weighed in with Russia on grain shipment from ports on the Black Sea. New Delhi had also conveyed to Moscow global concerns about the safety of nuclear plants in Ukraine.

An eye on both West and China

Modi's visit to Russia comes days after a series of meetings between India and the West. At the G7, Modi met, besides the leader of Ukraine, Western leaders. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan then visited New Delhi. This was followed by a visit by a US Congressional delegation led by Congressman Michael McCaul and former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to meet the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, and the top Indian leadership.

From India's perspective, Modi's visit is part of the series of annual bilateral summits between the leaders of the two countries that has been ongoing since 2000. Twenty-one summits, the highest institutionalised dialogue mechanism in the strategic partnership, have so far taken place in India and Russia.

Since their last summit in December 2021, Modi and Putin have had at least 10 telephone conversations to review progress on bilateral cooperation and exchange views on regional and global issues of mutual interest.

An irritant in ties has been the presence of Indians in Russia who are believed to have been "misled" into joining the war in Ukraine. Four Indians have been killed and 10 have returned, but another 40 are believed to be still in Russia. New Delhi has asked for their early discharge, and the issue is expected to be discussed during Modi's visit.

India's core concern of course, will be its defence relationship with Russia, and the Moscow-Beijing embrace that is against Indian strategic interests. Modi's visit will seek to strengthen historical ties between the two countries, and to ensure that Beijing does not become a factor in the relationship.

Denisovans hunted yaks, hyena, marmots: What new study says

THOUSANDS OF bone fragments discovered in a cave on the Tibetan Plateau in China are offering rare insight into the lives of Denisovans, the mysterious extinct cousins of Neanderthals and our own species, showing they hunted a wide range of animals from sheep to woolly rhinoceros in this high-altitude abode.

Researchers studied more than 2,500 bones found inside Baishiya Karst Cave, which is situated 3,280 metres above sea level. They used ancient protein analysis on these remains to reveal that the Denisovans exploited various animals for their meat and skins.

Most of the bones were identified as belonging to blue sheep, also called bharal, a goat species still seen in the Himalayas. Other bone remains came from woolly rhinos, yaks, small mammals like marmots,



NEW RESEARCH

birds, and even from the spotted hyena, a large carnivore that prowled the region called the Ganjia Basin.

It was a grass landscape with small forested areas, teeming with life despite harsh conditions. The animals were butchered for meat, based on cut marks found on various bones, and there was evidence of bone marrow extraction and skinning activities.

"It is the first time we have gotten an understanding of the subsistence behaviours of Denisovans, and it shows us they were highly capable of accessing and utilising a wide range of animal resources," said University of Copenhagen molecular anthropologist Frido Welker, one of the authors of the research published on Wednesday in the journal *Nature*.

REUTERS

SANATH PRASAD
BENGALURU, JULY 7

KARNATAKA'S FOOD safety department has cracked down on sellers of many street food staples, such as gobi manchurian and pani puri.

The statewide crackdown is against the use of artificial food colouring, and other cancer-causing agents by food business operators (FBOs). In the past five months, 4,000 food samples have been collected for testing by the food safety department following reports of FBOs' unhygienic practices leading to health disorders.

Action after complaints

Srinivas K, Commissioner of Karnataka's

Food Safety and Standards Commission, said they had received multiple complaints of vomiting, diarrhoea, and other health complications after consuming certain food items.

As a result, the department decided to take action against the use of artificial colouring agents. Since March, it has issued three orders banning the use of such agents in food items such as gobi manchurian, cotton candy, and chicken kababs.

The latest ban came earlier in July after the department found carcinogenic agents (they can potentially cause cancer) and bacteria harmful to human health in the samples of pani puri and shawarma.

Harmful colouring agents

The samples tested by the food safety department revealed that the food items contained artificial colouring agents such as Tartrazine, Sunset Yellow, Rhodamine B, and Brilliant Blue. These agents can cause cancer or lead to diabetes, kidney failure, and other complications, according to food safety department officials.

In use of such agents in food items such as gobi manchurian, cotton candy, and chicken kababs. The latest ban came earlier in July after the department found carcinogenic agents (they can potentially cause cancer) and bacteria harmful to human health in the samples of pani puri and shawarma.



Legal action against FBOs

To take legal action against an FBO sell-

ing unsafe food items, the food safety department has to collect two kinds of samples — a survey sample and a legal sample. It first collects and tests a survey sample from an FBO. If this sample is found to be unsafe, four more samples (known as legal samples) are collected from the FBO concerned, and then sent to Central Food Technological Research Institute (CFTRI) for further testing. If the CFTRI report also deems the sample unfit for human consumption, the FBO is booked under the Food Safety Act.

The FBO is tried at a court of Judicial Magistrate of First Class (JMFC). If the FBO is found guilty, a fine of up to Rs 10 lakh and imprisonment for seven years can be awarded.

So far, 284 FBOs in Karnataka for selling unsafe food items under the Food Safety Act.

As Biden refuses to budge, story of a US president who stepped aside

ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, JULY 7

THE INCUMBENT US President Joe Biden is facing growing calls to step aside, following a disastrous performance in the first televised presidential debate of the election season.

Biden, 81, has thus far defiantly maintained that he is not going anywhere. But if he were to drop out he would not be the first Democratic incumbent to have done so just months before the presidential election.

On March 31, 1968, President Lyndon B Johnson announced he would not run for another term. This decision did not end well for the Democrats.

Worn down by war

The story of Johnson's decision begins in the fields and jungles of Vietnam. Johnson inherited the war (and the White House) from

his predecessor John F Kennedy, after the latter's assassination on November 22, 1963.

Despite his personal skepticism about the expansion of US involvement in the war, after assuming office, Johnson did not depart from the path set by his predecessor. By March 1965, he had sanctioned the landing of the first American combat troops in Vietnam, and an intense aerial bombing campaign.

US troop deployment in Vietnam continually went up under Johnson, from around 180,000 in 1965 to over 500,000 by 1968. More than 35,000 US troops were killed in action in this period.

As a highly organised, countrywide anti-war movement took shape, support for the war — and Johnson — plummeted. According to UC Santa Barbara's American Presidency Project, in March 1965, Johnson enjoyed an approval rating of 68-69%. By the end of 1966 this had fallen to 44%. At the same time, his disapproval rating had risen to 47%

up from around 21% in March 1965. By the time Johnson left office in 1968, his approval rating was 36% and disapproval rating 52%.

Johnson drops out

Amidst growing popular disaffection, schisms began to emerge within the Democratic party. In 1967, Senator Eugene McCarthy decided to run against Johnson in the Democratic primary as an anti-war alternative to the President.

Few took McCarthy's candidacy seriously until March 12, 1968, when the senator nearly pulled off an improbable upset in the New Hampshire primary. He won 42% of the vote compared to Johnson's 49%. Smelling blood in the water, Robert Kennedy, JFK's brother and also a war critic, decided to enter the race.

The primaries were now set to become a proper three-way fight, with Johnson under unprecedented pressure. People

wanted change, and as the incumbent, Johnson represented the status quo. Many believe that he might have won the primary anyway. Nonetheless, he soon dropped out.

Johnson ended a televised address on March 30, in which he also announced a de-escalation in Vietnam hostilities (also unexpected), with a huge surprise.

"With America's sons in the fields far away... I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes... Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President," Johnson said.

Democrats in disarray

As Richard Nixon cruised to the Republican nomination, the Democrats witnessed among the most hotly contested primaries in history. In the fray were three can-

didates — Kennedy, McCarthy, and Hubert Humphrey, Johnson's vice president and the 'establishment candidate'.

Based on popular discontent with the war, either Kennedy or McCarthy should have been frontrunners. By August, when the Democratic National Convention was to be held in Chicago, McCarthy had secured almost 39% of the primary vote, whereas Kennedy had gotten above 30%. Humphrey had won a paltry 2.2% of the primary vote.

At the time, however, Democratic primaries were not all that democratic. Only 15 states chose their delegates via open primaries, with almost three-fifth of all delegates selected by party leaders in closed caucuses. Humphrey had secured the support of enough of these delegates to get him elected. Moreover, in June, after winning both the California and South Dakota primaries, Kennedy was shot dead, clearing the way for Humphrey to collect more delegates via backroom deals.

The Democratic convention was a catastrophe. Numerous organised groups had planned to disrupt proceedings, and over 20,000 police personnel were mobilised to keep things under check. The police roughed up McCarthy's delegates when they tried to stage a walkout. Outside the venue, it clashed with protestors throughout the days of the convention. Hundreds of injuries would be reported, including to innocent bystanders and press personnel.

Ultimately, the uninspiring and rather unpopular Humphrey became the Democratic presidential nominee. But with his party in disarray, he never stood a chance in the November election. Nixon comfortably defeated Humphrey, carrying 32 states, and 301 electoral votes compared to Humphrey's 191.

Humphrey's nomination, despite lack of popular support, eventually led to a reform in the Democratic nomination process.

Mind over matter

Koo's failure shows companies need to focus more on the battle of perception

THE SHUTTING DOWN of the home-grown micro-blogging platform, Koo, offers valuable lessons to budding entrepreneurs on how not to position their products. While its founders may say that they sank because talks for a partnership with multiple large companies failed, the reality is that nobody bets on a losing horse. For a horse to be a winner, its positioning is the most important. Marketing and branding gurus Al Ries and Jack Trout, in their masterly 1993-work, *The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing*, had demonstrated how me-too products never work. The first principle is that it works better to get into the mind first than to try to convince someone that you have a better product than the one that got there first. The second is equally important — if you can't be first in a category, set up a new category you can be first in. Everyone is interested in what's new. Few people are interested in what's better.

Simply put, in a competitive market, me-too products don't work, and Koo was exactly that — a desi version of Twitter (now X). Koo was launched in 2019 but only became a known product around March-April 2021. The reason wasn't that the product appealed to users by way of any innovative feature. It was simply because Twitter at that point of time was playing hard in complying with the new intermediary guidelines notified by the government. Several ministers talked about national sovereignty and jumped on to Koo, signalling that they will boycott a foreign product if it did not follow national laws. As it happens in such cases, the regulatory battle with Twitter soon petered out. Still Koo was doing well for a year and was able to notch up some 30 million users. It may have gained more had the government's regulatory battle with Twitter continued at frequent intervals over blocking of accounts or removing content not seen as politically correct. But with Elon Musk taking over Twitter, such frictions disappeared.

The other lesson in the shutting down of Koo is that muscular nationalism may work for a few political leaders, but not for consumer products. With only central ministers and government departments joining it, and opposition parties by and large being conspicuous by their absence, the perception gained that it's some sort of sarkari social media. Even prominent India Inc personalities never became a part of the platform. The founders should have known that in the past, home-grown platforms similar to WhatsApp faded away because they were not able to become a generic product. Globally also, Meta launched Threads, something on the lines of Twitter which has failed to get much of a traction. However, where it has been the first — Facebook and Instagram — it continues to be a leader with no challengers nearby. If the name of the product becomes generic, it will be able to maintain its leadership. Just as Xerox became a substitute for photocopying, Twitter is to the world of micro-blogging.

Therefore, if Indian start-ups want to be winners, they need to be the first in the mind of consumers. For, the mind can't be changed once it's made up. They should know that marketing is not a battle of products, rather it's a battle of perception. And for this to happen, innovation is key. Of course, the funding environment and support and mentoring by the bigwigs of India Inc will be required.

Only locals should be allowed to attend the Olympics

THE PRESENCE OF the two million or so fans who will travel from abroad to attend the Paris 2024 Olympic games will be felt in the city's stadiums. Unfortunately, it will also be felt by the climate. According to Olympic organisers, around a quarter of the carbon emissions associated with holding the world's biggest sporting event will be generated by spectator travel.

It's a longstanding problem that didn't originate with the Paris Olympics. But Paris, like previous games, has embraced sustainability as a core principle. Along the way, it's made good progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions related to venue construction and operations. But it's done little to address overseas spectator emissions.

There is an attainable, if radical, solution that would make future games far more enjoyable and accessible: Keep it local. Limit most ticket sales to residents of the host city and surrounding areas, while providing some access to regional fans who travel most sustainably.

The argument for taking action is clear: At the 2012 London games, spectator-related emissions, most of which were air travel-related, clocked in at 913,000 metric tons, or 28% of the 3.3 million tons of carbon emitted during the games (that's equivalent to the annual emissions of about 696,000 typical American cars). Four years later, the organizers of the 2016 Rio Olympics estimated that overseas spectator travel would generate a massive 1.72 million metric tons, or 38% of the emissions associated with the games (final numbers were never released).

While it would no doubt be scary for the International Olympic Committee to take on travel-generated emissions, the organization does have a real-life example of the impact it could create: Tokyo 2020.

As you'll recall, those summer games were delayed a year due to the pandemic. Organizers, desperate to limit viral transmission, ordered a 70% reduction in overseas personnel allowed to travel to Tokyo. According to a post-games analysis, that reduction (not including athletes) cut associated air travel-generated CO2 by nearly 79%, from 165,051 metric tons to 35,365 metric tons. Meanwhile, overall carbon savings from prohibiting most spectators totaled 800,000 metric tons, according to the IOC.

In 2021, a widely cited Nature study on Olympic sustainability argued that downsizing the games would reduce the attendance — and environmental impacts — of spectators. It's a good idea, but dialing back the size of the games would mean penalizing the athletes whose events would be eliminated and reducing the overall importance of the Olympics on the world stage. Switching to a model of regional attendance would avoid such sticking points, while also creating some important benefits, chief among them an engaged local fanbase who will lend the games a true flavor of their home country.

Games populated almost entirely by foreign tourists have long been a thorn in the side of locals. In Paris, for example, opposition to the games has been significant, driven in part by frustration over the traffic and price gouging that comes with the influx of fans. An Olympics expressly designed to entertain the locals should erode some of that opposition, and perhaps expand the number of cities willing to host the games.

The most determined fans would likely find and buy tickets on the secondary markets. But on-site authentication would dissuade all but the biggest risk takers from showing up at the airport. It's certainly doable on a technical level; professional teams in the US occasionally impose geographic restrictions on ticket sales when they want locals — not hostile visiting fans — cheering on the home team.

Of course, there will still be Olympic discontents, starting with airlines and hotels that hope to profit from Olympic tourist traffic. But those profits might not be quite as important as they think. Economists studying hotel occupancies around mega-sporting events find that these events often simply displace other tourists, who travel elsewhere rather than deal with the games. Paris appears to be the latest example. Earlier this week Air France-KLM projected a 14.8% drop in foreign arrivals to the city during July, compared to last year. The airline blames the Olympics.

That's an accidental win for the climate, and for Parisians. To keep the streak going, the Olympics need to think like a local.

● FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

SHIVRAJ SINGH CHOUHAN NEEDS TO FIX THE AGRI-TECH SYSTEM TO ENSURE THE LEAST HUMAN MANIPULATION

Trust, transparency, and tech

TRUST IS THE foundation of any relationship, be it in family, friends, fraternity at work, or between farmers and policy makers. But building trust requires transparency in actions. Without trust and transparency, any action by any party can be misconstrued, leading to a collapse in relations and policies. I am talking in the context of farm policies and the trust deficit that widened between some segments of the farming community and the agri-policy makers.

If agriculture in India were to be put on a fast and sustainable track, first and foremost agriculture minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan must bridge the trust deficit with farmers. The best way to do it is to form two agri-councils, one with representatives of farmers from each state, say two per state — one owner cultivator and one tenant. Let us call it the Farmers' Council. The second council will comprise agri-ministers of each state, somewhat on the lines of the Goods and Services Tax Council. Both these councils must meet at least twice a year, at the beginning of kharif and rabi conferences that the Centre holds annually. This will go a long way to arrive at a convergence on some important reforms in the agri-sector, which is crying for change.

Second, climate change is already knocking at the door and farming will get impacted in a big way unless we take some bold steps. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) claims that it has produced more than 2,000 seed varieties that are climate-resilient for different crops. If that is the case, how does one explain the drop in agri-GDP growth in FY24 to just 1.4%, compared to the high of previous year's 4.7%? It was the El Niño impact in 2023. That means



either we are still way behind in creating climate-resilient agriculture or our innovations in seeds have not moved from scientists' labs to farmers' lands. In terms of the forthcoming Union Budget, this also means that ICAR funding needs to go up significantly, say from less than ₹10,000 crore today to about ₹15,000 crore. The marginal returns in investing in climate-resilient agriculture and promoting climate-smart agriculture are very high. The latter requires resurrection of agri-extension work in a way that promotes farming practices which can withstand extreme heatwaves or bursts of rains, etc. The extra funding of ICAR should be exclusively focused on creating climate-resilient and climate-smart agriculture. But this is not going to happen overnight. In the short run, we need to fix the crop insurance scheme, called the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY).

PMFBY was started in 2016 after back-to-back droughts in 2014-15 and 2015-16. The agri-GDP had collapsed and suddenly, the farming community was in deep stress. PMFBY was a bold step in the right direction. But the success of any such scheme depends upon how efficiently it is implemented. It started off with a big

bang and good promise. In total, 26 states and 16 insurers came forward to join this scheme. But the scheme was somewhat premature as the spade-work was not done, and infusion of technology was meagre. The automatic weather stations were not fixed, continuous monitoring of plots was not done through high-tech low-Earth orbits, algorithms for crop losses were not properly designed, and so on. In brief, the scheme was open for more

human manipulation. It is no wonder many of our states, with the help of some leaders, took undue advantage. There were several cases of corruption. As a result, after a good start, the graph of the scheme's adoption, instead of going up, started coming down. Re-insurers, who are the real risk-takers in crop insurance business, were not satisfied, as there was not enough transparency in crop losses and claims made. By 2021-22, there were only 20 states and 10 insurers willing to participate in PMFBY. It was feared that the scheme may fail. But there was no better alternative to compensate farmers in case of crop failures. It is at that time that a major push of technology rebooting was made. In the last two years, there seems to be a turnaround in PMFBY. The number of states and insurers par-

If agriculture has to be put on a fast and sustainable track, agriculture minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan must bridge this trust deficit with farmers

Made in India, for Tesla



RISHI RAJ
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The company's silence in the last four months signals that it may have reservations on the bank guarantee part of the country's EV policy

IT WILL BE fair to conclude that the government's electric vehicle (EV) policy has failed to yield the desired results. Last week RK Singh, secretary, department for promotion of industry and internal trade, said they hadn't heard from Elon Musk about his India visit or about Tesla's India plans. The congratulatory message to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on his election victory was the last that was heard from Tesla's CEO.

Going by the fine print, the EV policy is not about Tesla only. It's aimed at promoting domestic manufacturing by global players. However, the policy has been structured keeping in mind Tesla's demand for India entry. The disappointment about not hearing from Tesla so far could have been contained had other global manufacturers that are already present in India shown interest in availing its benefits. But the silence of all manufacturers — global and local — from the day the plan was announced (March 15) signals that none seem to be interested. If Tesla does not come to India, the policy is dead for all practical purposes.

But what exactly does the EV policy offer and what's wrong with it? The policy is a fine mix of incentives and deliverables which lay the ground for manufacturers to explore India as a production hub to service the world market. True, it has been designed keeping Tesla in mind because it had been insisting on reduction of import duty before considering domestic assembly, but then it has not given it a

free ride. India's automobile market is a developed one with all global players having a manufacturing base here. But then it's mostly for internal combustion engine technology. The emerging area of EVs comprise only around 2% of the passenger vehicle market. Even in the luxury segment where Tesla operates, the share of EVs is 3-4%.

Tesla's main demand for setting up an assembly base in India was reduction of custom duty on import of completely built-up units (CBUs). At present, 70% import duty is levied on CBUs costing less than \$40,000, and 100% on vehicles priced higher. To meet Tesla's demand and achieve its own purpose, the government combined two things. It brought down the duty under the policy to 15% on vehicles priced \$35,000 and above for a five-year period. But this has been subjected to companies setting up manufacturing facilities in India within three years. In addition, they will have to meet 25% localisation within three years and 50% at the end of the fifth year.

The minimum investment commitment from the manufacturers is ₹4,150 crore (\$500 million).

Now comes the most important part. Companies applying will have to back their commitments with a bank

guarantee in lieu of the duty forgone, which will be encashed if they fail to meet the investment criteria.

There can be no complaints about the fairness of the policy as it also opens the gate to global players like BYD, Volvo, Kia, Hyundai, BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Audi, and Porsche. Of the 15 EV models from these manufacturers that are available in the market, only two are domestically assembled.

Why have they not shown interest then? Perhaps because they can scale up their EV presence at a pace which suits them. They can import any models even at 100% duty and test the market here. If the response is good, they can be gradually assembled in India in the numbers required.

Take the case of Jaguar Land Rover, a part of Tata Motors. The company announced in May its plan to start manufacturing its marquee brands, Range Rover and Range Rover Sport, in India. Prior to this, JLR was already assembling Range Rover Velar, Range Rover Evoque, Jaguar F-PACE, and Discovery Sport here. Why should the company submit a bank guarantee to the government and be bound by three- to five-year localisation requirements when it can do the same without any such encumbrances?

Similarly, Mercedes-Benz, present

in India for 30 years, has so far made an investment of ₹2,800 crore, which it plans to take to around ₹3,000 crore by this year-end. Contrast this to the requirement under the EV policy for a minimum investment of ₹4,150 crore.

It was hoped that VinFast would avail the benefits of the policy. In January, the Vietnamese EV manufacturer had announced plans to invest \$500 million in India to set up manufacturing over five years. However, recent reports suggest it is considering direct assembly instead of importing its products first.

Tesla may announce plans for India at a later stage but it won't be wrong to conclude that it seems to have reservations about the bank guarantee part. It's clear that its intent behind seeking import duty concessions is to test the market. If the response isn't encouraging it may choose not to carry on, but in that case it will have to forgo bank guarantee worth \$500 million.

Even if well-intentioned, manufacturers opting for the policy benefits will need land to set up units and ancillary industry to meet domestic value addition. If the process of identifying land parcels isn't fast and smooth, deadlines can be missed. In such a scenario encashment of bank guarantees will pose a legal challenge that can turn messy as the law is tilted in favour of the one encashing.

The policy provisions are such that both the government and manufacturers seem to be caught in a catch-22 situation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A historic reset for the UK

Apropos of "Reinvented Labour" (*FE*, July 6), with a clear mandate of 412 seats in the 650-member House, Keir Starmer will be virtually unchallenged inside Parliament for his agenda on wealth creation for the working classes, taxing higher incomes, banning fossil fuel car sales, and building a new border control agency. It should be equally

clear that more than the Labour win, this is a Conservative loss. After its 14 years of power, five Prime Ministers, and sizeable turmoil, the British voters have clearly punished the Conservatives led by Rishi Sunak for their cumulative errors. Despite efforts by PM Narendra Modi and Sunak, the India-UK FTA couldn't be finalised. All eyes will be on how quickly Starmer's government would be able to do so. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Being specific with growth predictions

It has become a practice by the companies not to mention specific numbers while predicting their growth. Terms like single-digit or double-digit growth have replaced specifics. FMCG majors like Dabur and Marico see mid to high single digit growth for the first quarter. What does high single-digit mean? 9, 8, or 7? Double-digit would mean

anything from 10 to 99. A rural demand would mean better performances by the companies. Data cannot be ambiguous, it has to be specific. That is why numbers are important in human activity. The government too uses approximates to confuse the public. It needs to be specific to present a clear picture. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

NEED PROACTIVE STEPS TO BOOST PRIVATE INVESTMENT

THE Indian economy needs the next private investment cycle to take off right now, but the hour's growing late. In a setback, latest data indicates that the value of new investment projects announced during the first quarter of the current fiscal year plunged 92% to ₹59,900 crore. According to CMIE data, in value terms, June quarter reported the lowest level of project announcements by both private and the government since September 2009, when it began collecting data. Not only is the investment sentiment low, but they are concentrated in just a few sectors. One can take comfort in the fact that the decline was partly due to general elections, which concluded only last month. That said, industries' reluctance is undeniable and though private investment is expected to pick up pace in FY25, overall investment activity is likely to depend on public investments like in the past.

This is disappointing since corporate India got everything on a platter. Be it tax cuts, production-linked incentives, ease of doing business and so on. Yet, the long-awaited capex cycle remains elusive. The government too has been nudging industries to go out and spend now that balance sheets of both borrowers and banks are clean, profitability levels are improving, and capacity utilisation touched the pre-pandemic levels of about 76%. For investors, India also remains one of the lucrative markets, but companies just don't seem to be in the mood for risk taking, perhaps because private consumption is growing in single digits. In particular, rural demand hasn't gathered the needed pace, while urban consumption, which was relatively doing better until now, has started showing signs of tiredness as was evident from the lacklustre monthly auto sales data.

In FY23, investments stood at 10.9% of GDP, lower than the 16.8% peak seen during FY08. The decline was largely from manufacturing, where the share of private capital formation in the GDP fell from 4.6% to 3.2% during FY12 and FY19. This was acknowledged by none other than Anand Mahindra, chairman of Mahindra & Mahindra, who urged the manufacturing industry to increase investments, as the share as a percentage of GDP fell to a 'worrisome level.' Investments are a key driver for economic growth and are a source of job creation. It's imperative that the government takes urgent measures to revive consumption, which will spur investments by default.

CO-ED SCHOOLS NEED MORE PUSH

FOR a change, something right is happening on the education front in Kerala with regard to gender relations. Many centuries-old schools and colleges catering exclusively to boys or girls, have now thrown open their doors to students of both genders. As many as 45 schools—both government and aided—have shifted to co-education this year. The oldest school that has turned co-ed is the Sree Moola Vilasam School in Thiruvananthapuram. The 189-year-old school created history when it opened its doors for girls to study last year. Two prestigious colleges—St Berchmans College and Assumption College in Changanassery—too joined the league of co-ed institutions. There has been an increase in the number of applicants of the opposite gender in all these institutions. The student community and the management of the educational institutions are happy with the change. And this trend is bound to continue.

The trigger for this ongoing change was the Kerala State Commission for the Protection of Child Rights' directive that schools exclusively for boys and girls should cease to exist from 2023-24 academic year. Maintaining that there is no need to teach boys and girls in separate schools in the existing social context, the order said that the best educational institutions in the word are co-ed. This move is correct in the context of the RTE Act too, which had stated that it is obligatory for the government to provide free and compulsory elementary education to each and every child in a neighbourhood school within 1 km, up to class 8 in India. The Commission's order was based on a petition in which the petitioner had argued that gender justice was denied in exclusive schools.

There are no two ways about the benefits of mixed education. The most basic and the most convincing reason for the relevance of co-ed school is that we live in a co-ed world. There have been enough and more international studies proving the benefits of co-ed schools. According to studies, mixed schools are instrumental in instilling mutual respect and ensuring gender equality. Studying in these schools will also help in removing orthodox ideas and encourage boys and girls to respect the opposite gender. Boys and girls who are comfortable with opposite genders will adjust better in the adult world too. Exclusive gendered schools are certainly an anomaly in today's world. On the other hand, co-ed schools, by nature, are more inclusive and egalitarian. They must be encouraged at all costs.

QUICK TAKE

LONG-TERM PLAN FOR ASSAM

IKE almost every year in recent times, Assam is being devastated by a flood. At least 66 people have died and more than 5 lakh are sheltering in 577 relief camps. Floods have routinely wreaked havoc along the riverbanks of the mighty Brahmaputra. But with climate change, their frequency and ferocity have increased. The rainfall in Assam has been far above the long-term average this year. At least 18 people have died in neighbouring Meghalaya too. Given that we know this is not going to be a rare phenomenon, we must prepare much better—both on short-term relief and long-term solutions. Too much is at stake.

WHILE speaking in the Lok Sabha on Monday (July 1), Rahul Gandhi said, “*Aap Hindu ho hi nahin* (You are not Hindu).” The line was directed at the BJP benches, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his cabinet colleagues, fellow members of the House and, by extension, the millions of voters who supported the saffron outfit.

Rahul's words indicated three things—his sense of entitlement, ignorance of Indian ethos and disrespect for democratic norms.

Can Rahul or anybody else decide who is a Hindu? During the just-concluded Lok Sabha polls, 23.59 crore Indians voted for the BJP. There are likely to be millions more who support the BJP, but couldn't vote for their favourite party for various reasons. A majority of them identify themselves as Hindus. With one utterance, Rahul seemed to strip them of this identity.

Who can make such a statement? Only someone with an acute sense of entitlement. Unlike Abrahamic religions, Hinduism is timeless (hence also *sana-tan*), catholic and pluralistic. There is no centralised authority in Hinduism, and none has any right to pass such edicts regarding the faith.

Identity can work differently for the Abrahamic faiths. For example, the Ahmadiyya sect in Pakistan has been 'shunned' from Islam, and its followers are routinely persecuted because their belief system differs a little from the mainline Shia-Sunni doctrines. These two sects are also perpetually locked in internecine wars because of their conflicting theological beliefs. Ironically, Ahmadiyyas were at the forefront, along with communists and the Muslim League, in striving for an independent Pakistan. Doesn't Rahul somewhat sound like a similar establishment voice when he decrees in Lok Sabha who is a Hindu and who isn't?

During his 1-hour-40-minute speech, Rahul also observed, “Those who call themselves Hindus indulge in hatred, violence and untruths 24x7.” Can anyone, including Rahul, make such an acerbic statement about any other faith? Don't miss the contradiction. After suspects are identified following a terror episode anywhere in the world, the usual comment is: a terrorist has no religion.

Rahul's allegations are without basis. He can get away with it because of the immunity that members of parliament enjoy. In their history, Hindus have resorted to violence mainly to defend them-

A recent comment has brought up an old question: who gets to decide religious identity? It's tougher to answer in a land where harmony is stressed over uniformity

A PERSISTING CONFUSION OVER IDENTITY

BALBIR PUNJ

Former chairman, Indian Institute of Mass Communications



MANDAR PARDIKAR

selves. Hinduism is inclusive and has in its fold numerous traditions, all equally valid—ranging from devout idol worshippers to outright heretics. Anyone who cares to call oneself a Hindu is a Hindu.

Rahul also spoke about violence and hate. Given his party's track record in this respect, can he sound so sanctimonious? While Rahul argues against the two evils, he promotes divisive narratives and allies with forces that seek to divide Indians based on caste, region and faith. Highlighting Indians' caste identity was central to his election campaign.

Hate and divisiveness, the bane of India, have been aggravated in its socio-economic and religio-cultural life in recent centuries. The use of violence or deceit is a part of a playbook while

dealing with non-believers or dissent within own ranks. Uniformity, particularly in matters of faith, is central to their existence. In contrast, Indian ethos is indifferent to uniformity, it focuses only on harmony.

Who ceded a fourth of India in August 1947 to the forces of Islamic nationalism? Pakistan is not just a country; it is now a religious idea that transcends borders. Recall 1980-90, when Pakistan trained and funded terrorists with local help, and hounded Kashmiri Pandits out of their ancestral homeland. In a recent interview, the newly elected National Conference MP Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi threatened a repetition of the black decade in retaliation to the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A.

THE HISTORY OF THE ‘HIJRI’ LUNAR CALENDAR



RENUKA NARAYANAN

FAITHLINE

Each of these lasts from the first sighting of one crescent moon to the first sighting of the next, approximately twenty-nine or thirty days. Though Muslim majority countries follow the solar Gregorian calendar, the lunar calendar is used to calculate the dates of religious feasts and important rituals such as the Haj pilgrimage. Because the Hijri calendar relies on the movements of the moon, the Muslim calendar has just 354 or 355 days, making it about 11 days



Each Hijri calendar month lasts from the first sighting of one crescent moon to the first sighting of the next. Though Muslim majority nations follow the Gregorian calendar, the lunar calendar is used to calculate the dates of religious feasts and important rituals such as the Haj pilgrimage

shorter than the Gregorian calendar. Back then, among the warring Arab tribes, the months of Rajab, Dhu al-Qada, Dhu al-Hijjah, and Muharram were regarded as holy months of peace. In Arabic, the word *muharram* means forbidden, indicating the month's meaning. The *Quran* forbids warfare or fighting during Muharram and the three other holy months. Muslims around the world reportedly commemorate Muharram with prayer.

The *Quran* speaks of the calendar thus: “He it is who appointed the sun a splendor and the moon a light and measured for her stages, that ye might know the number of the years, and the reckoning,” (X:5) and “Lo! the number of the months with Allah is twelve months by Allah's ordinance on

the day that He created the heavens and the earth.” (IX:36).

However, Islam's two largest sects observe the first month of the year differently. These differences go back to the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson, Husain Ibn Ali al-Hussein, aka Imam Husain, during the battle of Karbala in 680 CE. This marks the schism between Shia and Sunni Muslims since Shias adhere to the Prophet's son-in-law Hazrat Ali and Imam Husain as his true successors, not the Sunni Caliphs. There is a famous saying attributed to the Prophet when at the pond of Khum: ‘*Man kuntu maula fa haza Ali un maula*’, meaning ‘Whoever calls me master, Ali is his master, too’. This is widely sung in Sufiyana and you can hear it on YouTube.

As Muharram begins, Shia Muslims observe ten days of mourning, culminating in Ashura to mourn the death of Imam Husain. This year, Ashura occurs on July 17. Some Shia Muslims conduct mourning marches that day. I have seen their beautiful *tazia* (portable pavilions) and *alam* (flags) carried in procession. At a big Shia *majlis* I attended in Delhi, a banner proclaimed ‘Live like Ali, die like Husain’. As the sorrowful poems describing the martyrdom—*shaam-egharibaan*—were recited, the audience sobbed aloud. It was an intense, moving experience.

Other Shias, particularly young men, commit self-flagellation using their whips and chains as a way of recalling Imam Husain's suffering. Though some Muslim scholars believe this practice is permissible, others object to it. Some Sunni Muslims observe Ashura with fasting and prayer, but in honour of a fast undertaken by the Prophet in Medina after he emigrated. However, there is apparently no agreement among Sunni scholars as to whether Ashura fasting is permissible or not.

Muharram is also the time for special food, which includes saffron rice in Iran and *doodh ka sharbat*, a milky drink prepared in Hyderabad in memory of the thirst felt by Imam Husain and his followers during the fatal battle.

(Views are personal) (shebabab09@gmail.com)

In June 2022, Kanhaiya Lal in Rajasthan and Umesh in Maharashtra were beheaded by Islamic zealots. Last week, a young couple was publicly humiliated and battered Taliban-style by a musclem affiliated with the local ruling party in West Bengal's Uttar Dinajpur. On June 27, a Muslim woman was stripped, dragged by her hair and thrashed for over an hour by goons for supporting the BJP in West Bengal's Cooch Behar. The berating and torturing of victims such as Anees Mian-Parveen Jahan (Uttarakhand, 2022), Samina (Madhya Pradesh, 2023), and Tahira Bano (Rajasthan, 2023) don't usually figure in public discourse.

The killings of Hafizul Sheikh (West Bengal, 2024), Aijaz Ahmad Sheikh (J&K, 2024), Babar Ali (Uttar Pradesh, 2022) and Sheikh Waseem Bari (J&K, 2020) have not been highlighted as much as some others. They were all victims of hate and were guilty of a common ‘crime’: supporting the BJP. This list of hate crimes is indicative and not an exhaustive one.

This itineray of hate and violence, however, doesn't seem to concern Rahul. His public utterances are shaped by the compulsions of power politics and the requirements of the ideological ecosystem he is aligned with. His narrative is solely fashioned by the political dividends he is aiming to reap. No wonder, he blames only those “who call themselves Hindus” for these twin evils.

There is a method to this madness. For decades, the Congress has been on the decline. Rahul is in a hurry to resurrect it. His options are limited. It's difficult to fault the incumbent Modi on his performance. As a shortcut to gather electoral support, Rahul is increasingly leaning on identity politics and aligning, knowingly or unknowingly, with the forces of neo-colonialism.

Rahul won Wayanad with the Indian Union Muslim League's support—a post-independence reincarnation of the Mohamed Ali Jinnah-led Muslim League. Muhammad Ismail set up the IUML after independence. Prior to 1947, he was president of the Madras unit of Jinnah's Muslim League. The League has changed its signboard, but has it changed its agenda?

Rahul is trying to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. He can't carry on with this contradiction for long. Shorn of hyperbole and embellishments, Rahul's first speech in the newly constituted Lok Sabha was poor on facts and high on toxins.

(Views are personal) (punjbalbir@gmail.com)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Misguided opinions

Ref: *Time for maximum Modi, minimum govt* (Jul 7). Ever since the BJP got 240 seats in the general elections, anti-BJP heads have once again risen. Rahul Gandhi in particular seems much like a misguided school boy.
Rajaram Bhat, Mysuru

Country's progress

I agree with the author's observation that a country's progress can't be measured in terms of its escalating share market indices alone. Of what use is the raised index if bridges, roads, airport roofs and waterways are collapsing one after the other, making life impossible in various cities?
G Nataraja Perumal, Belagavi

Budget hopes

Ref: *FM to present full yr budget on July 23* (Jul 7). The ensuing budget presentation by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has to take into account several important issues still hanging out such as the uncontrolled price rise and the severe unemployment. The standard deduction limit has to be raised to ₹1 lakh and the tax slab itself should commence from ₹5 lakhs so as to enable taxpayers to meet the rising costs of survival.
Katuru Durga Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

Objective fulfilled

Ref: *Ayodhya win defeats Advani's temple movement, says Rahul* (Jul 7). One can't agree with Rahul Gandhi when he makes statements like this. The temple movement spearheaded by L K Advani has ensured its objectives were fulfilled with the construction of the Ram mandir. As such, the BJP's defeat in Ayodhya cannot be seen as the defeat of the movement.
Sudhakar Cherukunnu, Kannur

Shocking defeat

While cricket lovers in India are still rejoicing India's World Cup victory, it is shocking to see the strong young Indian team led by Shubman Gill play a rather poor game against Zimbabwe and lose by 13 runs. It is sad that the team with a strong batting lineup could not chase a moderate total of 115 runs set by Zimbabwe.
KS Aswathanarayana, Bengaluru

Insincere investigation

The lip service offered by the absconding Bhole Baba, who expressed grief over the Hathras stampede, counts for nothing as it can neither resurrect the dead nor provide solace to their grieving kin. The police hunting for the Baba are obviously not sincere in their efforts and the biggest drawback is that the Baba has not been named in the FIR. This means the police are not suspecting that he had a role in the tragedy, which is a travesty of justice.
CV Aravind, Bengaluru

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

Chairman of the Board: Manoj Kumar Sonthalia Editor: Santwana Bhattacharya

Resident Editor (Telangana) : T Kalyan Chakravarthy * Printed and Published by R K Jhunjunwala on behalf of Express Publications (Madurai) Private Ltd., at H.No.6-3-1113/1, B.S.Makta Lane, Somajiguda, Near Grand Kakatiya Hotel, Punjagutta, Hyderabad – 500 016 and printed by him at Sakshi Press, Plot No.D-75 & E-52, Industrial Estate (APIE), Balanagar, Medchal-Malkajigiri District, Telangana. Hyderabad: Vol. 48, No. 161 RNI Reg. No. 32179/77. Phone: 040-23413908. * Responsible for selection of News under the PRB Act. Copyright: Express Publications (Madurai) Private Ltd., All rights reserved. Reproduction in any manner, electronic or otherwise, in whole or in part, without prior written permission is prohibited.

Keep Fine-Tuning Those Customs Duties

Transitioning to lower tariffs needed for growth

The first budget in the third term of NDA may be a good opportunity to address the dichotomy between higher import duties and rising import dependency on industrial products, particularly from China. NDA has used customs duties creatively to protect some industries from predatory pricing. This is not a blanket protection for all industries, and there is a realisation that the economy will have to transition to a lower tariff structure for domestic manufacturing to reduce import dependency. But this dependency is increasing vis a vis China, whose share of industrial imports is now around 30% and rising twice as fast as imports from the rest of the world. This percentage climbs in sectors such as electronics and telecom, where India is gaining traction in the export market.

The creativity in calibrating customs duties lies in setting them high enough for import substitution but not



high enough to affect export competitiveness. That involves a progressive easing from infant to mature industries. Import dependency will rise initially as exports increase, eventually as local value chains are seeded and plugged into global chains. The result should yield diversified value chains not dependent on single-country imports. Some adjustments in customs duties on electronic components may thus be called for immediately, while for others, such as automobile components, the risks of dumping by China may be higher. The caveat is that tariff protection can delay export competitiveness if left unadjusted for too long.

The dual nature of customs duties as a provider of protection and revenue allows for continuous fine-tuning. The budget could, however, signal an acceleration towards a low-tariff regime. Although this depends on the relative export performance of a host of industries, certain macroeconomic yardsticks could be set to indicate a medium-term trajectory for the basic customs duty. A GDP growth rate of around 8% depends on a solid manufacturing export performance. Lower import tariffs would be a measure of that performance.

Something is Rotten In the State of Bihar

Bridges in Bihar are collapsing like ninepins. As many as 10 have collapsed in Kishanganj, Araria, East Champaran, Madhubani, Siwan and Saran districts since June 18, thankfully without fatalities or injuries. Over 16 engineers of the Water Resources Department (WRD) responsible for these structures have been suspended. Last week, Nitish Kumar instructed officials to survey all old bridges and identify those requiring immediate repairs. Why didn't the government take this routine step <before> the monsoon season? Or will 'third world' infrastructure remain as the new 'old normal'?

Officials gave two key reasons for these disasters: poor quality of construction and the materials used in building and maintaining bridges, and unscientific dredging and desilting of stretches of rivers, which removed mud, rocks and other material from around the pillars on which some bridges stood. The latter left the bridges without any kind of base and vulnerable to rainwater flowing at a frenetic speed after rains. All these explanations prove one thing: rotten governance. If a large retinue of bureaucrats can't ensure regular maintenance of infrastructure according to scientific guidelines, woe betide the state of Bihar.

Infrastructure collapse isn't just a structure crashing down. It's the collapse of a lifeline for many people and can have a deep impact on local development. Every bridge or road collapse may mean critical patients can't be taken to hospitals, students unable to go to school and missing exams, missed job interviews, and crucial aid vehicles unable to reach cut-off villages. Such losses of time and opportunities are never calculated or compensated by the state. How strange is it that the state values its own citizens so little.

JUST IN JEST
Biden's willingness to act only upon divine intervention is mortally brilliant

And Here's Another God-Given Politician

Joe Biden is the second big enchilada in the political world recently to have invoked god. No, the evaporative prez hasn't stated that the paramatma also sent him to our planet for a purpose, and that once that purpose is achieved, he'll be returning to Krypton. Instead, Joe the Debatable Debater brought the Big Guy into the conversation by stating that 'If the lord almighty came down and said, 'Joe, get out of the race,' I'd get out of the [presidential] race, adding rather blasphemously, especially for America's second Catholic president, 'The lord almighty's not coming down.' With the Second Coming not coming according to Biden, Democrats must be getting on their knees in churches across the US to pray — indeed implore — that god does come down and convince Cotton Eyed Joe to withdraw from the presidential election race. After all, the US dollar bill says it upfront: 'In god we trust.'

But coming back to the god-not-forsaken profession, nothing says 'I'm holier than thou' like a politician talking about divine intervention — or, in Biden's case, divine decision not to intervene with one of his/her creation's free will. Watch out for more politicians across the believing world bringing up their takes on dharma, karma, and moksha in random conversation (read: interviews). These Chosen Ones will, after all, want to be chosen by voters.

TESSELTUM Take advantage of global pushback, inefficiencies due to Beijing's over-investment

Chinese Takeaway Plus One



Neelkanth Mishra

Over the last few years, as the US-China strategic conflict has intensified, 'China+1' has become a popular phrase. Countries, including India, have jostled to be the '+1', easing policies and providing incentives to attract foreign firms trying to reduce their dependence on China for manufacturing.

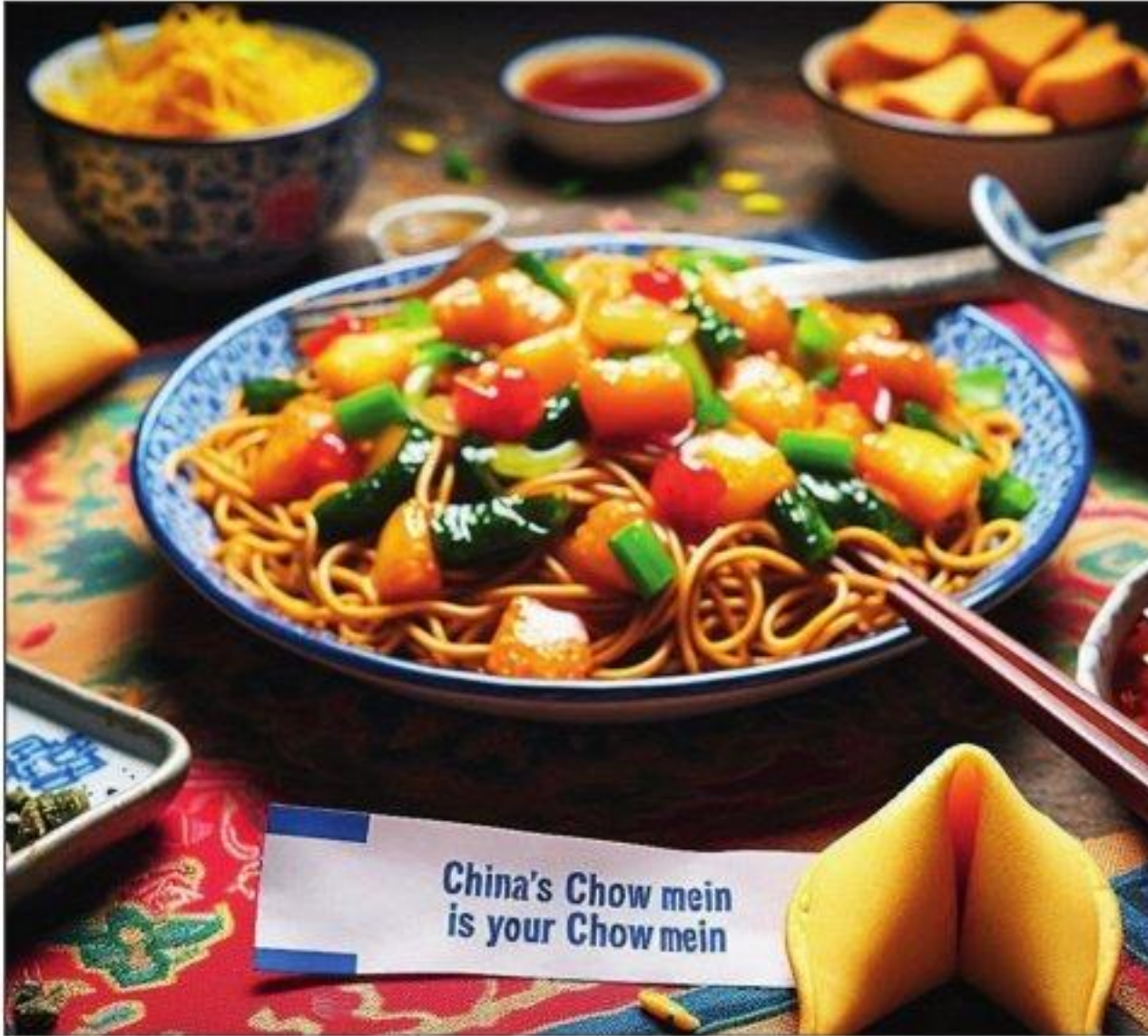
However, let alone a drop in China's global share of manufacturing, we are seeing an increase — from an already high 35% in 2020, it may already be near 38%. Global industrial output is well below the pre-pandemic path, but China's isn't. Industrial production in the rest of the world is showing the strain, especially in the EU, Japan, Latin America and Africa.

This is not because foreign firms are not leaving China. Their share of manufacturing capacity in China is at a 25-year low, and their goods exports have indeed declined over the past decade. However, these have been offset by a surge in exports from Chinese-owned firms. Further, while goods exports are up about \$1 tn since 2019, imports have risen by a lot less as China has also focused on import substitution (especially in mechanical and electrical products), nearly tripling the goods trade surplus.

Underlying trends suggest we are likely to see more of this going forward. When China had surplus labour but lacked capital, it out-competed labour-intensive industries globally. Given its larger economic size now, its ability to invest in capital-intensive industries is now a threat to firms globally.

China's dominance in the fast-growing markets of RE generation, energy storage and EVs, and rapid strides in semiconductors means its manufacturing will grow faster than that of the rest of the world, which lags in these sectors. More importantly, this investment is also important for China to sustain its growth rate.

The much-anticipated slowdown in the Chinese housing market has



Reading fortunes

been offset by growth in investments in infrastructure and manufacturing. In the last four years, as Chinese policymakers redirect loans away from real estate to industry, medium-to-long-term loans to industry have risen 2.4 times. In absolute terms, such loans have increased \$1.9 tn (India's total banking system loans are \$2 tn). If loans to industry grow at the current pace of 24% y-o-y, another \$2.5-3 tn of loans could be allocated to industry in the next three years.

This is not to say that all of China's industrial policy is successful. Capital allocation that is devoid of the discipline imposed by market forces also tends to be inefficient. However, this onslaught of capital means that the return of assets in capital-intensive industries is falling sharply in China. Profits as a share of total assets in 2023 decreased to levels last seen in 2002. This is part of the policy of letting 'a thousand flowers bloom'.

Thousands, if not tens of thousands, of new firms, enter greenfield ind-

tries. Many fail. But the ones that survive can be very competitive.

For these reasons, stress on profits is unlikely to remain contained in China. The country's export price index has fallen sharply from 116 in mid-2022 to 107 in March 2023 and 97 in March 2024. Even as China cedes space in labour-intensive manufacturing, it's rapidly growing exports of goods in capital-intensive industries is likely to affect profitability and return on assets globally. In industries such as flat panel displays that use legacy tech, several fabrication units in South Korea have shut down in recent years, unable to compete with China.

There is a long legacy of pithy aphorisms from Chinese leaders that scholars interpret for masses.

Only now is the world beginning to understand the meaning of 'new quality productive forces' that Xi Jinping first mentioned last year.

China's trading counterparties are beginning to erect tariff and non-tariff barriers. However, given China's domi-



China's global share of manufacturing has actually increased, not decreased — from an already high 35% in 2020, it may already be near 38%

Will It Be a 'Congress' Budget, Gol?



Anil Padmanabhan

In June, Congress-ruled Telangana announced a farm loan waiver of ₹31k cr, fulfilling a key poll promise made before the assembly elections last year. A similar fiscal strategy has helped Congress in the past. One of the key reasons for the re-election of UPA in 2009 was the ₹60k cr farm loan waiver in the preceding year.

No matter how justified, such giveaways create a moral hazard. While these promises don't affect banks that loaned the money — as Gol picks up the tab — it incentivises non-payment of dues. Those who repaid feel cheated. Together, these factors undermine credit culture. The exchequer adds to its debt burden or is forced to cut back on other spending priorities.

To be sure, Congress isn't the only party offering freebies. They stand out because of the scale of its pro-

mises and the reasonable electoral successes that have accrued, including in the 2024 general election. In its manifesto for the Lok Sabha polls, Congress promised to transfer ₹1 lakh every year — ₹8,500 every month — to every poor Indian family under the Mahalakshmi scheme, ideally to the bank account of the oldest woman of the household.

Even as economists debate the pros and cons of such populism, the big question is whether BJP will respond in kind in the union budget on July 23. This is especially true given that these promised payouts did, to an extent, influence the outcome, particularly in UP, where the party witnessed a severe erosion of seats.

So far, BJP-led NDA's playbook has favoured empowerment — enabling universal access to basics like banking, cooking gas, electricity, drinking water, housing and health insurance — over entitlement. In fact, they missed an opportunity for a course correction in the interim budget, unlike in 2019 when they came up with the PM-Kisan giveaway.

If BJP does blink, India may witness a phase of competitive populism. Not only will the wages of populism push states and Gol to fiscal ruin, but it will

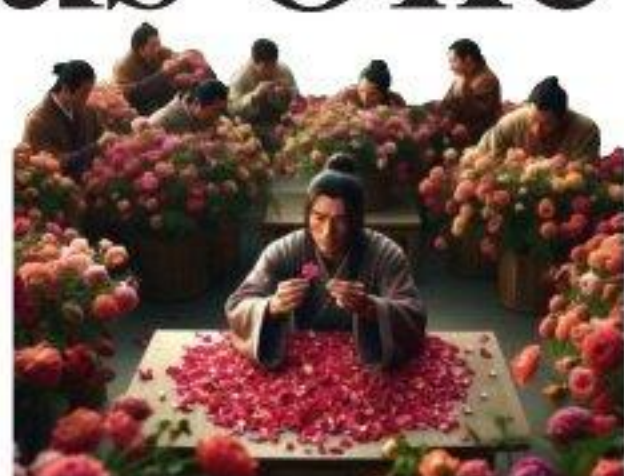


Avoid this route

also undermine hard-earned macroeconomic stability, especially in containing inflation at moderate levels.

On June 4, the day the general election results were announced, the perception was that populism as an electoral calling card was on the wane. This was especially true after the creation of millions of labharthis (beneficiaries) through targeted welfare spending. This cohort was seen as blunting the traditional lure of vote-bank politics based on caste and religion, contributing to BJP's winning rhythm over the last decade.

Furthermore, Gol was refusing to bail out fiscally irresponsible states. Similarly, the Supreme Court, which has been frowning upon electoral freebies, was refusing to lend a sympathetic ear. While hearing a PIL two



China's 'let a thousand flowers bloom' policy has thousands of new firms enter greenfield industries. Many fail. But the ones that survive can be very competitive

nance, and rapid growth in its capital allocation, it's unclear whether the drawbridges can be pulled up quickly. The decision to restrict imports will not be straightforward. There is likely to be a debate on whether importing low-priced goods in critical sectors with growing demand makes sense. China's manufacturing share gains through import substitution will be harder to challenge.

In addition to attempts to restrict imports, other major economies are likely to increase industrial policy action, such as cheaper financing, tax rebates, or other fiscal aid, to develop alternatives to China. As challenges intensify, the scale of these responses is also likely to grow.

For example, Vannevar Bush's seminal 'Science, the Endless Frontier' report to the US president just after the end of World War 2, making a case for why the US government must support science, initially faced some resistance, as the FDR government balked at private sector control of taxpayer dollars. However, evidence of Russian advances in missile technology, like the 'Sputnik moment', galvanised active US government intervention in tech development.

This pattern might repeat itself. While the more ambitious Endless Frontier Act was watered down a few years back, policy support for local manufacturing is already picking up in the US.

For India, the challenge now lies in identifying strategic areas where it must not cede ground, finding ways to compete in areas necessary to sustain growth and create jobs for its growing workforce, and taking advantage of the inefficiencies created by Chinese over-investment and the return of industrial policies globally.

The writer is chief economist, Axis Bank



Search for Identity

SHIBANI BELWALKAR

In his autobiography Confessions, Jean Jacques Rousseau speaks of his cathartic journey to reach his real self. What we avoid facing, we don't address. Thus, we have to embellish the truth and selectively present what might please others or make us more acceptable in their eyes. Wade through all those feelings — between the nice and bad, ugly and beautiful, kind and harsh, jealousy and pain — unpeel the layers to get to the core. Write down what you've done and the feelings that motivated it. From the negatives and the positives, we get to the basics. In doing this, you will get to the truth, your truth, your real self.

The search for authentic identity, Self, also involves rejecting false personas and inauthentic behaviours, a principle described in the Upanishads as Neti Neti, neither this nor that. It involves eliminating what one is not by systematically rejecting all the finite attributes and delving into deeper layers of existence. It shows us how the mind eventually gets tired of putting on labels and slides into deeper modes of seeking. To know who you are, you need to know who you are not. The function of Neti Neti is to remove the obstructions produced by ignorance.

If not this and not that, then what? If we don't know, then there is a possibility of knowing, and in this possibility, we find our authentic Self.



Wolf Totem

Mongolian metal band The HU masterfully blends folk with modern metal in their powerful song, 'Wolf Totem'. This track, from their 2019 debut album The Gereg, taps into something vast and deep that, without knowing the Mongolian language, the listener immediately finds awe-inspiring in the Wagnerian sense.

At the core of the track is the HU's signature Mongolian throat singing — thuvan — that runs through and over the

music of traditional instruments like the stringed tovshuur and morin khuur that have been electrified. In 'Wolf Totem', these elements create an otherworldly atmosphere, evoking the vast steppes and the spirit of Mongol warriors as well as the headbanger's sense of total freedom.

The music — voice very much included — is a force of nature. All four members — Temuulen 'Temka' Naranbaatar, Galbadakh 'Gala' Tsendbaatar, Nyamjantsan 'Jaya' Galsanjants, Enkh-saikhan 'Enkush' Batjargal — rumble-sing words that celebrate courage, loyalty and pride using metaphors of wolves and nature.

Wolf Totem is an atavistic anthem that in its rawness and heaviness, becomes that paradox — a life-affirming dirge to human weakness. It is nothing short of magnificent.

Chat Room

More Ways to Decongest

Apropos the Edit 'Loosen the Chokehold on our City Roads' (Jul 6). Increased parking charges could exacerbate congestion in areas just outside and around the parking site. Very often, people park in not only end-designated areas for a short while. MCD's proposal to hike rates will result in more people parking in unauthorised spots. To avoid decongestion, parking rates could incorporate a ₹0 charge for the first 15 minutes. It will minimise parking in unauthorised spots and improve traffic flow. This can be another option to consider to decongest roads.

SAMARTH S RAJNAYAK
New Delhi

Reform Your 'Reformist Iran' Opinion



Maryam Aslany

On July 6, Masoud Pezeshkian was elected the new president of Iran. Most newspapers reported that a 'reformist' has triumphed. However, Iranians know this is untrue because they are accustomed to the Islamic Republic's manoeuvres.

Iran is not a democracy. All presidential candidates are vetted by the Guardian Council, an assembly of religious jurists appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He, not the president, controls state strategy and policy. Pezeshkian is aware of whom he owes his job to.

Pezeshkian is eligible for the job because he has demonstrated loyalty to Khamenei. The views of 'reformists' are often indistinguishable from those of 'hardliners'. The new president-elect has been an advocate of mandatory hijab, promoted gender segregation in education and healthcare, and is an enthusiastic supporter of extremist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah.

Since 'reformists' have held the

presidency for 24 of the regime's 45 years, Iranians understand there is no difference between the two. The only reason these factions exist is to persuade the people to believe that there is variety within the establishment, change is possible, and a national revolution is unnecessary.

Iranians have long decided that they would not engage with the pseudo-choices on offer, which will only sustain the regime and delay its collapse — their only real hope for political freedom.

In a carefully designed operation, they boycotted this election. Khamenei expressed his contempt, but it has been effective. Iranians shared videos of empty voting booths on social media to show that the state's official turnout figure — 49.8% — is fiction.



Bend it like Pezeshkian

Though we won't know the figure, the trending hashtag #10percentregime signals what Iranians believe.

In such a context, the main audience for these elections was not the Iranian people. The regime knows they will not be impressed by Pezeshkian's 'landslide' win. So, it is desperate to repair its relationship with the international community.

However, these relationships too are in crisis. Last month, Canada joined the US in listing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) — centre piece of the regime's authority — as a terrorist group. Germany is one of several European countries pushing the EU to take a similar step. Britain's newly elected Labour Party also plans to proscribe IRGC.

The regime is anxious that if Donald Trump becomes president, the US will begin to apply much greater pressure than Joe Biden did. Many Republicans believe that the most direct path to peace in West Asia is to cut off the Iranian backing of Hamas and Hezbollah, and to counter the Islamic Republic's escalation of violence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

This is why the regime fielded a 'reformist' president, whose key promise was to become a more cooperative member of international society. Support from other states is essential for the Islamic Republic to maintain its grip at home. Narendra

The writer is a Marie Curie fellow, Yale University



CONTRAPUNTO

Without authority there is no liberty...
And if there are rights, there is an authority
to which we appeal for them

GK CHESTERTON

Tehran Twist

As religious conservatives ebb in Iran, it's not Iranian women alone who are taking hope

Are presidential elections in Iran free and fair? Hardly. A stark tell is that instead of being selected by political parties, candidates are tightly screened by a guardian council beholden to the Ayatollah. But against this background, the divergence in the two finalists' platforms was all the more striking. The victory of reformist Masoud Pezeshkian means a great deal more than a first glance at Iran's political system would suggest.

On domestic liberties | Shervin Hajipour, whose *Baraye* became an anthem for anti-govt protests, has been sentenced to three years in prison. Pezeshkian's campaign chose to play this song: "Because of dancing in the street/ Because of fear while kissing/ Because of my sister, your sister, our sister." In sharp contrast, the defeated conservative advocates even stricter controls on women, to "strengthen the sanctity of the institution of family". So, although Pezeshkian hasn't gone as far as to call for an end to compulsory veiling, one real change his election should deliver is a climbdown of morality police.

On foreign relations | On the core national principle of anti-Israelism, no shift has been indicated by Pezeshkian. Plus, there is no sign that the Ayatollah will loosen his fierce grip on major policy decisions. But the world has taken note how Pezeshkian has admitted that fixing Iran's economy needs lifting of US's sanctions, which in turn means resolving the standoff over its nuclear programme. Many who have voted for him blame their own plight, such as having had to substitute lamb with lentils, on their govt isolating their country.

On Indian interests | Iran has managed to ward off economic collapse by increasing oil production and sales. Once the US waiver allowing import of Iranian crude ended, India stopped buying it in FY19. But in the years leading up to this, Iran was a big source of crude oil for India, sometimes the third biggest, sometimes the second biggest. Now, roughly 90% of Iranian crude goes to China. An Iran-US detente would be good news for India and the world. Of course, another election, Trump's, could undo all Pezeshkian movement in this direction.

Tank You, DRDO

The defence tech body's light tank is good news.
But armoured units need much more

In a much needed break, India's indigenous light tank has completed the prototype development stage under Project Zorawar. Developed by DRDO and L&T, the tank will now undergo an array of trials before its induction into the military by 2027. Success here is absolutely crucial in light of the ongoing standoff with China along LAC.

For Himalayan punch | While Indian army has managed to deploy some of its heavier Russian-origin tanks along the border with China, this is not optimal. The T-90s and T-72s are mainly geared for operations in plains and deserts, as they weigh 40-50 tonnes each. The indigenous light tank weighs around 25 tonnes. Therefore, should they ace the trials, they will be ideally suited for deployment in the higher Himalayas.

A big tank problem | But this will solve only a part of the tank problem India faces. The army is getting just 354 light tanks. The bigger challenge is to replace and upgrade the larger fleet of Russian-origin tanks that are reaching the end of their life cycles soon. The army plans to issue a Request For Proposal this year, with the aim to produce 1,770 Future Ready Combat Vehicles to replace the T-72s from 2030. This will be done in three stages if all goes to plan. However, the army has 2,400 T-72s, and as per reports, it plans to upgrade a significant number of them with more powerful engines and better fire detection and suppression systems. But many of these tanks won't be upgraded, creating a deficit in tank numbers in the near future.

Seamless transition needed | Induction of new advanced tanks and upgrade of old tanks must happen in perfect coordination. Sans this, army's firepower could see a serious shortfall. Given India's security challenges across two fronts, that's a very uncomfortable position. News on Zorawar is welcome. Now focus on modernising the bulk of India's tank fleet.

All that extra baggage

Today's airlines wouldn't be able to handle yesterday's trunks

Bikram Vohra

People have matching luggage these days and it's all so delicate and fashionable no wonder baggage handlers at airports have fun breaking it. And I was thinking would the plane even take off if the luggage of yesteryear was to make a reappearance. Big, black steel trunks with our names stencilled in white paint with a solid chunk of a lock rather than today's toy locks with keys so small and frail they bend when used. Those trunks held all our fortune as school and college boarders and even the porter at the station was hard pressed to carry them.

The trunks carried clothes, food, books, tuck made with mother's love and were always accompanied by a canvas holdall and that really held all. We would unfold it on a train berth so it became a bed and invariably one shoe stuffed in the top corner would self convert into hard pillows. Holdalls are pure nostalgia. This generation has not seen even one. You could put so much into the pouches and corners and it had these bold thick leather straps that took some doing to hook. Yes indeed, our luggage was robust, not this current namby pamby stuff made of ticky tacky and looking just the same. One day, like someone had cast an evil spell on them, both black trunks and holdalls simply disappeared, never to return.

By the same token all the families we knew had a small mousy looking attache case covered in a brown cloth that normally lay on top of the cupboard. It was never used but just lay there gathering dust. Perhaps it contained something important, perhaps it was empty but every home had at least one...they probably still do. Go on, look up at the cupboard. Fathers would go to work with what was called a leather file as opposed to a briefcase. It had a handle, opened by the flap being unstrapped and had a magical quality because we were forbidden from touching it. My grandfather had a portmanteau with brass knuckles, the sort they carried onto the Titanic and it took four people to carry.

These days they have the cheek to call their stuff personal luggage. Personal luggage was in our time when every scratch, every stain, every mark had a story behind it. We didn't have to check baggage tags to recognise our luggage like you see at airport carousels these days. Folks picking up a suitcase thinking it is theirs then dolefully putting it back. Give me a holdall any day. At least I knew the shoes were in it.

Why Modi's In Moscow

Partly to troubleshoot problems in bilateral relationship. And to make sure Russia has some influence on its strategic partner and India's great adversary, China

Ajay Bisaria

When Modi and Putin sit for dinner in Putin's Moscow dacha tonight, they will chew on a geopolitical and bilateral context that has changed dramatically since they broke roti together in Delhi in 2021. The Ukraine war that began in Feb 2022 not only delayed their meeting but has also thrown up unprecedented challenges and opportunities.

A layered partnership | Both Modi and Putin are veterans of the annual bilateral summit, which sits at the apex of a multi-layered diplomatic architecture. Putin has attended most of the 21 summit meetings since 2000, when he signed a strategic partnership agreement with then PM Vajpayee. The adjectives 'special and privileged' were added in 2010 to describe ties, to reassure Russia of its continuing relevance for India in the wake of the Indo-US civil nuclear deal.

For Modi, this is the eighth straight summit with Putin. Both realise that given the nature of bureaucratic structures on both sides, their annual meeting is vital for troubleshooting problems and generating fresh thinking. With the gap of three years, several crucial issues have piled up on the high table.

Striking the right balance | While the 'time-tested' and largely state-driven relationship has robust strategic pillars - defence, nuclear, space - trade has lagged. In 2014, at their first summit meeting, Modi and Putin released a joint statement outlining their vision for strengthening ties over a decade. With trade numbers hovering under \$10bn then, they set an ambitious target for 2025 of \$30bn of trade and \$50bn of bilateral investments. Trade has surged in the last couple of years to more than double the target, achieving an all-time high of around \$66bn (with India's imports around \$82bn) in fiscal 2024, thanks to imports of discounted petroleum, fertilisers and coal.

With this problem of plenty, both Modi and Putin will need to discuss ways of fixing the skewed trade balance. They will seek pathways for Russian companies to navigate Western sanctions and use local currencies to invest surpluses in India, to try and reach the target of \$50bn of bilateral investments, from the current level of \$33bn.

Powering up | The import of discounted petroleum deepens an energy partnership that includes the Kudankulam nuclear park, which is already supplying

2,000 MW of energy, with 4,000 MW of reactor capacity in the pipeline. Russia is the only external partner delivering nuclear energy on the ground and will offer more reactors.

The defence relationship remains crucial as India's dependence on Russia for platforms and



munitions continues. Despite the steady diversification into other defence partners like US, France, South Korea and Israel, coupled with an ambitious domestic manufacturing programme, Russia still offers a competitive edge in several niches of critical defence technology. It will remain an important partner for a

few more decades, given India's purchase of platforms like the S-400 air defence system, newer frigates, joint production of BrahMos missiles, a nuclear submarine programme and the requirement of spare parts for older acquisitions.

Changing world order | For New Delhi, Moscow will remain an important strategic, defence and energy partner. India's historical investments in the Russia relationship do not just make for a 'legacy factor', they are essential to sustain defence preparedness, to ensure an alternative source for energy and technology, and even to serve as a geopolitical hedge in a world between orders.

Indeed, while the bilateral plate is full, geopolitics will not be checked at the door. The world has changed critically since the last summit. Russia is at war, another dangerous conflict is on in Gaza, while Chinese belligerence has not lessened. Putin met Xi twice in the last two months and, with bilateral trade over \$240bn, exulted that Russia-China 'no limits' ties were experiencing their "best period in history".

China challenge | For India, the single-most critical strategic challenge is China's expansionism at its borders. It will tend to look at all its relationships through that prism. The China factor makes for an additional driver for India's engagement not just with China's strongest global competitor, US, but also with its closest ally, Russia. Both India and Russia recognise the other's interest in engaging a geopolitical adversary. Russia acknowledges that US may be a closer partner for India, just as India sees Russia's compulsions in its tight embrace of China. Yet, India would hope that Russian influence would modulate Chinese behaviour.

The endgame of the Ukraine war will no doubt figure in the conversation, particularly in the context of Putin's recent offer of a conditional ceasefire timed to the Swiss-Ukrainian summit, which Modi did not attend. Putin has an upper hand in the war and might await Trump in White House to push through a ceasefire deal on his own terms. And India may be the only major West-friendly democracy that can encourage, if not facilitate, Putin on the path to dialogue.

Modi and Putin have an excellent personal chemistry, growing since their first summit a decade ago. This will fuel their engagement at the start of their new terms. The Moscow meetings will be an opportunity to reaffirm faith in this enduring relationship, as Modi 3.0 navigates the complexities of a world in flux.

The writer is a former diplomat

If Govts Really Cared, Hathrases Wouldn't Happen

Stampede-like crowding is an Indian staple, Jagannath yatra is the latest example. Smoothly run events are exceptions. NDMA has a list of to-dos on crowd control. No administration follows it

Nandita.Sengupta@timesofindia.com

Within hours of the two-day Jagannath rath yatra in Puri starting to cover its 3km journey, there was news of a 'stampede-like' situation, some reports suggesting a death and people critically injured. The yatra is expected to attract 10L devotees. Police and paramilitary are focusing on 50 vulnerable points for bottlenecks and crowd surges. Because this yatra comes a week after the Hathras stampede that killed 121 people at a Dalit gathering of reportedly 2.5L people, administration has been particularly tense.

Again and again, it's the same story. Back in Hathras, there's little to suggest lessons are being learnt. There's nothing to suggest district authorities even believe they're as accountable as organisers for failing to recognise potential hazards of such a mass in their jurisdiction. The questions ask themselves.

Are local authorities trained enough to spot probable accidents as crowds swell? Do they have the resources or capacity for crowd control? Was there an SOP in place for crowds spilling beyond 'permission'? Where were people congregated? Did authorities not notice the single exit/entrance? Was the crowd compartmented into seating areas? How many police are required to handle a surge? Where would they come from? These obvious questions are being asked post-mortem. They should've been asked pre-event - before permission was given.

That is the crux of crowd management. Planning. Preventive measures. Pre-event steps.

Plans on paper | There've been at least three inquiry committees into stampedes that made concrete proposals. But to quote Hegel, "We learn from history that we do not learn from history." India is bursting with potential for stampedes. City crowds, suburban rail daily passengers, Howrah and Thane, discount days in malls - are everyday a stumble away from a crush.

To address "recurring stampedes", and "typically ad hoc responses", NDMA in 2014 released a 95-page document, currently a paper tiger, to "professionalise

crowd management". The National Guide on Crowd Management was specifically meant "for all levels of governance" in states, to move from "crowd control to crowd management". Its applicability was for any gathering: religious, youth fests, sports and music events, political, even "product promotion".

It talks of pitfalls and SOPs, underestimation of crowds and overselling of tickets, insufficient holding area in front of entrances and need for observation towers with PA systems. It details clearly identified tasks, and police's role including "adequate publicity on security", ensuring no collision of inward-outbound human traffic.

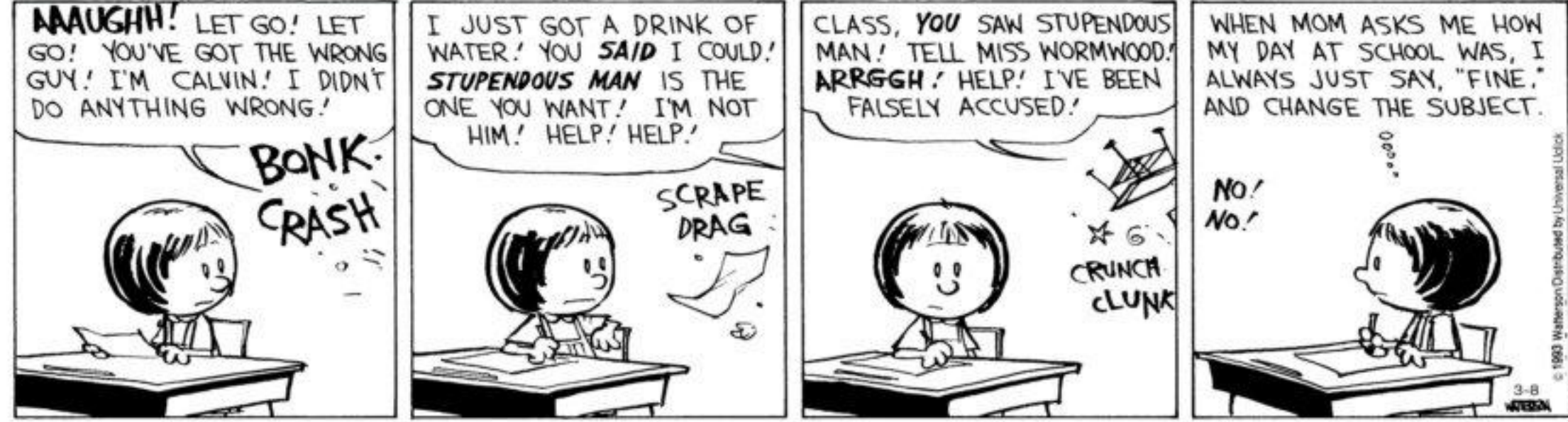
Who's monitoring this crowd?

Who owns public safety | Religious gatherings and pilgrimages have been venues for 79% of the stampedes in India. Accountability is slippery. Blame is bouncy. State seldom holds itself responsible.

A stampede in Andhra during an event, Godavari Pushkaram (Naidu's promotion of Brand Godavari), in July 2015 killed 29 people. An inquiry committee said: "AP govt started a high-decibel media campaign... assumed the role of a religious organisation... people ...were welcomed in large numbers." It went on to reason that "undue and unwarranted publicity" may have "caused the huge gathering". It concluded that since the injured were medically treated and



Calvin & Hobbes



The Three Important Definitions Of Yog

KVS Rao

The word 'yog' is derived from the Sanskrit root 'yuj', which means 'to join', 'to yoke', or 'to unite'.

There are two different ways to understand yog. On one hand, it is seen as the union of the individual soul with the universal Soul. Here, it is cut off from the material world and irrelevant to our daily lives. On the other hand, it is interpreted as purely physical, the Hath Yog. This only gives us a narrow glimpse of actual yog.

Comprehending yog in these ways makes us miss the essence of the purpose and goal of yog and its philosophy. Here are three definitions of yog derived from our scriptures to help us understand its real meaning. First is Patanjali's *Yog Sutra* - 'Yogah cittavrtti nirodha' (1.2). The skill of yoga is

demonstrated by the conscious non-operation of the vibrational modes of the mento-emotional energy. In simple terms, it is the ability to control our thought processes. Yog recognises that the mind is central to our life, behaviour and actions. Mind decides the route of our life. Either we control the mind, or we get controlled by it. In our practical life, the mind is neither calm nor peaceful. If it is reined in, the purpose of yog is largely achieved.

The Bhagwad Gita has the second and third definitions. Krishn, while trying to remind Arjun of his duty, says 'Yogah Karmasu Kaushalam' (2.50). It means that excellence in action is yog. Meaning skill or perfection; discharging our work with full concentration.

Krishn knows that we have many reasons to justify the performance or non-performance of our tasks. Either we are diffident and confused or overconfident, which affects our focus on such tasks. Often, we ignore our mandatory duties due to our emotional make-up or moods. Keeping aside our emotions, feelings and perceptions, if we can perform our tasks perfectly and to the best of our abilities, then it is nothing short of yog.

The third definition is - 'Samatvam yoga uchyate' (2.48). It means that being steadfast in performing our duty by abandoning attachment to outcomes such as success and failure, such equanimity is called yog. We are generally not consistent in performing our duties as we are influenced by their

outcomes. If we fail, we abandon our duty or perform reluctantly. Or even when we succeed, we rejoice so much that we delay performing the next task.

So, our leanings towards dualities of life - success and failure, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, praise and insult - determine our decision to act or not to act. Consistency in performing our duties is possible only when we go beyond these dualities, not abandoning actions but accepting all situations with a stable mind.

If we examine these three definitions together, we find that yog is performing our tasks skillfully, karm yog, with a concentrated mind, dhyana yog and not be attached to the outcomes, jnana yog. If we can achieve this, then we are surely moving in the right direction, that is, to succeed in uniting our individual soul with the universal Soul.

Sacredspace



The servant-leader is servant first...It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first.

Robert K Greenleaf



The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Put S+4 policy on hold

Haryana must not disregard public concerns

THE Haryana Government's fresh approval to the construction of stilt-plus-four floors (S+4) in residential areas is both flawed and imprecise. Concerns are being raised over the policy being pushed under pressure of the builder lobby ahead of the Assembly elections. Despite the inclusion of certain conditions, it is increasingly clear that the policy doesn't serve the public interest. And that the additional, excessive burden on infrastructure and civic amenities adds to already grave environmental risks and puts neighbours in conflict situations. The voices of opposition are articulating a key, grave concern, which is that rampant apartmentalisation is a recipe for an urban dystopia. Comparisons are being drawn with the older sectors of Gurugram, where residents have been left struggling to get fresh air and sunlight.

A ban was imposed on S+4 constructions in February last year, following protests in Panchkula over misuse and rampant commercialisation of residential space. Several instances of additional floors being built on houses with the weight-bearing capacity of only two floors had come to light. The government now insists that the new compulsory mutual consent agreement with adjoining plot allottees addresses the concern of structural compromise. Moreover, it claims, the sale of an extra fourth floor — since three floors are already allowed — will help those still unable to purchase houses due to exorbitant property rates.

But the outcry from Haryana's several cities is a measure of concern, especially since the government has chosen to disregard some key recommendations of the expert panel. That has generated an avoidable lack of trust. In its present form, it is clear the negatives far outweigh the positives. Haryana must put the implementation of the policy immediately on hold.

Breaking point

Address cops' grievances on priority

THE revelation that seven police officers of Haryana have sought demotion due to stress-related ailments underscores a profound crisis in the state's law enforcement setup. The applications, detailing struggles with depression, hypertension and other health issues, paint a grim picture of the working conditions of the police personnel. Their plea for relinquishing future claims to seniority and career progression sums up their desperation. The Haryana Police have a sanctioned strength of 70,000 personnel, but there are only around 50,000 cops on duty. This shortfall puts an enormous strain on the force. Cops are expected to perform their duties under tough conditions, conducting investigations, maintaining law and order and fulfilling numerous additional responsibilities. The situation is aggravated by the inadequate pay and the failure to implement the recommended reforms.

Reports from other states validate this distressing scenario. In Maharashtra, cops have been working extended hours without adequate rest. In Uttar Pradesh, the police have faced complaints of overwork, with officers reporting burnout and psychological distress. The Indian Police Foundation has highlighted the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to address these systemic issues, emphasising better staffing, improved working conditions and mental health support for personnel.

The cops, who dedicate themselves to public safety, deserve better support, fair compensation and a work environment that safeguards their wellbeing. State governments and police authorities must address these issues promptly. Implementing the Supreme Court's directives and police commissions' recommendations for reforms is essential. The recruitment process must be expedited to relieve the pressure on the staff. Ignoring the cries for help will further demoralise the force. Those whose job is to protect us must be protected from debilitating stress and strain.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, JULY 8, 1924

The Congress programme

WE do not know if Mr Asaf Ali gave his interview, of which a telegraphic report appeared in our last issue, before or after the publication of Mahatma's two articles on the Ahmedabad meeting of the All India Congress Committee. It is certainly no easy thing to reconcile the most important of his conclusions, that regarding the revelation of Mahatma Gandhi's mind, with what the Mahatma has told us himself. "The Mahatma" he said, "has proved himself a practical idealist. Those who had begun to look upon the old programme of the quintuple boycott as the law of the Medes and the Persians must now see its plasticity." If these words mean anything, they mean that the Mahatma has not only voluntarily but ungrudgingly accepted the changes in the Congress programme which circumstances forced upon him at Ahmedabad. We wish with all our heart that this were true. Unhappily, a perusal of the Mahatma's two articles can leave no doubt in one's mind that it is not so. That the acceptance of the changes was voluntary goes without saying; indeed, in their final stages, they were made at the instance of the Mahatma himself. But so far from the acceptance being ungrudging, the Mahatma has told us in the clearest possible terms that he is only biding his time, that the most important and urgent task he has placed before himself is to obtain, of course, by perfectly fair and legitimate means, such a majority in his favour as to be able to restore his old programme in its entirety. It is worse than self-deception for those who, like Mr Ali, are convinced of the supreme desirability of changing the old programme to blink this fact, instead of facing it manfully as it ought to be faced.

UK's diplomatic reset on the cards

From India's perspective, the Labour govt's approach to China will be of particular interest



NAVTEJ SARNA
FORMER HIGH COMMISSIONER
OF INDIA TO THE UK

THE United Kingdom's (UK) new Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, has had sufficient time to think things through. As the Shadow Foreign Secretary since 2021, he has clocked nearly 50 visits abroad and watched the erosion of Britain's global standing, largely as a consequence of a messy Brexit, a sluggish economy and unprecedented political instability over 14 years of Conservative rule. He aims to turn things around, primarily through a reset on the UK's approach towards Europe, climate and the Global South, while managing what he cannot reset. Lammy's approach, defined as 'progressive realism', is inspired by two of his Labour predecessors — Ernest Bevin and Robin Cook, one a hard-nosed post-War realist who helped kick-start NATO and the other a proponent of an 'ethical' foreign policy. Deploying this doctrine, Lammy would seek to promote Britain's national interests while recapturing prominence in global governance and international development.

The present turbulent international landscape provides enough challenges to test any doctrine. Conflicts in Ukraine and West Asia are not going away. In fact, the Israel-Hezbollah confrontation is dangerously close to triggering a wider escalation. A grimly determined Russia and an aggressive China have ensured that great power rivalry is here to stay in a world where the 'rule-based international liberal order' is an obsolete shibboleth. A deeply polarising presidential election in the US could throw its own set of wrenches into the works, particularly if Donald Trump returns to the



NEW GOVT: British PM Keir Starmer (left) with Foreign Secretary David Lammy. REUTERS

White House. Climate, trade, migration, technological divide and an increasingly disenfranchised Global South demand agile engagement. Objective constraints, resource crunches, domestic compulsions and an instinctive alignment with the US in all situations will instil realism.

Labour is determined to stabilise the UK's relationship with Europe, particularly through better trade and security ties. European leaders will have time for Keir Starmer; they had tuned off the Tory Prime Ministers after the shenanigans that accompanied 'getting Brexit done'. The 75th anniversary NATO summit this week could see the new PM spell out the UK's strong support for Ukraine and the need for a strong trans-Atlantic relationship. Ironically, the same relationship could flounder with a second Trump term and put Britain in a spot six months from now. Later this month, the UK will host the summit of the 47-member European Political Community (which interestingly includes Georgia and Azerbaijan). Trade, immigration, security and defence are expected to be in Starmer's talking points, though any return to the European Union (EU), a single market or even a customs union has been ruled out.

Labour is determined to stabilise the UK's relationship with Europe, particularly through better trade and security ties.

From South Block's perspective, the UK's approach to China — marked by confused ambivalence during the Tory period — will be of particular interest. The decade 2010-20 saw a lovefest between the two countries, with David Cameron and his Chancellor, George Osborne, being the starry-eyed poster boys of this relationship. The highpoint came, so characteristically for Britain, in a pub with a half-mocking Xi Jinping drinking beer and eating fish and chips with Cameron. Things changed after the pandemic as widespread security concerns, including in the Huawei 5G case, emerged and the US-China relations soured. Since then, the British government has tried to juggle its security concerns and its economic engagement, but this approach lacks clarity and consistency. Lammy has promised a 'full

audit across Whitehall'. This audit, however, is unlikely to provide any dramatic way out of the fundamental quandary: China, despite its assertive behaviour, is a major market for the UK, a critical source of imports and a potential partner for addressing global problems like climate change and technological governance. US pressure to align on China is only likely to increase, no matter who reaches the White House.

Meanwhile, the new government has the three Cs mantra: cooperate where we can, compete where we need to and challenge where we must. This mantra will soon be under stress as the UK will have to decide whether it will join the EU, US and Canada in probing massive subsidies extended by China to its electric vehicles now flooding foreign markets. Increased tariffs following the probe would invariably attract Chinese retaliation and go against Labour's growth promise.

A related matter is the UK's 'tilt' towards the Indo-Pacific both for security and economic concerns. This tilt, its initial ambition already moderated by the Tories, was earlier criticised by Labour since it could take away resources from Europe. But Labour, too, has now accepted its strategic logic, and it remains to be

seen how the new government can build on the early steps towards defence diplomacy and deployments in the region, participation in the AUKUS (a trilateral security partnership for the Indo-Pacific region between Australia, the UK and the US), dialogue partnership with ASEAN and membership of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. Enhanced Indo-Pacific engagement could lead to closer strategic links between India and the UK in maritime security on the pattern of India-US relations. In geostrategic terms, it would mean that the sun has finally set on the 'golden era' of Sino-British relations.

The new government has so far been unequivocally positive on the India relationship. It has stated its clear intention to vigorously pursue the India-UK Free Trade Agreement to an early conclusion. Complicated issues of mobility and migration, market access as well as non-tariff barriers, including labour, environmental and phytosanitary standards, will need to be overcome in the negotiations. Other areas identified for deeper cooperation include security, education, technology and climate change. A roadmap for the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership already exists. It needs an imaginative follow-up.

Shadow Cabinet members, including Lammy, have recently visited India and made flattering references to it as a 'superpower' and the "future of Asia, the future of the English language... and the future of democracy itself". The new government is clearly going the extra mile to blunt, if not erase, unpleasant memories of the troubled relations that Labour has had with the Indian government in the past. Starmer's message to India that this "is a changed Labour party" would imply that Labour is prepared to cast aside the Pakistan prism when looking at India and would be prepared to prevent with a strong hand any attempt by extremist elements or divisive diasporic politics to rock the boat. This pudding should soon be available for tasting.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The Labour Party is a moral crusade or it is nothing. — Harold Wilson

Cash shortfall and shocking recovery

SV VENUGOPALAN

THIRTY years ago, I received a late-evening phone call at the office of our bank union from the branch in Chennai. The cashier had reported a shortfall of Rs 10,000. On checking and rechecking everything, the denominations of currency notes recorded on the backside of the cheque slip had led them to zero in on a payment made to a particular customer. The new office assistant of the customer concerned, an adolescent boy, had collected that payment. He was summoned by the branch manager for questioning. The branch staff told me that the lad reacted angrily on being targeted for the shortfall. He maintained that he had received the exact amount. While seeking our assistance, the staffers told me that they had informed the local police authorities.

I rushed to the branch. As I entered, the boy, at the sight of a man in uniform approaching him, had just started confessing that, indeed, an excess payment of Rs 10,000 had been made to him. But the puzzle was far from solved. He had handed the cheque amount to his employer and kept the rest with him. The manager asked him to return that immediately so that he could be let off without any complication. The boy stood calm and would not say anything on the whereabouts of the money.

It took 15 minutes of grilling before he eventually revealed that he had paid the money to his sister, who was employed in a private company. A team of the staff took him in a vehicle to his sister's residence. It was well past 10 by then. When they knocked on the door, the sister's husband came out and was shocked to find so many people at that hour. He called his wife outside; initially, she denied that her brother had given her money. When her husband raised his voice, asking her to tell the truth, she admitted that the boy had indeed visited her at her office and given the said amount with a request to keep it safe. Where was the money, then?

She broke down and told us that she had placed it in her tiffin box and kept it in a cupboard at her office. The team swiftly moved to the residence of the company's proprietor, who was kind enough to send the keys of his office premises through his assistant. The tiffin box was found in the said place and the amount quickly recovered.

It was around midnight when the affair came to a satisfactory conclusion; otherwise, the shortfall would have proved costly for the cashier. But the web of lies spun by the brother-sister duo left us shocked.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Pappu pass ho gaya

Refer to 'Kya Pappu pass ho gaya' (*The Great Game*); Rahul Gandhi, once mocked by the BJP, has cleared the people's test. His address in Parliament, invoking Hinduism's inclusive spirit, was a breath of fresh air. Mahua Moitra's fiery speech asserted freedom from fear, a new leitmotif for India. The BJP no longer in majority, is on the back foot. Chandrababu Naidu and Nitish Kumar, allies of the BJP, are demanding their pound of flesh from the Centre. The government can no longer ride roughshod over an empowered Opposition. The people have spoken, and it is time for the BJP to listen. Rahul Gandhi must keep up the pressure. India has changed, and the era of majoritarian dominance is over. The era of democratic dialogue has begun, and the government must pay attention to the Opposition voices.

SARGUNPREET KAUR, MOHALI

Opposition yet to deliver

Apropos of 'Kya Pappu pass ho gaya'; it is the Indian voters that deserve credit for the electoral success of the INDI alliance, not leaders of the Opposition bloc. While the electorate has revived the Opposition by handing it big wins, the leaders are yet to return the favour by contributing to the growth and progress of the nation. Most parties in India reek of dynastic politics. Until recently, it seemed like Rahul Gandhi harboured prime ministerial ambitions just because he comes from a political family with members who have held the post. But the Gandhi scion has finally made his presence felt in the political landscape of late, thanks to his outreach to the masses through his Bharat Jodo Yatra and Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra.

DEVINDER K BHANDARI, CHANDIGARH

Open debate a must in democracy

Rahul Gandhi's maiden speech in the 18th Lok Sabha has helped him bury his reputation as a leader who could not be taken seriously. He is no longer 'Pappu', as he has long been pejoratively called by his detractors. It is inspiring to see a buoyant Opposition take the ruling dispensation to task over issues confronting the nation. Led by Rahul, the Opposition has done well to press the party in power on paper leaks and irregularities that have raised questions about the integrity of exams in the country. PM Narendra Modi also

delivered a befitting counter to Rahul with his 'balak buddhi' dig. A vigorous debate is a must for a vibrant democracy.

M SOMASEKHAR PRASAD, HYDERABAD

A criminal lapse that cost lives

The death of more than 120 people in a stampede in Hathras during a 'satsang' organised by a self-styled godman, Bhole Baba, is tragic. Reportedly, over 2.5 lakh people had assembled in the venue that was meant for merely 80,000. The stampede was apparently triggered as a crowd of devotees scrambled to collect the dust stirred up by Bhole Baba's car as he was leaving. The godman did not even bother to offer assistance to the injured. Local authorities must not allow such events unless there are adequate security arrangements in place and an ambulance on standby in case of an emergency.

THARCIUS S FERNANDO, CHENNAI

Bring those responsible to book

Refer to the editorial 'Learn from tragedies'; every mishap needs to be thoroughly investigated to identify administrative lapses and fix responsibility. This would be a major step towards ensuring justice and preventing similar mishaps. The death of over 120 people in a stampede in Hathras is an irreparable loss for their kin. Bhole Baba, who hosted the religious gathering, did not even bother to ensure proper arrangements for crowd management. Those responsible for the preventable loss of lives must be brought to book.

YUGAL KISHORE SHARMA, FARIDABAD

Restrict religious gatherings

More than 120 lives were snuffed out as a ruckus broke out at a religious gathering in UP's Hathras. A time-bound probe into the matter is in order to fix accountability. Further, lessons should be drawn from the tragedy to avert a repeat of such mishaps. Organising events in a staggered manner can help prevent overcrowding. It is time to stop allowing religious congregations in public places altogether. Religion is something that should be practised within the four walls of one's house.

SUDERSHAN WALIA, AMRITSAR

India-US relations growing despite rough edges



G PARTHASARATHY
CHANCELLOR, JAMMU CENTRAL UNIVERSITY, & FORMER HIGH COMMISSIONER TO PAKISTAN

WHILE elections in India have resulted in the formation of a coalition government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the US presidential election campaign has triggered confusion. There has never been any love lost between the top contenders — President Joe Biden and his predecessor Donald Trump. Biden had, after all, prevailed over Trump in the 2020 election. The world has seen a medically unfit Biden laying bare his frailties in a televised nationwide debate with Trump. Large sections of the US public appear aghast at the health of their President. Moreover, the neutrality of the US Supreme Court in the run-up to the election appears questionable.

The current indications are that Biden may have to withdraw from the contest or face a defeat in the election. There appears very little prospect of him winning against Trump. In any case, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and

National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan have good relations with their Indian counterparts, S Jaishankar and Ajit Doval, respectively. These relationships are crucial for smooth ties between New Delhi and Washington. The next Foreign Secretary, Vikram Misri, has served in the US and China and is well positioned to deal skilfully with both nations. It is clear that the primary focus of India's policies will be on building a strong and peaceful neighbourhood, primarily extending from the Strait of Malacca to the oil-rich Strait of Hormuz.

While Trump, quite evidently, has a good rapport with PM Modi, the same cannot be said for Biden. It is apparent that Biden was responsible for the recent State Department statement that expressed concern about human rights in India. The department asserted: "In India, we see a concerning increase in anti-conversion laws, hate speech, demolitions of homes and places of worship for members of minority faith communities". Not surprisingly, PM Modi is headed for Moscow for a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has been not only friendly and helpful but has also invariably spoken with restraint and respect for India.

Despite these developments and ostensible differences, the India-US relationship has grown stronger with



FOCUS: India's response to China's growing power is being seen through the prism of its ties with the US. **ANI**

the passage of time. India's relations with the UK are, meanwhile, now marked by bipartisan support and growing ties with both Labour and Conservative parties. A similar view prevails in Europe, with both France and Germany set to improve ties with India. France has remained a reliable supplier of a range of weapons, from Mirage 2000 fighters to frontline Rafale jets. India has acquired 36 Rafale fighters, with orders for a further 26 currently under negotiations. This is apart from the earlier import of submarines from France.

In the larger perspective, another important factor to be borne in mind is how India's relations are being calibrated with other global

It is clear that the primary focus of India's policies will be on building a strong and peaceful neighbourhood.

power centres amid growing India-US ties. There is an increasing focus on how India responds to the growing power of China in its relations with countries across the world. This is particularly so in India's neighbourhood, where one can be sure that Chinese power and influence will inevitably seek to undermine India's national security and economic interests.

The European Union (EU) sees China as a 'partner' for cooperation. But, at the same time, it sees China as a dangerous rival. It asserts that China has become less open to the world, while taking a more assertive posture abroad, by resorting to economic coercion. China's policies make its

trade relations with the EU imbalanced. The EU acknowledges that China does not operate on a level playing field. There is EU concern at the growingly close relations between Beijing and Moscow. While the EU acts largely as a junior partner of the US on security issues, it is highly unlikely to assist or join any foreign power facing Chinese aggression, unless it is backed by the US. The EU countries could, however, join the US diplomatically in situations where they face direct pressure from Washington.

Asian countries facing Chinese hostility can expect virtually nothing from the EU without American support, especially when they get into a conflict situation with China. It needs to be remembered that it is India that has provided BrahMos missiles to the Philippines, which has been facing territorial pressures from China. But India itself cannot lower its guard when it comes to tensions and uncertainties on its borders with China. More importantly, China continues to woo India's South Asian neighbours with a view to securing facilities to berth its ships in South Asian/Indian Ocean ports. It already has unfettered access to the Gwadar port in Pakistan's Balochistan province. China's attention has for long been on Myanmar, where New Delhi is set

to take over the operation of the Sittwe port. India's pact with Iran to develop the Chabahar port gives it access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan.

There is a keen interest internationally in the role of the Indian Navy following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas conflict. Over the past six months, Indian naval ships have guarded the safety of shipping lines across the Gulf of Aden and adjoining areas in the Arabian Sea and the East Coast of Somalia. The Gaza conflict has triggered massive violence and international outrage. India has skilfully avoided getting involved in this conflict. In the meantime, New Delhi has remained focused on the Gulf countries, where around 88 lakh Indians live and work, with the largest number residing in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. There has been a conscious effort to widen ties with these countries, notably Saudi Arabia and the UAE, where a distinctly warm relationship has been developed with their rulers. This is unquestionably the most important region for India in its neighbourhood.

One hopes that India will continue to build on what it has achieved, while making it clear that it will act firmly on the China-Pakistan axis, which remains the strongest challenge to India's security.

Kargil lessons have relevance for the Agnipath ferment



C UDAY BHASKAR
DIRECTOR, SOCIETY FOR POLICY STUDIES

JULY 4 is a significant date in the 1999 Kargil War, marked by major operational and political events. It offers important cues for the Indian higher defence management edifice amid the current challenges — the Agnipath scheme being the most visible.

Operationally, the capture of Tiger Hill (16,608 ft) by the Ghatotkat platoon of the 18 Grenadiers battalion was a turning point for India; the Pakistani military led by Gen Pervez Musharraf knew that this was the beginning of the end of a feckless misadventure.

At the political level, then Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif sought an unscheduled urgent summit meeting with US President Bill Clinton in Washington DC; the outcome was clear. While Sharif sought US intervention to restrain India, Clinton's message was firm: Pakistani troops had to withdraw to their old positions behind the Line of Control. The beleaguered Pakistan

PM had no choice but to accept this 'advice'; thus, the war came to an inglorious end for Rawalpindi, the General Headquarters of the Pakistan army.

While the war ended officially on July 26, a day celebrated as Vijay Diwas by India, and which will in all probability be packaged as a mega 25th anniversary event this year by the BJP-led NDA government, the deeper import of the outcome of the war and its contemporary relevance merit recall and rumination to contextualise India's current national security challenges.

The 1999 war can be triangulated in different ways — for instance, the nuclear shadow (both India and Pakistan had demonstrated their nuclear weapon capability in May 1998); or being the first major conflict in the sub-continent after the end of the Cold War in December 1991; or the fact that Atal Bihari Vajpayee as a caretaker Prime Minister. But the most significant outcome of the war, in my view, was the manner in which the BJP-led NDA government encouraged an objective external review of the fiasco by a group of eminent experts.

The Kargil War was a triumph of the indomitable fighting spirit and valour of the Indian soldier, and the capture of Tiger Hill and Tololing are illustrative. This gallantry is to be recalled and cherished, but



DEBATABLE: The Agnipath scheme has come under scrutiny in the political and military spheres. **PII**

the sacrifice of precious lives has to be framed against the larger failure of the higher defence leadership of the country.

To his credit, then PM Vajpayee set up a committee on July 29, 1999, headed by defence studies expert K Subrahmanyam, to review the "events leading up to the Pakistani aggression in Kargil district of Ladakh in Jammu & Kashmir; and to recommend such measures as are considered necessary to safeguard national security against such armed intrusions."

In a rare and commendable manner, the Kargil Review Committee (KRC) completed its task in mid-December 1999 — a month ahead of schedule — and the Kargil

The govt has fielded a former IAF Chief to support the Agnipath scheme. A sensitive national security issue is becoming a polarised political blame game.

report was tabled in Parliament on February 23, 2000. Soon after, the report was published as a book and released in the public domain with some parts redacted. Kargil-1999 exuded a degree of transparency and introspection that still eludes the ill-fated October 1962 debacle at the hands of China. Successive Prime Ministers, from Nehru to Modi, have not mustered the resolve to place the Henderson-Brooks report in the public domain, though pirated versions abound in cyberspace.

Today, 25 years later, it is a matter of shame that many of the major recommendations made by the KRC have neither been deliberated upon in Parliament nor in select committees in an informed and

constructive manner. Rather than transparency, it is tenacious opacity and embroiled obfuscation that envelop major national security policy decisions.

The Agnipath scheme to induct young soldiers for a limited four-year period, unveiled in June 2022, is illustrative of this trend. The scheme acquired a high degree of relevance in the 2024 General Election and has come into unsavoury political focus. Much to the discomfiture of the Modi government, a major ally — the JD(U) — was the first to voice its reservations about the scheme. Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi has accused the Defence Minister of misleading Parliament on the matter.

A corrosive political slugfest is gathering momentum, and former Service Chiefs have been brought into the social media kerfuffle. A former Army Chief, Gen Manoj Naravane, in his yet-to-be-published book, referred to a modest pilot scheme proposal mooted by the Army being transformed by the PMO into a radical mega recruitment template to trim the pension bill. Two former naval chiefs (Admirals Arun Prakash and KB Singh) have made public their observations about the inadequacies of the scheme and what they perceived as fiscal compulsions for the hastily launched programme.

Predictably, the Modi government has fielded a former

IAF Chief — Air Chief Marshal RK S Bhadauria (who has joined the BJP) — to support Agnipath. A sensitive national security issue is becoming a bitterly polarised political blame game. This is dangerous and avoidable.

The Kargil lessons that may be applied in the current ferment would be for the government to lower the temperatures in Parliament and end the diatribe in the media, while assuring both the Opposition and the aggrieved citizenry that a *de novo* review of the scheme by a team of eminent apolitical experts would be undertaken in a speedy manner.

This is not the first time that the government of the day has sought to review recruitment policies. Previous reports prepared by Lt Generals K Balaram and Harwant Singh can be re-examined.

In its epilogue, the KRC noted that "the Committee has after very wide interaction sign-posted directions along the path to peace, ensuring progress, development and stability of the nation. How exactly the country should proceed to refashion its Security-Intelligence-Development shield to meet the challenge of the 21st century is for the Government, Parliament and public opinion to determine. There is no turning away from that responsibility."

The government must rise to this challenge in an empathetic and purposeful manner.

QUICK CROSSWORD

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ACROSS

1 Lacking enthusiasm (4-7)

9 Partly cover (7)

10 Sum (5)

11 Detest (4)

12 A culinary herb (8)

14 Disclose (6)

16 Put an end to (6)

18 Until that time (2,2,4)

19 Grow weary (4)

22 16th century English buccaneer (5)

23 Mixture (7)

24 Put into proper order (3,2,6)

DOWN

2 Vigilant (5)

3 Enclosure for sheep (4)

4 Make use of (6)

5 Introduce economies (8)

6 Obtain with difficulty (7)

7 Be in general circulation (2,3,6)

8 Act strictly honourably (4,3,4)

13 Most distant (8)

15 To spoil (7)

17 Take oneself (6)

20 Illuminate (5)

21 Suspend (4)

Saturday's solution

Across: 1 Duress, 4 Sit tight, 9 Armour, 10 Actually, 12 Bane, 13 Parry, 14 Lean, 17 Concert pitch, 20 Emancipation, 23 Room, 24 Newly, 25 Miss, 28 Gndiron, 29 Herald, 30 Cold fish, 31 Attend.

Down: 1 Drawback, 2 Ruminant, 3 Shun, 5 Incurable, 6 Thus, 7 Galley, 8 Trying, 11 Cantankerous, 15 Seamy, 16 Scrap, 18 Litigate, 19 One-sided, 21 Tragic, 22 Jovial, 26 Tiff, 27 Deft.

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MEDIUM

FORECAST

SUNSET: 19:27 HRS

SUNRISE: 05:29 HRS

CITY: MAX MIN

Chandigarh 36 27

New Delhi 35 26

Amritsar 32 26

Bathinda 33 25

Jalandhar 34 27

Ludhiana 33 26

Bhiani 32 26

Hisar 33 26

Sirsa 33 25

Dharamsala 29 21

Manali 26 18

Shimla 25 17

Srinagar 34 19

Jammu 32 25

Kargil 28 15

Leh 23 11

Dehradun 28 23

Mussoorie 23 17

Liberals a the helm

With the Labour Party’s victory in the UK, India can anticipate a more favorable stance and pro-India policies

After remaining out of power for more than a decade, the Labour Party led by Keir Starmer is back with a landslide victory in the recently held elections in the UK. Prime Minister Modi was among the first to congratulate Prime Minister Keir and both leaders agreed to work towards more vigour for FTA and strengthening the ties between the two countries. Indeed, it is a big shift in UK politics and many policies and initiatives would be at a stark departure from the previous dispensation. This shift holds great significance, given the Labour Party's decisive victory over the Conservatives in the recent general elections. This change in governance marks a new chapter in the UK's domestic and international policy. For countries like India, with deep historical, economic, and diplomatic ties to the UK, this transition could bring about notable changes. The evolving dynamics of UK-India relations under the new Liberal government could influence various sectors, including trade, education, technology,



and immigration. The Labour Party's victory signifies a substantial shift in British politics. The Labour Party is known to be liberal, traditionally more progressive, inclusive and believes in sustainability and international cooperation. Their policies are expected to diverge from the Conservative approach, particularly in areas such as climate change, social justice, and economic reform.

Though Conservatives did not touch upon the UK’s ties with India there can be a marked shift in the UK’s policies in the months to come. The biggest change may come in the form of immigration laws. India has a sizable population in the UK and getting a Visa and

residency status is always on the top agenda of the Indian community in the UK and back home. The next area where substantial change could be witnessed is the economic ties between the two countries. The Liberal Party's commitment to free trade and economic partnerships could enhance bilateral trade, potentially leading to a comprehensive UK-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA). It was the first thing that came up when Prime Minister Modi congratulated the new Prime Minister of the UK Keir Starmer. Indeed, for long, The UK and India have had robust trade relationship, with the UK being one of India's significant trading partners. Under the Conservative government, there were ongoing discussions about a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The Labour Govt's more enthusiastic approach to global trade could accelerate these negotiations. A more collaborative and open approach to foreign policy may lead to deeper strategic ties, particularly in areas like defence, cybersecurity, and counter-terrorism. Greater involvement in global platforms like the Commonwealth, the United Nations, and climate forums, facilitating joint efforts on issues of mutual interest. Besides, India can look forward to the UK’s support for India’s aspirations for a greater role in international organisations, including a potential permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

PICTALK



Locals cross a flooded area on a boat, in Balimuk village of Morigaon district

PTI

The art of listening in a fast-paced world

Prejudices create barriers and divide people; our lives are so frenetic that we lack the time to observe and listen to other voices

We had organised a literature festival a few months back. Almost all the writers spoke about the stories all around us waiting to be put on paper. This set me thinking. If the life of each of us is a palette of stories of different hues, why is it that we do not hear more of these experiences? Does it have something to do with a life that is increasingly running at such a frantic pace that we have no time to observe and listen? Or is it the divides that we carry within us – social, class, caste, age, gender, religion, ideologies, and many more? I have met many people in my life. If I was asked to place them in two distinct categories, I would not hesitate to categorise them as extroverts and introverts. The outspoken are the ones who attract attention. It is the ones shy in expressing sentiments in public, who are a revelation to me. It only needs a nudge for their unexpressed and hence unheard stories to come out. Their life experiences are a myriad of emotions. I remember my first holidays in the mountains.



The adjoining room was occupied by an old couple, who at that time may have been our grandparents' age. One morning, as we sat outside, my parents sipping their tea, the couple also came out. My father asked us to fetch the chairs placed nearby, respecting their old age, and slightly bent backs. Our efforts were brushed aside, “We can still carry our own chairs.” Habits inculcated at a young age are difficult to break. I still get up to offer my seat to an older person. My paternal grandfather was hard of hearing. We children had to shout to make him understand. I did not realise that I had started screaming at anybody old, till the time I was told by my maternal

grandmother, “Why do you shout at us. Our hearing is perfectly normal.” I now make a conscious effort not to speak loudly to an older person unless asked. My maternal grandfather was paralyzed on one side when he may have been 50. He was extremely slow, but insisted on wearing his clothes without anyone's help, also brushing aside my grandmother's efforts to do so, even if there was a time constraint when going out for a movie show. It is not that only the old want to be heard and treated with dignity and respect. I remember a cab driver who only needed a gentle query to tell me that he chose to drive a cab after he retired

to keep himself active and for the opportunity to talk to willing passengers, overriding the objections of his children who were now much better placed than he ever was. Or yet another cab driver, who was bursting to proudly tell anyone willing to listen to him that his daughter had cleared her CA examinations in the first attempt and had been offered a job with one of the Big 4. There are many more who only need a gentle prod to express their unheard stories if only there is someone around to give them time without being judgemental. Their silence is a plea to be encouraged to narrate a life story that many might deem to be common but is no less extraordinary than that of the most successful celebrity. It is also important to be a story-listener! In Bryant H McGill's words, “One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say.” (The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)



SANJAY CHANDRA

Hinduism and the perception of violence

Each religion’s cultural and ethical framework is distinct. Dietary habits and historical contexts have influenced perceptions of violence across different religions



To specifically associate violence—as was done on the floor of the Lok Sabha on July 1, 2024—with Hinduism, showed that not all our leaders have had time to intimately know and understand the Indian ethos. This is understandable if one remembers that Indians can be Hindu, Muslim, Christian (duly baptized) and others. An argument between the honourable Speaker of the Lok Sabha and the leader of the opposition reflected the differences, albeit in a rather acrimonious manner. As the Speaker explained, the Hindu goes to the extent of touching an elder's feet and not merely bending. On the other hand, Islam does not permit bending to anyone, except Allah the Merciful. A Christian is different and shakes hands to convey the warmth of his feelings. The scale of violence indulged in also varies from ethos to ethos. Christians are habituated to meat-eating, except on Fridays, when they do not go beyond a piece of fish. The Muslim also likes his meat without restrictions even on Fridays. This dietary preference might have been forced upon these communities because their origins began in the deserts of West Asia, where vegetation was (and continues to be) sparse. Even Europe, where Christianity flourished, could not easily grow crops during the winter. In the process, the world's consumption of animals is an estimated 100 million

killed a year, according to a database prepared by Poore and Nemecek in 2018. The Hindu, for the information of our leadership, largely grew up where vegetation has been plentiful. He could, therefore, choose to be anything from a strict vegetarian or an omnivore. However, he owes his vegetarianism to his belief in the transmigration of the soul, unlike the Christian who believes in a single life until Doomsday when God would send him to either heaven or hell depending on his performance on earth or even in the grave. The Hindu on the other hand believes that when his father, mother, relations, and near and dear ones depart from the world, it is only their bodies that perish; the soul is imperishable and enters new bodies to carry on with its respective new lives gained after rebirth. The Hindu would, therefore, be afraid that if he or she eats meat, it could be the product of the killing of some deceased relation, who might have been reborn as that particular animal or bird that was killed for his culinary pleasure. I too hesitate to eat meat whenever I imagine how I would feel if my progeny were to be killed for the pleasure of someone else's food. Pray, tell me, who is perpetrating more violence, the meat eater or the vegetarian?

“THE HINDU WOULD, THEREFORE, BE AFRAID THAT IF HE OR SHE EATS MEAT, IT COULD BE THE PRODUCT OF THE KILLING OF SOME DECEASED RELATION, WHO MIGHT HAVE BEEN REBORN AS THAT PARTICULAR ANIMAL OR BIRD THAT WAS KILLED FOR HIS CULINARY PLEASURE

Incidentally, I am a Hindu. The diet or food habits of an individual, if given to the consumption of meat, may also transfer to his social as well as professional conduct and behaviour. This question is well answered by the history of Europe. This continent, throughout its history, has fought 896 recorded wars. Europeans were fighting and killing each other as tribes, much before the Greek and Roman Empires came into existence. The Athens-Sparta wars, the Peloponnesian War, the expansionist wars of the Roman Empire, etc., are part of Europe's history and need not be retold here. But it is Europe's obsession with war and killing from Achilles to Putin (or Zelensky) that needs to be emphasized and reiterated. From sticks to stone hammers, bronze and later iron and steel, armour and edged weapons like the dagger sword and spear, Europe kept developing and improving the tools of killing. The 19th and 20th centuries saw the explosion of technological development and innovations. The age of iron, steel, coal and steam came to the world. Railways steamships, the telegraph and then the radio, automobiles, machine guns, tanks, airplanes and the submarine came into being. All this enabled European

nation-states to muster, equip, arm, transport and command more men than ever before in their history, with deadlier firepower and killing capacity. In the past 75 years alone, the invention of the atomic bomb, guided missile, the internet and cyber warfare have changed war and its dimensions like nothing else has. Our contention that Europe has been the land of war, war and more war is easily proved by the sheer number of human beings who have perished because of European wars. Even if we were to leave aside all its ancient and medieval wars, the two World Wars (together) alone consumed 130 million lives. Even a relatively small power like Italy under its dictator Benito Mussolini was ready to jump into wars of aggrandizement owing to delusions about its armed might. Those delusions occurred as a result of the phenomenon of “armed suasion”: for quite some time Italy was believed to be the most formidable air power in Europe. Be that as it may, there is no denying that Europe, a meat-eating continent has been the land of war. To accuse Hindus of violence, therefore, is nothing but a moral travesty.

(The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A STUDY IN CONTRAST

Madam — The recent election results have highlighted a stark contrast between our Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the outgoing Prime Minister of the UK, Rishi Sunak. Modi's victory, despite being well-funded and supported by the media, felt hollow as his party, the BJP, suffered a significant setback, losing 63 seats compared to the last Lok Sabha elections. Despite this, Modi remained publicly unshaken and did not express any remorse or responsibility for the disappointing outcome. The BJP's third consecutive term was celebrated as if it were a gold medal, despite being more akin to a silver. In contrast, Rishi Sunak demonstrated remarkable candor and humility following his party's defeat to Labour. He openly acknowledged his responsibility for the loss, saying, “I take responsibility for the loss... I am sorry.” This display of accountability and character stands in stark contrast to Modi's approach. As Bill Courtney wisely noted, “The measure of a man's character is not determined by how he handles his wins, but how he handles his failures.” By this standard, Rishi Sunak has demonstrated commendable character, and Modi could benefit from following his example by acknowledging the conditional nature of his victory.

Avinash Godbole | Dewas

SPECULATION OVER GOVT'S STABILITY

Madam — In a significant and serious assertion, Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chief Lalu Prasad Yadav on Friday predicted the fall of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government at the Centre by August, anticipating a split among its coalition partners and hinting that elections could be imminent. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP secured 240 seats, falling short of the 272 needed for a majority. Nevertheless, it formed the government with the support of allies such as the Bihar-based Janata Dal (U) and the Andhra Pradesh-based Telugu Desam Party, allowing Narendra Modi to begin his third consecutive term as Prime Minister. Notably, since the inception of

Give substantial compensation to victims



The victims of the Hathras tragedy, predominantly from impoverished backgrounds, have lost their loved ones, leaving them in profound grief and despair. They are in dire need of substantial compensation. Rahul Gandhi, the Leader of the Opposition, visited their homes and promised generous compensation, which has brought comfort to the bereaved families and gained the goodwill of the community. Such tragic incidents at religious gatherings have repeatedly occurred in the country, causing not only the loss of lives

but also devastating many families. The magnitude of their grief is immeasurable, and the aftermath ripples through entire communities, leaving them to grapple with both emotional and financial burdens.

To prevent future occurrences, these gatherings require essential improvements, including the deployment of security forces, police, ambulances, and the installation of CCTV cameras, to manage the situation effectively before any problems arise. The government must take proactive steps to implement stringent safety protocols and infrastructure enhancements to prevent such incidents from happening again. This is not merely a matter of compensation but of ensuring that the lives and well-being of our citizens are protected and that no family has to endure such unimaginable loss in the future.

Jakir Hussain | Kanpur

Modi's third term, several Opposition leaders have voiced concerns that the government may not endure beyond a few months. Lalu's recent statements have intensified such speculation, suggesting a potential political upheaval. Amidst this, there is a possibility that a strategic maneuver might be underway by Nitish Kumar and N. Chandrababu Naidu to destabilize the Modi government if their demands are not met. Both leaders, known for their political agility, may take drastic steps for their political survival, which could potentially lead to the government's collapse.

Bhagwan Thadani | Mumbai

JAILED MPS TAKE OATH

Madam — Jailed MPs Amritpal Singh and Engineer Rashid took their oaths as Lok Sabha members amidst stringent security measures by concerned authorities. Both MPs secured significant victories in their respective constituencies of Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir, marking a triumph of democracy in regions historically marred by unrest.

Under Article 101(4) of the Constitution, MPs must inform the Speaker in writing if unable to attend House proceedings post-oath, subject to scrutiny by the House Committee on Absence of Members. However, a Supreme Court ruling mandates immediate disqualification if an MP receives a prison sentence of two years or more, overturning prior provisions. The impact of Engineer Rashid's victory is pivotal in Kashmir's upcoming assembly elections, necessitating careful handling by the central government to maintain current peace, especially amidst ongoing Amarnath Yatra. Similarly, Amritpal Singh's electoral success in Punjab underscores the need for sensitive management amid recent incidents potentially affecting communal harmony. It is crucial for the central government to approach Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir with utmost delicacy and maturity in light of these developments. nent athletes and teams.

Yash Pal Raihan | Jalandhar

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

PASSION IS THE CATALYST FOR A FULFILLING LIFE

By prioritising passion, individuals can infuse their lives with purpose and excitement



Passion is the powerful force that propels individuals towards their desired objectives, igniting ambition and providing unwavering determination in the face of life's challenges and uncertainties. When someone discover a pursuit they are truly passionate about, they experience a distinct and unstoppable energy that drives them towards it and motivates them to achieve success. Many individuals find themselves trapped in monotonous routines that weigh them down. Rise and shine, head to the office, wrap up your tasks, and return to the comfort of your home, only to repeat the routine the following day. Engaging in the same routine day after day can lead to feelings of sadness and discontentment when there is a lack of enthusiasm for one's daily activities. Why bother doing something if it doesn't ignite your passion? I understand that not everyone has the opportunity to pursue their dream career. Many individuals work tirelessly to establish stability in their lives, with some solely focused on providing for their basic needs. Even in such cases, it is important to prioritise and make time for activities that bring joy and fulfilment. Passion evokes a sense of joy, happiness, and deep satisfaction that emanates from within. Consider my acquaintance, for example. She's immersed in the corporate world, tackling one of those challenging jobs that will provide financial stability but won't ignite her passion. After a long day of work



and on weekends, she dedicates her time to what truly brings her joy: baking. She radiates enthusiasm as she describes the new recipes she's experimenting with or the joy she feels when she witnesses someone savouring the results of her hard work. It gives her a unique sense of thrill and personal fulfilment that her corporate job fails to deliver. Her unwavering passion keeps her spirits high and provides her with a daily source of motivation, even during the most challenging moments at work. There's no need to leave your job and venture into uncharted territory abruptly. It's something so small that it can fit into your current routine. Perhaps dedicating a few hours each week to your hobby, taking learning classes, or developing a side hustle could be beneficial. Even though these endeavours may seem modest, they can have a significant impact on your overall health and happiness. Passion is essential for everyone to lead a fulfilling life, not just a select few. The sense of purpose and the excitement it brings are necessary for keeping our minds and hearts youthful and vibrant. So, if you have a strong passion for something, prioritise and dedicate time to it. You will achieve success by wholeheartedly embracing your pursuits. Indeed, the lengthy voyage can be quite exhausting. The rewards, however, of living a life fueled by passion are immeasurable. Ultimately, it all boils down to passion. Develop it, nourish it, and believe that it will guide you to a happy and prosperous life. *(The writer is a motivator; views are personal)*

Kenyan uproar against IMF-backed Ruto tax bill

Amid calls for his resignation, Kenyan President Ruto faces mounting pressure to address the root causes of economic instability and social unrest



Kenya's President William Ruto has finally withdrawn the Finance Bill 2024 following widespread protests triggered by Bloody Tuesday, when police fatally shot numerous austerity protesters in Nairobi this week. According to media reports, the bill, influenced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), proposed significant tax increases amidst soaring food and fuel prices, high unemployment, and perceived governmental corruption and extravagance. The World Bank and IMF are sending conflicting messages to Kenya regarding taxation. While the World Bank cautions that Kenya's unpredictable tax policies are deterring Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), the IMF has praised the government's proposed tax increases in the Finance Bill 2024, suggesting they will significantly expand the tax base. Last year, the IMF and the World Bank convened their annual joint meeting in Marrakech, marking their return to African soil after nearly five decades. The last occasion these two Bretton Woods institutions convened on African soil was in 1973, during the IMF-World Bank meeting in Nairobi, Kenya. At that time, Kenya's President Jomo Kenyatta (1897-1978) implored the attendees to swiftly address the 'monetary sickness of inflation and instability that has plagued the world.' In recent years, the tragic and grim situation has worsened significantly, with an increase in conflicts reported across the continent. Long-time exploiters like France, along with their alliances, are now confronting significant and formidable challenges. Amid critiques from organisations like Oxfam, who denounced these neo-liberal financial institutions' persistent austerity measures and debt policies, the meeting accentuated the enduring economic challenges facing developing countries. Despite promises of social spending safeguards, exemplified in recent IMF agreements with countries like Pakistan and Sri Lanka, critics argue that these measures perpetuate cycles of dependency and inequality. Amidst global protests demanding alternatives to neoliberal orthodoxy, as Vijay Prashad asserted, the meeting in Morocco underscored a deepening disillusionment with the IMF and World Bank's capacity to address the fundamental economic disparities they perpetuate. It is crucial to remember that these financial institutions are neither charitable nor humanitarian; they operate with the primary goal of profit and the consolidation of their political agendas. Kenya serves as yet another glaring example. During my conversation with Tom Jalio, a journalist working for The Star, a daily newspaper in Kenya, he said, "President Ruto inherited a highly indebted country, and his attempts to curb borrowing with internal solutions have been seen as overly aggressive. Using his parliamentary majority to push through contentious tax bills for two consecutive years, President Ruto now faces mounting public opposition. Despite heavy security measures, the public outcry against these policies erupted in what President Ruto labelled as treasonous acts—a response that fails to acknowledge the genuine patriotism underlying the protests. As Kenyan literature might suggest, when the detachment of President Ruto affects an entire nation, dismissing dissent as criminality falls



RECENT EVENTS IN KENYA HAVE WITNESSED SEVERE REPRESSION REMINISCENT OF HISTORICAL ATROCITIES. TUESDAY'S VIOLENCE, WHERE SECURITY FORCES UNDER PRESIDENT WILLIAM RUTO'S COMMAND FIRED ON PROTESTERS, ECHOES THE BRUTAL 1969 KISUMU MASSACRE

short of addressing the root concerns." However, protests initially aimed at the Finance Bill have evolved into a broader uprising challenging not just Ruto's administration but the entire 60-year-old post-independence establishment supported by US and NATO powers. Millions nationwide, spanning 37 counties and crossing tribal lines, participated in demonstrations led largely by youth demanding rejection of the bill and Ruto's resignation. The protests culminated tragically with reports of 53 deaths and hundreds injured, with 30 fatalities occurring in Githurai and 23 more across Nairobi and other regions, all due to police use of live ammunition as documented by the Police Reforms Working Group. Recent events in Kenya have witnessed severe repression reminiscent of historical atrocities. Tuesday's violence, where security forces under President William Ruto's command fired on protesters, echoes the brutal 1969 Kisumu massacre ordered by President Jomo Kenyatta, highlighting a pattern of state violence against dissent. Ruto's swift shift from threatening violence against protesters to withdrawing the Finance Bill 2024 reflects intense public outcry and tragic losses during demonstrations, initially labelled as treasonous. Despite withdrawing the bill, economic pressures persist. The proposed austerity measures, influenced by the IMF, aim to tackle fiscal challenges but face widespread opposition due to potential impacts on healthcare, education, and social services. Ruto's manoeuvres to navigate these challenges, including dialogue with youth and stakeholders, stress Kenya's complex political and economic terrain. Opposition led by figures like Raila Odinga, supported by

unions, engages in political manoeuvring amid broader socioeconomic tensions, reflecting ongoing struggles over economic policies and governance. According to Onyango K'Onyango, a journalist working for one of Kenya's top newspapers, The Nation, he told this writer, "Our Constitution allows for the right to picket and assemble. As one of the most progressive Constitutions in Africa and perhaps the world at large, freedom of expression and association is guaranteed. It was an ill-advised move for the police to use live bullets on peaceful protesters. Whatever happened is unfortunate, but I blame the police for using excessive force and the government for failing to listen to issues raised by our Gen-Z." A chest-thumping government and Parliament is dangerous to a progressive democracy like ours. Arrogance exhibited by pro-government lawmakers and those who surround the president is the cause of all this mayhem. This is the time to embrace a reconciliatory tone, and the President should firmly deal with corruption in his administration. He should order a lifestyle audit and lead by example. The controversial bill should be returned to Parliament accompanied by a memorandum. This is what Kenyans want to hear, not rushing to term their peaceful protest as treasonous and deploying the military." In Nairobi, escalating tensions between the youth and the government, exacerbated by recent violent incidents, reflect deep-seated bitterness. In my conversation with a freelance journalist, Andrew Mutungwa highlights key grievances: outrage over fatal shootings during protests, President Ruto's divisive portrayal of protesters as criminals undermining their right to assemble peacefully, and a perceived arro-

gance from leadership intensifying feelings of neglect among youth. Mutungwa urges the president to address these issues promptly, calling for action against corruption, criticising wasteful governance practices, and highlighting economic hardships as drivers of widespread discontent and ongoing protests. He warns of potential political instability if grievances are not addressed and acknowledges external influences supporting youth activism, advocating for dialogue and reforms to resolve Kenya's underlying issues. Meanwhile, Erick Gangu, a human rights activist, provides a nuanced perspective on the unfolding events in Kenya. He asserts that the current unrest is primarily an internal affair without external financial or other support, contrary to speculations about foreign influence. Gangu criticises President Ruto's recent statement as emotionally charged and inappropriate for a figure expected to embody national unity, emphasising that declarations of treason fall under the jurisdiction of the judiciary, not the executive branch. He highlights concerns about pre-demonstration arrests, including doctors and journalists, and condemns these actions as unconstitutional. Despite early attempts in 1993 to establish a dedicated anti-corruption squad within the police, its impact was short-lived as the unit disbanded. The milestone formation of the Kenya Anti-Corruption Authority (KACA) in 1997 was cut short by a 2000 High Court ruling deeming its statutory framework unconstitutional, leading to dissolution. Kenya's ongoing struggle against corruption necessitates sustained institutional reforms and public vigilance for effective resolution. *(The writer is a journalist and author. Views are personal)*

Gold ETFs: The modern, convenient safe haven for young investors

Gold Exchange-Traded Funds provide gold's stability without the hassles of physical ownership, while offering the flexibility of stocks

Gold has always been a traditional safe haven particularly in uncertain situations of geo-political tensions, financial and economic turmoil. Many generations have taken advantage of investing in the security of gold. However, even this traditional investment has witnessed considerable changes with the advent of financial innovation. The newer generation can now take benefit of security provided by gold which is more convenient, cost effective and eliminates the hassles of physical ownership by investing in Gold Exchange-Traded Funds (ETFs). An ETF is an exchange traded passive fund that tracks any index, or a commodity. In this case, a Gold ETF invests in gold bullion and tracks the physical gold price. One Gold ETF unit is equal to 1 gram of gold and is backed by physical gold of highest purity, making it a dematerialised form of physical gold. This gives Gold ETFs twin advantage of security of gold investment in combination with flexibility of the stock market, as they are traded on stock exchanges like stocks of any listed companies and can be traded continuously at market prices. Upon redemption of a Gold ETF, investors receive cash equivalent instead of possession of physical gold. To take maximum advantage of flexibility and security that a Gold ETF has to offer, it is advisable to take some safeguards to achieve maximum returns. The first lookout for an investor is to choose a Gold ETF with lower expense ratio. Expense ratio is the yearly management fee charged by the fund houses, which is usually a percentage of the fund's assets under management (AUM) and is used by the fund house to cover their administrative, advertising and various other operational costs. A lower expense ratio is significant as it would eat less into the investors' returns and result in higher net returns for them, maintaining the cost-advantage of Gold ETFs when compared to storage costs and making charges of physical gold. The second precaution for investors is to examine the tracking error. Tracking error measures how closely the fund mirrors the underlying index or the commodity and how different is its performance from that of the benchmark. A low tracking error signifies how effectively the fund reflects the performance of the underlying asset and a high tracking error indicates a higher deviation. Tracking error is an extremely critical performance metric for investors due to a number of reasons. Firstly, it displays consistency of performance. A lower tracking error guarantees reliable tracking of the actual price changes of physical gold. Secondly, low tracking error resonates the efficiency of the fund management. This metric can be used by investors to identify the Gold ETFs that have better performance and provide higher returns. Thirdly, lower tracking errors indicate lower costs incurred by the fund managers, thereby leaving higher returns for investors to enjoy.

Having many benefits, one cannot stress enough on the importance of tracking error. It is known that higher expense ratio and management fees can lead to deviation of the performance of Gold ETFs from the underlying assets, i.e., physical gold. In addition, investors should also be aware of the cash holdings of a Gold ETF. Higher cash holdings again lead to deviation in their performances. Since ETFs are similar to stocks, liquidity is an important metric. Higher the liquidity of a Gold ETF, lower is the performance deviation. Regular rebalancing the portfolios is an important aspect of any fund, and in doing so Gold ETFs incur costs associated with sales/purchase of physical gold. This again contributes to tracking error. Thirdly, like stocks and commodities, Gold ETFs are subject to market volatility. Since the underlying asset – physical gold – can be volatile due to geopolitical conditions, economic and financial factors. Finally, while buying Gold ETFs, one should not forget to factor in the capital gains tax. Long-term capital gains, if held for more than 3 years, are taxed at 20 percent. The investors, however, can take the benefit of indexation. Short-term capital gains as usual are added to income and taxed at applicable tax slab rate. So, it would be prudent to understand the implications of taxation before investing in Gold ETFs. For young and modern investors, investing in Gold ETFs is a modern and efficient way to invest in gold. For them, Gold ETFs provide a winning combination of traditional security of gold with the benefits of stock market investing. Using an approach of regular and disciplined investing through systematic investment plans (SIPs), young investors can take the advantage of rupee cost averaging and alleviate the impact of market volatility. With varied benefits and much needed flexibility, Gold ETFs can definitely substitute physical gold investment in one's portfolio. Young generation should take advantage of this modern approach to gold investing with a long-term perspective. *(The writer is Associate Professor at Amity University, Noida. The views expressed are personal)*

