



A new methodology with some issues

The National Sample Survey (NSS) Office released the key results of the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) 2022-23 in late February. These primarily include all-India estimates of the average household monthly per capita consumption expenditure (MPCE) for rural and urban areas, its distribution by broad item groups for food and non-food categories, the variation in the average MPCE of households with different standards of living (by appropriately grouping them into 12 ‘fractile classes’ of MPCE), and the trend in the composition of MPCE since the 1999-2000 survey (55th round of the NSS). So far as the State-level estimates are concerned, the factsheet gives only estimates of average MPCE – total of food and non-food items – for each State and Union Territory (UT) for rural and urban areas.

As the earlier available results pertain to 2011-12, the latest results have bridged the data vacuum of more than a decade on an important subject that also goes into the compilation of poverty estimates. While the methodology for the HCES is more refined now, there are still challenges that need to be addressed. This will ensure that apart from producing much firmer estimates of the average MPCE, the new series has an in-built mechanism to maintain comparability of the current estimates with those of the earlier ‘quinquennial series’ available from 1972-73 to 2011-12.

Changes and implications
One change in the new HCES is the updated item coverage, which has been done keeping in view the latest consumption behaviour.

Another significant change is the splitting of the single questionnaire into three parts covering food items, consumables and services items, and durable goods. The three questionnaires have been used at random in a selected household during three separate monthly visits contrary to the past when the team would



G.C. Manna
is Professor at the Institute for Human Development (IHD), New Delhi, and a senior adviser at the National Council of Applied Economic Research. He was earlier the Director General of the Central Statistics office and the National Sample Survey Office and a member of the National Statistical Commission

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visit a household just once. Using the single questionnaire during one visit often resulted in long interviews. As a result, respondents were fatigued and there was a possibility of under-reporting consumption expenditure, particularly in respect of items like durable goods which were placed towards the end of the questionnaire. While the latest change will help us derive more reliable estimates of the average MPCE, we are also now unable to compare the current estimates of the average MPCE, and the share of poor that may be derived from it based on the survey data, with the estimates of the past, given the likelihood of under-reporting of household consumption expenditure in the previous surveys.

A third change is in the method of stratification of villages and urban blocks for the purpose of sampling. While in HCES 2011-12, every district was considered as a basic stratum for rural and urban areas, the new HCES considers a State/UT as the basic stratum. While every district with some minimum sample allocation got represented in both the rural and urban samples of the 2011-12 survey, the new HCES does not ensure the same. Such a change does not affect the generation of State-wise estimates.

There is also a change in stratification of households. All the households of a selected village/urban block are classified into three groups depending on a criterion. The criterion in rural areas is possession of land and in urban areas it is possession of four-wheeler cars for non-commercial use on the date of the survey. The total sample of 18 households with proportional representation from the three groups have been selected. Given that the proportion of urban households possessing four-wheelers is as low as 6% in States like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal as per the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21), adequate number of rich households in the sample may not

get ensured in such States as intended. It is worthwhile to note that the said stratification in the HCES 2011-12 was based on the average MPCE of the households with the top 10%, middle 60% and bottom 30% forming the three strata, and a sample of two, four, and two households, respectively, was allotted to these strata.

Methodological issues
The splitting of the questionnaire and visiting a sample household thrice now have led to non-comparability of the current estimates with those of the past, although the current estimates appear to be much firmer ones. One way to address this issue is to replicate the traditional approach of ‘one schedule with a one-time visit to a household’ in an independent random sample of households to be drawn from the same villages and urban blocks of at least one of the panels for which the fieldwork is yet to commence. In this context, it is important to note that the sample in the new HCES for a year is in the form of 10 panels, each comprising consecutive three months, with an equal number of sample villages/urban blocks allotted to each panel. This add-on module will facilitate generation of two independent estimates of the average MPCE and other associated correlates based on the current approach vis-à-vis the earlier one. This information will be useful to study the extent of divergence between the two alternative estimates of MPCE and build a comparable series.

Further, to ensure adequate representation of rich households, it will be worthwhile to develop a frame of such households based on administrative data and a random sample of households drawn from this frame for enquiry on consumption expenditure of rich households through a dedicated survey. This database in conjunction with those from the HCES will be useful to derive an improved distribution of households by their average MPCE.

Testing the waters in Ramanathapuram

Despite its campaigns in the district, the BJP has chosen not to contest the polls

STATE OF PLAY

T. Ramakrishnan
ramakrishnan.t@thehindu.co.in



The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has revived the row over Katchatheevu, an uninhabited, barren islet about 14 nautical miles off Rameswaram in Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu. An agreement between India and Sri Lanka in June 1974 recognised Katchatheevu in the Palk Strait as a part of Sri Lanka.

On March 31, reacting to the reply to a Right to Information query filed by the BJP State president, K. Annamalai, Prime Minister Narendra Modi posted on X that “new facts” showed how the Congress “callously gave away” the islet. The next day, he accused the Congress’s ally, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), of having done “nothing” to safeguard the interests of Tamil Nadu. Mr. Annamalai’s contention is that M. Karunanidhi, who was Tamil Nadu Chief Minister in the early 1970s, should have prevented the Centre from signing the agreement with Sri Lanka.

Responding to this, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and DMK president M.K. Stalin asked whether Mr. Modi had raised the issue of the “retrieval of the islet” with the Sri Lankan government even once during his tenure as Prime Minister. He said that the issue was being raked up as part of the BJP’s election strategy.

In 1974, shortly after the bilateral agreement with Sri Lanka was signed, the BJP’s previous avatar, the Jana Sangh, had challenged the accord through its State unit secretary, “Jana” K. Krishnamurthi, on the grounds that this had been done without the approval of Parliament and with-

out proper amendment of the Constitution. The State unit of the BJP too has been consistently demanding “retrieval” of the islet, even though its national leadership has not made any statement to this effect, possibly because it is aware of the impact on bilateral relations with Sri Lanka.

Back in 2007, the BJP protested against the Sethusamudram Project on the ground that it would destroy the Rama Setu, officially called Adam’s Bridge. The BJP had supported the call for declaring the site as a national heritage monument.

All these campaigns are part of the BJP’s long-standing project to make inroads into the southern districts of Tamil Nadu in general and strike a chord with the fishing community in particular. In January 2014, BJP leader Sushma Swaraj had participated in the ‘Kadal Thamara’ (sea lotus) meeting to espouse the cause of the fishing community. There was even a strong rumour for about two years that Mr. Modi would contest from the Ramanathapuram Lok Sabha constituency this time, despite the fact that the BJP has never won the seat. Some people have said that the party is trying to use the “Rama card” to strike a chord with voters. This belief got strengthened when Mr. Modi visited Rameswaram, took a dip at the ‘Agnitheertham’ on the eastern beach of the Ramanathaswamy temple, and wit-

nessed special pujas, a few days before the consecration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya in January.

In terms of electoral politics, the party performed modestly in the three Lok Sabha elections it contested in 2009, 2014, and 2019, securing a vote share of 16.5%, 17.09%, and 32.13%, respectively. While in 2009, the BJP faced the electorate without the support of any major or established party, in 2014 and 2019 it put up its candidates as a constituent of a front. This time, the party has allotted the constituency to former coordinator of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), O. Panneerselvam, who hails from Periyakulam in Theni district.

In contrast to the previous Lok Sabha elections when the BJP contested only five seats including Ramanathapuram, this time it is contesting 23. Its candidates include T. Devanathan Yadav, a prominent businessman who is contesting from Sivaganga, and Tamizhaga Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam president B. John Pandian, who is contesting from Tenkasi, a reserved constituency for the Scheduled Castes. In certain sections, the BJP is being given the credit for getting a notification issued three years ago to use the common nomenclature Devendrakula Velalar to refer to seven different Scheduled Castes who predominantly live in the southern districts of the State. In this context, it is surprising that the party has chosen not to be in the fray in Ramanathapuram and leave the constituency to Mr. Panneerselvam. It begs the question of whether the BJP is unsure about the electoral utility of its campaigns in Ramanathapuram and is only stirring up a row to corner the Congress and the DMK.

Heat affects India’s aim to move from coal to renewables

While power availability determines our ability to deal with heat waves, high heat affects what sources of power are available to use

DATA POINT

Vasudevan Mukunth
& **Sambavi Parthasarathy**

In what many would have hoped was a Fool’s Day joke, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said on April 1 that India will have more than the ‘usual’ number of days with heat waves in the forthcoming summer. The forecast comes against the backdrop of an impending water crisis in the south, Lok Sabha polls, and rising food inflation.

Higher heat is bad for crop yield (to different degrees depending on the crop), agricultural workers’ productivity, and the availability of water. **Maps 1A and 1B** depict the probability of maximum and minimum temperatures, respectively, the IMD expects for April-June 2024. It predicted “above-normal” temperatures for the month, with a 55%-65% probability in one half of the country and over 65% in the other half. Very few parts are likely to record normal or below normal temperatures.

Heat increases power demand in urban and industrial centres; makes the consequences of outdoor work, especially at construction sites, deadly; overwhelms health service providers by its effects on the very young and the very old; and places a premium on access to clean, cool water, indoor ventilation, and indoor bathrooms. The availability of power undergirds our ability to respond to all these effects of heat (**Chart 2**). The chart shows the average evening peak-hour demand met in March across years. In March 2024, the peak demand reached a new high of 190 GW.

A lot of this power comes from coal-fired plants. Coal is easily stored and has a high load factor, and these plants meet both peak and off-peak demands. The government is targeting 500 GW of power generation capacity from

renewable energy sources by 2030 and has committed to producing 50% of its power from non-fossil fuel energy sources by the same year. A big chunk of this addition will be in the form of solar power. But because solar output is intermittent and power storage capacity is still being established, peak demand has been met with coal.

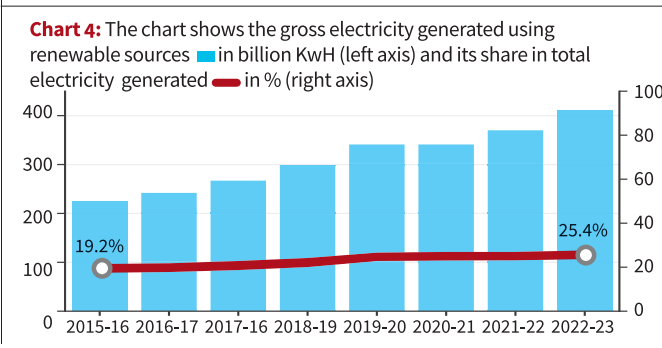
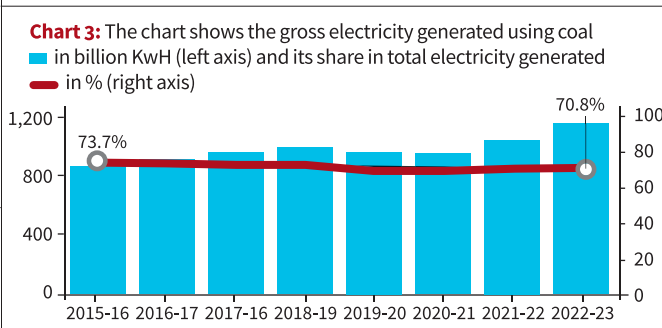
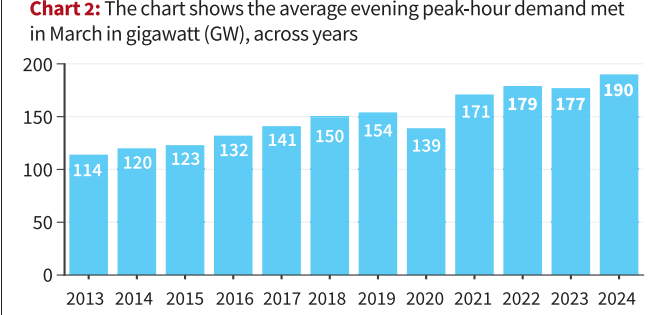
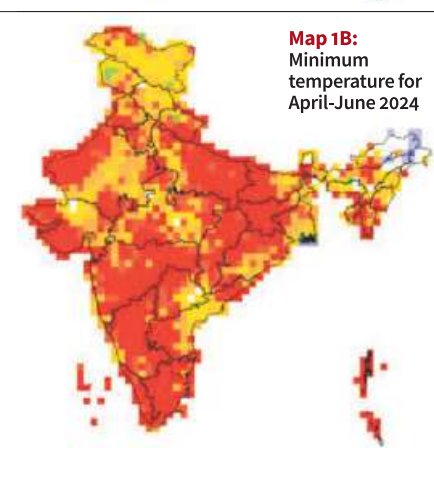
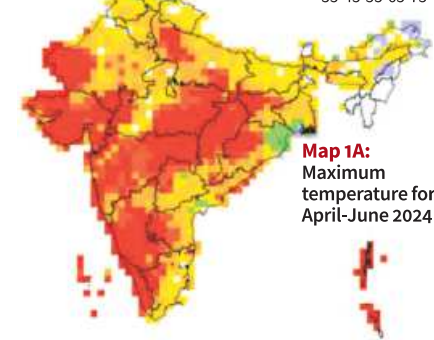
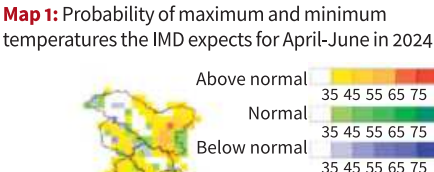
Chart 3 shows the gross electricity generated using coal in India and coal’s share in total electricity generated. The latter has remained 70-74% since at least FY16.

The most commercially viable forms of energy storage in India are currently battery-based storage and pumped hydro storage (PHS). PHS works like a hydroelectric power-generation facility in most respects except pumping the water from a lower to a higher elevation using off-peak power and running the turbines to load-balance the grid during peak power, among others. However, both hydroelectric and PHS facilities are undermined by water shortage – which is the case during periods of intense heat, when water demand for other needs is higher. **Chart 4** shows the gross electricity generated using renewable sources in India and the share of renewable sources in total electricity generated. The share of renewables (solar, hydro, wind, etc.) has remained 20-25% since at least FY16.

While the effects of climate change are hard to predict, especially at longer timescales and smaller spatial resolutions, concerns about the underperformance of dams India is building in the sub-Himalayas in the event of high heat and water stress persist for this reason. Thermal power isn’t free of this necessity either: according to one analysis by the World Resources Institute, “India lost about 14 terawatt-hours of thermal power generation due to water shortages in 2016.” All these challenges add to the multifaceted nature of extreme weather in India. Ready or not, the heat is on.

A (load) balancing act

The data were sourced from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, GRID-INDIA and the India Meteorological Department



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 9, 1974

Quick disposal of suits: Aims of C.P.C. changes

New Delhi, April 6: A comprehensive bill to amend the Code of Civil Procedure was introduced in the Lok Sabha to-day by the Law Minister, Mr. R.R. Gokhale.

The bill, which seeks to simplify the procedure and expedite the disposal of civil suits and proceedings, has been brought forward by Government after considering the recommendations of the Law Commission in four reports.

The statement of objects and reasons of the 102-clause bill, says that the following basic considerations have been kept in view:

That a litigant should get a fair trial in accordance with the accepted principles of natural justice.

That every effort should be made to expedite the disposal of civil suits and proceedings, so that justice may not be delayed and

That the procedure should not be complicated and should, to the utmost extent possible, ensure a fair deal to the poorer sections of the community who do not have the means to engage a pleader to defend their cases.

Some of the important changes proposed to be made by the bill are as follows:

The Doctrine of Res Judicata is being made more effective. (The principle behind the doctrine of Res Judicata is that issues heard and finally decided between the parties to a suit should not be allowed to be re-agitated by the parties or any person claiming through them in a subsequent litigation).

The power to transfer proceedings from a High Court in a State to any other High Court, which now vests in the State Government, is now being conferred on the Supreme Court.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 9, 1924

The S. African national bank

Bombay, April 8: The National Bank of South Africa Ltd. has given notice that it will close the Bombay branch on the 13th April. Depoisters and current account holders will be paid in full. The National Bank of India, Bombay, will take over unclaimed balances and have been instructed to honour any outstanding drafts drawn on the Bombay office of the Bank.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The rise in coffee exports in the January to March period

13.35 in percentage. Coffee shipments from India rose to 1.25 lakh tonnes during the January-March period of this year due to higher demand for Robusta coffee, as per official data. PTI

The increase in automobile retail sales in India in FY24

10 in percentage. Automobile retail sales saw double-digit growth in 2023-24 driven by record offtake of vehicles, three-wheelers and tractors, according to the Federation of Automobile Dealers Associations. PTI

Loan sanctioned by Rural Electrification Corporation in FY24

3.59 in lakh crore. The REC posted a year-on-year rise of 33.66% from sanctioning loan worth ₹2.68 lakh crore in 2022-23. Of the total loan, ₹1.36 lakh crore were 'renewable energy sanctions'. PTI

Vistara airline to reduce capacity in domestic routes

10 in percentage. Facing delays due to non-availability of crew, Vistara said it was cutting 25-30 flights daily with most of the cancellations in the domestic network as it strives to stabilise operations. PTI

Hike in Indian CEOs salary compared to pre-COVID: Deloitte

40 in percentage. The average CEO compensation in India stood at ₹13.8 crore, according to the Deloitte India Executive Performance and Rewards Survey 2024. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Different approaches to AI regulation

Amid the global movement towards regulating AI systems, India's response would be crucial, with the nation currently catering to one of the largest consumer bases and labour forces for technology companies. India's path must align with its SDGs while also ensuring that economic growth is maintained

LETTER & SPIRIT

G. S. Bajpai

The Artificial Intelligence (AI) space has seen certain developments crucial to its regulation in recent years – the United Nations's Resolution on Artificial Intelligence, the AI Act by the European Parliament, laws introduced on AI in the U.K. and China and the launch of the AI mission in India. These efforts to formalise AI regulations at the global level will be critical to various sectors of governance in all other countries.

With the passing of the United Nations Resolution on Artificial Intelligence, the need and associated discourse on the regulation of AI has entered a new phase. A global acknowledgement of the risks associated with AI systems and the urgent need to promote responsible use was at the centre of the adopted resolution. It was recognised that unethical and improper use of AI systems would impede the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), weakening the ongoing efforts across all three dimensions – social, environmental, and economic. Another controversial aspect mentioned in the UN resolution has been the plausible adverse impact of AI on the workforce. It would be imperative, especially for developing and least developed countries, to devise a response as the labour market in such countries is increasingly vulnerable to the use of such systems. In addition to its workforce, the impact on small and medium entrepreneurs also needs to be ascertained. Thus, being the first of its kind, the Resolution has shed light on the future implications of AI systems and the urgent need to adopt collaborative action.

The EU's approach

The EU recently passed the AI Act, the foremost law establishing rules and regulations governing AI systems. With its risk-based approach, the Act categorises



GETTY IMAGES

systems into four categories, namely unacceptable, high, limited, and minimal risks, prescribing guidelines for each. The Act prescribes an absolute ban on applications that risk citizens' rights, including manipulation of human behaviour, emotion recognition, mass surveillance etc. While the Act allows exemptions to banned applications when it is pertinent to law enforcement, it limits the deployment by asking for prior judicial/administrative authorisation in such cases.

The landmark legislation highlights two important considerations – acknowledging the compliance burden placed on business enterprises, and start-ups, and regulating the much-deliberated Generative AI systems such as ChatGPT. These two factors warrant the immediate attention of

policymakers, given their disruptive potential and the challenges of keeping pace with such evolving systems.

China's stand on AI

Identifying risks is evident in the approach adopted by China, which focuses on prompting AI tools and innovation with safeguards against any future harm to the nation's social and economic goals.

The country released, in phases, a regulatory framework addressing the following three issues – content moderation, which includes identification of content generated through any AI system; personal data protection, with a specific focus on the need to procure users' consent before accessing and processing their data; and algorithmic governance, with a focus on security and

ethics while developing and running algorithms over any gathered dataset.

The U.K.'s framework

The U.K., on the other hand, has adopted a principled and context-based approach in its ongoing efforts to regulate AI systems. The approach requires mandatory consultations with regulatory bodies, expanding its technical know-how and expertise in better regulating complex technologies while bridging regulatory gaps, if any. The U.K. has thus, resorted to a decentralised and more soft law approach rather than opting to regulate AI systems through stringent legal rules. This is in striking contrast to the EU approach.

India's position

Amid the global movement towards regulating AI systems, India's response would be crucial, with the nation currently catering to one of the largest consumer bases and labour forces for technology companies. India will be home to over 10,000 deep tech start-ups by 2030. In this direction, a ₹10,300 crore allocation was approved for the India AI mission to further its AI ecosystem through enhanced public-private partnerships and promote the start-up ecosystem. Amongst other initiatives, the allocation would be used to deploy 10,000 Graphic Processing Units, Large Multi-Models (LMMs) and other AI-based research collaboration and efficient and innovative projects.

With its economy expanding, India's response must align with its commitment towards the SDGs while also ensuring that economic growth is maintained. This would require the judicious use of AI systems to offer solutions that could further the innovation while mitigating its risks. A gradual phase-led approach appears more suitable for India's efforts towards a fair and inclusive AI system.

The author is the Vice Chancellor, National Law University Delhi. Inputs from Priyanshi, Academic Fellow, NLU Delhi. Views are personal.

THE GIST

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Why have madrasas been in the spotlight in Uttar Pradesh?

Why did the Supreme Court stay a ruling of the Allahabad High Court on the U.P. Board of Madrasa Education Act 2004? What was the aftermath of the U.P.'s government's survey on madrasas?

Ziya Us Salam

The story so far:

This past week, the Supreme Court stayed a ruling of the Allahabad High Court on the U.P. Board of Madrasa Education Act 2004 calling it an infringement of the fundamental rights guaranteed under the Constitution. The top court also found the High Court's ruling to be against the principles of secularism. The decision gave massive relief to around 17 lakh students of the State's 16,000 recognised madrasas.

What happened?

Earlier, the High Court had dubbed the U.P. Board of Madrasa Education Act "unconstitutional" and asked for immediate closure of the madrasas. It called for the relocation and integration of the madrasa students with regular schools. The Supreme Court called the High Court's ruling "not warranted" and

imposed a stay on the relocation.

The three-judge Supreme Court Bench, headed by Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud, scrutinised the provisions of the Act and made it clear that "the object and purpose of the statutory board which is constituted under the Act is regulatory in nature." The apex court did not agree with the High Court's ruling on educational institutions funded by the State being prohibited from imparting religious instruction. The Bench cited a 2002 judgment clarifying the term "religious instruction." The judges felt that striking down the 2004 Act was not the solution towards making a provision for secular education alongside religious instruction.

Why are madrasas in the spotlight?

Uttar Pradesh has around 25,000 madrasas of which 16,500 are recognised by the U.P. Madrasa Education Board. Only 560 madrasas receive grants from the government though there have been

complaints in recent years of delayed payment and arrears in salaries. The irregular madrasas are usually strapped for resources and manage to provide only elementary learning.

The latest case in the Supreme Court is in continuation of a long trail of madrasas being the focus of attention. In 2022, the U.P. Government ordered a survey of the State's madrasas to find out the number of unrecognised or illegal madrasas. Though the findings of the complete survey were not made public, the State government caused a ripple in Muslim education circles when in October 2023, irregular madrasas operating in the western U.P. township of Muzaffarnagar were ordered to be closed within 24 hours. The Basic Education Department issued a notice to these educational institutions stating that unregistered madrasas operating in Muzaffarnagar would be subject to a daily penalty of ₹10,000 if they were not able to submit relevant documents within three days of the notice.

The move upset minority organisations, with the Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind calling the move discriminatory. "These madrasas provide free education to around 10,000 students. They will not have the resources to pay the fine. The order seems targeted at a particular community," a Jamiat official had then said. Around the same time, a Special Investigation Team (SIT) was formed to investigate the sources of the madrasas' alleged foreign funding. The SIT claimed that the madrasas had received over ₹100 crore from abroad over the past three years though evidence was not shared with the public.

What next?

Madrasas have been under the spotlight since the Yogi Adityanath government was first sworn in 2017. At the time, the government had instructed madrasas to hoist the national flag and sing the national anthem on Independence Day. The circular issued by the U.P. Madrasa Shiksha Parishad also asked these schools to videograph and photograph the Independence Day function as evidence. The order upset many madrasas who claimed it called into question their patriotism.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court Bench on the U.P. Board Madrasa Education Act case has asked the State to file its counter affidavit before May 31. It has also given the appellants time till June 30 to respond to the State's views. It will hear the arguments in the second week of July.

THE GIST

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BUILDING BLOCKS



FILE PHOTO

Understanding the science behind the functioning of a mosquito bat

The bat's working principle is simple. Essentially the mosquito receives an electric shock, just like we might if we were hit by lightning on a stormy night. The mosquito bat is thus, a portable thunderstorm for the mosquito

Adhip Agarwala

As the winter months fall behind us and summer heat starts to rise, we have some visitors in our midst: the all-pervading mosquitos. Everywhere and anywhere, we find these creatures hovering all around us. So among all the electronic and chemical technologies humans have ever developed to battle them, perhaps the most impressive is the 'electric tennis bat'. While someone unaware may mistake it as one of the pieces of sports equipment Indians love, this single-player game is a pleasure to play. You chase and hit an airborne mosquito with the bat. If you succeed, you will hear the sweet sound of the blood-sucker's body crackling to death.

Complete the circuit

The bat's working principle is simple. There are three metal meshes. The one at the centre is positively charged and the outer ones are negatively charged. When the layers don't touch each other, current cannot flow. But when a mosquito connects them, a current passes through and kills the insect.

Essentially the mosquito receives an electric shock, just like we might if we were hit by lightning on a stormy night. The mosquito bat is a portable thunderstorm for the mosquito. The

physics of sparks and lightning is the same, whether it's in your gas lighter, in the belly of storm clouds or in the mosquito bat.

So the question arises: why do electric sparks – like a bolt of lightning – look white? If this is the 'colour' of electric current, shouldn't the current flowing through electric wires at home also be white? Yet they aren't.

Batteries and shocks

Electric current is carried by electrons, the negatively charged fundamental particles that usually revolve around positively charged protons in every atom. Every atom has an equal number of protons and electrons, rendering them electrical neutral.

In any piece of metal such as copper, there is a large number of atoms but every atom also shares some electrons with other atoms. The whole material still remains neutral but these common electrons can freely move from one atom to the other, and conduct current easily.

In an insulator, on the other hand, every atom holds onto its electrons and doesn't share. The air we breathe is a wonderful insulator – as are most of us. This barrier can be torn down by applying a high voltage, which will force electrons out of atoms. Suddenly, instead of a neutrally charged air, we have a gas made of positively charged atoms and

negatively charged electrons floating together.

A battery generates electric force. How much electric force is generated depends on the battery's volt value. Higher the voltage, greater the force. For example, the pencil battery that powers our wall clocks is usually 1.5 V. A phone battery has a comparable range.

These are strong enough to drive currents through clocks and phones but not strong enough to give humans electric shocks. That's why you don't have to worry when holding them in your hand. On the other hand, the current supplied to our household appliances comes with a voltage of 220V, which is enough to electrocute us.

During a thunderstorm, the voltage can cross a hundred million volts, powering electrons to fly through the air.

The 'colour' of electricity

Strong voltages ionise and pull electrons away from atoms. These unhappy atoms then try to get their electrons back. If the electrons do go back, they need to lose the 'excess' energy they have, and they do this by emitting light. Every time the electron loses some energy, the light has some wavelength. In the case of air, the light the electrons lose is in the range of wavelengths human eyes can see. And this light is what we see.

The colour of the light and the spark

depends on the type of atom. In fact, this emission can be thought of as an atom's fingerprint – its unique identifier. For example, in air, most of the atoms are of oxygen and nitrogen and so the sparks are white or near-white. On the other hand, on some alien planet with an atmosphere made of neon, the sparks will look red.

Interestingly this is also the physics which goes into the working of a tube light but in a slightly different way.

Circling back to the mosquitos and our mosquito bats: how much voltage do these devices generate?

It's around 1,400 V – equivalent to approximately a thousand regular batteries, and enough to drive a powerful electric current through the mosquito and at the same time drive electrons out of atoms in the air nearby, thus creating the sparks we see.

In case you are also wondering how certain wavelengths of light can be emitted by certain atoms: it is only by learning quantum mechanics can one understand this. So if you are interested, consider pursuing a course in physics.

And the next time a mosquito troubles you and you end up using the electric bat with crackling success, just remember: it's not just you. Quantum physics, electrons, and the atoms in the air are all joining in to celebrate your victory.

Adhip Agarwala is an assistant professor of physics at IIT Kanpur.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Following the success of the mini series 'Shogun', a quiz on the history of the Shogunate, the hereditary military dictatorship of Japan

V. V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1

The title 'Shogun' is an abbreviation of the highest warrior rank 'seii taishōgun' and was later applied to all shogunate leaders. What does 'seii taishōgun' mean?

QUESTION 2

What were the four social classes in Japan during the Tokugawa Shogunate?

QUESTION 3

What is the significance of the Battle of Dan-no-ura

in the history of the Shogunate?

QUESTION 4

Name the shogun credited with unifying Japan after the Sengoku period?

QUESTION 5

Name the policy of isolationism, restricting foreign influences and trade with other countries during the Tokugawa Shogunate.

QUESTION 6

If the first capital of the shogunate was Kamakura, what was the capital of Ashikaga clan and of Ieyasu Tokugawa?



Visual question: Name this leader considered the first shogun. WIKIPEDIA COMMONS

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. Superconductors expel _____. Ans: Magnetic fields

2. The process Onnes used to liquefy gases. Ans: Hampson-Linde cycle

3. The meeting wherein Georg Bednorz and Alex Muller were invited by the American Physical Society to present their findings. Ans: Woodstock of Physics

4. The angle at which one sheet of graphene is twisted by 1.1 degrees with respect to the other to acquire the properties of a superconductor. Ans: Magic angle

5. The NASA satellite launched in 2004 that tested predictions of general relativity. Ans: Gravity Probe B

Visual: The only scientist to have received the Nobel Prize for physics twice. Ans: John Bardeen

Early Birds: Navtosh Arun| Jyot Prakash Gulati| Saheni George| Shiva Nigam



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

“Cop it (S. Lalita, Palghat)”

“‘Cop it’ is an informal expression which means ‘get into trouble, be punished,’ ‘be killed.’

You will cop it for what you have done.

He will cop it from his wife for not remembering her birthday.

‘Cop’ has several meanings. As a noun, it means ‘a policeman,’ ‘a capture or arrest.’

He is a nice cop.

She was copped for shoplifting.

‘Cop out of something’ is ‘to go back on a promise, to fail to do what one ought to do, especially through fear.’

He tried to cop out of it by saying he had no time.

‘Cop-out’ is a noun.

The meeting with the minister was a cop-out. The minister did not discuss the issues at all.

‘Not much cop’ or ‘no cop’ means ‘little or no value or use.’

She is not much cop as a writer.

He is no cop as a singer.

‘Copshop’ is a police station. ‘To cop a plea’ means ‘to plead guilty to a charge, especially with the intention of escaping more serious punishment which might result from standing trial’. This is recorded in American dictionaries but not in dictionaries published in Britain. Perhaps this expression is used only by American lawyers and judges.”

“In the picture (C.C. Jacob, Nagpur).”

“‘In the picture’ means ‘fully informed.’

I don't know anything about what happened at the meeting. Please put me in the picture.

She insisted on being put in the picture about what happened to her complaint to the police. There was a time when the expression meant ‘to be in the foreground or play a prominent part.’

He always wants to be in the picture.

In America the expression came to have the meaning ‘be informed, in the know’ as a result of the influence of German settlers. It is believed that some German(s) wrongly translated the German phrase ‘im bilde sein’ and the English-speaking Americans accepted it. The new meaning has almost driven out the old meaning in Britain and America.

A cop saw a thief in a crowd. He copped him and took him to the cop-station. The cop's boss asked him to put him in the picture about the arrest and be vigilant or he would cop it.”

“Procrustean (S. Bhatnagar, Jaipur)”

“‘Procrustean’ means ‘seeking to enforce uniformity by forceful or ruthless methods.’ Procrustes was a robber in Greek legend. He used to put his victims on an iron bed and fit them to it by stretching their limbs or cutting them off. Any attempt to bring about uniformity through violent, irrational methods is called ‘Procrustean.’ ‘To stretch or place on the bed of Procrustes’ means to bring about crude uniformity.

He tried to confine our economy to the Procrustean bed of socialism.

I detest this Procrustean system of education.”

Published in The Hindu on August 20, 1991.

Word of the day

Lambaste:

beat with a cane; censure severely or angrily

Synonyms: flog, scold, berate, rebuke, remonstrate, reprimand, lecture, chide

Usage: The coach lambasted the team for loosing the match.

Pronunciation: bit.ly/lambastepro

International Phonetic

Alphabet: /læmˈbeɪst/, /læmˈbæst/

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

Troubling promises

Populist Congress manifesto has a few pluses

As political statements of intent during election time, manifestos are understood to be grandiose and unreal. The Congress’s just-released manifesto is a similar enterprise, with some interesting, not-so-practical and other downright imprudent ideas. The major promises of the manifesto, with an eye on the youth, are: providing a one year apprenticeship as a right to every diploma holder or graduate below the age of 25, raising the 50 per cent cap on reservations and conducting a caste census, providing a legal guarantee to MSP, starting an urban employment guarantee programme and bringing about tax reforms.



The promise of an apprenticeship at ₹1 lakh a year, to be shared by the private party and the government, seems innovative but is also disconcerting. After railing against the government for not creating jobs, the Congress needed to come up with a response. Even as it is hard to say at the outset whether this can outperform the current skilling initiatives, it does raise some immediate concerns. Is it a great idea for industry to lose its freedom to hire workers, and what does it get in return? The promise to enact a Direct Tax Code and maintain stable personal income tax rates is a welcome commitment as also the abolishing of angel tax and similar tax schemes that inhibit investment in new micro, small companies and innovative start-ups. Another promise is replacing the current GST laws enacted by the NDA Government with GST 2.0 along with a single, moderate rate that will not burden the poor. States would appreciate the commitment to end the “cess” regime that they have long held as denying their rightful share of tax revenues.

As for fiscally imprudent proposals, one such is the Mahalakshmi scheme to provide ₹1 lakh a year to every poor family as unconditional cash transfer. A guaranteed MSP falls in the same bracket, unless the party has some caveats up its sleeve. Thankfully, the ill-conceived idea of reverting to the Old Pension Scheme (OPS) has been given a quiet burial in the manifesto.

A proposed constitutional amendment to raise the 50 per cent cap on reservations for SC, ST and OBCs is problematic, even if a caste census is less so, if only for the information it places in the public domain. Political parties have to think beyond reservation quotas that only serve to create disaffection among communities. The lack of emphasis on health and education for all, as an antidote to the politics of reservation, really stands out here. Finally, it is disingenuous for the Congress to accuse the BJP of enacting laws that inhibit personal freedoms. It was during the UPA’s tenure that most of the provisions of the dreaded POTA were incorporated into the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. Even the Prevention of Money Laundering Act came into force in 2005 when the rules were framed by the UPA government. But such about-turns are only to be expected, with elections in the air.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



The ‘last mile’ could be a stretch

PRICE WORRIES. The finishing line for the descent of inflation to 4 per cent should be crossed on a durable basis



HIMADRI BHATTACHARYA

It was an easy bet that the MPC of RBI would keep the policy repo rate unchanged at 6.50 per cent — seventh pause in a row — in its first bi-monthly meeting for 2024-25 that concluded on April 5, 2024. Moreover, that the decision to maintain status quo would invite one dissent was also a foregone conclusion. Given this backdrop, the financial markets did not react to the policy announcement in any noticeable manner.

The tone of the statement accompanying the policy announcement is one that brings out RBI’s resoluteness to steadfastly buttress the current path of disinflation till inflation reaches the 4 per cent target on a durable basis. It has reaffirmed that the policy must continue to be actively disinflationary to ensure anchoring of inflation expectations and fuller transmission. More significantly, the MPC has categorically stated its belief that durable price stability would set strong foundations for a period of high growth. This is fundamental to the conduct of the monetary policy under an inflation-targeting framework.

A YEAR SINCE THE LAST HIKE

In the days following the last hike in the policy repo rate by 25 basis points in February, 2023, a section of the market expected the MPC to hike more, which did not happen, thanks to the steady decline in core CPI inflation throughout 2023-24 and moderation in headline CPI inflation in its second half. Expectations of policy easing in India gathered momentum from January this year, occasioned by similar expectations rising in several advanced economies, including the US.

The reasons put forth by the lone dissenting member of the MPC who advocated a rate cut in its meeting in February this year are pretty straightforward: Real interest rate is close to 2 per cent now, which is high by historical standards and can lead to overcorrection and a fall in the growth rate.

The majority opinion and views in MPC seem to favour no change in the policy rate at this stage, on the one hand, and refrain from providing any guidance for the future in this regard, on the other.



INFLATION PRESSURES. The risks of a spurt in food inflation cannot be ignored by the central bank SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

The main planks of their approach to these issues are: (i) India’s potential growth rate is now higher as a result of various structural reforms, and advancements in physical and digital infrastructure which provide more ‘policy space’ to continue with the current policy rate as also the stance, (ii) the cumulative rate hike by 250 basis points during May, 2022 to February, 2023 is still working its way through the real economy, and (iii) despite the fall in core and headline inflations in 2023-24, the risks of a spurt in food inflation, imparting volatility to the trajectory of CPI inflation, are not trivial at all: after a correction in January this year, food inflation rose to 7.8 per cent in February.

Further, RBI wants to avoid the kind of gyrations in the US treasury yields that have been witnessed since the last hike in the policy rate there in the current tightening cycle by the Federal Reserve in July last year. The markets there expected an early reversal in the

Core inflation is on a steady declining path. But worries over food price pressures, rising global crude prices and geopolitical tensions remain

US monetary policy cycle on the back of faster-than-expected decline in inflation and some forward guidance on policy rate cuts provided by the authorities.

In the words of a member of the MPC, as revealed in the minutes of its last meeting in February, 2024, “Expectations of a change make agents and market participants behave in a way as if the change has already happened, which makes managing the present even tougher”. This explains why RBI avoids providing any guidance or hint on the specifics of any future monetary policy action.

GROWTH, INFLATION PROSPECTS

RBI remains optimistic about the growth prospects of the Indian economy, with the real GDP growth for 2023-24 being pegged at 7.6 per cent, underpinned by strong investment and an improvement in private consumption.

Headline CPI inflation, which was 5.5 per cent in the first-half of 2023-24 eased slightly to 5.3 per cent in the following five-month period: October 2023-February 2024.

As mentioned earlier in these columns, core inflation has been on a steadily declining path, falling to a low of 3.4 per cent in February 2024, driven by both core goods and services components.

As compared to the last bi-monthly meeting of MPC held in February 2024, the projections for both real GDP growth rate and headline CPI inflation for 2024-25 have now been kept unchanged at 7 per cent and 4.5 per cent respectively.

In MPC’s reckoning, food price uncertainties, the recent uptick in international crude oil prices, upward bias in cost-push pressures faced by firms and geopolitical tensions constitute major upside risks to the inflation outlook.

The finishing line for the descent of headline CPI inflation to the target of 4 per cent, though in sight, is never crossed till it is actually and durably crossed. The journey to traverse the proverbial last mile may turn out to be arduous and painstaking for its length. The use of the ‘elephant in the room’ expression in this connection was a bit misplaced.

High inflation would always be an obvious major issue that the RBI is tasked to acknowledge and combat head on. Needless to say, the pachyderm’s slow and ponderous exit to the forest may not be long-lasting. It may return at the slightest hint of any lowering of the guard.

The writer is a former central banker and a consultant to the IMF. (Through The Billion Press)

Why the 2036 Olympics bid is too ambitious

India must focus more on grassroots development of sports and become a sporting powerhouse first

Srishtee Ramchandani
Ravikiran Naik

India has expressed strong interest in hosting the 2036 Summer Olympics, with the Prime Minister saying that India will leave “no stone unturned” in its efforts to bid for the dream of 140 crore Indians.

Though the Olympics is an attractive vehicle to showcase India globally, the country faces significant challenges.

While hosting the Olympics could help accelerate sports development in the long run, some numbers give grounds for why India must still prepare to take on such an enormous undertaking.

One of the major hurdles is India’s low spending on sports development. India spends only 0.1 per cent of its GDP on sports, far less than Western nations, which spend close to 1 per cent. With limited funding, India needs robust sports infrastructure, a solid grassroots programme for identifying and training athletes, and coaching staff needed to compete at the Olympics level.

COST OVERRUNS

Hosting the Olympics is a complex and expensive undertaking frequently

plagued by cost overruns. Every Olympics in recent decades has exceeded its budget by billions.

The 2014 Sochi, Russia Winter Olympics went over budget by \$41 billion, while the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Summer Games experienced approximately the biggest loss, at \$2 billion. For a developing country like India, the financial liability of potential debt from cost overruns could be a heavy burden. There are also concerns about the environmental impact and disruption from large-scale construction of venues and infrastructure over a short period.

Valuable land may be diverted from more pressing priorities like housing and development and can have a huge socio-economic impact. A vivid example is the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa, which positively impacted the economy in the short run but significantly diverted resources from other sectors.

Hosting the Olympics could motivate greater sports participation, but 2036 may be too soon. A more prudent approach would be to continue strengthening sports at the grassroots levels through sustained funding increases over time.



OLYMPICS. Too early to host REUTERS

MEDALS COMPARISON

India should focus on regularly qualifying and winning medals at other global multi-sport events to prove its capabilities before considering an Olympics bid. India has won only 35 medals over the years compared to other Olympic giants like the US and Germany, which have crossed the 2000 and 1000 mark, respectively.

India compares unfavourably even with countries with similar economies such as China and Brazil, which have crossed the 700 and 150 medal mark, respectively.

These numbers are underwhelming

and give us the ground reality of India’s sporting ecosystem and its long way to go.

Therefore, hosting after the necessary sporting ecosystem and financial security are established would make the venture more realistic and sustainable. There are also concerns about the need for a unified regulatory body overseeing all sports.

Currently, different sports federations operate independently with fragmented development and governance issues. Organising an Olympics requires centralised coordination, which may require more work under the current model. Establishing a new national sports commission first would lay the groundwork.

In conclusion, though hosting the Olympics has undeniable prestige, 2036 may be premature for India. A step-by-step approach focusing on sports development through long-term planning would serve the country better than an overly ambitious bid.

However, for 2036, India needs more time to strengthen itself as a sporting powerhouse.

Ramchandani is a Student, and Naik is Assistant Professor of Economics, FLAME University

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Scaling up SFBs

Apropos ‘RBI may issue guidance on SFB upgradation to universal banks’ (April 8). The importance of SFBs is immense whether in rural areas or semi urban areas or even metropolitan areas. SFBs play a key role in garnering deposits and lending and also pay higher interest on deposits. At the same time their lending is restricted due to their restricted capital. RBI’s decision to upgrade SFBs as per the needs of the account holders is welcome otherwise customers may move to commercial banks.

Katuru Durga Prasad Rao
Hyderabad

RBI, institution builder

This refers to the report ‘RBI may issue guidance on SFB upgradation to

universal banks’ (April 8). From transformation of Imperial Bank to SBI in 1955 to introduction of Small Finance Banks and Payment Banks almost a decade ago, RBI has played a proactive role in institution-building in the financial sector. Organisations like IDBI, Exim Bank, Nabard and RRBs and SFBs are the results of such RBI initiatives. The last decade was a period of consolidation and strengthening of financial institutions. Time is opportune for redefining and restructuring the institutional system in the Indian financial sector. The RBI could establish a couple of national level organisations to entrust some non-central bank functions like public debt

management and developmental roles.
MG Warrior
Mumbai

Connect southern ports

This refers to ‘Three new dedicated freight corridors on track’ (April 8). It is significant to note that the three new dedicated freight corridors (DFC) are progressing well. As per the design it covers the major ports at Maharashtra, Telangana and West Bengal covering East, West and Northern corridors to facilitate fast movement of iron ore, cement, coal and fertilizer. The Eastern corridor starting from Kharagpur ends at Tenali in Telangana missing the vital Chennai and Tuticorin Ports in South. The East West Corridor I starting from Dankuni

in West Bengal ends at Mumbai port. The Western coast has two important ports — Mangalore and Cochin catering to ferrying crude oil and other minerals. With ICF Chennai becoming focal point in building thousands of coaches for Vande Bharath and its variants and Tuticorin becoming another industrial hub in down south, the omission to link the three ports Chennai, Tuticorin in South, Cochin and Mangalore in Western corridors would give an incomplete picture of proposed DFC which was designed on the lines of Bharat Mala.

RV Baskaran
Chennai

Improve local governance

Come election time and it is natural for citizens to evaluate their quality of

life in various spheres. On a macro sphere there is much satisfaction. Be it national highways, excellent trains, good air connectivity, defense preparedness, public health, or digital service delivery, things are much better than earlier. Of course these are experienced by citizens infrequently, not daily. Some experiences occur on a daily basis. The poor quality of city roads, inadequate and poor quality water supply (alleged tanker lobby), power supply issues (quality), alleged corruption in last mile service delivery, and sadly, indifferent governance; all are pain points for the citizen. Governments would do well to also address issues which affect the citizen on a daily, continuous basis.
V Vijaykumar
Pune

Privacy in the age of AI

Early identification, resolution of privacy issues vital

Manish Sehgal
Samidha Chaudhari

Automation, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) have significant consequences on privacy, which can vary depending on the specific use of application, be it for personal, business or monetisation, such as:

AI and ML are being used for rapid analysis of large data sets for extracting meaningful patterns and predictions, which may result in information manipulation as seen in the creation of fake content by Creative AI. Another aspect of data monetisation involves selling insights from analysed data, including social media behaviour trends. This is where AI's algorithmic decision-making may lack transparency, creating challenges in understanding how data is processed.

DATA-CENTRIC APPROACH

While handling massive personal data, we need to focus on a data-centric approach for PTM (privacy threat modelling) and PET (privacy enhancing technologies).

When we discuss security, the focus is often more on network/perimeter-centric aspects rather than being data-centric. Technology serves as one of the resources, which comes with its own set of consequences, limitations or advantages, depending on how we utilise it. AI, ML, and GenAI represent technologies that are engineered by humans, and the human brain possesses extraordinary capabilities.

Understanding “what to do?” simplifies the “how”. Early identification and resolution of privacy issues during planning and design are critical. Companies that prioritise transparency, trustworthiness, and security in AI implementation can create an environment that fosters more effective utilisation of advanced technologies, leading to enhanced performance and greater success.

It is required to shift focus from self-defence to self-empowerment. The traditional self-defence focus has shielded against external threats, emphasising zero trust and data security.

In the Shifted Focus approach, it's vital to self-define data — embracing and leveraging personal data for self-discovery and empowerment through data democratisation. This means understanding oneself by



AI. The privacy challenge

analysing habits, preferences, behaviours, and empowering individuals, regardless of their technical expertise, to engage with data effortlessly. Instil confidence while using data for informed decisions, fostering a culture where all can enhance customer experiences with data-driven insights, balancing empowerment and privacy.

Transitioning from defence to self-defined data use emphasises proactive personal data utilisation for self-improvement and informed decisions, while still prioritising privacy and user autonomy in PET. The development and wider adoption of privacy-preserving AI techniques, such as federated learning, homomorphic encryption, and secure enclaves, are set to increase. These methods enable the training of AI models without compromising raw data, thereby bolstering privacy protections.

In our pursuit of data privacy compliance, fostering a culture of privacy is essential. Our adherence to data privacy principles should stem not just from the potential business impacts of non-compliance but from a commitment to balancing human rights with the rapid evolution of technology for ethical data innovation.

Looking forward, AI and data privacy shall entail navigating strict global regulations. Countries enact AI Acts to mitigate adverse effects, clarify ownership, and ensure transparency to build responsible AI platforms. Organisations and OEMs collaborate to fortify data governance, creating an environment that safeguards privacy and enhances data management practices for the future. Are we ready to leverage the positive aspects of technology to uplift and connect the world, thereby fostering innovation and contributing to a brighter global future?

Sehgal is Partner and Chaudhari is Associate Director, Deloitte India

Will e-mobility go the biofuel way?

ROUGH ROAD. EVs’ growth may suffer due to problems of battery availability and disposal, just as biofuel has been hit by feedstock constraint



SANJIB POHIT
CHETANA CHAUDHURI

E-mobility seems to be the buzzword in India now. Almost every other day, some news comes out on how much progress India has made in the use of electric vehicle in the transport sector and how it helps in reducing carbon emission. While the progress in the use of e-vehicle is a fact, the carbon saving due to use of the same is highly exaggerated for the simple fact that India is still heavily dependent on fossil-based electricity for recharging e-vehicles.

Thus, unless we can tilt the balance sharply in favour renewables-based electricity, there will be a net increase in carbon emissions, as per IEA analysis, when considering life-cycle emissions. Moreover, as e-vehicles weigh more than internal-combustion (IC) vehicles, it may lead to higher tyre-related particulate emissions, even though it removes tailpipe emission of IC-vehicles.

Range anxiety, in terms of availability of charging infrastructure for an e-vehicle is a concern in India, especially in rural/remote areas and highways, and also the charging time is longer than refuelling an IC vehicle. Setting up a

charging station is capital intensive, both in terms of land and technology. Widespread adoption of e-vehicle can affect electricity grids, especially at peak hour of demand. Battery swapping, where a depleted battery can be replaced with a pre-charged one, can save time for full charging, but the technology is yet at a nascent stage in India, and significant investment and co-ordination among the stakeholders are required to develop the infrastructure.

Additionally, it also requires standardisation of the battery design, efficient testing and compliance for compatibility adherence. With the growth of e-vehicles, there is a need to increasingly focus on supply-chain related issues, particularly batteries. The manufacture of batteries for e-vehicles is growing at a much slower pace than the adoption of vehicle use, and thus India is following an import dependent pathway. This is a very risky proposition.

As all countries move towards e-mobility and most of them bank on imports for sourcing of battery, the prices of batteries may skyrocket in the coming years, especially as some of the

raw materials are sourced from limited geographic regions. Thus, near self-sufficiency in batteries is a must for faster adoption of e-vehicles. This would not only safeguard India from the vagaries of global battery price, just like crude oil prices, but will also pave the way for growth of jobs in the sector. Surely, the job prospects will be higher if the domestic supply chain of e-vehicles is developed as far as possible.

CBAM EFFECT

With growth of e-vehicles, the disposal of batteries will be a matter of environmental concern. India is not paying enough attention to this. It appears India has yet to learn the lesson from the CBAM (Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism) experience. Looking back, developing countries like India were quite happy when ‘dirty’ industries from the EU moved to their shores following the Kyoto Protocol. Three decades later, the EU comes up with CBAM, which is likely to affect some of our industries. The EU has already announced that the reach of CBAM will be expanded to other sectors. Most likely e-waste, particularly batteries, will be on top of their agenda. The EU’s policy is stringent on the same and to create a level-playing field, it will expect partner countries to be on the same page in this respect.

A decade back, the kind of hype currently being witnessed in the case of e-mobility was observed in the case of biofuel. Down the line, however, we are

yet to achieve 20 per cent blending target, even though at one point the government gave tax incentives for flexi-IC vehicles so that it is technically possible to run a vehicle on 100 per cent biofuel, just like in Brazil.

However, biofuel growth did not take off like in Brazil. The weakness in feedstock for biofuel was the real bottleneck, even though India is self-sufficient in other parts of the supply chain for biofuel.

On the jobs front, e-mobility is no match to the biofuel sector. However, not much attention has been paid to increase the feedstock supply of biofuel by way of scientific research to increase the oil-bearing capacity of biofuel feedstock. While India has achieved success in food crops through the Green Revolution, this sector has not receive similar attention. Productivity, and not land, probably is the principal constraint for its growth.

Unless sufficient attention is paid to supply bottlenecks and the battery disposal issue, e-mobility may go the biofuel route. A collective and co-ordinated effort is required from the government, industry and other stakeholders to develop infrastructure, facilitate a supply-chain that includes domestic manufacturing, increase awareness about battery disposal, and incentivise adoption to cater to the increasing demand for fuels triggered by a large and growing population and expansion of urbanisation in the country.

The writers with NCAER. Views are personal

Is Indian digital market ready for ex-ante regulation?

Avaantika Kakkar

The Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) has invited stakeholder comments (by April 15, 2024) to the Report of the Committee on Digital Competition Law (CDCL) and the Draft Digital Competition Bill, 2024, which will redefine (largely in the footsteps of the European Commission/EC) how large digital companies will conduct business in India.

The CDCL was constituted to review whether the existing provisions of the Competition Act, 2002 were sufficient to address challenges of the digital economy and to examine whether an *ex-ante* digital competition law was required.

The CDCL report concludes that *ex-post* intervention under the Competition Act may not sufficiently enable early detection and intervention to prevent digital markets from irreversibly tipping. The report then examines certain *ex-ante* sector regulations and concludes that their intersection with the competition regime is sporadic, since they ‘are

limited in their ability to holistically ensure fair competition in the digital economy in an *ex-ante* manner’.

Is the *ex-ante* regulation of the digital economy a pre-drawn conclusion? Per the CDCL report, that an *ex-ante* digital competition law is required seems premised on: (i) international developments; (ii) a general acknowledgement that digital markets move faster than meaningful regulatory intervention; and (iii) stakeholder responses.

LEGAL DEVELOPMENTS

The CDCL report provides an exemplary insight into legal developments across the world and a statement of stakeholder concerns, but it does not answer the questions of whether an *ex-ante* competition law is required, and what its anticipated effects will be for India’s burgeoning digital sector.

It is too soon to understand the effects of the similar *ex-ante* digital markets law in Europe, which was brought into effect recently. Other major jurisdictions are still discussing/bringing into effect their



DIGITAL FIRMS. Fair play crucial

versions of *ex-ante* law. While on the question of developments in Europe, take the idea of ‘killer acquisitions’, which has received much attention worldwide. In India too, the concept has been covered by recent amendments to the Competition Act.

The reference is to acquisitions by a larger competitor of a smaller competing target that may — in the future — challenge the acquirer. Oddly, the marquee case on ‘killer’

acquisitions for the European Commission (EC) has been Illumina/Graile, where the acquirer was not in fact, a competitor of Graile. Graile (developer of a blood-based early cancer detection test) was acquired by Illumina (the only supplier of technology to develop this test) in 2021.

In 2022, the merger was prohibited by both the European Commission and the US Federal Trade Commission. The regulators believed that Illumina would be incentivised to restrict supply of its technology to innovators competing with Graile.

The matter is in appeals before the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). If the CJEU reverses the EC’s order, the EC’s regulatory philosophy faces a reset.

Developments in India on ‘killer acquisitions’ point suggest that Indian law is chartering its own course. The MCA could consider commissioning market studies by the CCI before the Draft Bill is legislated.

The writer is Partner (Head - Competition Law), Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas. Views are personal

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

April 9, 2004

Banks win freedom to sell mortgaged assets

The Supreme Court has upheld the constitutional validity of the Securitisation Act thereby allowing banks and financial institutions to sell assets of defaulting borrowers that have been attached under the Act. The 2002 Act was challenged in various courts on grounds that it was loaded heavily in favour of lenders.

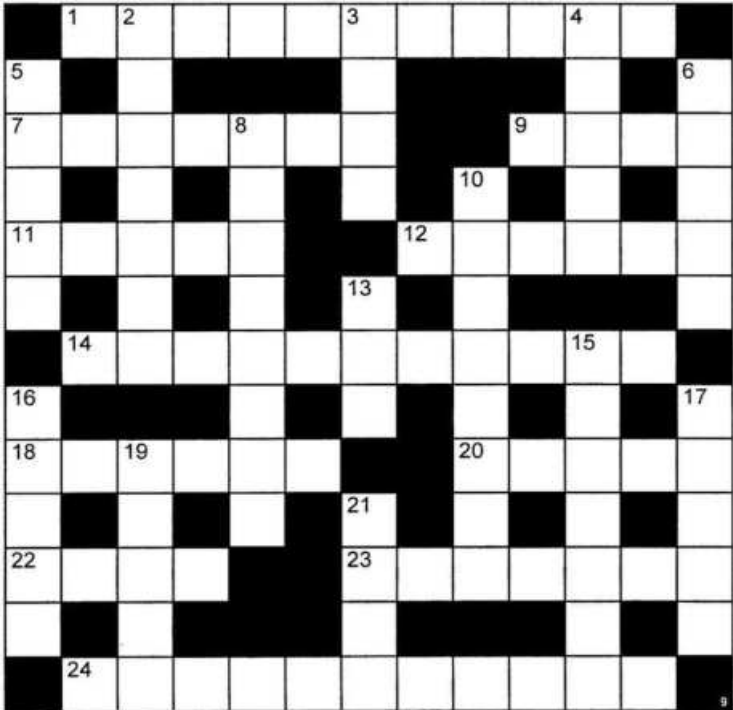
‘Bonus shares by tech cos to have short-term impact’

Wipro stocks are likely to rise on the back of its plan to consider a bonus issue of shares. However, the positive sentiment due to the bonus issue is likely to be in the short term since earnings momentum or P/E multiples will not be affected, say analysts. “The valuation will not change because of the issue of bonus shares,” said Mr Dheeraj Sachdev, portfolio manager, ASK Raymond James.

Infosys plans to recruit 500 in US

Software major Infosys Technologies Ltd, which announced it has floated its US consulting subsidiary, plans to recruit 500 professionals in the US over three years. It feels such job creations would defuse outsourcing backlash to some extent.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2413



EASY

ACROSS

- Metallic-coloured flies (11)
- Guided to target (5,2)
- Just (4)
- Foreign currency unit (5)
- Have the making of film (6)
- College (11)
- Fast (6)
- Precise (5)
- Tidy (4)
- Expressing hatred (7)
- Draws (11)

DOWN

- Back trouble (7)
- Admits (4)
- Dodge artfully (5)
- Lift-well (5)
- Large box (5)
- Naval base (8)
- Princely address (8)
- Wager (3)
- European language (7)
- Employing (5)
- Theatrical world (5)
- Vessel (5)
- Elegant in style (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Flies for what one may find poison in (11)
- Approached target, there being a racket in the house? (5,2)
- Just a sort of complexion (4)
- There’s no end to the nation’s money unit (5)
- Make film straight (6)
- Where one is taught to copy: let chin get broken (11)
- See about Ulster force returning safe (6)
- Make one pay to be very accurate (5)
- In the country a cow may be undiluted (4)
- The man’s to vocalise, making a sibilant sound (7)
- They draw a non-drinker with carbon in the food allowances (11)

DOWN

- Upsetting Gaul, mob has trouble bending with it (7)
- Is the possessor of urban areas that haven’t been begun (4)
- Dodge back out of crowded avenue (5)
- Part of column will call for silence towards back of ship (5)
- Box one would make were it to contain the East (5)
- Cut off three feet where naval repairs are concerned (8)
- Royal address elevated on the headland (8)
- Have something on body - even tank-tops (3)
- Vermouth, having lain awkwardly, having given it a beginning (7)
- The employment of moral offence in huge contents (5)
- Old (drama?) coach (5)
- The cunning followed by the skilled tradesman (5)
- Artistic skill is necessary to teach Icelandic (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2412

ACROSS 1. Chamois 5. Hated 8. Tearful 9. Lamps 10. Evidently 12. Sue 13. Congo 17. Hen 19. Sticklers 21. Shrub 22. Carbine 24. Scene 25. Rotters

DOWN 1. Cutter 2. Amazing 3. Oaf 4. Split 5. Hollyhock 6. Tames 7. Dusted 11. Excusable 14. Precise 15. Thesis 16. Assess 18. Norse 20. Incur 23. Rot

Productive employment

Policy must also focus on earnings

Discussions on labour market conditions are focused usually on the unemployment and labour-force participation rates. Real earnings often remain neglected. Amid the increase in labour-force participation numbers and lower unemployment rates, a recent report by the International Labour Organization and the Institute for Human Development cautions that all is not well with India's labour market outcomes. The report highlights the decline in real wages in both urban and rural areas. The data for the period between 2012 and 2022 shows that the average monthly real earnings of regular salaried workers declined by about 1 per cent each year — from ₹12,100 a month to ₹10,925 in just 10 years. Moreover, urban areas seem to have performed worse than rural, exhibiting a much larger decline in real earnings. In urban India, real wages, on average, declined by 7.3 per cent between 2012 and 2022, while real wages in rural areas declined by 3.8 per cent during the same period.

This is particularly concerning, given that regular, salaried workers are engaged in better-quality work, with longer tenures and entitlement to some form of social security, and receive wages at regular time intervals. Among those regularly employed, salaries have increased for those in the government sector, but the deterioration in real wages happened primarily for people in private organisations. Of course, this can be attributed to stagnant earnings for low-skilled workers. Real wages for the self-employed category mirror a similar trend. Comprising nearly 55 per cent of all workers in the country, their earnings took a hit owing to pandemic-related shocks and the closure of economic activities during lockdowns. Surprisingly, monthly real earnings of casual workers increased by an average of 2.4 per cent each year in the decade until 2022. The trend in the real earnings of regular salaried workers and the self-employed, along with only a small increase in real wages for casual workers, can be seen as an indicator of deterioration in the quality of employment generation in recent years. This is also reflected by demand for employment under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which is still higher than the pre-pandemic levels.

Unemployment figures frequently quoted in policy discussions, therefore, hold little relevance for the poor and large swathes of the Indian population. It must be noted that most poor people are rarely unemployed. They simply cannot afford to sit back at home and do nothing. With minor economic activities and part-time work, most of them are counted as employed in surveys. What should also matter is how much they earn. In-work poverty is a major problem for the country and needs immediate redress. Recent figures show that millions have been lifted out of multidimensional poverty in the country, and have been granted access to health, education, bank accounts, and the like. Yet, depressed wage and income levels question whether increased access to public utilities is sufficient to address income poverty. Despite a strong rebound in growth after the pandemic, driven by government spending, private investment in India remains weak, which is hurting job creation. India needs to create more productive jobs for its workforce, which will increase earnings and well-being. It would also help generate demand and lead to a virtuous growth cycle.

Eyeless in Gaza

Little visibility on the end of the conflict

Last week marked six months since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, and the prospect of peace appears weak. There are reports of a new round of truce negotiations in Cairo but the outcome is doubtful. It is hard to see an endgame when the Israeli government openly speaks of withdrawing troops from southern Gaza to regroup ahead of an assault on Hamas in Rafah, the border point that is choked with refugees. Meanwhile, Hamas has indicated that it wants to link the fate of the 129 hostages of the 253 it seized in a killing spree on October 6, 2023, to the permanent withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza. The Israeli Defense Forces claims that 34 of the remaining hostages are dead. This intransigence on both sides has caused the death of 600 Israeli troops and over 30,000 Palestinians in Gaza, mostly women and children. Israel's indiscriminate attacks on civilians, including hospitals, in Gaza are being increasingly viewed as genocide globally rather than a legitimate security operation against Hamas.

It is unclear what Hamas can gain in this prolonged asymmetric war in which the Israeli military might is supported by the US, the world's most powerful arsenal. But there is much benefit for Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving Prime Minister, who secured a parliamentary majority in the fifth election in four years. The alliance between his Likud Party and ultra-orthodox and far-right parties has given Israel one of its most right-wing governments in its history. But his popularity was dented before the Hamas attack after his party rammed through a Bill in Parliament that removed judicial oversight (of the Supreme Court and lower courts) on government decisions. Protests against this law surged steadily till Hamas' assault. Israel's retaliatory war, therefore, has ensured his continuation in office. Equally, the regional escalation of the war into Lebanon and Syria as a proxy battle against Hamas' major sponsor, Iran, enables him to acquire validity to attract continuing military support, now increasingly under question domestically and globally, from the US. Israel's open admission of responsibility for the attack on Iran's embassy in Damascus, Syria, can be viewed as a symptom of Tel Aviv's war aims. Now, prolonging the war has become an urgent imperative for Mr Netanyahu since protests against his government's inability to, first, prevent that Hamas attack last October and, second, bring home the hostages, 12 of whom, tragically, were returned in body bags, escalated over the weekend.

India's approach to the war has sought to balance its heavy dependence on Israel for security technology with its historic, principled position on the two-state solution for Palestinians. Initially abstaining from a UN resolution for an immediate humanitarian truce, India recovered a month later by voting in favour of a resolution condemning Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. Last week, however, it abstained from a resolution holding Israel responsible for possible war crimes in Gaza. All in all, including the well-meaning decision to send Indian workers to Israel, India has been carefully balancing its diplomatic approach, including with the Arab nations. This could become more difficult if the war prolongs, which seems to be the overwhelming possibility.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Buybacks and their importance

Paying money back to shareholders does not mean that you have no growth. It may simply mean that you do not need all the capital you generate for your core business

One of the critical tools used by corporations globally and especially in the US to return capital to investors is buybacks of stock. Partly done to offset dilution due to share-based employee compensation and partly due to greater tax efficiency, it has become the primary means to return capital to investors. One of the less well-known facts is that since the year 2000, net share buybacks in the US have totalled \$5.5 trillion. They have been the single-largest

source of demand for US equities. The next biggest source of demand has been buying from foreign investors, and that totalled \$1.8 trillion in this period. Since the year 2000, buying from domestic retail investors has totalled only \$100 billion (households and mutual funds). One of the biggest reasons for US exceptionalism in terms of stock market performance has been this dynamic of large, sustained net buying by US companies of their own stocks. The scale and pace are unprecedented compared to any other geography. At the moment we are seeing gross buying of about \$1 trillion per annum in terms of actual buyback execution from US companies and this number continues to rise. Beyond the obvious imperative to neutralise share-based compensation, share buybacks have now become accepted wisdom as the primary means to return capital to shareholders. All the technology giants have come on board, with each of them having large buyback programmes. Even the poster child of growth stocks, Nvidia, as recently as six months ago, announced a \$25 billion buyback.

If we look at a more micro level, Apple is a very good example of the power of buybacks. Till recently the world's most valuable company, buybacks have

been a critical part of its shareholder value equation. iPhone sales began to slow in 2015. Since then Apple has grown its earnings per share (EPS) at a compound annual growth rate of approximately 13 per cent (2015-23). Interestingly in this period top line growth was only 6.4 per cent per annum, and pre-tax profits grew only 5.7 per cent. The gap was made up by lower tax rates and share buybacks, which combined to deliver over 6.7 per cent per annum EPS growth. Of the 13 per cent EPS growth, fully 5 per cent was delivered by net share buybacks. Share buybacks have been over \$550 billion during this period and the company has retired over 30 per cent of its share count. Share buybacks were most critical between 2015 and 2019, when pre-tax profits actually declined and the company bought back nearly 6 per cent of its shares every year with the peak being 7 per cent retired in 2019. Even today the company buys back more than \$85 billion of stock every year.

Apple is an exceptional company with a free cash flow (FCF) conversion of 112 per cent and given that it has limited capital spend and acquisitions, it has been able to pay out an average of 101 per cent of its FCF to shareholders over this period. Its profits and FCF at over \$100 billion are also on a different scale. Apple does pay dividends, but chooses to pay only about 15 per cent of its FCF through this route of capital return, and 85 per cent of FCF is returned via buybacks. Is it not surprising that for the world's most valuable company, fully 40 per cent of its earnings growth between 2015 and 2023 has come from share buybacks.

Since Apple started down this path of capital return, it has had a noticeable improvement in valuation. Its



AKASH PRAKASH

Huge tax and licence raj in liquor

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and some other leaders are behind bars because of corruption charges against them in liquor policy for Delhi. This has understandably received much attention. However, this is missing the elephant in the room — the millions of consumers *all over India* who pay a very high price for liquor. Domestic tax on liquor can be, in one way or another, well above 200 per cent! Customs duty is also huge at 150 per cent. And, it is also the licence raj that is problematic. There is a need for an overhaul of policies on liquor across the country. It is true that there are vested interests that can come in the way. However, often vested interests thrive on the basis of the mindset of the public. So, it is important to see where the more important misconceptions lie.

A common belief is that state governments impose a very high tax on liquor in the public interest. This is not entirely correct. It is a very soft option to collect large tax revenues! Though a big tax can reduce the consumption of liquor to some extent, it is a blunt policy. It affects the budgets of many households for all things other than liquor. Now very many drinkers enjoy responsibly with friends and family every now and then. So why punish them? And, the licence requirements on serving liquor at eateries and social gatherings can be literally taxing, restrictive, and harassing. Also, as liquor becomes expensive due to very high taxes, people tend to very gradually and subconsciously shift to lower-quality and cheaper brands. At the bottom of the income pyramid, the

consumption of low-quality country liquor and illegal liquor rises. This has an adverse impact on health.

Another common belief is that state governments just cannot do without a very high tax on liquor. This is not quite true. Even a poor state like Bihar has imposed prohibition on liquor. The point is not that this is a good policy; the point is that the state government is making attempts at managing its finances without any tax on liquor. There is a lesson here for other governments that too can explore other sources of revenues. Of course, it is important that the central

government helps state governments in this endeavour. A beginning can be made if the Centre cuts down substantially on cess and surcharge, and it increases its regular taxes. The former accrues to the Centre only while the latter needs to be shared with the states.

Yet another widespread belief is that liquor cannot be brought under goods and services tax (GST). This is questionable if we allow for the possibility of a legislative change. If liquor is under GST, just as cigarettes are, this will also serve a larger purpose as this will unify and simplify the overall tax structure. The public authorities can charge the highest 28 per cent rate under GST. Of course, since part of the GST goes to the Centre, it is necessary that the latter compensates the states adequately.

Last but not the least, a common view is that instead of the state government itself having the monopoly to sell liquor through its own stores, it is better to conduct auctions to give licences to private



GURBACHAN SINGH

relative price/forward earnings were 0.6 in the beginning of 2016. This is now 1.25, having peaked at 1.5 times. Part of the valuation expansion is undoubtedly due to the market treating the company as a consumer franchise rather than a hardware company, but part of the credit must also be given to the decision to return all the FCF to shareholders. Higher payout ratios are clearly linked to higher valuations and rising return on equity. Investors do not like companies squatting on excess cash.

This is the power of buybacks and capital return. What is the relevance of all this for India? In our markets beyond the information-technology services giants and a few exceptions like Bajaj Auto, nobody uses buybacks. Partly there is limited tax incentive to do so and not much share-based compensation, and even today most Indian companies consider capital returns as a signal of having gone ex growth. Many promoters still consider the cash in the company as their money and are averse to sharing this pie with minority investors.

There is also the risk that given the current optimism around the long-term prospects of the country, there is desire to keep investing even if the core business does not require all the profits being generated. In today's India every growth opportunity looks exciting. Markets have also lost a bit of their focus on capital discipline and may not penalise companies going into unrelated growth areas.

This is a time of high profits and cash flows. Animal spirits of corporate India are rising. Everyone is optimistic and bullish. The worst mistakes are made in the best of times. Capital discipline can easily slip. Hopefully companies will closely evaluate any unrelated business investment and realise that capital return is a viable option. Paying money back to shareholders does not mean that you have no growth. It may simply mean that you do not need all the capital you generate for your core business. Times like today of strong corporate profitability are the most dangerous for investors. This is where the art of capital allocation comes into view. Companies must maintain their standards for return on capital thresholds. That is how they got their premium valuations and rising payouts will not lead to valuation compression.

This is an especially important lesson for our next-gen companies, many of which will hit the markets soon. Once they achieve profitability, many of these companies have limited capital intensity and will generate large FCF. Instead of continually entering new businesses and using the cash, there may be a case for them to consider capital return and buybacks. They will anyway need to offset share dilutions, but can do many more share buybacks than required to simply offset share-based compensation.

Every company has its own unique set of circumstances and growth options. Capital return must be one of the options management considers when thinking of capital allocation. All new growth projects and businesses do not always make sense. Despite the current temptation, we must stick to thresholds based on return on capital. As investors we also have an obligation to enforce capital discipline through markets and valuations.

The writer is with Amansa Capital

Congress talks the walk



BOOK REVIEW

CHINTAN GIRISH MODI

The Indian National Congress is still reeling from the shock of having its bank accounts brought under the Income Tax Department's scrutiny just before the Lok Sabha elections of 2024 but it is clear that the party will have to think creatively and quickly to seize and own the narrative.

Bharat Jodo Yatra: Reclaiming India's Soul, a comprehensive volume of essays edited by Pushparaj Deshpande and Ruchira Chaturvedi, might be a useful weapon to deploy, especially to woo urban voters who have the disposable income to buy and read non-fiction in English.

This book offers a glowing account of the Bharat Jodo Yatra, an epic march across India from Kanyakumari in the south to Kashmir in the north, which was led by Congress scion and Member of Parliament Rahul Gandhi between September 2023 and January 2024. It seeks to convince readers that the yatra was not simply a rebranding exercise for the party but a passionate attempt to safeguard the democratic ethos and secular fabric of our country.

Both the editors walked with Mr Gandhi in the Bharat Jodo Yatra. Mr Deshpande is the director of the Samruddha Bharat Foundation; he helped with the civil society outreach and interactions in a few states. Ms Chaturvedi, who works as the national convener of social media and digital communications for the Congress, coordinated the yatra's social media activities.

With this background, it is not surprising that their book is largely self-congratulatory unlike journalist Dilip

D'Souza's recent book *Roadwalker: A Few Miles on the Bharat Jodo Yatra*, published by Penguin Random House, on the same subject. While this compilation is not structured as a manifesto, it does a fairly good job of emphasising the values and principles for which the party stands, and who its allies are.

In addition to essays by Congress insiders such as Mallikarjun Kharge, Salman Khurshid, Supriya Shrinete, Chandu Ommen, Kanhaiya Kumar, Utkarsha Rupwate, Mahima Singh, Hrishikesh Singh, Sasikanth Senthil, Meenakshi Natarajan, R Sudha, Lhingkim Haokip Shingnaisui, Jothimani Sennimalai, and of course Rahul Gandhi, the volume also features essays from others who are sympathetic to its politics—Mehbooba Mufti of the People's Democratic Party, Supriya Sule of the Nationalist Congress Party, Sanjay Raut of the Shiv Sena, and Doraisamy Raja of the Communist Party of India.

Will the Congress-led Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) be able to defeat the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)? This remains to be seen at the polls but it is worth noting that the allies of the Congress seem to have found

a substantial common ground despite the differences that they have had in the past, and might still have behind the scenes. Read this book to find out how Mr Gandhi managed to earn respect and trust despite the BJP's incessant efforts to characterise him as "Pappu" — a good-for-nothing dynast who is out of touch with the pulse of the people of India.

Given his experience as a journalist, Mr D'Souza is able to temper his generous appreciation with incisive critique but this book provides a far more vivid picture of the yatra because

it stitches together multiple voices. It includes, for instance, a moving essay titled "Walking with Rahul Gandhi: Bridging Hearts and the Nation" written by Bhanwar Meghwanshi, who joined the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) as a teenager and left it five years later in order to become an activist and

journalist chronicling the Dalit movement. He was pleased to see Mr Gandhi making time to interact with farmers, labourers, poets, media persons, environmental activists, human rights defenders as well as women and youth representatives from Dalit, tribal and other minority communities. Mr Meghwanshi writes, "Rahul Gandhi also asked me about my views on the caste census and said that he did not understand why Dalit tribals joined the RSS." He came away from the Yatra thinking of Mr Gandhi as "a nice,

sensitive man, who listened to everyone but also spoke his mind". Though this anthology keeps reinforcing an inclusive image of Mr Gandhi, it also makes room to point out some significant absences. In the essay "Will Yatras Be Charting a New Path? Why Not?" Medha Patkar and Guddi S L from the National Alliance for People's Movements write, "We were hopeful that a galaxy of Muslim and Christian communities would swell the ranks of the Yatra. After all, given what they were facing, they needed and wanted to join. But this was not to be." They think that Mr Gandhi "has done enough to expose the RSS-BJP" and must now "redress the mistakes made by privatization, liberalization and trickle-down politics." While this aspiration sounds desirable on paper, the harsh reality is that the Congress is now seeking citizen donations for its election campaign in Madhya Pradesh.

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The reviewer is an independent journalist and educator based in Mumbai. He is @chintanwriting on Instagram and X



OPINION

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{ OUR TAKE }

Understanding bull run in BSE

Its new high is emblematic of investor trust in the economy and the government

The combined market cap of stocks listed on the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) touched ₹400 lakh crore for the first time on Monday. What is one to make of this development? Three key takeaways can be listed.

BSE crossing the ₹400 lakh crore market-cap milestone is yet another addition to the rise and rise of Indian equity markets. This is primarily a result of two factors. India continues to be the fastest growing major economy in the world and with the incumbent BJP entering the 2024 contest as a strong favourite, political uncertainty is hardly a problem. These two factors have positioned India very well to reap the dividends of a growing China-plus-one sentiment in the global economy. This is music to the ears of institutional investors, both domestic and international, who see the Indian economy as one of the best long-term bets in the global markets.

Political certainty and high growth, however, are not the only tailwinds for India's equity markets at the moment. There is good reason to believe that the ongoing equity market bull run is also symptomatic of the ongoing churn within the economy. There is more than enough evidence to show that bigger firms and households have done better than their smaller counterparts in the post-pandemic phase. This is likely to have created higher profits for bigger firms and higher savings for well-off retail investors, triggering a virtuous cycle in the equity markets.

To be sure, things could have become difficult if the unequal or K-shaped growth in the post-pandemic phase had created political anger forcing the government to loosen its fiscal purse strings. However, the interim budget presented by the Narendra Modi government in February shows that the government is not worried about any such political backlash. The current government's ability to mute inequality-related policy tensions is, for all practical purposes, unique in post-reform India.

Is the ongoing bull run in equity markets an unambiguous good for the Indian economy? Stock markets, more than anything, are seen as a bellwether of economic sentiment. However, in an economy, where economic fortunes are sharply divided along class lines, even the sections which are not experiencing an improvement in economic sentiment may also make spending, investment and borrowing decisions based on misplaced exuberance. This is exactly what RBI has been trying to flag in the recent past.

Battling the doping challenge in sports

The writing is on the wall, and it shouldn't please India. The World Anti-Doping Agency's 2022 report saw India being identified as the country with the highest number of doping offenders. Out of 4,064 samples collected from Indian athletes, 127 individuals tested positive for banned substances, constituting 3.26% of the sample size. This report comes on the back of a 10-year WADA global study of positive doping tests by children and young teenagers which saw India emerge as the second worst in the world in this respect. These reports establish that India has a serious doping problem, one that is fast spiralling out of control. One of the big reasons for this happening is the awards and cash rewards that are doled out by states and the sports ministry. The money and the jobs are temptations that many athletes have been unable to resist. The doping isn't hi-tech and that is apparent from the number of athletes who are being caught in the WADA net.

To counter this, India needs to work on two fronts. One, educate athletes on the dangers of doping and make sure that youngsters are taking the right supplements. Two, test not just international athletes but others as well. So rather than rely on WADA, the National Anti-Doping Agency needs to step up tests at the age-group and state level. The final push has to come from the government. India needs to criminalise doping. If you get caught, you go to jail and that should apply not just to athletes but also coaches. China has shown that it can work. Since formally criminalising doping in sports on March 1, 2021, their numbers have dropped. In the 2022 WADA report that India topped, China's athletes were tested 19,228 times (almost five times that of India) but produced just 33 positive results. It may seem harsh but given the way things are, it just might be the way India needs to go as well.

Tread with caution on Katchatheevu

India and Sri Lanka share a civilisational mutuality. They must be exemplars of it on Katchatheevu, making it a vibrant shelter for fishermen from both countries

The reactivation of the Katchatheevu issue following allegations that the island was "callously" given away by the Congress government of Indira Gandhi to Sri Lanka in 1974 has brought into sharp focus the history of this dispute between India and Sri Lanka. That dispute is embedded in the ecosystem of the Palk Straits and involves ethnic Tamils living on both sides of the international maritime boundary line (IMBL).

That the island now lies on the Sri Lankan side of the IMBL arouses spirited opposition within the political spectrum in Tamil Nadu. The late chief minister (CM) and AIADMK leader, J Jayalalithaa in a fiery speech made while unfurling the national flag from the ramparts of Fort St George in Chennai on August 15, 1991, urged the people of Tamil Nadu to retrieve Katchatheevu. She said that the basic cause of the misery and suffering of fishermen in the Ramanathapuram district was the "gifting away" of the island in the

1974 Agreement between India and Sri Lanka and that her government was, if necessary, even prepared to fight the Centre on this issue.

The response by the ministry of external affairs to an RTI request by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader K Annamalai makes clear that in consultations between the then Indian foreign secretary Kewal Singh and the late Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) leader M Karunanidhi (who was then Tamil Nadu CM) in 1974, the latter had acquiesced in India acceding to the Sri Lankan claims to Katchatheevu. The revelation thus questions the credibility of the DMK's demands for the "return" of the island.

From the geopolitical viewpoint, what follows? Do election-related statements by leaders like the Prime Minister and the external affairs minister have an impact on bilateral relations with Sri Lanka? Domestic political questions do not exist in a vacuum and, in this case, carry foreign policy implications. Although there has been no mention that India will seek the "return" of the island, given the emotion-ridden texture of the Sri Lankan outlook on India, turf-dig concerns have been expressed by Colombo-based influential news outlets. The Sri Lankan foreign minister Ali Sabry has, however, said that this is a problem "discussed and resolved 50 years ago and there is no necessity to have further discussions on this".

International agreements are con-

sidered sacrosanct in international law, they must be kept (*pacta sunt servanda*) in good faith, if international order is to be maintained. This is a fundamental, moral principle. The agreement of 1974 and that of 1976 that followed it, are binding upon both India and Sri Lanka. Any changes must be incorporated and effected only by mutual agreement of both signatories.

During the negotiations leading up to the 1974 agreement, both India and Sri Lanka sought to establish title to this disputed island. The exercise did not result in the reaching of common ground. The possibility of Sri Lanka seeking international arbitration in the matter did exist, an option that India wanted to avoid. India's view was that any differences with neighbouring countries should be resolved through bilateral discussions without outward interference.

India wished to remove irritants in relations with neighbours and provide the government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike with a solution that would burnish its image and blunt the arguments of Sri Lankan Leftist elements who had made Katchatheevu an issue as the scholar Urmila Phadnis noted, "symbolic of India's hegemonistic designs towards its neighbours".

Whether there was lasting appreciation for India's gesture is debatable. A former Indian high commissioner to Sri Lanka, Thomas Abra-



Nirupama Rao



The fact that Katchatheevu now lies on the Sri Lankan side of the IMBL arouses spirited opposition in Tamil Nadu

KUMANAN KANAPATHIPPILLAI

ham once noted: "The relationship from the Sri Lankan side is conditioned by a whole series of historical fears that are extremely complex. I do not think it was even appreciated in Colombo that Delhi deviated from the median line in order to see that Katchatheevu fell outside the Indian side. I do not think Sri Lanka viewed this as an act of generosity. They are very firm that Katchatheevu was their territory."

There have been suggestions that Tamil Nadu should persuade the ministry of external affairs to come to an agreement with Sri Lanka for the island to be "leased in perpetuity" to India for which, obviously, concessions would have to be made, in return. This is by no means an easy process and may not result in a mutually satisfactory conclusion. The fact that Sri Lanka now exercises sovereignty over Katchatheevu is a *fait accompli*. With the benefit of

hindsight, Tamil Nadu should have voiced its concerns and stated its firm opposition to the approach of the central government before the deal was done. History could have been written differently.

India and Sri Lanka share a "civilisational mutuality". They are united by their history, and ties of religion, language and ethnicity. Perhaps the best symbol of this capacity for inclusiveness, and tolerance, is the Church of St Antony, patron saint of fishermen in the area, that exists on the island of Katchatheevu. India and Sri Lanka must be exemplars of that civilisational mutuality on Katchatheevu, making it a vibrant shelter for fishermen from both countries, a haven on choppy seas.

Nirupama Rao is a former foreign secretary and was high commissioner of India to Sri Lanka. The views expressed are personal

{ SIMPLY ECONOMICS }

Pramit Bhattacharya



Poll finance is waiting for a clean-up by ECI

While introducing India's draft constitution in the Constituent Assembly in November 1949, the economist-turned-lawyer BR Ambedkar drew attention to the inequities of the new Republic. "On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions," said Ambedkar. "In politics, we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics, we will be recognising the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value."

Nowhere is the contradiction starker than in the electoral arena. In the world's largest democracy, only a minuscule minority can aspire to contest elections. Wealth has become a key determinant of winnability today. In each successive election, the wealth gap between the winning candidate and the runner-up keeps on growing. The wealth gap between an average member of Parliament (MP) and an average citizen also keeps on growing. Moneybags, dynasts, and dons dominate the candidate lists of all major parties. Such candidates are self-financing, helping a party save on funds, which are then directed towards its small set of "merit quota" candidates.

The widening gap between people and their representatives weakens India's democracy. Reliance on fat cats and shady corporations to run political parties disempowers party cadres, hollowing out intra-party democracy. It also harms the economy by encouraging politicians to vest government agencies with extraordinary discretionary powers. Such powers are deployed to reward donors and harass others. But this culture of discretion also adds to the unease of doing business in the country, limiting new investments and jobs.

To be sure, the wealthy exercise disproportionate power in elections across the world. Some do it to gain direct favours (I give you money and you give me that highway project if you win), others to influence policy (I give you money and you enact a new telecom policy that bleeds my rival), and still others to promote their pet ideological agendas (I give you money and you ensure that schools don't teach Darwin's theories). In each case, the principle of "one man one value" is violated. Yet, some democracies have worked

THE WIDENING GAP BETWEEN PEOPLE AND THEIR REPRESENTATIVES WEAKENS INDIA'S DEMOCRACY. RELIANCE ON FAT CATS AND SHADY CORPORATIONS TO RUN POLITICAL PARTIES DISEMPOWERS PARTY CADRES, HOLLOWING OUT INTRA-PARTY DEMOCRACY

harder than others in limiting the influence of plutocrats. Globally, reforms to regulate the flow of money in politics stand on three legs — transparency norms around political funding, regulation of political parties, and State funding. India needs substantive reforms that address all three aspects.

How might this be achieved? The political scientists Devesh Kapur, Eswaran Sridharan, and Milan Vaishnav have proposed a "grand bargain" in which political parties receive State funding to cover a part of their expenses and, in turn, subject themselves to stringent transparency norms. A new law empowering the Election Commission of India (ECI) would be needed to put such a plan into action, they argue in the 2018 book, *Costs of Democracy: Political Finance in India*.

Right now, political parties face stringent (and unrealistic) spending curbs, which they habitually violate. Political parties hoodwink ECI by getting friendly auditors to certify their financial accounts. Even though they are public entities, political parties face far less scrutiny than private companies.

Kapur, Sridharan, and Vaishnav rightly call for an end to this dysfunctional system. If digital trails can be used to clean up the welfare system, they can be used to clean the electoral system as well. There is no reason why a political party should not be asked to share the voter identification (or Aadhaar details) of each donor with ECI for each paisa it collects. Party accounts should face scrutiny either from the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) or by a panel of independent auditors certified by the Commission.

Once political parties fall in line, they should be allowed to access a State Election Fund (SEF), in proportion to the votes they receive or the donations they earn, or a combination of both. SEF grant rules can be designed intelligently to reduce the role of big money, and to encourage crowd-funding. For instance, SEF could offer a 100% matching grant for each small donation a party receives (say anything less than ₹5,000), and offer only a partial matching grant (say 30% or less) for large donations (₹5,000 or above).

Most politicians know that the current political finance system is deeply problematic, and some of them might welcome such reforms. Legitimate businesses that face unreasonable demands from politicians also stand to gain. The industry lobby group Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) had proposed several meaningful electoral reforms in a 2018 report which echo some of the suggestions of Kapur, Eswaran, and Vaishnav.

ECI needs to take the lead on this, and help shape a consensus on such reforms. Creating a level-playing field for elections should not just mean reining in central investigative agencies that are selectively targeting Opposition leaders. India's electoral arena can be called a level playing field when those without deep pockets are able to stand for elections, and win in large numbers. The *aam aadmi* should not be a rarity in Parliament.

Pramit Bhattacharya is a Chennai-based journalist. The views expressed are personal

{ RAJNATH SINGH } DEFENCE MINISTER



We promised a citizenship act, and we did it. I want to clarify that any citizen of India — whether they are Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi or Jew — nobody's citizenship will go away



Name games Beijing plays with New Delhi

What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet." goes the line in William Shakespeare's play, *Romeo and Juliet*. But apparently, China does not think so, and it recently embarked on yet another exercise to rename places in Arunachal Pradesh, bringing to the fore again the question of the unresolved border. The armies of India and China have been locked in a standoff at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) for around four years following the violent clashes in 2020. During this period, China has also attempted to change the status quo in other places along the LAC.

The renaming comes close on the heels of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Arunachal Pradesh last month to inaugurate the Sela Tunnel that will secure connectivity to Tawang. In 1962, Indian and Chinese troops clashed in Tawang, and yet again in December 2022, the People's Liberation Army made an unsuccessful bid to change the status quo in Tawang. The Sela Tunnel is a force multiplier for the Indian Army since it will improve its ability to move soldiers and armaments quickly to the India-China border.

Beijing recently released a map showing Arunachal Pradesh within China, terming it as Zangnan. While asserting territorial claims, China has put roadblocks in the path of sportspersons from Arunachal with respect to their participation in the Asian Games and World University Games, which Beijing hosted in 2023. China is reportedly settling its citizens in the villages that it has constructed along the LAC. Back to the renaming row, Arunachal is being sucked into a vortex of China's larger aims with respect to religion, identity, and geopolitical contestation with India. In addition to Tawang's strategic importance, it has a special place in Tibetan Buddhism, being the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama. China has been trying to consolidate its hold on Tibet since its annexation in the 1950s. Tibet's capital, Lhasa, has been rocked by unrest in 1989 and 2008. There have been waves of immolations by Tibetan clergy and activists to protest China's policies. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Tibet in 2021, making it the first visit to the region by a head of State in nearly 30 years. During the trip, he visited the newly constructed railway station



Harsh V Pant



Kalpiti Mankikar

at Nyingchi close to the Arunachal border — Nyingchi has been linked to Lhasa via a high-speed train line.

In the Xi era, efforts to sinicise the province where the current Dalai Lama is a revered figure have gathered momentum. Those advocating for the preservation of Tibetan language and culture have been prosecuted on charges of separatism. There have been efforts by the Chinese State to assert greater control over organised religion across China, particularly in Tibet. Senior officials of the Communist Party of China (CPC) have emphasised the need to build a "politically dependable" religious class who bear affection for their nation and religion. In Tibet, the CPC has sought to discredit the institution of the Dalai Lama, dubbing the current temporal head as a separatist. It has also asserted control of Buddhist monasteries and sought to game the reincarnation process. For example, the 11th Panchen Lama, who was barely six years old when he was endorsed in the 1990s, went missing, following which Beijing propped up its own nominee for the important position in Tibetan Buddhism. Beijing has stepped up efforts to erase Tibet's independent identity by trying to popularise its Mandarin nomenclature "Xizang".

In October 2023, China hosted the "Xizang Trans-Himalayan Forum for International Cooperation" that was attended by foreign delegates. Shortly after this gala, it released a white paper themed on Xizang's governance. India can ill afford to neglect this name game and map fare as cartographic warfare is followed by the real McCoy.

The timing chosen by China to resuscitate the boundary dispute is important. It hopes that the border row may find resonance in the public debate ahead of the 2024 general election and thereby put the government on the back foot as the Opposition parties would demand pushback from the government. Chinese actions are a reminder that even as we enter a two-month-long election season, Beijing is unlikely to stay quiet. The challenge from China will continue to manifest in different guises.

Harsh V Pant is vice president for studies and foreign policy at Observer Research Foundation (ORF), New Delhi and Kalpit Mankikar is fellow, China Studies, at ORF. The views expressed are personal



Wipro's CEO switch was not about its share price

Shareholder value data does not explain the firm's change on top. In a flux-filled field like infotech, business performance counts for more and Wipro's challenge still seems quite steep

Top leadership exits, especially if they are abrupt, tend to worry shareholders. In Wipro Ltd's case, however, minority investors seem to have taken Thierry Delaporte's departure as CEO over the weekend, 15 months before his tenure ends, in their stride. The IT major's stock dropped on Monday, but by barely 1%. That reaction suggests little anxiety over its future. Srinivas Pallia, a three-decade Wipro veteran, has taken charge. By the classic public yardstick of any CEO's appraisal, shareholder value, Delaporte's exit would look puzzling. Since he took over as CEO on 6 July 2020, Wipro's shares have climbed about 116%. In comparison, those of TCS rose 81% and of Infosys 94% over the same period. So in terms of enriching owners, Wipro's former chief appears to have done well, although shareholders of HCL Technologies saw even bigger gains (of about 166%). Market value, however, is not the only way owners judge how a company is being run. In this case, just over a quarter of Wipro's shares float freely, with Azim Premji and his family in control of the bulk. This makes space for early-indicator criteria to dominate calls on leadership. Wipro wasn't just lagging its IT peers on business performance, it has had a high degree of management turbulence.

Delaporte took over soon after the outbreak of covid, with the entire industry's stock prices in a crevice. Then came a wave of opportunity as a 'digital pivot' became a general war cry among enterprises globally. While Wipro's business recovery appeared to be in line with that of other IT majors, its results over the past year-and-a-half—an unusually tough patch for the sector—aroused market murmurs that it

was not showing the verve needed to keep pace. Although the former CEO made a couple of big acquisitions in the consultancy space, hired fresh executives and put the company through a rejig of operations, the impact of his plans on both revenues and profits left a lot to be desired. Its top-line rose 47% during Delaporte's tenure, but profits climbed just 5.5%. Its operating margin in the third quarter of 2023-24 had shrunk from the time he took over. For the entire fiscal year, Wipro is the only IT firm among India's top four that may report a revenue drop—which is suspected to have been the last straw for the Premji family. Disgruntlement among executives—hundreds left—did not aid the CEO's cause. Among the grumbles that surfaced was a badly managed integration of new businesses and Delaporte being away from Wipro's Bengaluru headquarters too often.

To be sure, Rishad Premji, Wipro's executive chairman and Azim Premji's son, had shown confidence in Delaporte's leadership in July 2023 at its annual general meeting. IT services, though, are subject not just to market flux, but also to larger threats. How IT services fare in the face of artificial intelligence (AI) capable of basic coding, for example, is a ponderable issue right now. Given his career at Wipro, Pallia is expected to steady the business, turn the firm around and brace for a potential future of higher risk. An embrace of AI does hold new prospects for service providers that alter course swiftly. That way, Wipro's challenge is no different from other Indian IT firms that must contend with weak IT-service spends and find new ways to generate value. Pallia will have to move fast. Whether or not to break things will have to be a strategic call.

GUEST VIEW

Let's shatter the glass ceiling for women in senior corporate roles

That so little has changed a decade after a board-diversity mandate highlights India Inc's challenge



SHALLY BHASIN
is a partner at Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas & Co.

The first day of April marked the 10th anniversary of the rule that made it mandatory for all listed firms above a certain size to have at least one woman member on their board of directors. According to Primeinfobase, as of March 2024, of 2,296 listed companies on the National Stock Exchange, 2,251 have at least one woman director on their board. So far, so good. However, the picture changes if we dig a bit deeper. Only 262 companies have three or more women directors; 43 have four women directors; 12 have five women directors; and just three companies have six women directors. This shows that while India Inc has made progress in complying with the statutory provision, genuine—let alone proportionate—representation of women at the board level remains a distant goal.

A breakdown of the composition of women directors at India's top 500 companies makes for revealing reading. According to a report by Institutional Investor Advisory Services & APG, as on 31 March 2022, independent women directors comprised 71.5% of total women directorships of Nifty-500 companies. Out of 827 women directors, 592 were independent directors, 148 were non-independent, non-executive directors (from the promoter family, promoter nominees and other non-promoters); and just 87 were executive directors. Out of these 87, 54 were from

promoter families, two were promoter nominees and only 31 were non-promoters. This data is two years old and may have changed, but it is startling to discover that in the 21st century, among India's top 500 listed companies, there are less than 100 women executive directors and so few professional, non-promoter women in this role.

In these tiny numbers and the micro presence of women at the CXO level lies corporate India's women's-empowerment challenge. These numbers must rise sharply for women to become decision-makers and change agents at the highest levels. In the last 10 years, firms have complied with the gender diversity rule by inducting independent directors. *Per se*, there is nothing wrong with this. Independent directors are the lifeline of good governance, after all. But for the pool of competent independent women directors to expand, the number of women at senior/CXO levels must rise substantially. Otherwise, the danger is that women from unrelated fields with little relevant experience will get pitchforked onto boards and their contribution being limited may reinforce the false belief that they should not be there.

Businesses must follow a deliberate strategy of hiring, retaining and promoting female talent. The presence of women in the workforce drops from the entry to mid-management level, which reduces the pool for CXO elevation. A key reason for this is what former PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi described as the conflict between managerial and domestic responsibilities. "Total, complete conflict. When you have to have kids you have to build your career. Just as you're rising to middle management, your kids need you because they're teenagers, they need you for the teenage years," Nooyi had said.

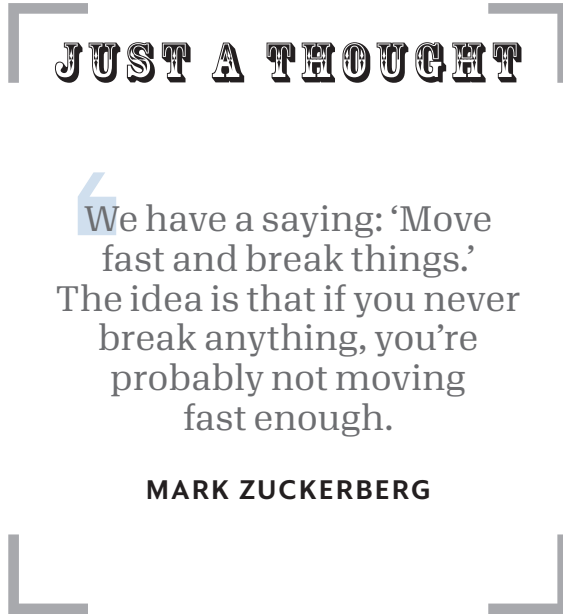
Companies must help their women employees manage this conflict. Deloitte's 2023 work report suggests that workplace flexibility is the primary factor driving women's career choices.

To increase women's participation at the highest levels, an environment conducive to their retention and success needs to be created. This might include non-linear work hours, reduced commute time, flexible work locations and more financial and institutional support for dependent care.

Simultaneously, companies should build a pipeline of women leaders. Quantifiable and clear targets should be set for the number of women at various levels, including leadership positions, and these should be tracked. Policies should be designed to promote, reward and mentor high-performing women managers and enable them to shatter the glass ceiling. A few companies have mandated that when there are male and female candidates of equal merit, the woman must be chosen. This should become a universal practice. But more importantly, there should be a level playing field for women at the workplace. These changes have to be driven from the top. Creating a pipeline of women leaders should not be the HR department's responsibility. It should be a 'key result area' of the CEO.

Here, it must be pointed out that greater women representation at the CXO and board level is not just about women's empowerment (not that this is not sufficient reason). Studies suggest it is good for business as well. According to a 2020 McKinsey report (*Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters*), companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 25% more likely to have above-average profitability than companies in the fourth quartile. Its finding: The greater the representation, the greater the outperformance.

France and Norway have mandated 40% women's representation at the board level. Some have called upon India Inc, too, to increase its number of women board members. For this measure to be successful, companies should focus on expanding the overall pool of female managers and leaders.



MY VIEW | MUSING MACRO

The persistence of unequal growth will be bad for India

AJIT RANADE



is a Pune-based economist.

The World Inequality Lab (WIL) recently published a report, *Income and Wealth Inequality in India 1922-2023: Rise of the Billionaire Raj*. The subtitle is a nod to the name of a 2018 book by James Crabtree, then a *Financial Times* correspondent and considered an avid India watcher. The book described itself as a journey through India's new gilded age and had the imprint of a journalist's keen eye for detail and drama. It had ample hints about India's deepening cronyism. It won praise for being an invaluable commentary and also the Business Book of the Year award at a prestigious lit-fest. Yet, recently Crabtree admitted that he got some of his prognosis completely wrong. He and others had predicted that India was destined to be ruled forever by minority governments with cobbled coalitions. Two national elections have proved this prediction utterly wrong and a third is on its way. He suggested that foreigners like himself ought to observe a moment of humility, as they'd had no clue

about the transformative leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The second wrong prediction was that inequality would decline in India, as liberal democracy and capitalist growth became more inclusive. In fact, India's trend is the opposite. The latest WIL report shows inequality increasing.

The state of wealth and income inequality is the worst in 100 years. The top 1% of the country receives nearly 23% of the annual national income and holds a staggering 40% of the wealth. The country now has 271 dollar-billionaires, with 94 being added in 2023 alone. One of the authors of the report is Thomas Piketty, who is the world's foremost critic of worsening inequality everywhere. Piketty's research uses data not just from income and expenditure surveys, but also from income-tax filings. The latter tend to be more truthful than survey responses. But using tax data in the Indian context has severe limitations. It does not stretch back for 100 years. The fraction of people who file income tax returns is small; and only a tiny fraction of them account for the bulk of taxes collected. So there is a double skew.

The point is not to quibble with the data sources used in the WIL report. Inequality has worsened in India across dimensions, beyond income and wealth. It is reflected in

access to good-quality education and health-care, in basic amenities like drinking water, and in securing jobs and livelihoods. The latest unemployment report published jointly by the International Labour Organization and Institute for Human Development paints a grim picture on youth unemployment, especially of those with college degrees, and of wage stagnation. That this is happening while India is among the fastest-growing economies in the world makes the inequality phenomenon worrying.

The more contentious debate is on growth versus inequality. One view, echoed by the chief economic advisor, is that India must focus on promoting high growth and ignore inequality for now. It is the growth process that will generate the dividends required for a more generous redistribution policy. India's free-food scheme, covering 813 million people for the next five years, provides basic food security. The government can afford it only if high growth leads to high tax revenues, direct or indirect.

The opposing view is that inequality has reached unacceptable levels, and that the growth process itself is causing inequality to worsen. In 1990, China and India had roughly the same economic size, population, per capita income and global rank. Today, China is the world's second-largest economy and its rank by per capita income is 68. India is the fifth-largest economy with a per capita rank of 141. The difference in growth rates over three decades is about 3 percentage points. But China's growth has delivered benefits that are more widely diffused in its population, whereas the lion's share of India's growth went to people at the very top. That's why India's per capita rank is stuck. The income growth rate of the bottom half has stayed below the average growth rate of national income over that long period. Everyone's income was rising, but at the top, it was galloping.

Aided by liberalization, the growth process unleashes innovation and animal spirits, which helps higher-productivity sectors

surge ahead while others lag. In the early stages of such growth, income inequality tends to increase due to urbanization and industrialization, and then decreases as a threshold level of development is reached. The decline is attributed to increased access to education, technology and more inclusive social and economic policies. This is the famous Kuznets hypothesis and the inverted U-curve of inequality versus growth. But in India's history of the past three decades, the evidence is ambiguous or contradictory. There is a 'winner takes all' element, and then the winner stays permanently ahead. Social and financial capital enjoys an inter-generational advantage. The chances of churn, wherein someone from the bottom deciles is thrown into the top-most decile within one generation, are slim.

Persistent inequality might be acceptable so long as there is sufficient social and economic mobility and churn. But a growth process that leads to rising inequality and more rigidities is ultimately detrimental.

We must consider the possibility that reducing some inequality could be growth-enhancing for India. We can do this not merely by means of more welfare spending, but by increasing public spending on education and enhancing human capital.

If central banks are in thrall to gold's glitter, why not others?

While the covid shock and other setbacks got in the way, data indicates that employment in India is on a firm recovery path



When we try to replicate their work, we get interesting results. We calculate the employment ratio as the ratio of India's overall employment (sourced from RBI-KLEMS) to the total population (15-64), taken from the World Bank database. Sure enough, the ratio has declined by about six percentage points from 64.1% to 58.2% between 1999-00 and 2021-22. Remember, RBI-KLEMS data is available only up to 2021-22. However, the story is different if we calculate the non-farm employment ratio. The non-farm employment ratio has increased by 7.6 percentage points. It has gone up from 25.7% to 33.3%. This is healthy.



One more positive trend with respect to employment creation needs highlighting. The World Bank's *SADU* mentions, "Larger establishment sizes in non-agricultural sectors have been associated with significantly higher long-run non-agri-

These are the author's personal views.

Global worker migration patterns will inevitably shift

is chairman, InKlude Labs. Read Narayan's Mint columns at www.livemint.com/avisiblehand

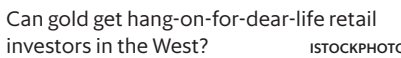
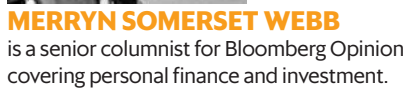
First, consider birth rates. These have been declining and are now plunging in the developed world. Birth rates for Portugal, Greece and Italy are now at 1.4 (number of births per woman) or below. They are even lower for Korea and Hong Kong, at 0.8 and China at 1.2 respectively. In the next three decades to 2050, a dozen different regions of the world will experience vastly different

According to a recent report from the United Nations Population Division, of eight world regions, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, Europe and Northern America, Australia and New Zealand, and Latin America and the Caribbean had the highest proportions of working-age people aged 25-to-64 years in 2022, accounting for 56%, 54%, 53% and 51% of their total population, respectively. However, due to ageing, the percentage of persons of working age has stabilized or has started to decrease in these regions. The implication of these dramatic changes in birth rates and in age bulge of populations is

This combination of tight labour markets

Immigration is a part answer to the data mystery of super-charged employment numbers in the US today. India is the second largest source, after Mexico, of legal migrants into the US. The number of inter-

P.S: "Travel is the language of peace," said Mahatma Gandhi. To which one might add 'migration.'



How do you invest? There are ETFs, of course. But the miners are also worth looking at. Back in early March, John Hathaway of Sprott Asset Management pointed out that the entire gold-mining sector in the US had a market capitalization of less than that of just Mastercard Inc—and not much more than Nvidia Corp rose in a single day when it last reported earnings. They've begun to move a little since: the iShares Gold Producers ETF is up 17% since a double-digit decline in 2022. But it's still way off the highs of 2011, something that makes little sense given the rise in the metal itself. There could be fireworks ahead for those miners. But either way, it might be worth putting a little gold in your portfolio. If it's a good enough everything hedge for China's central bank, it should be good enough for the rest of us. **©BLOOMBERG**

Powerful demographic forces are at work that will cause migration towards rich economies



THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

WORDS HAVE NO POWER TO IMPRESS THE MIND
WITHOUT THE EXQUISITE HORROR OF THEIR REALITY.
— EDGAR ALLAN POE

The IndianEXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A CALL TO ACTION

SC ruling linking climate change mitigation to fundamental rights should lead to greater ownership of a pressing challenge

THE SUPREME COURT of India has taken an expansive view of two Fundamental Rights enshrined in the Constitution — Right to Equality under Article 14 and Right to Life and Liberty under Article 21 — to underline the need to protect lives and livelihoods in the face of climate change, one of the toughest and most pressing global challenges. The significance of the Court's verdict — delivered on March 21, uploaded on the SC's website on Saturday — cannot be overstated. Evidence for the vulnerability of Indians to climate change is mounting by the day. Floods have become more frequent and intense, rainfall patterns are changing and heatwaves pose serious health risks. Several studies, including IPCC reports, have warned that global warming will put an increasing number of Indians at risk in the coming years. Yet, the toll taken by receding glaciers, landslides, sea-level rise, poor air and the loss of green lungs is rarely an issue for the country's political class even in an election year. Ecology has, by and large, remained the concern only of academics, civil society groups and activists. The SC's prod could be the first step towards a wider ownership of the tasks that lie ahead.

The apex court has, from time to time, seen environmental protection through the lens of rights. In *M C Mehta v Union of India* (1987), for instance, it treated the right to live in a pollution-free environment as a part of the Right to Life. Since then, several SC verdicts — including as late as March this year, in a case related to the mining major Vedanta — have underlined that people have a right to breathe unpolluted air, drink clean water and live a healthy life. In its ruling on climate change, the Court made important connections between human rights and global warming mitigation. "Without a clean environment which is unimpacted by the vagaries of climate change, the right to life is not fully realised. The right to health is impacted due to factors such as shifts in vector-borne diseases, rising temperatures, droughts, crop failures and storms," it said.

Governments have not always given proper respect to SC rulings that underline the links between ecology and human dignity. Delhi's continuing air pollution is a classic example of the hiatus between jurisprudence and policy. The lack of executive action is symptomatic of a larger problem. Environmental issues like air and water quality receive attention only when they become an emergency. But with climate change, crisis episodes have multiplied. Year after year, extreme weather events expose the unpreparedness of India's cities, towns, and increasingly, even rural areas. These events also invite questions on the country's developmental endeavours which haven't always been sensitive to ecological concerns. The SC has underlined the need to apply correctives: "States are compelled to take effective measures to mitigate climate change". Its ruling should be seen as a call to action.

REACHING OUT

IIT-Delhi's initiative to help students who are struggling academically is much-needed and heartening

IF 21-YEAR-OLD ANIL Kumar's long journey from Banda district in Uttar Pradesh to the hallowed halls of IIT-Delhi embodied the hope that animates the arcs of lakhs of young Indians, as they follow the path of higher education, his death by suicide in September last year echoed an all-too-familiar despair. Following Kumar's death and in response to the alarming trend of suicide by students who find themselves crumbling under academic pressure, IIT-Delhi set up an Academic Progress Group (APG), also in September, to help out those struggling to keep up with their studies. This was an encouraging sign of an institute responding to the needs of its students and stepping up to the need to create a supportive and enabling environment. According to documents accessed by the Indian Express through the Right to Information Act, the APG has so far identified 192 undergraduate students as "academically adrift" and has permitted "exceptional cases" to stay with a family member on campus.

Already in 2024, five student suicides have been reported at various IITs — two in the Kanpur campus and one each in Delhi, BHU and Roorkee. In July last year, the Union Minister of State for Education, Subhas Sarkar, told Parliament that in the previous five years, there had been 98 student suicides in central educational institutes (central universities, IITs, NITs, IIITs, IIMs and IISERs). The numbers speak of a sobering reality, and of a pressure that, in most cases, begins at home and continues in the highly competitive environment of institutes like the IITs. For many students with several years of hard work behind them and the promise of a better future for themselves and their families before them, failure is unendurable. The problem becomes far more acute in the case of students from marginalised groups and regions, for whom success at an IIT may seem like the only way out of generations of poverty. According to data presented by the Ministry of Education in Lok Sabha in March last year, nearly half of those who died by suicide in IITs since 2018 were from SC, ST and OBC communities. Clearly, it is not enough that students from deprived backgrounds, like Kumar, make it to prestigious institutes; they must be enabled to avail themselves of the opportunities. This can only happen when the institutes themselves become sensitive to their needs.

Before he joined IIT-Delhi, Kumar had written in one of his notebooks, "Since my childhood, my aim was to become a scientist. I didn't know then that scientists are not made, they are born..." For institutes tasked with helping young people shape their own futures, listening to them is the first step towards addressing their anxieties.

THE OMEN

For a world on edge, fictional escapism might just be what the doctor ordered. Rise in horror book sales is a pointer

LITERARY FOLKLORE HAS it that Stephen King's predilection for the macabre came from having witnessed a friend die in a train collision as a child. He never quite remembered the incident, but for years afterwards, he was haunted by the morbid. Later, when he chanced upon books by H P Lovecraft, the American horror writer, King knew that he had found his calling. Horror would be his métier for it allowed him the comfort of making sense of what terrified him. It is a truth seldom given its due that a fraught present and an uncertain future seek catharsis not in the familiar but in the eerie and the horrifying. In a year worn out by wars — between Russia and Ukraine and Israel's unrelenting retaliatory action against Palestine — lingering pandemic woes, economic uncertainty and climate anxiety, a recent report in *The Guardian* has shown that between 2022-2023, sales of horror books have risen by an unprecedented 54 per cent. The streak has continued into the first quarter of 2024.

The rise of horror fiction has historically coincided with periods of social unrest. In 1764, when Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* — acknowledged as the first Gothic horror novel — was published, it seemed at odds with the great modernist strides of the era. Walpole's novel, a retreat into medieval intrigue and supernatural terror, came as a reaction to the anxieties around the Industrial Revolution, the unprecedented economic transformations and challenges to organised religion that it had set off. Likewise, the rise in dystopian horror fiction in the 20th century could be traced to the possibilities of nuclear war.

Unsurprisingly, the current surge in horror veers towards the political and the feminist, a reaction to and escape from, perhaps, some of the more terrifying real-life prospects — a rollback on abortion rights or democratic freedoms in some of the world's foremost democracies or the spectre of the climate crisis in the time of the Anthropocene. For a world on edge, fictional escapism might just be what the doctor ordered.



RAJANI SINHA

THE INDIAN ECONOMY seems to be in a sweet spot with healthy growth, moderating inflation, strong FII inflows and healthy corporate and banks' balance sheets. Recent economic data releases showing GDP growth at 8.4 per cent in the third quarter of 2023-24 and PMI Manufacturing at a 16-month high of 59.1 in March are adding to economic optimism. Our credit ratio (number of rating upgrades to downgrades) is at a healthy 1.92 in the second half of 2023-24 (as against a 10-year average of 1.57), reflecting the good health of the corporate and banking sector. But that's not to say that all is good. There are still concerns and the economy needs to tread cautiously in the new fiscal year.

India has recorded above 8 per cent growth in the first three quarters of 2023-24, with chances of full year growth turning out higher than the advance estimate of 7.6 per cent. Growth in GDP has mainly been led by investment, while consumption growth remains weak. Consumption GDP is estimated to have grown by 3 per cent in the year, as against a pre-pandemic growth of 7 per cent (2018-19). This data may come as a surprise to many, given the spending euphoria that we are seeing for items like cars, housing, jewellery, travelling. But lower price point categories like FMCG and apparels are somewhat feeling the pinch of cautious consumer spending by the masses. The silver lining is that rural demand that had been muted is showing signs of improvement. As per a Nielsen report, FMCG volume growth in rural areas has improved to 6.2 per cent in the second half of 2023 from 2.2 per cent in the first half. Two-wheeler sales, another indicator of rural demand, is also showing improvement. On the assumption of a normal monsoon this year, we can expect an improvement in overall consumption demand. However, we need to be watchful of layoffs (coupled with weak hiring) in the IT sector and the impact of that on urban consumer sentiments.

The government has continued its focus on capex. But a pickup in private investment will be a critical factor for a sustained growth momentum. There has been increased in-

Indian economy is comfortably placed. Government should focus on inclusivity and sustainability

Interestingly, even with higher interest rates, the Indian economy has been seeing a rapid rise in retail credit. As a precautionary step, the RBI has increased the bank's risk weightage for unsecured personal loans. This has led to some moderation in personal loans growth, but it remains high at around 18 per cent. This trend is here to stay given the changing consumption and saving pattern in the economy and easy access to credit. While so far there are no signs of stress in banks' retail loans, there is a need for banks to remain vigilant on this front.

vestment by the private sector in areas like steel, cement, petrochemicals, automobile, aluminium, renewable energy. The order book of capital goods companies has also increased sharply in the last fiscal year. With capacity utilisation of the manufacturing sector at 74 per cent (close to the long-term average), we can expect the private capex cycle to accelerate in the coming quarters. The CMIE data on project investment is also showing increased intent to invest by the private sector.

India's economic growth in 2023-24 has been mainly led by the manufacturing and services sector, as the agriculture sector suffered from the adverse impact of poor monsoon. Sectors like hotels, auto/auto components, healthcare, realty, iron & steel, pharmaceutical, jewellery retailers have performed well, while chemicals, textile, cut & polished diamonds felt the pinch of weak external demand.

Even while merchandise exports were weak due to the global slowdown, services exports remained healthy. Apart from software services, good performance was also seen in business consulting and travel services. Supported by healthy remittances and services exports, we estimate India's current account deficit at a benign 0.6-0.7 per cent of GDP and at around 1 per cent in 2024-25. We have been seeing very strong FII inflows into the economy, even while net FDI inflows have moderated. FII inflows were at a high of \$41 billion in 2023-24 (as against net outflows of \$5.5 billion in 2022-23). This has taken India's forex reserves to a comfortable level of around \$643 billion. Strong FII inflows are expected to continue in 2024-25 as we see the impact of Indian government bond inclusion in the global indices. However, this also warrants caution given the volatile nature of these flows.

CPI inflation has moderated below RBI's target upper band of 6 per cent. Core inflation has slipped below 4 per cent in the last three months, with persistent disinflation in the services sector. However, high food inflation remains a concern. There is specifi-

cally high inflation in vegetables (30 per cent), pulses (19 per cent) and spices (14 per cent). On the assumption of a normal monsoon this year, we expect CPI inflation to moderate to around 4.8 per cent in 2024-25 from an estimated 5.4 per cent in 2023-24. With inflation moderating, the RBI could opt for a shallow policy interest rate cut in the second half of the fiscal year, provided the US Fed also starts to cut rates by then.

Interestingly, even with higher interest rates, the Indian economy has been seeing a rapid rise in retail credit. As a precautionary step, the RBI has increased the bank's risk weightage for unsecured personal loans. This has led to some moderation in personal loans growth, but it remains high at around 18 per cent. This trend is here to stay given the changing consumption and saving pattern in the economy and easy access to credit. While so far there are no signs of stress in banks' retail loans, there is a need for banks to remain vigilant on this front. While overall bank credit growth has been strong, the deposit growth has remained relatively weak. This poses liquidity risks for banks while putting pressure on their net interest margins. However, the comforting factor is that banks' asset quality remains healthy.

Overall, the Indian economy is comfortably placed with GDP growth likely to be around 7 per cent in the ongoing financial year. Structural developments like digitalisation and increased formalisation appear to have pushed India's potential growth to a higher level. This is an apt time for the government to focus on quality of growth, while remaining vigilant of the lurking risks. This is also an opportune phase for the government to continue the focus on fiscal consolidation (as seen in the interim budget) and reduction in public debt that had shot up during the pandemic. With a new government set to be formed in a few months' time, we hope that there is higher emphasis on inclusive and sustainable growth.

The writer is Chief Economist, CareEdge Ratings



ALAKA SAHANI

SWERVING OFF FROM the presumed requisites of mainstream cinema, the recently-released *Crew* put three women actors — Tabu, Kareena Kapoor Khan and Kriti Sanon — at the centre of a heist comedy. Such a movie should not be seen as an aberration. Yet, it is. The industry has yet to warm up to the idea of women actors, even the A-listers, headlining commercial projects and is quick to question their ability to pull crowds to the theatres. It is a big deal, then, that the *Crew*'s leading ladies are assigned to do the heavy lifting in an entertainer that is both silly and subversive. *Crew*'s charm lies in its ability to take itself lightly. There is no grandstanding and throughout, the film maintains a breezy tone. Even though several recent films, such as *Sukhee* (2023) and *Dhak Dhak* (2023), have tried to bring feminist ideas to the fore or let women characters take centre stage, there is a tendency to blare out criticism of patriarchy, at times quite literally. In *Thank You For Coming* (2023) — the previous theatrical outing of co-producers of *Crew*, Ektaa Kapoor and Rhea Kapoor — the protagonist stands before a packed auditorium and proclaims that she is not ashamed of her desire and actions. She starts shouting "smash patriarchy" into the microphone, inspiring several others present in the auditorium to follow suit. The intention behind this scene might have been to deliver a message loud and clear, but such methods are not always effective. A gentler form of messaging could be more effective.

A NEW CREW TAKES OFF

'Crew' allows its women to be women, not just 'smashers of patriarchy'

For instance, *Laapataa Ladies*'s Manju Maai, an elderly tea stall owner, not only provides shelter to the lost bride Phool but also nudges her to be her own person. The golden rule of "show, don't tell" can be adopted by filmmakers too. In *Sheri* (2021), the lead character, a forest officer played by Vidya Balan, displays great fortitude. In *Darlings* (2022), what stands out is the resilience of the characters essayed by Alia Bhat and Shefali Shah.

Making a departure from the trajectory that women characters often follow, *Crew*'s leading characters don't need to come of age or discover self-love. They are independent and ambitious. They are down, after not getting a salary for six months, but never out. All that these working women want is money to support their professional dreams. Without depending on a male saviour, they find a way out of their misery. They end up creating a mess which they eventually sort out themselves. They enjoy a smoke or splurging on champagne, and at no point do they feel the need to bash men or behave like men. They are unapologetic about wanting to live queen-size without getting bogged down by moral dilemmas. They fight, they make up. They remain true to the sisterhood that they have formed over several flights spent serving passengers and ranting about their financial woes. Their chemistry is crackling and their performances propel the narrative even when the pace of the plot slackens. The sharp comic

timing of Kapoor Khan and Tabu comes to the film's rescue when the proceedings turn outlandish.

The result: With its weekend box-office collections worldwide registering Rs 104.08 crore, *Crew* has emerged as the fifth highest-grossing Hindi film of the year, so far. Indian cinema has been trying to step away from the archaic women-pitted-against-women formula for a while now. This movie furthers that effort. The grandfather of Kapoor Khan's character worries about her single status and advises her to find companions who would make her life better. She does find them — in her co-workers-turned-friends, who even join hands with her to smuggle gold. The men, especially Diljit Dosanjh, who plays Sanon's love interest, and Kapil Sharma, who appears as Tabu's husband, are exemplary "green flags". They don't enjoy as much screen time as the leading ladies do. But they come across as the kind of cheerleaders that women dream of having.

Notwithstanding the stardom that both Dosanjh and Sharma enjoy, they play second fiddle to this energetic trio, who carry out a mid-air heist with as much panache as they groove to "Choli ke peeche kya hai". This crew should pave the way for more fascinating female characters who are sugar, spice, and not necessarily everything nice.

alaka.sahani@expressindia.com



APRIL 9, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

DELHI ON HIGH ALERT

THE PUNJAB POLICE has alerted the Delhi police and the Home Ministry again that some extremists may leave Punjab to hit at their VIP targets in Delhi. The alert was given by Punjab CID chief H S Randhawa. It referred to the movements of terrorists around the Golden Temple and the possibility of the groups entering the capital. Security has been tightened.

INDO-BANGLA FENCE

THERE WOULD BE no going back on the work of erecting the barbed wire fencing along Bangladesh border to check infiltra-

tion, India's High Commissioner in Bangladesh I P Khosla said. He said Bangladesh's protest note had been received by the government and was under study. Construction of the fencing does not violate the border agreement with Bangladesh.

SPACE-EARTH TALK

"IT'S NOT TWINKLE twinkle little star from up here", Indian cosmonaut Sqn Ldr Rakesh Sharma said in a space-earth teletalk. The cosmonaut said he could clearly see the stars and planets as small lights. The interview was telecast by the Doordarshan from the mission control centre in Moscow. Question:

How do you pass your time when there is no work? Sharma: I just peep through the window and watch the timeless space.

INDIA-LIBYA RELATIONS

INDIA AND LIBYA turned a new leaf in their bilateral relations when they decided to upgrade their economic and technical cooperation and explore ways to achieve a deeper-political relationship. These decisions emerged following talks between Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. No joint communique was issued at the end of the Prime Minister's first ever visit to this oil rich country.



THE IDEAS PAGE

Law in its own time

Retrospective nature of law-making and subsequent political witch-hunting is a violation of individual rights, leads to erosion of people’s faith in the system



SHAMIKA RAVI AND
MUDIT KAPOOR

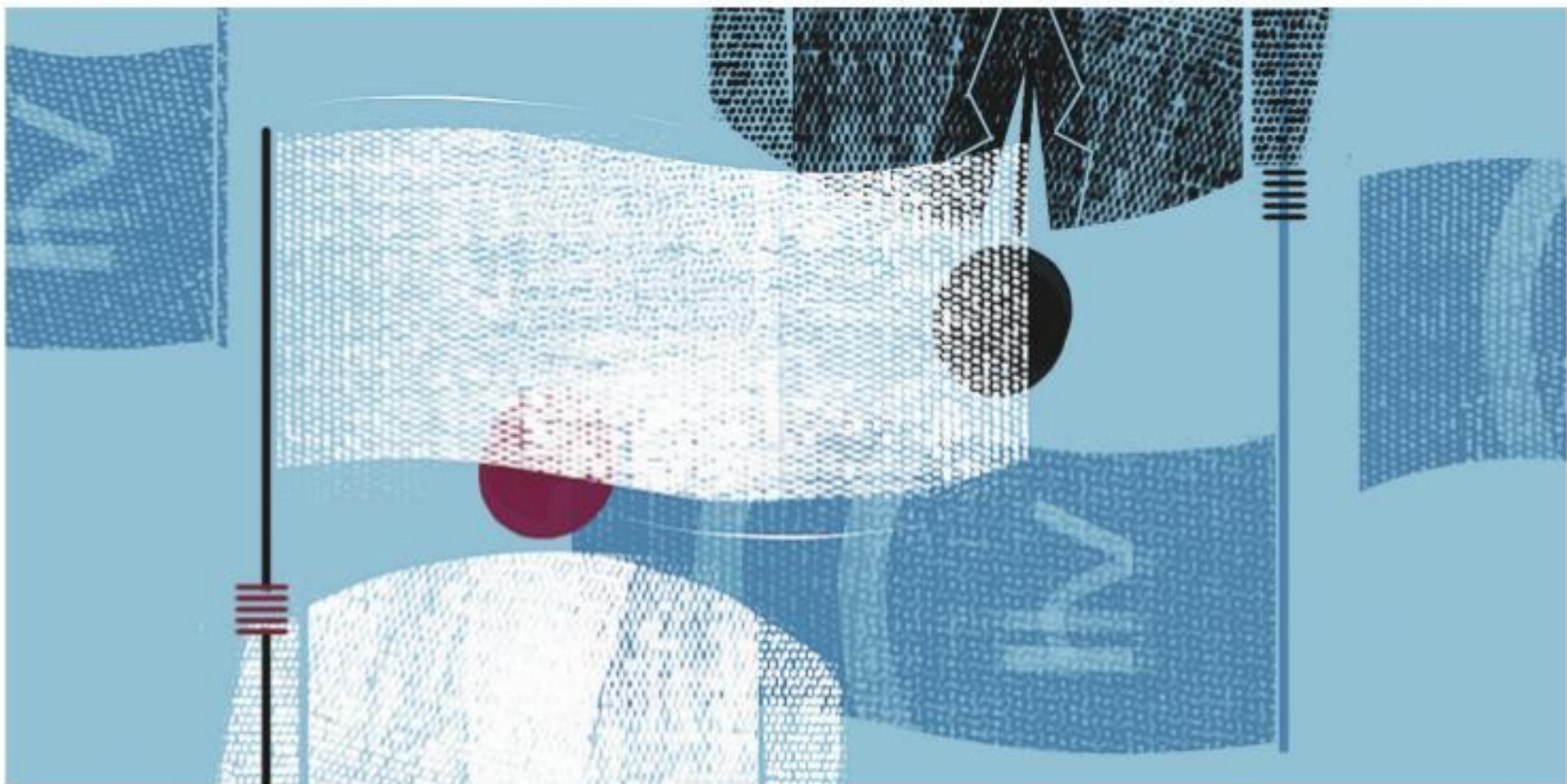
WHILE DEFENDING THE principles enshrined in our Constitution, the country’s highest institutions — the legislature and the judiciary — should be guided by pragmatism and common sense. Unfortunately, when one takes an absolutist stance with no care for the practical implications of their actions, there are unintended consequences and economic costs eventually borne by common people in whose name these principles are being defended.

On May 28, 2012, and February 15, 2024, the legislature and the judiciary created history by passing laws and judgments with a retrospective effect. The retrospective tax (2012) was done to safeguard the country’s sovereignty which was threatened by tax avoidance of manipulative large corporations. In the case of the illegality of electoral bonds (2024), it was done to defend democracy from the rapacious intent of large corporations who could potentially manipulate government via “quid pro quo” to divert resources from the needy and downtrodden. Indeed, such lofty ideals of defending sovereignty and democracy from plunderers are so tempting that they often blind the best of us to the economic consequences of good intentions.

In both instances, the troublesome part of the actions was not the ideals or scrapping of the law, but the retrospective nature of its effect. In both cases, bravado and heroism were the driving forces, since practical consequences, which should have been part of the guiding principle, were completely ignored. It is somewhat surprising on the part of the judiciary to have entirely missed an essential feature of the common law. As Justice Antonin Scalia of the US Supreme Court had said, “In the grand scheme of things, whether the right party won is really secondary. Famous old cases are famous, you see, not because they came out right, but because the rule of law they announced was the intelligent one. Common-law courts performed two functions: One was to apply the law to the facts... But the second function, and the more important one, was to make the law.”

The rule of law that the highest court has established through the electoral bonds judgment is that the most powerful institutions can strike at individual rights retrospectively by annulling a law. The practical consequence of such a rule of law is that individuals must become excessively cautious since their actions can be judged illegal in the future.

With the benefit of hindsight, the economic consequences of the retrospective tax law were a big blow to the confidence of private sector investment, since it introduced a nagging fear of expropriation by the government. The practical consequence has been lower levels of private investment and the massive opportunity cost in terms of loss of additional jobs that would have been generated had the taxation law not been retrospectively applied. However, after almost a decade of lost job opportunities and investments, better sense prevailed, and the government



C R Sasikumar

scrapped the controversial retrospective taxation law in August 2021.

The government introduced a law on electoral bonds as a legitimate funding source for political parties. There is no denying that Indian elections are a costly affair for political parties. Canvassing for candidates is labour-intensive. Despite new technology and social media, which exponentially enhance the outreach of political candidates, the 970 million Indian electorate craves human touch, which requires resources. Unfortunately, with intersectoral differences in growth in the economy, with capital-intensive sectors growing relatively faster than labour-intensive sectors, the latter are subjected to the Baumol cost disease — a relatively well-known phenomenon in economics which in the context of elections would imply that the cost of contesting elections would increase exponentially with faster economic growth. In other words, there would be increasing pressure on political parties to generate funds. In the old system with no electoral bonds, political parties raised funds from anonymous donors with little or no scrutiny. There was an overwhelming perception that a large part of the funding generated by political parties was through illegal means.

Consequently, in India where there is one election or another every year, political parties (national and state) have an unquenchable appetite for funds. The old system encouraged black money and attracted those with the greatest capacity to break law and generate funds. Since the courts have been very worried about the “quid pro quo”, they should have taken the pains to explain how the old system was superior to the electoral bonds scheme in preventing donors from receiving political patronage. After all, from a practical perspective, by scrapping the electoral bond scheme because it was “unconstitutional and manifestly arbitrary”, the highest court has implicitly tilted to the earlier mechanism of unknown and unaccountable political fundraising.

The fundamental difference between government and judiciary is in the accountability of their actions. In an electoral democracy, governments are ultimately accountable to people, and a misjudgement of policies that affect people can result in them being thrown out of power. This happened to the UPA 2 government — bad laws, indecisiveness in framing policies, and perception of favouritism and

Democracy has strengthened in the country. Far-reaching electoral reforms have been introduced by subsequent governments to make it more accountable, including voter ID, EVMs etc. Consequently, we witnessed a revolutionary change in women voters’ turnout and dramatic decline in electoral violence. The people’s court severely penalised the perception of unfair corporate influence on government policy, as we witnessed a near wipeout of the biggest and oldest party in the general elections of 2014. We are confident overall, that ordinary people are good judges of character and don’t need patronising. As an important step towards judicial accountability, the highest court should gauge public opinion about the courts and conduct a nationwide survey through an independent entity. The survey could highlight the nature and extent of justice-poverty, particularly among the most vulnerable.

corruption resulted in a defeat in general elections. More than the courts, people through their votes, check the government’s power. Government actions are scrutinised by Opposition and independent institutions such as the Comptroller and Auditor General, who are expected to monitor every government expense. In essence, there are multiple checks on the actions of the government. However, the judiciary is beyond scrutiny, and it’s unclear to whom they are accountable other than their own conscience.

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In conclusion, the retrospective nature of making laws and unleashing political witch-hunting is a gross violation of individual rights. The economic consequence of this act would be an erosion of people’s faith that they and their property are protected from mighty and powerful institutions of the country. In such an atmosphere, private investment and property don’t enjoy legal protection as the rule of law promulgated is that individual rights can be retrospectively violated for some lofty ideals. The highest court should have deliberated alternatives to safeguard democracy from undue corporate influence. In an electoral democracy, political parties can be penalised in the people’s court if they are unhappy with undue benefits to some at the expense of many. But, then, who will make the judiciary accountable?

Ravi is Member, Economic Advisory Council to Prime Minister of India and Kapoor is at Indian Statistical Institute, Delhi

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“The opening of aid corridors following Mr Biden’s call only reinforces the fact that Israel’s allies should have acted decisively earlier. Instead, the US allowed a critical UN security council resolution to pass, then called it non-binding; the president spoke of red lines, then erased them moments later.” — **THE GUARDIAN**

Breaking impunity

Army’s inquiry into Poonch-Rajouri torture case has made crucial strides. It is imperative that J&K is not viewed only through the security lens



RADHA KUMAR

THE ARMY’S INQUIRY into alleged torture by Rashtriya Rifles troops of 13 civilians in Poonch-Rajouri, three of whom lost their lives, has reportedly found that there is substance to the allegations. Given that the troops were caught on video beating the victims last December, it is difficult to see what else the committee could have said. Nevertheless, the report is welcome: Doubly so in the face of a growing cloud of impunity that many in the army themselves were concerned about.

The question is whether and what actions will be taken. Most Kashmiris remember the sorry saga of Macchil, in which troops convicted of extra-judicial killing spent a mere three years in prison because an army tribunal then ruled that the chain of evidence was incomplete. An assurance by the Home and Defence Ministers that the Macchil travesty will not be repeated would be helpful, but with the Prime Minister and most of his cabinet deep in electioneering, it is unlikely. Yet, the allegations of torture are not only deeply disturbing, they point to fault lines that have long existed in India’s treatment of internal conflict.

During the 1990s insurgency, torture by security and special forces was widespread in Jammu and Kashmir, as it had been in Punjab in the 1980s and periodically in states of Northeast India such as Manipur. Once the insurgencies died down, torture became relatively rare. But it was never eradicated, despite routine reminders of standard operating procedures.

During PM Manmohan Singh’s tenure, an effort was made to withdraw the army from internal security duties, transferring them first to the CRPF and then to the J&K police. Implementation of the policy proved to be more difficult than anticipated since the Valley police had been transformed into an intelligence-gathering rather than a community police force during the insurgency. The only change was that complaints of human rights abuses were levelled against the police rather than the army. While the shift of blame offered some relief to the Union administration, it did not lead to lasting security reform.

The Modi administration that succeeded Singh not only returned to a policy of cover-up for security wrongdoing, it valorised such actions as using civilians as human shields. Who can forget Major Leetul Gogoi, who tied a young Kashmiri to the bonnet of an army jeep ferrying election officers as a human shield against stone-throwers, and was given a commendation?

It is in this context that the enquiry committee’s report is so welcome. But does it represent a shift in the Modi administration’s security policy? According to Home Minister Amit Shah, the Modi administration intends to withdraw the army from internal security duties in J&K, as Singh had done. The army is currently training local police to take over, Shah said in March, adding

that while the local police were “not trusted” earlier (a reference to his own party’s attitude), it was now. Whether his statement can be seen as more than a flyer in election season remains to be tested.

A closer reading indicates that the Modi administration’s policy is significantly different from the Singh administration’s policy.

While the latter aimed to transform the J&K police into a community force, the former aims to train local police for counterterrorism. In other words, another 1,000 or so security personnel will now have the right to use draconian methods against civilians, since counterterrorism laws allow significantly greater latitude to security forces than other criminal laws do.

Read in tandem with the newly enacted penal and criminal procedure codes, the policy can only arouse foreboding. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (Indian Penal Code), scheduled to come into force this July, includes an expansive definition of terrorism, in addition to that already provided by the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, and stipulates that no commutation for good behaviour will be allowed for those sentenced to life imprisonment. The Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (Indian Civil Defence Code) provides that any person can be arrested on mere suspicion and any policeman can register an FIR even for acts committed in places outside his jurisdiction. The scope for misuse is large.

The larger implication of these measures is that the Modi administration will continue to see J&K primarily through a security lens, should it be elected for a third term. Security was earlier cited as a reason for delaying the return of statehood and elections to J&K. Though the Supreme Court accepted the argument without probing it on the issue of statehood, it ordered that assembly elections must be held before end-September 2024. If they are, the newly elected assembly will find that attempts to restore civilian rule of law have been preemptively hobbled by the Modi administration’s emphasis on counterterrorism. According to the J&K police website, there are already 35 armed police battalions in the UT, 24 belonging to the Indian Reserve Police and 11 to the JK Armed Police. Another 1,000 personnel is surely overkill.

The truth that innumerable army commanders have repeated over the decades is that the J&K conflict, like most other such conflicts including in Manipur, is politically rooted and requires a political solution.

At a time when our land borders are turning volatile under Chinese provocation, the one thing that India cannot afford is to have its troops stretched thin. Using young people to plug the gap through the Agniveer programme is not a solution. It compounds the problem, given that they lack the depth of training required; the more seasoned troops have the added stress of compensating for raw recruits. Any reform that seeks to return the army to its primary task of defending the borders is more than welcome. But armed police will only intensify the internal problem in J&K. Let such a decision be left to the state’s elected leadership — when elections are finally held. They are, after all, answerable to their voters. No one else is.

Kumar is the author of Paradise at War: A Political History of Jammu and Kashmir



MILIND SOHONI

Election’s missing questions

A look at what we are not talking about as we head into polls

AS WE APPROACH the elections, one question repeatedly asked is “how are we faring as a democracy?”. The answer depends on who you ask. A taxi driver, a college student or her retired father will offer very different answers on what constitutes democracy and what they expect from it. For most Indians though, it has three key features — free and fair elections, an elected body which guides and makes laws, and an executive state which implements them. On these three counts, we get just about passing marks.

On the other hand, some international agencies now call us an “electoral autocracy”. The Economist calls us a flawed democracy and ranks us at 41, between Malaysia and Poland. These agencies use additional indicators such as freedom to publish articles, make associations, practise one’s religion, and the right to fair trial. Our own liberals bemoan the erosion of constitutional values and institutions — amongst them, citizenship, secularism, the Supreme Court, and the Election Commission. But these issues do not seem to bother most of our people. So, the question remains: What constitutes a democracy and what is it supposed to deliver to the people?

As a professor at IIT Bombay in day-to-day contact with an elite segment of our youth, I see this as an important question. In fact, many issues which affect our youth and their prospects depend on how we choose to answer it.

A functional view is to see democracy as

a means for a people to progress materially, culturally and socially, through informed choice and collective action. Electoral democracy is then merely an implementation of the above grand objective. In many countries, the measurement of these conditions — of roads, employment, availability of water, the quality of universities and even the number of books published, etc — are periodically reported at the national and regional levels. Take the 132-page State of the Environment Report by Ontario State, Canada. This gives detailed information about air, water, climate and natural habitat.

To produce such reports and to provide a platform for discussion is an important agenda for the universities and scientific agencies of the country. They help identify problem areas, different perspectives and possible solutions. This also creates fresh demand for gadgets and processes and hence new jobs. It frequently leads to new science. In fact, the study of one’s own society may occupy nearly 5 per cent of the workforce, and employ some of the most sophisticated and skilled young graduates.

The bureaucracy too periodically puts out reports on the status of various indicators and informs both the people and the lawmakers about possible options. Canada’s Annual Housing Report is a 170-page document that gives important statistics and analysis of availability and affordability and various loan schemes and their performance.

It is no wonder that Canada ranks very high in most democratic as well as environmental indicators and its people are rated as some of the happiest. Thus, the knowledge and information cycle is an important part of the definition of democracy and something that brings prosperity. The right to know, the freedom to argue and the equality of the people as citizens with their bureaucrats and scientists are cornerstones of this prosperity. This is why other indices of democracy are important.

Sadly, much of this is absent in Indian society. Let us look at a typical district of Maharashtra with an average population of 30 lakh. It has a district city, a few smaller taluka places and hundreds of villages. Water supply is irregular and of poor quality, but there is no official acknowledgement. Though the expenditure on roads may be about Rs 200 crore, there is little measurement or testing. There are, of course, no maps. The district hospital has a shortage of doctors and the schools and colleges of teachers. Agricultural output depends largely on the monsoons and industrial output, on government policies. None of these issues figure in the elections, except sporadically, agriculture.

Its administration is headed by the District Collector, one of the most powerful positions in India. With about 50 colleges, and perhaps a university, she has an army of young graduates at her disposal. Scientific studies and independent reports commissioned by vari-

ous departments can employ more than 2,000 of them and bring efficiency and savings, which can pay their salaries. Given our diversity, these reports will bring different perspectives and nuances to the problem. But this needs community science and collective thinking, which is absent. The IAS and our scientists and professors have neither the training nor the inclination to participate as equals in this creative exercise of democracy.

The same story repeats at the national level. As per recent reports, after Pakistan and Bangladesh, India has the most polluted air in the world. Yet, vehicle emissions continue to rise even as public transport stagnates. Such issues have huge health costs but they largely remain outside our professional world. No wonder, there are no jobs. None of these questions even figure in the elections.

Even more worrying is the quality of education. ASER reports that only about 50 per cent of youth, 14-18 years of age, could divide a 3-digit number by a single-digit number, or correctly compute time and length in a real-life situation. This points to a deeper problem: Can our people even read the reports and comprehend the problems that beset us, let alone make the right choices?

And are we a functional democracy or a nation which regularly holds elections? The answer, alas, is lost in the din.

The author teaches at IIT Bombay. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

STABILITY BEFORE ALL

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Goal worth setting’ (IE, April 8). The MPC is confident about the outlook for economic growth through March 2025, with the GDP expected to expand by 7 per cent on average this year. Policymakers assert that improving incomes and a rise in readiness to spend on non-essentials go well for a boost in private consumption, which has been struggling for momentum in recent quarters. It’s the expectation of strong growth that gives the RBI the policy space to focus on tackling inflation. Price stability must be non-negotiable.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

IT’S NOT PERSONAL

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Getting around a boycott’ (IE, April 8). Diplomacy is a delicate art. Intermittent hostility towards a regional power like India is to be expected in the neighbourhood. This must be taken in stride. It needs to be ensured that decades of hard diplomatic work are not wasted due to any diplomatic/political reaction from our side. China’s “wolf warrior” diplomacy is a flawed policy which will prove to be counterproductive for it. We must refrain from taking a leaf out of China’s book.

Manish Mishra, Bhopal

BEYOND LIP SERVICE

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘What women voters want’ (IE, April 8). Undoubtedly, the passage of the Women’s Reservation Bill, was a big step towards gender parity, but political parties have not walked the talk. We hardly see women getting tickets, indicating that this was all mere lip service. Priyanka Gandhi did try to implement the policy by allocating 40 per cent tickets to women candidates in Uttar Pradesh elections in 2022, but overall results did not enthuse any confidence. We need a more sustained effort to ensure women are visible as voters and leaders in Indian politics.

Bal Govind, Noida

PLAYING WITH FIRE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Narrowing the view’ (IE, April 8). The latest revisions by the NCERT have sparked a debate about the portrayal of historical events and political intervention in education. The quick pace at which changes are being made to the is not prudent. In science and technology, a periodic revision of the syllabi is necessary to keep pace with the times. There should be no unnecessary alterations in literature and history books. The NCERT must not play with history.

SS Paul, Nadia

Why VVPAT was brought in, why Oppn wants all slips verified

DAMINI NATH
NEW DELHI, APRIL 8

WITH THE first phase of voting set to take place on April 19, the Supreme Court (SC) last week said that petitions seeking 100% verification of Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slips would be taken up soon.

In March 2023, the Association for Democratic Reforms had filed a petition before the apex court saying that to ensure free and fair elections, the tally from Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) should be cross-verified with the VVPATs. To make sure that this process is carried out as fast as possible, ADR suggested the use of barcodes on VVPAT slips.

What is a VVPAT machine? How does it work?

The VVPAT machine is attached to the ballot unit of the EVM, and provides visual verification for the vote cast by a voter by printing a slip of paper with the voter's choice on it. This slip of paper, containing the candidate's serial number, name, and party symbol, is displayed in the machine behind a

glass window, giving the voter seven seconds to verify her vote. Following this, the slip falls into a compartment underneath.

No voter can take the VVPAT slip back home, as it is later used to verify votes cast in five randomly selected polling booths. The idea is that by allowing for a physical verification of the electronically cast vote, both voters and political parties have greater faith in the process — that their vote is being recorded correctly.



Why did the Election Commission introduce VVPATs?

The idea of the VVPAT machine first emerged in 2010, when the Election Commission of India (EC), held a meeting with political parties to discuss how to make the EVM-based polling process more transparent.

After a prototype was prepared, field trials were held in Ladakh, Thiruvananthapuram, Cherrapunjee, East Delhi, and Jaipur in July 2011. After fine-tuning the design, holding more trials, and taking feedback from political parties, an EC expert committee approved the design in February 2013.

Later that year, the Conduct of Elections



A demo VVPAT machine at a school in Delhi in 2019. Abhinav Saha

Rules, 1961 were amended to allow for a printer with a drop box to be attached to the EVM. The VVPAT was used for the first time in all 21 polling stations of the Noksen Assembly constituency of Nagaland in 2013, after which the EC decided to introduce VVPATs in a phased manner. By June 2017, there was 100% adoption of VVPATs.

Why are VVPAT slips of only five polling booths randomly counted?

To determine what percentage of VVPAT machines' slips need to be counted to verify the accuracy of an election, the EC, in 2018, asked the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) to come up with a "mathematically sound, statistically robust and practically cogent sample size for the internal audit of the VVPAT slips with electronic result of EVMs", the EC mentioned in an affidavit it has filed in the Supreme Court.

In February 2018, the EC mandated the counting of VVPAT slips of one randomly selected polling station per Assembly constituency. This was increased to five polling stations per Assembly seat, following a Supreme Court judgment in April 2019 on a petition filed by TDP leader Chandrababu Naidu. The five polling stations are selected by a draw of lots by the Returning Officer concerned, in the presence of candidates/their agents.

What have been the legal cases surrounding the VVPAT?

The VVPAT has been a subject of multiple legal cases, starting with *Subramanian Swamy vs Election Commission of India*, in

which the SC ruled that a paper trail was indispensable for free and fair elections, and ordered the government to provide funding for the roll-out of VVPATs.

In 2019, Chandrababu Naidu moved the SC asking for a minimum 50% randomised VVPAT slips to be counted. The EC, however, argued that if this were to happen, results would be delayed by five to six days. Moreover, it pointed to ISI's calculations which found that even counting of slips from 479 randomly selected VVPATs across the country would guarantee over 99% accuracy — but the EC's guideline at the time of verifying slips from one polling station per constituency would have led to counting of 4,125 VVPATs.

Nonetheless, the court ordered the EC to count VVPATs in five polling stations instead.

Why does the EC not want to count 50% VVPAT slips?

As per a previous submission in the SC, the EC claims that it takes about an hour for election officers to match VVPAT slips with the EVM count in one polling station. Moreover, since the counting of VVPAT slips can begin only after EVM votes for the concerned polling station have been tabulated,

for five polling stations, it would mean a delay of five hours in all, EC sources said. The EC has also highlighted infrastructure challenges, including the availability of manpower, as obstacles to increasing the number of polling booths where VVPAT slips are counted.

Why are political parties demanding widened verification of VVPAT slips?

Opposition parties continue to call for verification of more polling booths to make voting more transparent. They argue that the sanctity of a fair election outweighs the concern of delay in the declaration of results.

Parties have called for anything from 50% to 100% verification of VVPAT slips. In December, the Opposition INDIA alliance, which includes the Congress, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Communist Party of India, the Trinamool Congress, the DMK and the Samajwadi Party, passed a resolution demanding 100% verification of VVPAT slips. The INDIA Alliance has sought time to meet Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar to discuss their concerns.

However, the EC has, thus far, been reluctant to do so. As per EC sources, the EVM and VVPAT concerns have been litigated and addressed by the Commission many times.

THIS WORD MEANS

DUAL EMERGENCE (OF CICADAS)

For the first time since 1803, two broods of 'periodical cicadas' will emerge in the United States this summer

IN A rare occurrence, 1 trillion cicadas from two different broods are expected to begin appearing in the Midwest and Southeast regions of the United States at the end of April.

It's the first time since 1803 that Brood XIX, or the Great Southern Brood, and Brood XIII, or the Northern Illinois Brood, will appear together in an event known as a dual emergence.

A roughly 16-state area will be center stage for these periodical cicadas, which differ from those that appear annually in smaller numbers.

One trillion cicadas, each just over an inch long, would cover 15,782,828 miles if they were placed end to end, said Floyd W Shockley, an entomologist and collections manager at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.

When are the cicadas coming out?

The first cicadas are expected to start emerging in late April. Temperature determines when they come out, said Gene Kritsky, a retired professor of biology at Mount St Joseph University in Cincinnati. Kritsky said first the soil needs to reach 17.78 degree Celsius, about 6 inches deep, and "then you get a good soaking rain, and that's when they really pop," he said.

How long will dual emergence last?

The Midwest and Southeast should be buzzing for about six weeks.

In most cases, Shockley said, the cicadas, which live about a month, will die not far from where they had emerged.

Are cicadas dangerous?

Cicadas don't bite or sting, nor do they carry any diseases. But since they're "not great flyers and even worse landers," cicadas often end up on sidewalks and city



An adult cicada flies from a clover flower in Washington. AP

streets, where they can be squished by people or cars and "could conceivably make things slick."

How do you get rid of cicadas?

The short answer is: You don't. If you have delicate plants that you want to protect, then use special netting created for that purpose.

The bugs are beneficial to the environment, acting as natural tree gardeners. The holes they leave behind when they emerge from the ground help aerate the soil and allow for rainwater to get underground and nourish tree roots in hot summer months.

The slits they make in trees can cause some branches to break, and the leaves then turn brown in a process known as "flagging," which is a kind of natural pruning. When the branch grows again, the fruits it yields will tend to be larger. When they die, the cicadas' rotting bodies provide nutrients that trees need.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

NIKHIL GHANEKAR
NEW DELHI, APRIL 8

THE SUPREME Court has ruled that people have a "right to be free from the adverse effects of climate change", which should be recognised by Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution.

The judgment by a three-judge Bench of Chief Justice of India (CJI) D Y Chandrachud and Justices J B Pardiwala and Manoj Misra, was delivered on March 21 in a case relating to the conservation of the critically endangered Great Indian Bustard (GIB). The judgment was made public on Saturday.

The Bench noted that the intersection of climate change and human rights has been put into sharp focus in recent years, underscoring the imperative for states to address climate impacts through the lens of rights.

What was the case before SC?

The apex court's ruling came in a writ petition filed by retired government official and conservationist M K Ranjitsinh, seeking protection for the GIB and the Lesser Florican, which are on the verge of extinction.

The plea sought, among other things, the framing and implementation of an emergency response plan for the protection and recovery of the GIB — including directions for installation of bird diverters, an embargo on the sanction of new projects and renewal of leases of existing projects, and dismantling power lines, wind turbines, and solar panels in and around critical habitats.

In the hearing held in March, the apex court was considering an appeal for the modification of its April 19, 2021 order, which imposed restrictions on the setting up of overhead transmission lines in a territory of about 99,000 sq km in the GIB habitat in Rajasthan and Gujarat.

The Ministry of Power, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, and the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy had filed the application to modify the 2021 order on grounds that it had adverse implications for India's power sector, and that undergrounding power lines was not possible.

The three ministries also cited India's commitments on transition to non-fossil fuel



The widespread use of air conditioners contributes to global warming in the longer term, and worsens the impacts of climate change. Praveen Khanna/Archive

energy sources vis-à-vis the Paris climate treaty as one of the key grounds for seeking a modification of the 2021 order.

What did the SC say?

The apex court modified its April 2021 order giving directions for underground high-voltage and low-voltage power lines, and directed experts to assess the feasibility of undergrounding power lines in specific areas after considering factors such as terrain, population density, and infrastructure requirements.

The ruling acknowledged that its earlier directions, "besides not being feasible to implement, would also not result in achieving its stated purpose, i.e., the conservation of the GIB". In essence, the ruling put the apex court's stamp of approval on the Union's affidavit on steps "for the conservation and protection" of the GIB.

However, the court also made several other observations on climate change, and on litigation in other jurisdictions.

"Prior to adjudicating the application for modification, it is necessary to briefly advert to India's obligations towards preventing climate change and tackling its adverse effects. This will assist the Court to take a decision based upon a holistic view of competing considerations," the ruling states.

Referring to environment-related aspects

of the Directive Principles of State Policy, the court said that these have to be read together with the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21.

How have the Courts interpreted Article 21 earlier?

The SC has historically acknowledged Article 21 as the heart of the fundamental rights in the Constitution. The SC has said that the right to life is not just mere existence, but that it includes all rights that make it a meaningful and dignified existence for an individual.

In the 1980s, the SC read the right to a clean environment as part of Article 21. A bundle of rights — including the right to education, the right to shelter (in the context of slum dwellers), the right to clean air, the right to livelihood (in the context of hawkers), and the right to medical care — have all been included under the umbrella of Article 21.

However, these "new" rights cannot be immediately materialised or exercised by a citizen. Despite the plethora of environmental rights cases, clean air is still a pressing concern. Such rights are actualised only when policies are framed and legislation enacted.

That said, their express recognition as fundamental rights helps in two key aspects. First, as a nudge to Parliament to take note of these issues and second, by making constitutional courts an avenue for citizens to litigate these

issues in future.

While dwelling on India's international commitments to mitigate the impact of greenhouse gas emissions, the apex court also noted that despite many regulations and policies to address the adverse effects of climate change, there was no single legislation relating to climate change and attendant concerns.

However, the absence of such legislation, the Bench said, did not mean that Indians do not have a "right against adverse effects of climate change".

What are the implications of the judgment for environmental jurisprudence?

Environmental lawyer Ritwick Dutta said that the apex court's judgment puts the focus on strengthening environmental and climate justice by elucidating the multiple impacts of climate change on a range of communities.

"A significant aspect of the judgment is the expansion of Article 14. Over the last few decades, the right to life has been expanded by the apex court to include a right to clean environment. The judgment not only looks to curb environmental pollution, but also proactively outlines environmental and climate justice issues, keeping our international commitments in mind," Dutta said.

Debadityo Sinha, Lead (climate and ecosystems), Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, said the judgment will set an important legal precedent, and will influence the broader public discourse on environmental matters, and has the potential to shape future government policies.

"The Supreme Court has on several occasions in the past few decades relied on the Constitution to uphold human rights pertaining to environmental issues. This includes rights such as the right to live in a healthy environment, to enjoy pollution-free water and air, to live in a pollution-free environment, etc. Typically, such recognitions signify issues of broader public interest where existing laws and policies are inadequate. The acknowledgment of the "right against adverse effects of climate change" by the highest court establishes a significant legal precedent," Sinha said.

Zaporizhzhia attacked again: the nuclear risks from reckless military action

AMITABH SINHA
NEW DELHI, APRIL 8

A DRONE strike at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant on Sunday triggered a new crisis at the facility that has been repeatedly brought to the brink of disaster by the war between Russia and Ukraine.

Russia, which has been in control of the facility, Europe's largest, for almost two years now, accused Ukraine of launching the attacks. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the global nuclear watchdog, confirmed there had been "at least three direct hits", including on one of the six reactors at the plant, but did not say who was responsible.

While nuclear safety had not been compromised, "this is a serious incident with potential to undermine integrity of the reactor's containment system", the IAEA said. Director general Rafael Mariano Grossi said "such reckless attacks significantly increase the risk of a major nuclear accident and

must cease immediately".

Zaporizhzhia is one of five nuclear power stations in Ukraine, which meets almost half of its electricity demand through nuclear energy. The six reactors at Zaporizhzhia have the capacity to produce 5,700 MW of electricity.

The drone attacks came three days after the power station suffered its most recent loss of external power supply. Nuclear power plants are connected to more than one external power source to run essential safety and security operations, including the crucial task of cooling the reactors.

The Zaporizhzhia plant has six external power lines, but outages or disconnections during the war have on several occasions left it dependent either on a single external source or on generators. The facility has suffered complete blackouts on eight occasions since August 2022, and managed only on generators.

The power station has also faced frequent shelling and mortar attacks from both sides, making it the most dangerous nuclear site in the world currently — even though

other nuclear power stations in Ukraine have also suffered shelling and lost external power at some point during the war.

Strong but vulnerable

Most nuclear reactors are made of several layers of steel and concrete, and are designed to absorb shocks from earthquakes of magnitude 8 or even higher. Ordinary shelling or gunfire can't impact them seriously, and it is not surprising that the drone attack did not cause much physical damage to the Zaporizhzhia station.

It is, however, not clear how a nuclear power plant would fare against a powerful bomb or missile attack. Such an incident has never happened, and no country is expected to be so reckless as to bomb a nuclear reactor. However, the war around Zaporizhzhia seems to be testing that assumption.

Risk from power outage

A power outage poses the biggest risk, and is the major concern. The insides of nuclear reactors get heated to thousands of degrees Celsius, and have to be constantly



cooled. This is usually done by a circulation of water, which is maintained through an external power source. Multiple power lines are usually available at nuclear stations, which are also equipped with generators to maintain additional layers of redundancies.

The failure to adequately cool the reactors can result in meltdowns or explosions. In the Fukushima disaster of 2011, the nuclear plant itself survived the magnitude 9 earthquake, and shut down its operations in

response. But the resultant tsunami flooded the entire area, including the power station, which disabled all power lines and backup systems. As a result, three reactors at the facility suffered partial meltdowns and allowed the leakage of nuclear radiation.

As part of the lessons from the Fukushima disaster, several nuclear reactors installed 'passive' cooling systems as an additional layer of safety. 'Passive' systems do not require electricity and can, therefore, continue to operate even after a power outage. One example would be of a system that relies on gravity — water circulation is maintained by ensuring that the supply comes from a higher-altitude location.

Courting avoidable disaster

All these measures, however, are meant to deal with eventualities that are beyond the control of humans. The magnitude 9 earthquake in Fukushima in 2011 was an unexpected, once-in-a-century event, against which the best of preparations might not have been adequate.

The situation in Zaporizhzhia, on the other

hand, is entirely avoidable. Russia and Ukraine have been courting disaster, and the rest of the world has been unable to do anything apart from warning them of the dangers, of which they are already fully cognizant.

The IAEA has a team stationed at the Zaporizhzhia station, but its main job has been to offer technical advice to keep the facility safe, and to intervene in regular maintenance activities. It cannot stop the war, or convince the two sides to keep a safe distance from the nuclear reactors.

The drone attack has made a mockery of the five principles that Director General Grossi put before the UN Security Council last year for the two warring sides to follow. There has been no damage this time, but there is no guarantee that another attack will not take place.

Grossi issued another appeal on Sunday: "I firmly appeal to the military decision makers to abstain from any action violating the basic principles that protect nuclear facilities. No one can conceivably benefit or get any military or political advantage from attacks against nuclear facilities. This is a no go."

● THE PRICE OF POPULIST POWER
Union power minister RK Singh

“ If any state wants to give free power to any category of people, they can go ahead and do so, but you have to pay for it

Targeting \$100 bn FDI

Investors require a more stable policy and regulatory framework including reforms

THE NEW GOVERNMENT at the Centre after the national elections ambitiously aims to attract \$100 billion a year in gross foreign direct inflows over the next five years, according to Rajesh Kumar Singh, secretary in the department for promotion of industry and internal trade. Earlier at the World Economic Forum summit at Davos, Union information technology minister Ashwini Vaishnaw, too, articulated this aspirational objective. This target compares with an annual average of \$75 billion in gross inflows during the previous five years to FY23. The government seeks big-ticket investments in infrastructure to transition to a \$5-trillion economy and also attract investors who want to de-risk their exposure to China. India has, according to the secretary, “unmatched market growth opportunity in a variety of sectors such as electric vehicles, electronic goods or general consumer goods where penetration levels in our population are far lower than the global average”.

While the higher level of ambition on FDI is to be welcomed, gross foreign direct inflows, in fact, fell by 3.6% in FY24 up to January when compared to a year earlier. This is far from a one-year blip as it follows the significant decline of 16% to \$71 billion in FY23 for the first time in nine years and suggests a different narrative from optimistic official statements that India still remains a leading destination for FDI. More worrying is the fact that repatriations and disinvestments have also increased. After taking these into account, direct investments plunged even sharper by 30.5% to \$25.5 billion in FY24 (up to January) as repatriation and disinvestments burgeoned by 36% over the previous fiscal. This is not good news as it indicates waning foreign investor interest; that they are reducing their exposure and even exiting the market. A corroboration of this is the closure of a fifth of foreign companies with offices or subsidiaries between 2014 and November 2021, according to commerce minister Piyush Goyal’s statement in Parliament in December 2021.

The big question is, why all of this is happening? High-profile exits by MNCs like Ford, General Motors, Harley Davidson, MAN trucks, Holcim, Pfizer, Sanofi and GSK — who have trimmed their manpower and operations — may not have a common narrative. In the auto space, the US majors reduced their exposure as their offerings did not find favour among consumers. In other sectors, intense domestic competition, rising costs and concerns about the regulatory environment may have triggered a rethink regarding their strategies. Another plausible explanation could be the fading appeal of greenfield projects, especially by Chinese investors for industrial parks, automobile and steel projects which did not materialise or were shelved due to difficulties in doing business in the various states, regulatory uncertainty, and land acquisition.

Boosting the share of manufacturing in India’s economy has been one of the key promises made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. But if more foreign capital is to be attracted, it is necessary to incentivise a much larger proportion of inflows towards the building of greenfield factories, industrial parks, and other infrastructure. Such investments depend on a stable policy and regulatory framework. Reforms are needed to free up the land and labour markets and improve the overall business environment. Unless this significantly improves, India’s attractiveness as a destination for FDI will reduce, reflected in growing repatriation and disinvestments.

Central banks are the newest HODLers of gold

A FEW WEEKS ago, when the gold price hit a record high, no one besides a few gold bugs seemed to care. Bitcoin also hit a record high. Everyone cared. Proof came in the personal finance pages of the UK newspapers. The *FT* had a piece on investing in crypto miners, a long read about what crypto still gets wrong and a cry of pain for UK investors denied the right to hold Bitcoin ETFs. The *Telegraph* had almost a full page on how to buy. Bitcoin also made made it into the Market Report section of the *Daily Mail* and got good exposure in the *Times* too — with another cry of pain for UK investors and the fussy bureaucrats who won’t let them get easy exposure to the asset of the century.

Unless I missed it, none of these papers had an article on gold. In March, it rose 9.1% (against 14% for Bitcoin and 3% for global equities) and this week the yellow metal hit yet another record high again to a remarkable lack of interest.

I get it. Gold isn’t digital; it doesn’t have a growing gang of Twitter (or X) evangelists or its own emoji; and it isn’t new money. It’s very old money — one of the oldest there is. But that you are more likely to see actual gold coins in a museum than in your purse doesn’t mean it doesn’t matter. For proof, look at who is buying gold today.

It isn’t the retail investor in the West. A good proxy for gauging ordinary investor interest is flows into global gold ETFs. And according to the World Gold Council these collectively saw outflows for nine months in a row until the end of February. This year alone outflows have added up to around \$5.7 billion, with the US and Europe seeing the fastest pullback and the collective holdings of the ETFs being around 20% below their level of October 2020. February’s exodus was lower than that of the previous few months; there have been small inflows into Asian ETFs every month for the last 12 months; and according to Charlie Morris of the research shop ByteTree, there may now even be small inflows.

For gold demand, look to emerging markets savers and central banks. Both have been “mega-buyers of bullion” since the start of the war in Ukraine, says Duncan MacInnes of Ruffer Investment Co. They don’t buy ETFs. They buy physical gold.

Central banks aren’t in it for the short term either: they don’t buy gold to trade. They are buying it for the long term to hedge political risk; to underpin their own currencies; to offset any decline in the value of the dollar. Looked at through the eyes of an emerging market central bank, gold is an everything hedge — and one that in the main has hung on to its role as money and its purchasing power for thousands of years.

Overall, central bankers are both volume buyers (1,000 metric tons annually for two consecutive years) and, to put it in, Bitcoin language, HODLers (a cryptocurrency fan play on hold which stands for “hang on for dear life”). Might it be, asks Ruffer, that we are entering a new era for gold of “price insensitive strategic buyers taking ounces out of the market that will never return?”

If so, and if the rising price starts to pull the retail investors in the West who have little or no exposure to gold right now back in, there seems little to stop the gold price continuing to soar. How do you invest? There are those ETFs, of course. But the miners are also worth looking at. Back in early March, John Hathaway of Sprott Asset Management pointed out that the entire gold-mining sector in the US had a market capitalisation of less than that of just Mastercard Inc. — and not much more than Nvidia Corp. rose in a single day when it last reported earnings. They’ve begun to move a little since: The iShares Gold Producers ETF is up 17% since a double-digit decline in 2022. But it’s still way off the highs of 2011, something that makes little sense given the rise in the metal itself. There could be fireworks ahead for those miners. But either way, it might be worth putting a little gold in your portfolio. If it’s a good enough everything hedge for China’s central bank, it should be good enough for the rest of us.

● TECHPROOF EXPRESS

FOSTERING A COMPETITIVE CULTURE IN INDIA WILL ENSURE BENEFITS ARE WIDELY DISTRIBUTED

E-commerce needs a bulwark

SIDDHARTH PAI

Technology consultant and venture capitalist
By invitation



amended in 2007, were the initial cornerstone legislations aimed at preventing practices that have adverse effects on competition. They aimed to promote and sustain competition, protect the interests of consumers, and ensure freedom of trade in the markets of India.

In recent years, the spotlight has turned towards e-commerce due to its explosive growth and the unique challenges it presents in terms of competition. Predatory pricing, exclusive contracts, and platform neutrality are areas of concern that regulators are addressing. Existing law needs to be expanded.

The Competition Commission of India has already been actively scrutinising e-commerce platforms to ensure they do not abuse their dominant position and that smaller players have a fair shot at success. Allegations of Big Tech firms such as Amazon and Google engaging in anti-competitive practices, from prioritising their products in search results to exclusive selling arrangements, have raised concerns about stifled competition, hindered innovation, and compromised consumer choice. This is in line with what we have seen abroad, particularly in the European Union (EU), where regulators have been swift to act, and have punished Big Tech firms with large fines

for a variety of transgressions. As I have argued before, the EU is a beacon for the rest of the world in the regulation of Big Tech firms, primarily because as a supranational body, its regulators do not have the horizon problem of elections every few years, like its member nations do.

India’s proposed e-commerce policy is a testament to the government’s intent to create a balanced, competitive market. The Report of the Committee on Digital Competition Law (RCDCL) is a tour de force. This policy is expected to address key issues such as data localisation, consumer protection, and anti-counterfeiting measures. By setting a clear regulatory framework, the government aims to level the playing field for all participants.

One of the RCDCL’s objectives is to stymie unfair trade practices like deep discounting, which can distort the market. Such practices, while seemingly beneficial to consumers in the short term, can stifle competition by driving smaller players out of the market. In the long term, these practices will end up in a TINA (there is no alternative) situation, thereby allowing Big Tech firms who corner the market the licence to exploit consumers.

Fostering this competitive culture in India’s e-commerce markets is essential for ensuring that the benefits of this dig-

Competition fosters innovation as well as more choices, better prices, and enhanced service quality for consumers

How economics should change



AMOL AGRAWAL

The author teaches at Ahmedabad University
Views are personal

After the 2008 financial crisis raised questions from non-economists, much of the condemnation of the discipline is today coming from economists including Nobel laureates

THE 2008 GLOBAL financial crisis raised lots of questions on the ‘state of economics’. There were wide discussions on whether economics is resolving the world’s problems as it is claimed or creating the very problems. The earlier criticism was from mostly non-economists but today much of the condemnation is coming from economists including Nobel laureates. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) added to the growing chorus of criticism by publishing essays in its quarterly magazine *Finance and Development* (F&D) under the theme ‘How Economics Must Change’.

Gita Bhatt, editor of *F&D*, explains the rationale for the edition. She says that there has been ‘extensive professional soul searching since the global financial crisis of 2008’. The economists were called to not just fix macro-economic policy but also focus on otherwise ignored economic developments such as rising inequality, worsening climate change, ageing demographics, etc. A need was felt to reorient economic thinking from production and profits to distribution and welfare. There was also a growing consensus on the necessity for economics to be open and integrate new ideas from other social sciences.

Nobel laureate Angus Deaton makes the startling observation that economists can be accused of having a vested interest in the way capitalism currently operates. He says current economics focuses too much on free markets and ignores the role of power. We currently see how the big firms

use power to set wages and prices and influence politics to make economics rules work for themselves. Economics is devoid of philosophy and ethics and equates economic well-being to money and consumption. The empirical revolution has ignored the historical evolution of economic development. He says he has become sceptical of the economic dictums such as ‘free trade and immigration is good, unions are bad’, etc. He calls for greater engagement of economists with philosophers, historians and sociologists.

Ulrike Malmendier and Clint Hamilton discuss new findings from behavioural economics which can be really valuable to design better economic policies. Michael Kremer, another Nobel Laureate, stresses the importance of innovation for driving economic development. He advises economists to join the burning issues of climate change and social needs not as passive advisers but as direct participants in the innovation process.

Jayati Ghosh reinforces the role of power in undermining social, political and economic institutions. She says that economics discipline has a significant and powerful lobby which has touted half-truths and even falsehoods on many critical issues: working of financial markets, role of fiscal policies, labour market and wage deregulation, etc.

She also stressed how economics discipline continues to be dominated by the US and Europe ignoring insights and knowledge produced by economists in other regions. Economists continue to work with assumptions of rational humans and perfect markets which are highly unrealistic. As a result, economic ideas are presented as mathematical tractable ideas rather than reflecting the effects of history, society, and politics. In another article, Niall Kishtainy provides a short history of how economics shifted from classical word-driven economics into a mathematical discipline.

Diane Coyle writes on the need to reboot welfare economics. Today’s global production is happening on global platforms aided by digital communications and logistics. It is highly difficult to point to the location of production in today’s global value chain, making it difficult to measure and tax the production. She says that the world economy has changed a lot and economics needs to follow the developments. Earlier physical and human capital were a hindrance to growth, now the constraint shall be natural capital. There is an urgent need to develop statistics to measure natural capital and economic models should not treat nature as a mere externality problem. Kate Raworth, in another article, provides a

There is an urgent need to develop statistics to measure natural capital and economic models should not treat nature as a mere externality problem

expectation of strong growth that gives the RBI the policy space to focus on tackling inflation. Sticky inflation has led to a sharp surge in personal loans for meeting essential expenditure. Price stability must be non-negotiable. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Rare respite

In a rare show of bonhomie, India permitted exporting essential items to Maldives for FY25, strengthening

new framework of doughnut economics which brings natural capital to the centre of the economics production function.

Atif Mian points to the world economy’s dependence on credit as a long-standing problem which needs course correction. He says financial sector is not intermediating credit towards productive investments but unproductive consumption by households and governments. These consumptions boost the economy over the short term, but in the long term the economy will be dragged back as consumption will be cut to pay back the debt. John Cochrane advocates the need to move beyond demand pushes highlighted by Mian to supply measures for increasing economic growth. The demand pushes have led to inflation as seen in last few years. He says we do not need new ideas but should go back to older ideas. There is a need to go back to relying more on markets and incentives rather than looking at governments and policies for resolving our economic ills.

To sum up, the IMF essays add to the long pile of articles written on the state of economics since the 2008 crisis. It is also interesting to note that of all institutions, it is the IMF which published these articles. The critics will argue that the IMF was at the centre of the very ideas that are being questioned by economists in the essays. In 1849, Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle used the phrase ‘dismal science’ to describe economics. One hundred and seventy-five years later, it seems not much has changed.

bilateral ties. Maldives expresses gratitude for renewed quota under the SAGAR agreement. The approved quantities are the highest since this arrangement came into effect in 1981. The announcement comes amid diplomatic tensions after relations soured following President Mohamed Muizzu’s demand for the repatriation of Indian military personnel. —Jayanthi Subramaniam, Mumbai

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

COURSE CORRECTION NEEDED TO REVERSE SLUMP IN FDI INFLOW

SLUGGISH growth in foreign direct investment is the latest concern for the Indian economy. Despite being the fastest-growing large economy in the world, India's FDI has been falling, suggesting a change in the global investment outlook. While several emerging Asian economies continue to attract foreign investment, some in the developed world—particularly the US—have also seen their FDIs grow. But things have played out differently for India despite the common thought that investors' China + 1 strategy would mostly benefit us. Instead, ASEAN countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand have been attracting large amounts of foreign investment in greenfield projects. Meanwhile, India continues to suffer from policy uncertainties that discourage foreign investors.

The FDI slump has been playing out over a few years. In 2022-23, FDI equity inflows declined 22 percent to \$46 billion. In 2023-24, till December 2023, FDI equity inflows fell 13 percent year-on-year to \$32 billion. The number looks slightly better when reinvested earnings and other forms of capital are added to the FDI equity inflow; in 2022-23, total FDI declined 16 percent to \$71 billion, compared to a 3 percent increase to \$85 billion in the previous year. Even as the finance ministry has blamed the trend on a global investment slowdown in recent times, India's case seems more long-term in nature—setting in since 2016-17. In the 10-year period to 2022-23, India's FDI grew at a compounded rate of 6.6 percent, compared to 27 percent in the previous decade. Total FDI as a percentage of the country's nominal GDP was 2.1 percent in 2022-23, compared to 2.7 percent in 2021-22; the highest of this measure that India ever achieved was 3.5 percent in 2008-09.

So, instead of blaming our FDI contraction to a global slowdown, the government must look elsewhere for answers. Foreign investors continue to be wary of India's bureaucratic hurdles, uncertain tax policies and difficulties in enforcing contracts. The government has announced many incentives for investment in the manufacturing sector; but it is also true that disbursal of those incentives is often marred by delays and at times even refused because of seemingly minor reasons. The competition for attracting foreign investment is getting tougher with many smaller developing economies playing their cards better: India needs to run faster if it wants to board the investment bus again.

INDIA'S DOPING SHAME A WORRY IN OLYMPIC YEAR

NDIA may not figure at the top of the world in Olympic sports. However, when it comes to doping, the country remains on top. This is another ignominy for the country after the World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) Operation Carousel found discrepancies in the testing system of the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA), especially on the whereabouts of athletes. According to the latest WADA report, India topped the world in the percentage of doping positives against the number of samples tested. In 2022, NADA returned 125 positives, which was about 3.2 percent of the total number of samples collected. South Africa, among the nations that had collected more than 2,000 samples for the year, followed India with 2.09 percent samples testing positive. India was on top in 2021, too—with 2.3 percent samples testing positive.

This is doubly embarrassing in an Olympic year. It is disconcerting that Indian athletes continue to dope and the numbers suggest the practice is quite rampant. Before the Olympics, the authorities need to tread a cautious line because one doping failure is enough to tarnish the country's reputation. NADA, too, needs to be more vigilant. The number of tests needed to increase. Through the total number of samples tested increased from 1,794 in 2021 to 3,865 in 2022, it is nowhere near China's testing figure of 19,222 samples, which returned 23 positive cases. The US Anti-Doping Agency, too, had a high number of positives at 84 from 6,782 samples. In 2019, before the pandemic, NADA had tested 4,008 samples and the positives stood at 225 or 5.6 percent. In 2022, there were some high-profile cases as well, which indicates that NADA had been targeting top athletes.

If Operation Carousel was not enough to sully the image of the country's anti-doping system, in another disturbing WADA report, India figured among the top three nations for doping among junior athletes. The 10-year study showed India was second after Russia to have the largest number of minors testing positive and getting sanctioned. This is disturbing especially because of the fact that the juniors' overall development, both physical and mental, is at stake. All stakeholders, including NADA, the national sports federations, the Sports Authority of India and other related NGOs must come together to stop this menace.

QUICK TAKE

NO N-CLOUD, PLEASE

SUNDAY'S drone strikes on the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant in Ukraine is a worry for the world. It's down the Dnieper, on which the Chernobyl plant was located. When the Chernobyl blast happened in 1986, though contamination was concentrated over a 150,000 sq km area in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, the radioactive fallout was scattered by wind over much of the northern hemisphere. In the dangerous brinkmanship between Russia and Ukraine, one is blaming the other for the strikes. The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency bluntly said, "This cannot happen." Whoever is to blame, all countries should work to avoid another radioactive fallout.

AS you read this today, we are in the midst of preparations going around—spearheaded by the Election Commission of India—to host the world's biggest election ever. The Lok Sabha polls begin on April 19 and conclude on June 1. It is a routine that runs for weeks, culminating with the results day on June 4. So now, India is charged with election fever.

As this unduly hot summer of 2024 scorches on, politicians of each and every party are out there in the sun, campaigning their way into the hearts and hearths of the voter. There are helicopters in the air, flags of every party colour out there, and there is the din and noise of the election on television, print and every other media there is to consume.

All of a sudden, the great Indian voter is feeling very special and in control. This is one season where the voter is boss and everyone else is nothing much. This season comes once every five years. One might as well enjoy its fleeting moments.

Coincidentally, as many as 64 countries go to the polls in 2024, but none of their efforts even match what's happening in India. 96.8 crore eligible voters are being wooed in India this election. This is four times larger than the US election (24.4 crore eligible voters). Add 10.5 lakh polling stations, 1.5 crore officials on duty and 1.82 crore first-time voters, and the numbers game is in the face. This is bigger than ever before.

Election fever has many dimensions. At one end, it is a fever that grips every candidate, every political party and every party worker who sweats it out in the field. At another end is the intermediary media. These are the months when television news viewership peaks. There is breaking news literally every half hour. Newspapers are filled with constituency-level analyses put together by pundits of every kind. Controversy is matched by a counter-controversy.

The school of scandal is really in full flow. Bad-mouthing one another seems the norm. Negating the word of one with the word of another is a well-honed science.

Rumour and conspiracy theory are friends and enemies that float in our midst every moment. Each one of us is so used to it that no one is really surprised. While a small set of us discount it all as part of the great election game

Every election is an opportunity to say yes or no. Your vote is a right as well as a duty. By voting, you say, "I belong." Do you?

THE WEIGHT OF EVERY VOTE IN THIS ELECTION

HARISH BIJOOR

Brand Guru & Founder, Harish Bijoor Consults



SOURAV ROY

at play, many really swallow the bait. Advertising, event management, PR, propaganda and brand building are the positive forces in full flow. The negative forces of rumour, the planted lie and the planted conspiracy are all tools used by many. Every breaking event is watched keenly at the constituency level by political parties in the fray and fed back to their election war rooms to act and counteract.

Therefore, the overall environment is quite charged. The yen to win is with every candidate and every political party. As of today, the BJP and NDA seems to be totally charged with the "Ab ki baar 400 paar"

sentiment, the INDIA configuration of parties seems to be hoping to reap a tumult that is quiet, indiscernible for now, but decisive.

The battle has clearly demarcated lines of the incumbent Goliath being battled by not one David, but possibly many fragmented ones. The INDIA alliance is hoping for an upset, just as the ruling NDA with the BJP in the forefront is hoping for a decisive victory, and a third-time return of Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the helm of affairs. While the National Democratic Alliance is depending on the stellar performance of PM Modi and his governance (as overt-

HOLDING LEGAL VALIDITY UP BY A STRONG PIGTAIL

THE story goes that Baron Münchhausen, a fantastical 18th century German nobleman-prevaricator, landed in the midst of a bog while on a trip on horseback to his friend's estate. It is said the baron, even though he was dulled with fatigue, responded to the emergency by pulling himself and his horse straight out of the bog by his own pigtail.

Hans Albert, in his *Treatise on Critical Reason*, coined the term 'Münchhausen trilemma' as a thought experiment to demonstrate that, without appealing to assumptions, it is theoretically impossible to prove any truth or its validity, especially within the realms of logic and mathematics. According to Albert, no knowledge can be definitively proven as any argument or proof presented to support a proposition can be challenged by asking additional questions that raise doubts about each proof.

Ultimately, we find ourselves in a position where each proof necessitates another, or in a logical circularity in which the proof of a proposition relies on the truth of the same proposition or on accepted precepts that are asserted rather than supported. If the trilemma is valid, then no statement, knowledge or truth can be validly proven. Each of the three options, as is evident, frustrates the possibility of establishing any definite foundation, leaving us mired down in uncertainty and, much like the baron, having to pull ourselves out of the bog with our own pigtails.

In law, legal validity is determined by whether or not a law was made in the proper manner by an authorised organ of the state. But what criteria must be met for an organ to be deemed authorised? And what defines a manner as being proper? Without appealing to assumptions, an enquiry into this would inevitably result in an endless chain of justifications. In order to disrupt this chain, we are faced with an unavoidable Münchhausen trilemma.

Countries, by resorting to a variant of one of the three options or a mix of them, not only seek to justify their own authority and their legal systems but also the validity of the laws they make. For instance, the community law of European legal systems traces its roots to ancient Roman laws (colated in Justinian's *Corpus Juris Civilis*) and cannon law of the Catholic church. Nevertheless, it is important to note these do not provide an unending sequence of justifications, as the sequence only extends until the time of the Roman republic.

Many countries have sought to justify the validity of their legal systems on an accepted truth or precept. Countries such as India, Bangladesh and Uganda have justified their systems on the basis of certain foundational principles of their constitutions they accept as axioms or *grundnorm*, which Hans Kelson claimed as being the highest-ranking presupposed norm.

cial rule that differentiates between those norms that have the authority of law and those that do not. That apart, legal sociologists have sought to contend the validity of law is due to ability to maintain itself, thereby resorting to logical circularity.

The Basic Structure doctrine, developed by our Supreme Court in a series of cases in the 1960s and 1970s, is a legal doctrine that the constitution of a sovereign state has certain characteristics that cannot be erased by its legislature. In the famous *Kesavananda Bharati* case, the SC propounded the doctrine, holding that certain fundamental features of the Constitution—such as democracy, secularism, federalism and the rule of law—could not be amended. Over the years, the court has confined the doctrine to encompass only those standards that are cognates of the *grundnorm*, that is, the Indian Constitution.

In *M Nagaraj vs Union of India*, the court, while refusing to accord principles relating to service law the status of constitutional norm, observed the "source of these concepts is in service jurisprudence. These concepts cannot be elevated to the status of an axiom like secularism and sovereignty". In other words, there's a judicially accepted conception that the Constitution possesses an intrinsic quality providing resistance to change beyond specific boundaries. The doctrine broadly advocates that there exists underlying moral principles that are independent and intended to be represented by the Constitution's text.

Since its introduction, the Basic Structure doctrine has often been criticised as illegitimate. One of the primary criticisms asserts that it lacks justification within the constitutional text. These critics claim the Constitution itself can be changed to suit the times. The judges, according to them, openly adopted a political stance and there is nothing inherent in the Constitution that resists change. However, having been constructed in the context of the broader constitutional mandate, the doctrine has stood the test of time, proving it is stronger than the Baron's pigtail.

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

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Dignified campaigning
Ref: *Poll roasting welcome but respect model code red line* (Apr 8). It is regrettable that the festival of democracy has many fireworks erupting from the mouths of leaders. It is time for intellectuals to appeal to political leaders to be dignified in campaigning.
Jayaprakash Reddy, Nalgonda

Democratic decency
Poll campaigns of the party in power have to be undertaken only with the objective of highlighting its strengths. The opposition parties should predicate their campaigns on their poll promises, the ruling party's shortcomings, etc. But no party is entitled to an extenuating ground for violating the canons of decency by using intemperate language, polarising tropes and intimidating innuendoes.
S Balu, Madurai

Losing battle
Ref: *Persistence of the prime minister's detractors* (Apr 8). PM Narendra Modi, who seems all set for a third term in office, has a legion of admirers across the country. But he has no dearth of detractors either. They seem to be fighting a losing battle as the PM has shown enough dexterity to deflect all the accusations flung in his direction.
CV Aravind, Chennai

Aloof saint
Ref: *The value of solitude and concentration* (Apr 8). I may add that King Yadu happened to watch a wandering ascetic who never reacted to any situation. The king humbly queried how the saint was so aloof. The ascetic answered to have learnt 24 precious lessons from 24 gurus. A virgin girl was among them whose bangle-clanking taught him that if there is more than one person, there is scope for quarrel.
Hulasa Behera, Bhubaneswar

Exaggerated promises
The Congress in its manifesto has made attractive promises, like an annual grant of one lakh to poor women through the Mahalakshmi scheme, minimum prices for farmers and 30 lakh jobs to young Indians. Like all parties, it has not uttered one word on raising resources for these schemes. The electorate should beware of empty promises on either side.
SV Venkatakrishnan, Bengaluru

Communal amity
BJP's Kerala *prabhari* Prakash Javadekar's claim that the BJP will win at least five seats in the state in the general election is an exaggerated statement. Kerala is a land well known for its communal amity. The people in the state, by and large, are averse to the divisive politics of the BJP.
Sudhakar Cherukunnu, Kannur



A thought for today

Price is what you pay.
Value is what you get

WARREN BUFFETT

Summer Of Discontent

Grounded planes, soaring airfares. And no respite in sight as problems can't be resolved quickly

It's not just temperatures that are climbing this summer. Airfares are set to give them stiff competition. It's going to be a summer of discontent for passengers and high profits for some airlines. Following grounding of planes on account of problematic engines earlier, discontentment of pilots has forced flight cancellations in holiday season. It's an unusual situation for an industry that has long claimed to offer the lowest airfares in the world.

Crude watching | Prior to Covid, the industry offered low prices despite high costs of running aviation business in India. One consequence of it was that when crude oil price hovered around \$80/barrel, most airlines took a serious financial hit because of rising input costs.

Supply crunch builds up | The tough operating environment took a toll by 2019 when Jet Airways went into insolvency. It was followed later by GoAir. Insolvencies put a number of aircraft out of service. But the pandemic's impact on flying muted the fallout of grounded aircraft. That's no longer the case.

Post-pandemic changes | In 2023, domestic air passenger traffic was 152m, the first time it crossed the 2019 mark of 144m passengers. This record passenger traffic was serviced by fewer aircraft than the pre-Covid period. That's because in addition to insolvency-related groundings, market leader IndiGo has had to ground aircraft on account of problems with the Pratt & Whitney engines. It's a perfect storm for flyers. The outcome is a surge in airfares. So much so that the last few months have been the most lucrative for the aviation industry.

Two's too little | Over the last year, the aviation market has transformed into a near duopoly with IndiGo and Tata Group's airlines accounting for nearly 90% of the market. With turbulence within Tata Group's aviation business, there's a disproportionate impact on flyers.

According to CAPA, which provides market intelligence in aviation, there's a serious capacity crisis because of both supply chain and other issues. The consequence is that airfares are expected to remain high for a while, particularly during peak seasons.

Passengers first | GOI did well to extend support to the aviation industry during Covid. But the manner in which DGCA postponed its rules on preventing pilot fatigue after, what appeared to be, industry representation, raises questions about priorities. There are no immediate solutions for airfares but passenger interests should come first.



Babes Out Of Woods

Message from kids moving court is they're not going to sit by and watch us do nothing

From mouths of babes does change begin. For some years, children and teens globally have petitioned courts on several issues – and been heard. In India too. Over 4m govt school students in Karnataka could get a second school uniform, thanks to a Class 4 kid who sought court intervention, after repeated representations to his school failed. A bridge, a village's lifeline, was repaired after Kerala students got a court order.

Since 2005, teen climate activists in US have been petitioning courts. In a landmark 2023 case, a Montana judge gave a third generation of teen activists their first court victory. Climate activism in India too is growing among teens – to protect their forests, beaches, water bodies and commons.

Children's basic rights in India are far from realised: over 1.2m are not in school. We moan that 10m kids between 5 and 14 are forced to work, but beyond "rescue missions" in a trickle, they're a blind spot. If only those kids could move court. But perhaps India's greatest failing is in our relationship with children. We struggle to relate to them as thinking individuals. We role play as parents, teachers, counsellors, and take over all conversations. Do we even *listen* to them as *individuals*? The answer's a resounding 'no'. Note: we're not talking toys, phones and food delivery apps.

Indians' attitude to children is largely dismissive. Be smart but don't question, is the mantra – teens deliberating on their world is often seen as precocious practice. Our struggle with especially teens is evident even in laws – labour laws say a child is below 14, for nutrition schemes, an adolescent is 10-19, for juvenile justice below 18.

Children winning court cases is heartening, yet sobering. Children are being forced to mount legal challenges even for basics, like petitioning to protect playgrounds from land sharks, who are often in cahoots with officials. That said, what better than for children to legally claim their due?



Everyone's Peter Pan

Aging at ashrams is passé, join dating apps instead

Shinie Antony

Have you noticed there are no old people anymore? With all the fancy medical innovations and plastic surgery, 90 is the new 19. Aging is one disease the planet is fighting on a war footing. We won't rest till the world is full of unlined faces, taut cheeks, full lips and Brazilian backside. You can frown all you want, but no vertical little giveaway lines appear between your eyebrows. Facial muscles have stopped taking orders: a mourner at a funeral or the life of the party, both look the same.

When someone says 'guess my age', watch their face fall when you get it right. Social protocol demands a discount of 20 years at least. Words like geriatric, elderly, senior citizen are a no-no. 'Old' is the ultimate insult: it is what we call the uncle who knocks on our door at midnight to say the music's too loud. No more bhajans and ashrams either – everyone is busy on dating apps. Motherhood is pushed from late teens to early 40s, outsourced to IVF and surrogates, eggs frozen. With the right hormonal treatment, men can carry a baby full term.

Every product is anti-aging, all procedures endless. Betty bought a bit of botox but the bit of botox was bitter, so she bought some better botox to make the bitter botox better. Once people boasted of exotic villas and aristocratic bloodlines, now it's new knees, stents in hearts, state-of-the-art hip joints and imported vital organs. Millionaires are getting their bodies frozen so that when scientists learn to bring us alive, they will be back – boring everyone silly with 'in my time...' and dated gossip. You can now look like your favourite celeb – only for a short while though as celebs change their looks constantly. No Kardashian is the same two years in a row. Because of lip fillers actresses look like they are puckering up for a kiss even when being murdered in the film.

A future movement will implore us to age naturally. An exclusive members-only nook where you can age organically, in step with time. Everyone there will be wrinkled, with crow's feet and stretch marks. There will be historical museums with vintage photos of a grey-haired, toothless, shuffling generation on display. Meanwhile, Mick still moves like Jagger, Murdoch just got engaged at 92 – and then there are those who forgot why they opened the fridge.

Opiods Of Fintellectuals

Derivatives trading has caught on in India. Particularly among the young. But 90% of derivatives traders lose money. Poor financial education & regulation carry much of the blame



Rampasad.Murali@timesgroup.com

It's well-known that in India, most (90%) derivatives traders lose money. What's really worrying now is that younger investors (aged 20-40) now make up the lion's share of derivatives traders (75%) here. Young money is being financially 'educated' to treat the stock market like crypto, if not like Monte Carlo.



market prices at ₹1L/tonne. So, he locks in a future at ₹90k/tonne, for his 10 tonnes of expected production that year. This move guarantees Ashok will sell his tea at this price to the other party, come year-end, dodging potential losses if the market corrects to, say ₹60k/tonne. However, if prices soar to ₹1.3L/tonne, he'll miss out on extra ₹40k/tonne profit.

Sounds like betting!
Derivatives might look, swim and quack like a betting scheme, but the intent of these products was (and to a certain degree, is) for businesses to hedge against risks.

However, a confluence of factors, globally but especially in India, have led to a tremendous rise in retail (individual) investors trading in futures and options:

- Financial influencers swarming social media (YouTube, Instagram, Telegram) with more reach than ever, peddling double-your-money schemes and courses under the guise of "financial education" – a realm, which, unlike "investment advice", is as yet untouched by Sebi's regulations.
- Stock exchanges in India (NSE, BSE) chase profits and pole position in a duopoly, by rolling out

shorter derivative contracts (daily, weekly expiries), stripping away guardrails, and making the derivatives market generally more accessible to the Average Jai.

- Regulators are lagging in their response to this fast-evolving market. Though still largely unregulated, sporadic measures like RBI's recent directive for currency FX derivative traders to have exposure in the underlying currency, are more of a knee-jerk RX.

Experts warn, finfluencers party
Warren Buffett, a few years ago, called derivatives, "financial weapons of mass destruction".

And back home in India, Dhirendra Kumar, CEO Value-Rethink, wrote that "the stock exchanges have dropped all pretence of not being in the casino business. They have launched any number of products, like the daily/weekly expiry derivatives, which have no use except in gambling."

Today, a cabal of influencers, fintechs and brokerages is exploiting the lax regulations. Influencers push get-rich-quick schemes, lining up coffers with ad rev, course fees (spanning from hundreds to lakhs), sponsorships and deals with fintech firms – who collect their undues through transaction fees, platform charges and so on, and sharing a good chunk with exchanges, that continue to introduce questionable 'features'.

Sebi data: It's in black and white
To underline why we should be concerned about young traders, consider Sebi data for FY22:

- Age group of <20 years, which is 1% of traders, witnessed highest average profit as well as highest average loss in the futures segment, compared to all other groups.
- Participation of traders aged 20-30 rose to 36% from 11% in FY19.
- Individual (retail) traders in the equity F&O segment rose 5x, to 45L from 7L in FY19.
- 9 out of 10 retail traders in the F&O segment, in either year, incurred net losses.

Options & locks: Twin tracks
Derivatives come in two flavours. Options offer the option-holder a right, but not compulsion, to execute the contract's terms. Options could be "call" options, where there's optimism about the underlying asset, or "put" options, where there's pessimism instead.


Locks, on the other hand, bind respective parties to the terms of the contract. Some kinds of locks are futures, forwards, and swaps.

Example 1: Option in action
A Goa theme park, peaking in Dec with cool weather drawing crowds, buys a weather derivative "put" option to offset potential visitor losses from a lukewarm winter. The park buys a "put" option by paying a ₹75k premium to a speculator doubting global warming. If Dec's average temp exceeds 30°C, the park has an option to claim ₹5L, cushioning against fewer visitors. If temps stay right, the speculator keeps the premium, but at least the park gets its usual visitor numbers.

Example 2: Future secured
Ashok, a tea baron in Assam, is wary of the tea market bubble, or some may call it froth, with current

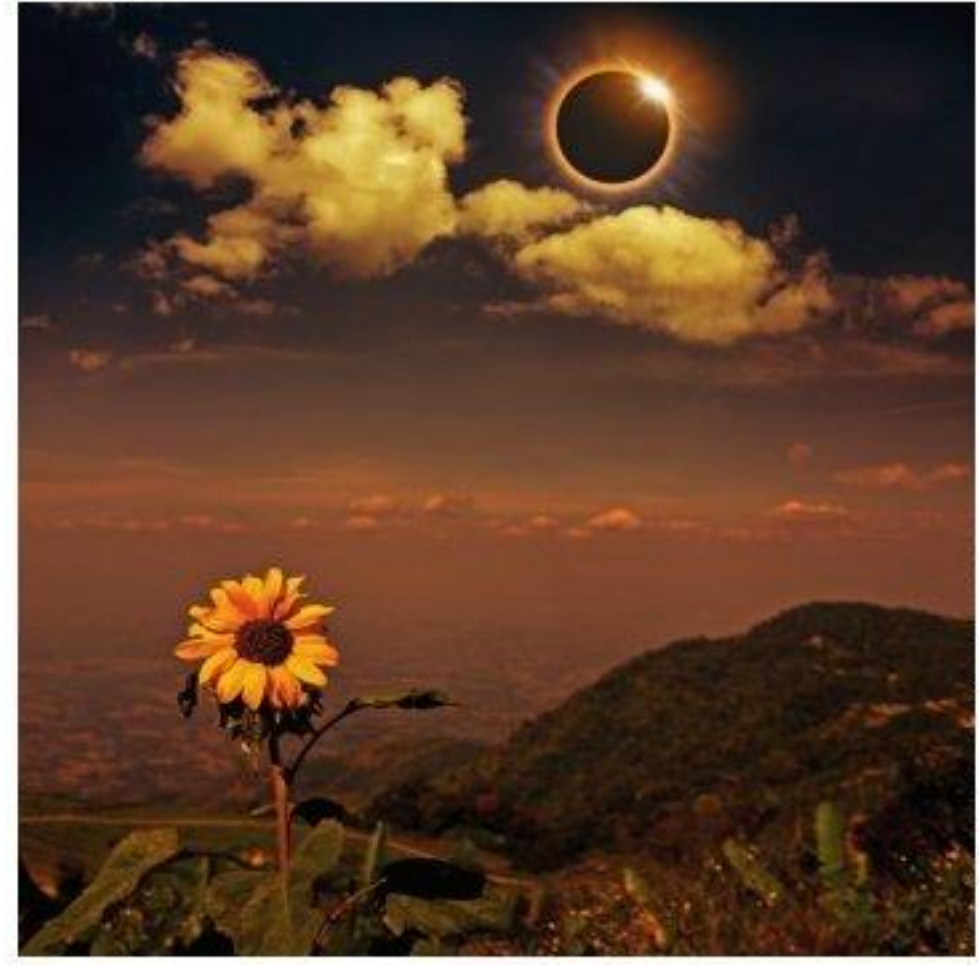
Light That's Shd By Darkness At Noon

North America's total solar eclipse yesterday was a reminder that the Moon doesn't just create spectacles. It may be the very source of life on Earth



Amit.Bhattacharya@timesgroup.com

A total eclipse of the Sun is the most spellbinding spectacle nature can conjure up on our planet. At the magical moment of totality, many watchers have been known to howl and weep. Some stand transfixed as in a trance while others go into a delirium of delight. Several people have described the experience as a life-changing moment, of transcendence, even a deeply spiritual one.



The visual majesty of it is just one aspect of a total solar eclipse (TSE). It's also a reminder of our special place in space and time. For, the extraordinary set of conditions that make the Moon's total occultation of the Sun possible, are also among those that have played a key role in the evolution of life on our blue planet, which is otherwise drifting in a vast and lifeless 'morgue' of space.

Unique in the solar system | A TSE can unfold only on Earth in the solar system. There are two reasons for this. One, in terms of size, our moon is an outlier. It's by far the biggest in the solar system in proportion to the size of the parent planet. Second, by a remarkable coincidence, the Moon appears in our sky almost exactly the same size as the Sun.

In diameter, the Sun is 400 times larger than the Moon, but it's also 400 times farther from Earth than our natural satellite. This makes the apparent size of the two bodies equal for observers on Earth.

The size of the Moon in the sky does change, depending on where in its elliptical orbit around Earth it happens to be. If a solar eclipse occurs when the Moon is closer to its farthest point from Earth, the lunar disc isn't large enough to fully obscure the Sun. But often enough, the Moon's apparent size meets the special

conditions needed for a TSE.

That was the case yesterday, with the 'Great North American Eclipse', when the Moon's 185km-wide umbra – the darkest and innermost portion of its shadow corresponding with the region of totality – will appear in the Pacific, then cross into Mexico before traversing through 13 US states and cutting through eastern Canada and ending in north Atlantic.

Children of the Moon | Let's return to the exceptional coincidence of TSEs occurring over the only planet where life evolved in the solar system (and in the universe, from what we know so far). The common link is our outsized moon. It is now emerging that the Moon may have played a much more crucial role in creating conditions conducive for evolution of life on Earth.


And, it may have begun with the violent process of its formation itself. The most widely accepted hypothesis says the Moon was formed out of a collision between Earth and a Mars-sized object late in the planet-formation phase of our solar system. As per one recent study, Earth most likely received the bulk of its carbon, nitrogen and other life-essential volatile elements from this collision more than 4.4 billion years ago.

Several scientists have proposed that if life began in Earth's oceans, then the high tidal energy provided by the Moon, which was closer to Earth at that time, played a crucial role in creating conditions for formation of self-replicating molecules like RNA and DNA, the basic building blocks of life.

In the epochs that followed, the Moon made Earth a much more habitable place with a relatively stable climate by moderating the planet's wobble on its axis. In short, the connections of life on Earth with forces far removed from our world run deeper than we can imagine. Eclipses, through moments of celestial magic, dramatically emphasise this.

Specks of dust in the Cosmos | During his final years in office, President Clinton reportedly kept in the Oval Office a sample of rock brought from the Moon by the Apollo 11 crew. In a later interview with astrophysicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Clinton said when discussions in the room became heated, he would point to the rock and say it had been around for 3.6 billion years. The lives of people in the room were fleeting by contrast: "Now we're all just passing through here and we don't have very much time, so let's just calm down and figure out what the right thing to do is." And it worked every single time, Clinton said.

In a similar way, a total solar eclipse presents a larger cosmic canvas to a world riven by differences that appear irreconcilable when seen through a narrower frame. Let us be mesmerised and uplifted by it.




Calvin & Hobbes

DEAR SANTA, WHY IS YOUR OPERATION LOCATED AT THE NORTH POLE?

I'M GUESSING CHEAP ELF LABOR, LOWER ENVIRONMENTAL STANDARDS, AND TAX BREAKS. IS THIS REALLY THE EXAMPLE YOU WANT TO SET FOR US IMPRESSIONABLE KIDS?

MY PLAN IS TO PUT HIM ON THE DEFENSIVE BEFORE HE CONSIDERS HOW GOOD I'VE BEEN.



Sacred space

Just after she vanquishes Mahishasur, the demon in the form of a buffalo, giving it mukti, liberating it, Durga sends out a message to her devotees, 'do not be scared, have faith, everything is under control, for I am around'.

Ritu Chopra, Ya Devi

Worshipping The Divine Feminine To Gain Mukti

Sonal Srivastava

We are enveloped by the Divine Feminine. In this cocoon of energy, we are born, live and die and merge into. The Adi Shakti, Divine Feminine, is the primordial source of energy that can neither be created, nor be destroyed. She is ever-present, energising us to do all that we do – from our daily mundane tasks to the most creative work we can think of. The Divine Feminine is the substratum that shapes us and our creative streaks.

Scriptures say that for a sadhak, spiritual practitioner, engrossed in the worship of the Devi, there is never a dull moment. Not only is his journey full of exciting spiritual experiences – practitioners have reported seeing visions or hearing naad, the unstruck sound – it also culminates in the most satisfactory of ways. The sadhak is assured of the following muktis, forms of liberation, as a consequence of his life-long sadhana: Salokya, samipya, swarupya, and sayujjya.


The Shaiv and Vaishnav schools of thought offer different interpretations of the four forms of mukti. According to some, salokya means entering the deities' lok; the sojourn in the goddesses' lok depends on the merit that a sadhak has earned through his spiritual practice, the jap; however, the moment his merit is spent, the sadhak is back in the cycle of death and rebirth.

Samipya is when the sadhak develops a closeness with the deity. According to ancient texts, this is like the servant-master relationship, the sadhak attains enlightenment by serving the master. Swarupya means to attain the physical form of the Devi. The Divine Feminine is depicted as Lalita Tripurasundari, Bagalamukhi, Matangi and Kamala, beautiful forms that are parts of the ten Mahavidya pantheon.

Worshipping all forms of the Divine Feminine principle, ultimately leads to Sayujjya, merging with Ishwar, when the worshipper and worshipped become one and externalities dissolve. It is the ultimate union with the Being. Most practitioners of Advaita sadhana aim for this stage and hope to attain it after death, but there is a twist in the tale. One does not have to die to achieve any of the above-listed muktis. A sincere sadhak can access these through higher states of consciousness by invoking the Devi through spiritual practices.

In the Bhagwad Gita, Arjun asks Krishna: Who is a jivanmukt? Krishna replies that jivanmukt is a person who is liberated while living. He is not affected by sorrow, anger or fear and does not have any likes and dislikes either. He just goes with the flow and accepts things as they are and stays equanimous every moment. A Shakti worshipper, too, can access these muktis through the power of devotion and sadhana. Qualities such as compassion, forgiveness, empathy, love towards all beings and the ability to nurture them are attributed to the Divine Feminine. If a sadhak is able to fully develop even one of these attributes, he stands a good chance to experience at least some form of mukti in his lifetime, all through the power of his sadhana. Like a thousand-petalled lotus, a sadhak can rest in the ocean of Being by just making the efforts to reach it.

Navratri begins on April 9



THE SPEAKING TREE

Yellen Speaks Softly, But Firmly, in Beijing

China needs to de-industrialise its economy

Wrapping up her 4-day visit to China on Monday, US treasury secretary Janet Yellen did some plain speaking to bring down excess Chinese industrial capacity and not allow a repeat of Chinese imports flooding the US market in the early 2000s. Since China emerged from Covid, its economic momentum has slowed on weak domestic consumption. This exerts pressure on policymakers in Beijing to crank up growth through more investments in emerging technologies such as EVs. This is threatening growth and jobs in China's principal trading partners like the US. If this remains unchecked, they could be forced to retaliate by withholding technology. China's investment-led growth model is reaching limits that are straining relations with the rest of the world, which wants to reindustrialise after the pandemic. For that to happen, China will have to de-industrialise its economy.

Beijing is open to seeking better balance in economic growth around the world provided it's not forced to do so through strategic levers. This is a softening of stance from a year ago when the US was rattling the cage over issues like Taiwan and arguing the Chinese economic model was broken. Yellen, too, made no noise about possible retaliatory tariffs. Despite its spectacular property market bust, China has adequate policy options to pump up local consumption. These would come at a cost to export-oriented investments as households reclaim their savings from manufacturers. Chinese consumers need a bigger social security net to be able to consume their way out of what appears to be a prolonged economic slowdown.

The world economy needs both the US and China to grow at reasonable rates to avoid sliding into recession. The current imbalance of China becoming the world's factory was driven by US companies seeking labour cost advantage. Some of those advantages are now available elsewhere, which gives Washington leverage in rebalancing its economic engagement with Beijing. It can press its advantage while being sensitive to China's security concerns. Yellen's mission of seeking cooperation with China offers a way out of trade wars and heightened geopolitical tension.

Decoupling the Great Indian False Binary

The Supreme Court's expert committee to determine the Great Indian Bustard's core habitat will help move towards resolving a difficult situation of balancing conservation with evacuating renewable electricity. Irrespective of the precedent it sets, the era of managing multiple goods and non-negotiables is upon us.

Such instances will rise as India decarbonises and climate-proofs its economy. Electricity networks will grow exponentially even if India adopts every energy efficiency option. Robust transmission-distribution network and digital infrastructure will mean more wires and cables — overhead and underground. Given population density, rich biodiversity resources and

hotspots, cultural sanctity, livelihoods of forest residents, conservation of forests and health of hydrological systems, choosing between competing non-negotiables will be the norm. Hierarchy of norms that prioritised economic growth over other considerations no longer holds in a climate-constrained world. We need a different

approach, which includes pushing back on the dogma of speciesism, or caring about humans at the cost of other living beings.

Clear targets, plans, consultations, and exploring trade-offs and options must underpin the road to a net-zero emissions economy by 2070. The 2030 target of 500 GW of non-fossil electricity-generation capacity and sourcing 50% electricity consumption from RE by 2030 must be translated into drawing board plans considering all factors, including addressing non-negotiables. A plan that details out every possible issue and contingency can factor in all workarounds and options. One good won't need to be sacrificed at the altar of another.

JUST IN JEST
Dev Patel's Monkey Man gets desi grit and edgy action we've been enjoying

Finally, Angrezi Flicks Catch Up With Us

In Danny Boyle's 2008 film, *Slumdog Millionaire*, Brit actor Dev Patel played his 'Indian card' to the hilt as Jamal Malik, teen resident of Juhu's shanties who finds himself on a winning streak on Kaun Banega Crorepati. The word 'slum' itself set the tone of what the movie was doing — rehashing 'slum tourism' of Roland 'Rickshaw' Joffe's 1992 *City of Joy* that made Calcutta the 'slum capital' of the world — and gave the city a name its residents have since used without realising the irony ('City of Joy' is 'slum' in the adjoining town of Howrah). Indian cinema and OTT shows, including in Hindi, have moved on from those twee Orientalist depictions a while back, venturing into a terrain that's gritty, dark and edgy. But foreign films depicting India have stayed stuck in their usual 'poverty n' biscuits' aesthetics. Until now, it seems. Patel has played catch-up in his directorial debut, *Monkey Man*, and sets to redeem his old foray into slumdogma. Heartily described as an Indian 'John Wick', the neo-noir franchise starring Keanu Reeves as a dark assassin, *Monkey Man* has Patel play hardcore Mumbai noir in the title role. There's violent action — of the extreme non-Gandhian type — but 'with soul', something we have come to relish in shows like *Sacred Games*, *Paatal Lok* and *Farzi*. Good that the West is finally catching up with us.

STATE OF PLAY BJP isn't just laying claim to GOP's space but is ready to take it as its own

BJP Hand in Congress Glove



Pranab Dhal Samanta

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent comparison of Congress with pre-Independence-era Muslim League is a direct attack on the GOP's credentials as sole inheritor of the freedom struggle legacy. It also tells us how far BJP has travelled to not just lay claim to this space but also is prepared to take it as its own — an effort at the heart of its revival since 2014.

BJP has, over the past decade, drawn on Congress' leadership pantheon. It took advantage of the latter's tendency to predominantly play up the legacy of the Nehru-Gandhi family while paying little or no attention to the contribution of others. As a result, today, BJP has acquired a reasonable degree of ownership on legacies of leaders like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, BR Ambedkar and Subhas Chandra Bose.

Congress of that era had many political strands, and each of these leaders represented one thought or the other. What BJP has done is, it has worked on owning each of them, including Mohandas Gandhi. In fact, leaving aside Jawaharlal Nehru, BJP has accepted almost all greats from the decades of the 1920s and 1930s who shaped the Independence movement.

What's perplexing is that Congress has allowed this to happen without a contest. And it's not just about the distant past. Take P V Narasimha Rao, awarded Bharat Ratna by the Modi government, while Rao's own party is still unwilling to claim his legacy.

Modi has prised open this contradiction and, in the process, laid the ground to create a new legacy for BJP. But how? Both BJP and Congress are nationalist parties with different ideologies. Historically, Congress was that big umbrella organisation occupying the political middle ground to which any party could gravitate. Political cooption of leftist



Before the paint can dry

ideological thinking is an example of how Congress was able to contain leftist parties from expanding their political footprint.

BJP now feels it's well-positioned to replace Congress as it expands from right towards centre. So, alongside historical icons and eminent contemporary leaders whom it recognised, the party has thrown open negotiating doors for leaders from almost all political parties — Left parties being the only notable exception — with a view to gain acceptability of the kind that is associated with Congress.



Take P V Narasimha Rao, awarded Bharat Ratna by the Modi government, while his own party is still unwilling to claim his legacy

med by the fact that even though his party may inch forward in terms of gains, it should at least be seen as a far better option to Congress across India's political geography. The problem in stitching alliances in Tamil Nadu shows need for more groundwork. Also, as the party grows, it will face genuine challenges from its own local units against building alliances like it has in Odisha. But, nationally, BJP is now looking to own the mantle of being natural partner at the Centre for any regional party.

Political inclusion and geographical expansion are the two intertwined processes through which this is playing out. Modi's Muslim League comment is, therefore, a scathing political rub on Congress on how much of its territory BJP can now claim as 'captured'. But there's also a pragmatic political aspect to all of this, which lies in the core numbers of BJP's electoral success.

For all the massive strides the party has taken in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and even West Bengal, it's important

not to forget that more than half of BJP's Lok Sabha seats are from direct contests with Congress. In 2019, BJP won 175 of the 190 direct contests, which is a 92% winning strike rate.

This catchment of 175 out of 303 tally from seats across Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Telangana, among others, is a critical base on which BJP has built the rest of its political superstructure.

Statistically, BJP has to maintain a very small margin of error in this set if it wants get close to the numbers it aspires for in this election. In fact, some in BJP argue the need to further improve this already formidable strike rate and add those extra seats. For this, BJP needs to keep Congress pinned to the ground. Because even the slightest revival could affect its calculations in what it considers a pivotal election to its political evolution.

About a century ago, when RSS was also formed, Congress was the dominant political force in the country. It represented the patriotic surge of that decade, leading up to Independence. This legacy has stayed with Congress, questioned on many occasions but not challenged. The frontal assault it's facing this time is clearly the most serious challenge to its legacy as the natural inheritor of the freedom struggle. BJP has built the ground and positioned itself strongly to now stake claim.

In many ways, BJP feels that the nationalist sentiment is now firmly settled in its direction, allowing it the space to take that final plunge at evicting Congress from this stage. The GOP will have to dig deep to reinvent itself — for the play on occasion is bigger than just numbers.

pranabdhalsamanta@timesgroup.com



THE SPEAKING TREE

Let's Embrace Imperfections

K V RAGHUPATHI

Accepting life as it is and embracing our imperfections are two strategies for conflict-free living. Being perfect is an ideal. Life is worthless without ideals. All of us strive to live up to our ideals. We could refer to this movement as evolution.

Wabi-sabi is a term from traditional Japanese aesthetics that emphasises accepting imperfection and transience. Wabi aims to help us see the beauty in modest simplicity, free ourselves from the conceit of materialism, and open our hearts to the spiritual richness that exists everywhere. Sabi is about things that grow, age and decay over time, and suggests that beauty is hidden beneath the surface of what we actually see as broken.

In Buddhist teaching, it is referred to as the three marks of existence: impermanence, suffering, and absence of self. Imperfections are impermanent. Suffering results from not accepting the impermanent imperfections. As we accept life as it is with all imperfections, it symbolises our release from transience to transcendence and a movement towards a simpler life. In a world that is riddled with high-stress, fast-paced living and unrealistic pursuits of perfection, our approach should be to accept what is, stay in the present moment, and appreciate the simple, transient stages of life. This way we can find beauty in everything, making every day a doorway to delight.

Chat Room

Hide the Medals Of Ignominy

Apropos the Edit, 'Shut Down 21st-C. Black Holes of India' (Apr 8), the death of a 2-year-old boy after he fell into a 50-ft deep manhole in Gurgaon is not a one-off tragedy. The citizens are indifferent towards such civic problems unless they are affected directly and substantially. It is unfortunate and deplorable that the Supreme Court's ruling that aimed at ensuring safety of human lives has not been implemented. The big task of developing world-class infrastructure and India becoming the third-largest economy should be simultaneously accompanied by ground-level action such as signboards, barbed-wire fencing and steel plate covers to avert such tragedies.

VIJAY MULLAJI
Byemail

Stowaway Secures Fraudster's Job

This refers to the Edit, 'Foreign Job Seekers, Look Before You Leap' (Apr 6). Inadequate economic and social opportunities in India and the increasingly restrictive legal migration pathways worldwide aid and abet the proliferation of fraudulent agents. Thriving on the demand

all valid emigration procedures. GoI and state governments need to plug the loopholes for illegal migration while curbing the criminal networks. Incorporate stricter provisions for illegal migration in the Draft Emigration Bill 2021.

GREGORY FERNANDES
Mumbai

Go Forth and Set Creativity on Fire

Apropos 'Need to Go Way Beyond IITs', JEE' by Suresh Prabhu and Shobhit Mathur (Apr 6), a few years ago, N R Narayana Murthy had observed that India has failed to make even a single earth-shaking invention in 60 years. This is mainly due to our faulty education system, which does not encourage research and invention. Even the storied IITs and IIMs have failed to make an impact on innovative technology, new inventions or research. One solution is to make IITs autonomous with minimal or no government interference. Our premier institutes should promote innovation and entrepreneurship.

VEENA SHENOY
Thane

Letters to the editor may be addressed to
editet@timesgroup.com

ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

There once was a boss at Wipro,
Whose leadership style was a no-go.
But then came a change,
In a manner quite strange,
Now, the office is headed by a new bro.



Battery Recycling

China was the leading country for recycling lithium-ion type batteries in 2021, with 188,000 tonnes of existing and planned recycling capacity per year, according to data from ACS Energy Lett. It was followed by Germany and the US, albeit with both countries lagging some way behind...

Existing and planned lithium-ion battery recycling capacity in tonnes per year (2021)



INTERNATIONALISING THE RUPEE

Time to Let Loose NR₹s



Prakash Balakrishnan

There comes a stage in everyone's life when one must choose between the safety of home and excitement of the world outside. This is true for economies also. In the formative years of self-discovery, nations benefit from the safety and security afforded by a walled-in monetary system, protected from vagaries of the external world. But there comes a point when the walls start stifling aspirations, instead of nurturing them. One can decide to stay put at that point, or walk the path less travelled with measured steps. From Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent speech at an RBI function, one gets the sense that this coming-of-age moment is around the corner for the rupee. Such a step will be a watershed moment for India.

India took the first baby step towards prepping the rupee for its eventual transition to full adulthood when we accepted Article 8 of the IMF charter in 1994. The regulatory changes emanating from it made the Indian currency freely convertible for most current account transactions, ushering in the era of current account convertibility.

In 1997, RBI set up a committee under SS Tarapore to chalk out a road map for graduating to capital account convertibility. This was followed by a second committee in 2006 headed by Tarapore. However, the 2008 financial crisis, and the asset quality crisis that hit the Indian banking system around the same time, ensured that recommendations of the committees mainly

remained on the back burner, but for incremental changes resulting in the gradual easing of restrictions on capital account transactions.

However, plans for the next big leap — introducing the rupee as a free-floating currency globally — have again started gaining momentum. RBI's 'Report on Currency and Finance 2020-21' set the ball rolling by postulating the emergence of the rupee as an international currency. Following this, an interdepartmental committee was set up within RBI to frame a road map for the internationalisation of the rupee. The committee's report was made public by RBI a few months back. Modi's speech is, perhaps, the final green signal for implementing the ambitious plan.

The timing of the move looks quite apt from a macroeconomic perspective. The Tarapore committees put stringent conditions on fiscal responsibility and financial sector reforms as preconditions for moving towards capital account convertibility. Today, our forex reserves are at a comfortable level and steadily growing. The banking sector is well-capitalised and in good health, with arguably the lowest NPA levels ever.

Though fiscal deficit and inflation are on the higher side, they are projected to come down by 2025 and fall further in later years. Trade deficit has also started coming down, and if the trend holds, we may even record a trade surplus by 2028. In short, the ground situation looks conducive and favourable for the proposed

transition, more than ever before. The newly launched digital rupee can also provide the much-needed technological edge for spreading currency globally.

But there are a few lingering concerns. ▶ **Dwindling global banks** Depleting presence of international banks in the Indian market is a worry. These banks have a big role to play in taking the rupee global, but their network and market share have been shrinking. There is no denying that some regulatory prescriptions and governmental policies have accentuated this trend. It will be of mutual benefit if this trend can be reversed, since these banks can create a global market for the Indian currency by providing distribution networks, clearing and settlement services, liquidity and leverage.

▶ **Tax hurdle** India is starting to be known for its stern and uncompromising stand in taxation matters. While we are well within our rights to do so, an open and less combative disposition in framing and enforcing tax policies can create a more ambient investment climate.

▶ **Easy resolution** Restoring our litigation system's efficiency, speed and respectability is essential if the rupee has to take centre stage in the global arena. Cases like Future-Amazon and SpiceJet are worrisome trends for global investors.

Clear these hurdles, and we certainly have a case of taking the rupee on a world tour and letting loose the non-resident rupee.



Set it free

The writer is a banker

Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



Now leave your material possessions here and return to Bhakti marga.

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY

The Three-Body Problem

Liu Cixin

'Where did you get thoughts like that?' Ye asked softly. She did not express agreement or disagreement, but Bai was grateful that she had spoken at all. 'I just read a book. And it really moved me. Can you read English?'

Ye nodded. Bai took a book with a blue cover from his bag. He looked around to be sure no one was watching, and handed it to her. 'This was published in 1962 and was very influential in the West.'

Wenjie turned around on the stump to accept the book.

Silent Spring, she read on the cover, by Rachel Carson. 'Where did you get this?' 'The book attracted the attention of the higher-ups. They wanted to distribute it to select cadres for internal reference. I'm responsible for translating the part that has to do with forests.'

Wenjie opened the book and was pulled in. In a brief opening chapter, the author described a quiet town silently dying from the use of pesticides. Carson's deep concern suffused the simple, plain sentences.

'I want to write to the leadership of Beijing and let them know about the irresponsible behaviour of the Construction Corps,' Bai said.

Translated from Chinese by Ken Liu

Stepping back

Signalling a potential shift in conflict dynamics, Israel to withdraw troops from south Gaza

After six months of ongoing conflict and the resultant humanitarian crisis, there are signs that the intensity of the Gaza conflict is on the wane. After the death toll mounted to 32,000 and 75,000 people were injured, besides 75 per cent of the population forcibly displaced, Israel has announced the withdrawal of its troops from southern Gaza. Marking a potential turning point in the ongoing strife between Israel and the Hamas, the decision comes amid mounting international pressure to de-escalate the situation. Caught in the crossfire, civilians have borne the major brunt of the bombardment, enduring unimaginable trauma and suffering. As Israel begins troop withdrawal, it is imperative to reflect on the human cost of war and the urgent need for a sustainable resolution. Throughout the conflict, civilians in south Gaza have faced relentless airstrikes, shelling and ground incursions, leading to a staggering loss of lives. The indiscriminate nature of the attacks has left families shattered, homes reduced to rubble and communities torn apart. Even hospitals have not been spared. On the Israeli side, communities near the Gaza border have lived under the constant threat of rocket attacks launched by the Hamas and its sympathiser militant groups. Besides, the war has deepened existing wounds and entrenched animosities on both sides. Decades of unresolved grievances and territorial disputes have fuelled cycles of violence, making it increasingly challenging to break the cycle of conflict and build trust between the sides.



Israel's troop withdrawal decision apparently stems from a confluence of immediate factors, reflecting both internal and external pressures. Among these, two events have played a significant role in shaping Israel's decision. One, the attack on aid workers on April 1 served as a catalyst for heightened international scrutiny and condemnation. The attack sparked outrage and prompted calls for accountability, amplifying pressure on Israel to reassess its military strategy and prioritise diplomatic solutions. Two, widespread protests against Prime Minister Netanyahu within Israel have added to the domestic pressure for change. The demonstrations, which have been going on for months, reflect growing discontent with Netanyahu's leadership. Meanwhile, Gaza continues to grapple with a severe humanitarian crisis, characterised by widespread poverty, food insecurity and lack of sanitation and healthcare facilities. There is now a glimmer of hope for respite from the bloodshed. However, the road to lasting peace remains fraught with challenges. Both Israel and the Hamas must demonstrate a genuine commitment to dialogue, negotiation and compromise to address the root causes. In addition to diplomatic efforts, the international community has a critical role in supporting peace-building initiatives and providing humanitarian assistance to those affected by the conflict. The withdrawal must be accompanied by sustained efforts to address the grievances of all parties involved and ensure that the cycle of violence is not perpetuated.

events have played a significant role in shaping Israel's decision. One, the attack on aid workers on April 1 served as a catalyst for heightened international scrutiny and condemnation. The attack sparked outrage and prompted calls for accountability, amplifying pressure on Israel to reassess its military strategy and prioritise diplomatic solutions. Two, widespread protests against Prime Minister Netanyahu within Israel have added to the domestic pressure for change. The demonstrations, which have been going on for months, reflect growing discontent with Netanyahu's leadership. Meanwhile, Gaza continues to grapple with a severe humanitarian crisis, characterised by widespread poverty, food insecurity and lack of sanitation and healthcare facilities. There is now a glimmer of hope for respite from the bloodshed. However, the road to lasting peace remains fraught with challenges. Both Israel and the Hamas must demonstrate a genuine commitment to dialogue, negotiation and compromise to address the root causes. In addition to diplomatic efforts, the international community has a critical role in supporting peace-building initiatives and providing humanitarian assistance to those affected by the conflict. The withdrawal must be accompanied by sustained efforts to address the grievances of all parties involved and ensure that the cycle of violence is not perpetuated.



Women perform rituals as they offer prayers on the occasion of 'Somvati Amavasya', in Bhopal

Ladakh's urgent cry for environmental protection

Activists in Ladakh, spurred by Sonam Wangchuk's climate fast, rally for urgent Government action to preserve the fragile environment

Ladakh has recently garnered attention due to Sonam Wangchuk's 21-day climate fast, followed by a 10-day fast by women advocating for Ladakh's statehood and the protection of its delicate Himalayan ecology. The primary objective is to urge the government to take decisive action to safeguard the fragile ecosystem of the Himalayan mountains in Ladakh, as well as the unique indigenous tribal cultures that flourish within its borders. Despite the pressing concerns of local residents regarding the fragile ecosystem of this snow desert, their voices have largely gone unheard by policymakers. Foremost among the challenges faced by Ladakhis is the looming water crisis. Diminished snowfall over the years, coupled with escalating consumption driven by the demands of tourism, has precipitated a severe water scarcity in the region. Located on the banks of Indus River, Chuchot village is located approximately 18 kilometers from Leh's district headquarters. This village stands out as one of the rare few with improved irrigation systems



supporting private farmland, supplied with water via channels connected to the Indus River. Unfortunately, this vital water supply is becoming increasingly contaminated, yet there is a glaring lack of monitoring efforts or plans to prevent its pollution. During a recent field visit to Chuchot, locals lamented the degradation of their water sources. They reminisced about drinking canal water during their childhood but now, due to contamination by tourists, they are forced to rely on jaljeewan water for drinking and cooking. Sadly, even this source is under threat due to rapidly receding glaciers, compounded by the influx of tourists who pollute the pristine waterways. The pollution of our water sources is primarily attributed

to inadequate sewage disposal practices. What was once recycled as manure is now flushed directly into our water bodies, rendering them unfit for use. With melting snow being our primary source of drinking water and low average rainfall exacerbating our reliance on glacier meltwater, Ladakh is facing an acute water crisis. However, amidst these challenges, there are glimmers of hope. Some villages have implemented water testing initiatives to ensure the safety of their water sources. Additionally, interventions like the Jaljeewan Mission have provided alternative water sources, mitigating the impact of water scarcity on communities. Yet, the role of local governance, represented by the

Sarpanch, is pivotal. It is imperative that all water management facilities are efficiently managed and maintained under their jurisdiction. However, freezing canals in winter and inadequate infrastructure pose additional challenges that must be addressed urgently. As a community, we must heed the warnings of environmentalists and activists who advocate for water conservation. The words of Nazer Husain, "Don't let the water run in the sink, our life's on the brink," resonate deeply. Water is indeed the essence of life, and it is incumbent upon us to protect and preserve it for future generations. In conclusion, the escalating threat of water pollution demands collective action and concerted efforts to safeguard our environment. Water conservation must become a cornerstone of our collective ethos, ensuring the sustainable future of Ladakh and its people. The voices of our people must be heard and respected. (The Writer is a student at EJM College, Leh; views are personal. Charkha Features)



TSEWANG DOLMA

Advantage BJP in UP following Ansari's exit

The silence of those feeling relieved at the mafia don's death is much louder than those grieving it

It is often said that sometimes silence is more deafening than cranking noise. At the burial of mafia don-turned-politician Mukhtar Ansari in Mohammadabad of Ghazipur district of eastern Uttar Pradesh, there was an estimated crowd of around 30,000 mourners, or more perhaps, who raised the slogan of "mafia nahi messiah hain" (he was not a mafia, he was a messiah). Similar moments of outbursts, although not of the same magnitude, were witnessed when another mafia-don-turned-politician of Uttar Pradesh Atiq Ahmed was killed.

Top Uttar Pradesh Opposition leaders, meanwhile, have demanded a high-level investigation into the death of the jailed gangster-turned politician Mukhtar Ansari, with the Samajwadi Party (SP) president Akhilesh Yadav even calling for an investigation under the supervision of a Supreme Court Judge. Similarly, with an eye on minority votes, four-time former UP CM and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) president Mayawati, too, has demanded a high-level investigation into the death in view of the serious allegations by the family of the deceased that he was in fact poisoned. Opposition leaders have alleged that Uttar Pradesh is going through the worst phase of 'government anarchy'. To which, many residing in the State may not agree. Ansari, for decades, was regarded as one of eastern UP's most dreaded gangsters, a reign that involved deadly rivalries with other gangster-politicians, some of whom he and his associates have been accused or convicted of having assassinated. He was lodged in different prisons in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh since 2005, when he was first arrested for inciting violence. His political career saw him represent the Mau Vidhan Sabha seat for five terms, winning it for the first time as a Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) candidate. He was subsequently expelled from the party but continued to win the seat — in 2002 and 2007 —



as an independent, and in 2012 under the banner of his party Quami Ekta Dal — before he rejoined the BSP in 2017. In 2022, his son took over from the father and contested and won the Mau Vidhan Sabha seat. The silence of those feeling relieved at the death of Ansari is much louder than those grieving it. Although there are no indications of the State being involved in the death of the jailed politician, the silent masses are giving credit to the resolute administration of Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath for the mafia don exiting the political scene ahead of the Lok Sabha polls. Ansari was accused in 63 criminal cases, including 14 of murder. These cases remained pending in the court of law till Yogi Adityanath came to power as Chief Minister in 2017. Slowing the legal process gained pace and Ansari was convicted and sentenced in eight of these since September 2022. Among the most high profile of these cases were the murders of then sitting Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) MLA

IN THE STATE WHICH GIVES 80 MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT TO THE 545-STRONG LOK SABHA, THE DETERMINATION OF THE PRESENT CHIEF MINISTER TO EXTERMINATE GANGSTERS HAS TO A GREAT EXTENT RESTORED PEOPLE'S FAITH IN THE LAW AND ORDER MACHINERY

Krishnanand Rai in 2005 and Awadesh Rai (brother of current Uttar Pradesh Congress president Ajay Rai) in 1991. The battle between the Rais (not directly related) and the Ansaris was about hegemony in the award of the Government contracts and the huge profits it brought. The garnering of the contracts needed use of terror and if missed out, unleashing threats of extortion. The gang wars were not limited to just the Ghazipur district but spread their tentacles to almost all the districts of Uttar Pradesh, east of the State capital of Lucknow. In the State which gives 80 Members of Parliament to the 545-strong Lok Sabha, the determination of the present Chief Minister to exterminate gangsters has to a great extent restored people's faith in the law and order machinery. Silent accolades for a Government into the seventh year of its rule, is bound to reap a huge political harvest. The death of Mukhtar Ansari may have made things more difficult for the Samajwadi Party-led Opposition. It will not bring any fresh consignment

ments of minority votes, as they stand already consolidated behind them, but it would certainly send a firm message to law-abiding citizens about the 'effectiveness' of the Yogi Adityanath Government. There are still images in the minds of the local residents of Ansari moving around in an open vehicle, flaunting firearms in a communally affected town under curfew. Government bulldozers pulling down concrete emblems of Ansari's empire — events that preceded his death — restored people's faith and belief in the Government machinery. Yogi Adityanath's bulldozers may, at times, seem to have crossed the line but they have been largely effective in restoring a sense of confidence in even among those who may not have been much swayed by the passion surrounding the inauguration of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. Therefore, Ansari, in his death, may give just that decisive advantage to the BJP in Uttar Pradesh. (The writer is a political analyst and President, Centre for Reforms, Development & Justice; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AAP LEADERS PROTEST

Madam — Apropos the news article "AAP leaders hold collective fast at Delhi's Jantar Mantar to protest against Kejriwal's arrest" published on April 7, this is my response. Top leaders of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) convened at Jantar Mantar for a day-long fast, condemning the arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal by the Enforcement Directorate (ED). The gesture, backed by scores of supporters, echoed nationwide and abroad, with protests spanning from Boston to London. Asserting Kejriwal's integrity amidst accusations, AAP leaders vowed to combat what they perceive as BJP's authoritarianism. The imagery of Kejriwal behind bars adorned the stage, flanked by portraits of national icons. The fast served not only as a protest but also as a call to action for AAP supporters to secure victory in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. Atishi, a Delhi minister, accused the BJP of tyranny, promising electoral repercussions. As the fast concluded, AAP leaders emphasised resilience against perceived political persecution. They pledged to challenge the BJP's dominance, rallying supporters both domestically and internationally.

Khiraabdi | Noida

TALIBAN'S OMINOUS AGENDA

Madam — Apropos the news article "Afghanistan under Taliban rule" published on April 6, this is my response. The Taliban's recent rhetoric, threatening to impose barbaric punishments on Afghan women, underscores their relentless assault on human rights. Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada's vitriolic remarks, vowing public floggings and stonings for alleged adultery, reveal a disturbing escalation in their oppressive tactics. Akhundzada's diatribe not only signals further atrocities against Afghan women but also exposes the Taliban's deep-seated animosity towards Western democracies. His depiction of Western representatives as "the devils" epitomises their extremist ideology. Moreover, the Taliban's expedited imple-

No end to controversies



Apropos the news article "CAA: Why the hula-baloo?" published on April 7, this is my response. The Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) has become a pivotal juncture in India's legislative landscape, altering citizenship acquisition for religious minorities. Enacted in 2019, it notably reduces the residency requirement for certain groups from neighbouring countries seeking Indian citizenship. This legislation, however, has sparked widespread debate and protests, both domestically and internationally, primarily due to

its exclusion of Muslims and the timing of its introduction vis-a-vis elections. Critics argue that it violates constitutional principles of equality. The Supreme Court is now deliberating on various aspects of the CAA, including its constitutionality and potential repercussions. While proponents assert its necessity for addressing the plight of persecuted communities, opponents question its discriminatory nature and its compatibility with India's secular ethos. Amidst this legal and societal discourse, international reactions, notably from American Senator Ben Cardin, have further intensified scrutiny on India's internal policies, prompting robust defenses from Indian authorities. Ultimately, the fate of the CAA rests with the judiciary, reflecting the ongoing tension between upholding constitutional values and addressing humanitarian concerns.

Sarachana Desai | Narnaul

mentation of Sharia law across Afghanistan raises concerns about their broader ambitions. Akhundzada's ominous reference to a prolonged struggle suggests a potential expansion of their draconian rule beyond Afghanistan's borders, risking international conflict. Their systematic suppression of women's rights and collaboration with terrorist groups like al-Qaeda underscore the urgent need for global vigilance. As Afghanistan teeters on the brink of becoming a terrorist haven once again, the international community must confront the Taliban's reign of terror and stand in solidarity with Afghan women facing systemic oppression.

Jitu Majumdar | Kolkata

LAKHAMANDAL'S CHARM

Madam — Apropos the news article "Devotees marvel at reflective mystique of Lakhamandal Shivalinga" published on April 8, this is my response. Nestled merely a stone's throw away from Dehradun lies the enigmatic town of Lakhamandal, steeped in myth and spirituality. Echoing the grandeur of

Kedarnath, this sacred site boasts a myriad of Shivalingas, reminiscent of the Pandavas' reverence in the Mahabharata. The Lakhamandal Temple, a testament to this divine legacy, proudly stands along the road to Yamunotri, its majestic Shivalinga drawing pilgrims and enthusiasts alike. Witnessing rituals of Jal Abhishek unveils a surreal spectacle: devotees glimpsing their reflections upon the Linga's surface, a testament to their unity with Lord Shiva. Yet, amidst the tranquility, lies a tale of rediscovery.

As whispers of its miraculous powers echo through the hills, Lakhamandal remains a beacon of spiritual enlightenment. Its intricate Nagara architecture and mythical narratives intertwine, inviting travellers to delve into its timeless allure. In the heart of Lakhamandal, where legends converge, lies a haven where the divine and mortal realms entwine, beckoning seekers from far and wide.


Neha Gupta | Delhi

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

BATTLING CANCER AND EMOTIONAL TURMOIL

Yoga, pranayama and breathing techniques help in detoxifying the body



RAVI VALLURI

The grandparents were in possession of a ten-year visa for their annual trips to Europe and they were undergoing a medical check-up to be insured. An inconsolable mother rang up her sons in England and Holland to communicate that their father was suffering from cancer. The sons to rushed to assuage the emotionally distraught parents. But where is the visa to combat cancer? The father is currently undergoing chemotherapy and braving radiation therapy. The mother has been impacted psychologically and is a victim of innumerable ailments such as hypertension, high sugar levels, intermittent cough and has become a virtual nervous wreck. “Why me?” Any patient will ask this question and it is gut-wrenching for the family to break the news. Cancer, also known as a malignant tumour or malignant neoplasm, is a group of diseases involving abnormal growth with the propensity to spread and ingress to other parts of the human body. The sun sign becomes an ailment! The Geneva-based Union for International Cancer and Control, has around 800 members spread over 155 countries. The body emphatically alludes that early detection of the disease and palliative measures can challenge the sickness. WHO has analysed that there are around 7 lakh cancer deaths in India and around 10 lakh people contract the disease every year. Among women, claim oncologists breast cancer, cervical and ovarian cancer is extremely prevalent. Consumption of tobacco, smoking and excessive consumption of alcohol are other contributory factors which are leading to widespread increase in cancer.

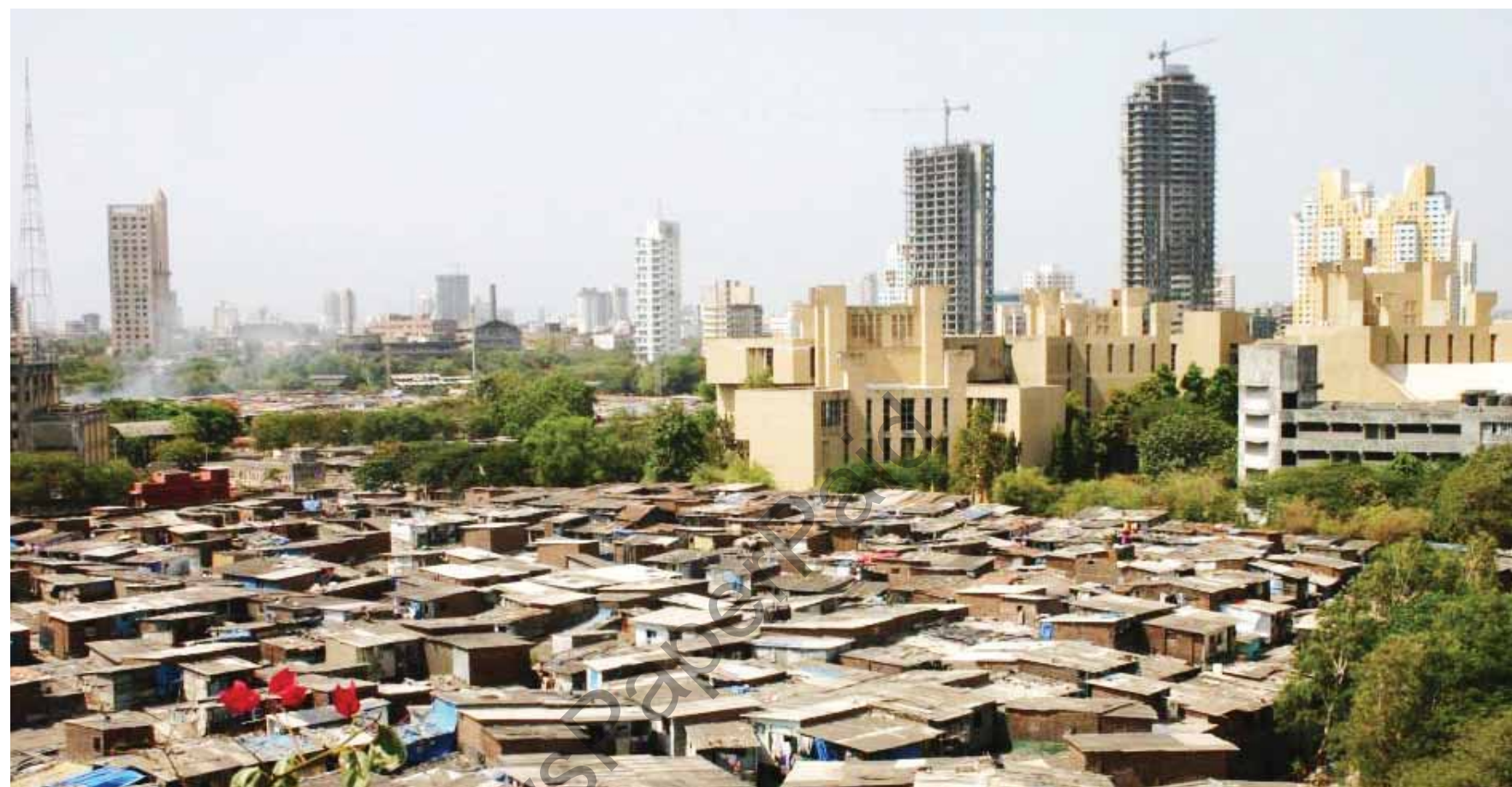


The United States Centre for Disease Control and Prevention describes tobacco use as ‘the single most important preventable risk to human health in developed countries and an important cause of premature death worldwide’. Several countries have adopted stringent measures to control the consumption of tobacco with the usage and sale restrictions as well as bold warning messages printed on the packaging. Smoking causes cancers of the larynx and the mouth and hypertension, besides polluting the environment. Secondary smoking is equally debilitating for the passive smoker. WHO argues that cigarettes sold in underdeveloped countries tend to have higher tar content and are less likely to be filtered, potentially increasing the vulnerability of tobacco and smoking-related diseases. An anxious patient prays and hopes that the growth is benign. Sometimes, however, they are misplaced and the tumour is malignant. How is the news to be broken to the patient? It requires enormous skill and dexterity to reveal the truth to the patient and the family since both are under tremendous distress. Dr Ranjana Shrivastava, an oncologist from Australia, belabours that the news should be broken with extreme care, caution and a human touch. Apart from early detection and early cure, a change in lifestyle is fundamental in tackling this lethal disease. Doctors arguably say no to smoking and advise the patient to refrain from alcohol. Individuals need to draw up a schedule of diet and exercise. Exercise releases endorphins that have an analgesic effect on the human body and mind. Practice of yoga (under a qualified practitioner), pranayama and breathing techniques such as Sudarshan Kriya help in detoxifying the human body. Whether diseased or healthy, humans should be surrounded by positive company and thoughts. Managing the mind to remain calm and contented provides roots to be mentally strong and sturdy. Reading inspiring literature of cancer survivors and their life stories acts as a lifeboat. ‘Time is shortening. But every day that I challenge this cancer, is a victory for me,’ said the talismanic actress Ingrid Bergman.

(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He is a faculty of the Art of Living; views are personal)

India’s wealth inequality is rising

The World Inequality Lab report says India’s top one per cent of the population holds a staggering 40.1 per cent of the nation’s wealth



In a diverse and democratic India, every citizen has an equal opportunity. A major global economic policy debate revolves around the pressing concern of wealth inequality in India. According to a recent research paper titled “Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj,” released by The World Inequality Lab (WIL) at the Paris School of Economics, the top one percent of India’s population held 40.1 percent of the country’s wealth in 2022-23, marking one of the highest levels globally. At the 2023 annual meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland, Oxfam International unequivocally released a report titled ‘Survival of the Richest’, revealing that the wealthiest one percent of individuals in India possess over 40 percent of the nation’s total wealth. These findings have sparked significant concerns about the precision and influence of foreign research agencies’ assessments of India’s wealth inequality. The specific nature of these findings has had a profound global impact, singling out India’s rapidly expanding economy. Clearly, the issue of wealth inequality demands a comprehensive examination and a far-reaching discourse. The issue of wealth inequality is often discussed at the WEF summit in Davos, where influential individuals from various fields come together to address global challenges. While there may be doubts about the methodology and biases of these reports, they still provide insights for consideration and reflection. An individual’s wealth is distinct from the wealth of the corporation they own. Corporate entities have various stakeholders, such as banks, shareholders, and financial agencies, and they also have liabilities. The wealth of a corporation



THE GOVERNMENT MUST ENSURE THAT EVERY INDIVIDUAL HAS A CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT TO ACCESS RESOURCES THAT CAN HELP REDUCE POVERTY AND INEQUALITY. THE DEFINITION AND IDENTIFICATION OF BPL FAMILIES IN INDIA NEED TO BE RECONSIDERED

belongs to these stakeholders in proportion to their stakes. There is a debate about why corporations’ competitive returns on their large investments are being targeted for wealth inequality, and why there is advocacy for wealth and inheritance taxes. Corporations argue that they already pay their fair share of taxes, including Corporate Tax, Goods and Services Tax (GST), Import-Export Duties, and Income Tax. Furthermore, they claim to contribute to the economy by generating employment and fulfilling their corporate social responsibility (CSR). Some people suggest restructuring the tax system to account for both income and wealth and imposing an additional 2 per cent super tax on the wealthiest individuals to address inequality and promote economic growth and job creation. However, proponents of this idea believe that corporate competitive growth is a natural phenomenon and contributes to the country’s GDP growth. The export of goods and services as a percentage of GDP has increased from 6.3 per cent in 1984 to 22.79 per cent in 2022-23. This high growth has led to significant changes in the socio-economic fabric of civil society. Since liberalisation in the 1990s, the economy has become increasingly globalised. Before 1990, wealth creation in India was minimal, billionaires were rare, and extreme poverty was prevalent. However, today, billionaires are common, and extreme poverty is history. According to Forbes, the number of Indians with a net

wealth exceeding \$1 billion increased from just one in 1991 to 162 in 2022. Why Corporates Are Being Targeted: It is a common but politically deliberated interpretation that corporations have exacerbated wealth inequality. There is a concern about the irrational international agencies catalysing conflict against Indian corporations, which are major contributors to the country’s GDP and significant employers, especially when India ranks as the world’s fifth-strongest economy. It’s important to note that existing inequalities based on gender, geography, ethnicity, race, caste, and religion already exist. Further disparities would not only harm our economy but also create a negative global public perception, hindering efforts to eradicate poverty. Extreme inequality is not inevitable and is often the result of political misgovernance, but it can be addressed through effective interventions. When compared to many other countries, India is relatively better off in terms of income and wealth equality. Globally, the top one per cent of the richest individuals have accumulated 46 per cent of the world’s wealth over the past two years. According to Credit Suisse’s Global Wealth Report-2023, Russia has the highest wealth concentration, with the top one per cent holding 60 per cent of national wealth. Brazil’s wealthiest one per cent holds 49.6 per cent, and in the USA, the top one percent of households own 33 per cent of the country’s wealth.

Way Forward: NITI Aayog claims that 25 crore citizens were lifted out of multidimensional poverty between 2013-14 and 2022-23, still around 23 crore below-poverty-line (BPL) families are there. The government’s key task is to uplift the poor, and the support of the corporate is crucial for this. Creating enough well-paying jobs is essential for reducing poverty and inequality. However, much more needs to be done to make India a less unequal country. The Government must ensure that every individual has a constitutional right to access resources that can help reduce poverty and inequality. The definition and identification of BPL families in India need to be reconsidered. The government should focus more on pro-poor policies for domestic resource mobilisation. The latest updates from the World Poverty Clock indicate that extreme poverty in India has dropped to less than 3 per cent. It is imperative to address the perception of wealth inequality in the country, as reported by foreign research agencies. This raises questions about the government’s commitment to poverty elimination, despite its much-touted slogan “Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas.” (The Author is Vice-Chairman of Sonalika ITL Group, Vice-Chairman(Cabinet Minister rank) of the Punjab Economic Policy and Planning Board, Chairman of ASSOCHAM Northern Region Development Council; views expressed are personal)



AS MITTAL

The unseen consequences of neglected eye care in women

Women’s susceptibility to autoimmune conditions, often with visual implications and age-related hormonal fluctuations, underscores the urgency of eye care

Women, who typically live longer than men, are exposed to the risk of eye diseases for a more extended period, making them more susceptible to visual impairment and blindness. Reports indicate that two-thirds of all cases of blindness and visual impairment occur in women. This higher prevalence can be attributed to several factors. Women are more likely to suffer from autoimmune conditions, which often have visual side effects. Additionally, regular age-related hormonal changes can affect women’s eyes. For example, dry eye is more common in women, partly due to hormonal changes with aging. These factors underscore the importance of



MANDEEP SINGH BASU

regular eye exams and proactive eye care in women’s health routines. Incorporating Ayurvedic practices can significantly benefit eye health. Ayurveda, an ancient Indian system of medicine that has been in practice for over 5,000 years, focusing on the balance of mind, body, and spirit. Ayurvedic treatments for eye care include eye exercises,

herbal remedies, and dietary recommendations that can help improve vision and prevent eye diseases. Ayurvedic treatments are tailored to the individual constitution (dosha) and ensure the restoration of balance and harmony in the body, which can positively impact eye health. Here are some essential measures women can incorporate with Ayurveda to safeguard their vision: Regular Eye Exams: Dilation of eye which is the only way to know if your eyes are healthy and your vision is intact. Early detection and treatment of eye conditions can control vision loss. Dietary and Lifestyle Recommendations as per Ayurveda: Ayurveda promotes holistic practices,

emphasising external treatments, physiological balance, and nutritional habits. Consuming various fresh fruits, mainly citrus fruits and green, leafy vegetables, supports optimal eye function and guards against age-related degeneration. Decreasing the use of electronic devices and minimizing digital visual distractions can also enhance eye health. Additionally, incorporating non-meat protein sources like nuts and beans provides essential nutrients supporting eye health. Antioxidants such as vitamins C, E, and zinc protect your eyes from damage. Ayurvedic Eye Care: Incorporating Ayurvedic interventions can help restore equilibrium and alleviate



symptoms through personalized treatment regimens. Kriya Kalpa, or Ophthalmic Kriya Kalpa, is a series of medical procedures for treating specific eye diseases. Tarpana, for example, involves using medicated ghee to nourish the eyes and manage certain eye diseases.

Putapaka, Seka, Ashchyotana, Bidalaka or lepa, and Pindi are other procedures that can benefit eye health. Practicing Nasya, which involves putting medicated oil or powder through the nasal route to cleanse the nasal passages, helps improve overall eye health. Maintain a Healthy Weight: Obesity can increase the risk of developing diabetes, which can lead to diabetic retinopathy and vision loss. Manage Chronic Conditions: Conditions like diabetes and hypertension can affect your vision. Managing these conditions can help prevent eye complications. Avoid Smoking: Smoking is linked to AMD, cataracts, and glaucoma. Quitting smoking can reduce your

risk of developing these conditions. Know Your Family History: Many eye diseases are hereditary. Knowing your family history can help you and your eye doctor take steps to prevent or manage any potential issues. Use Protective Eyewear and sunglasses: Protecting your eyes while performing regular household chores or yard work is necessary. Other than that, playing sports or working on a job involving flying debris, sparks, or chemicals needs to be checked. Therefore, start wearing safety glasses or eye guards made of polycarbonate. Sunglasses help in protecting your eyes from ultraviolet rays as prolonged exposure to sunlight can boost your risk of

cataracts and AMD. The best remedy is to go for sunglasses blocking out 99-100 per cent UVA and UVB rays. By prioritising these preventative measures and incorporating holistic approaches to eye care, women can significantly enhance their chances of maintaining clear vision and reducing the risk of debilitating eye diseases. Neglecting eye health can lead to severe consequences, including vision loss and impaired quality of life. However, with increased awareness and proactive steps, women can take charge of their eye health and ensure optimal vision and overall well-being for years. (The writer is Director, Dr. Basu Eye Hospital; views are personal)

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Battleground Bengal

Onus on ECi to tighten security

THE attack on officials of the National Investigation Agency (NIA) at Bhubupatinagar in West Bengal's East Midnapore district on April 6 has aggravated the conflict between the Centre and the state government. The officials were targeted when they were on their way back after arresting two local leaders of the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) in connection with a blast that had claimed three lives in December 2022. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has accused the NIA sleuths of provoking local residents and harassing women. The police have filed a counter-FIR against the Central agency's sleuths under Section 354 (outraging a woman's modesty) of the IPC on the complaint of family members of one of the arrested leaders.

The incident is reminiscent of what happened on January 5, when a team of the Enforcement Directorate faced mob violence in North 24 Parganas district's Sandeshkhali during a search at the house of TMC strongman Shahjahan Sheikh. At that time, one of Shahjahan's employees had accused the ED of entering the party leader's residence without a search warrant. The attacks on officials must be probed thoroughly, even as the TMC has approached the Election Commission of India (ECI) against the alleged misuse of Central agencies in Bengal.

With the stakes high for both the TMC and its biggest rival in the state, the BJP the next few weeks are expected to witness the hardening of battlelines. The saffron party, which had made major inroads in Bengal in the 2019 General Election — winning 18 seats out of 42 — is going all out to again give a tough fight to the TMC. The Lok Sabha election in Bengal is scheduled to take place in all seven phases (from April 19 to June 1), which makes it incumbent upon the ECI to tighten security and prevent clashes. Leaders of both parties must be taken to task if they incite their cadres to violence and try to derail the democratic process.

Safety protocol lax

Paragliding remains a risky affair at Bir Billing

THE death of Ritu Chopra, a seasoned paragliding pilot, at Bir Billing on Sunday underscores a grave concern — the lack of stringent enforcement of international safety norms in paragliding activities. It serves as a stark reminder of the risks associated with this adventure sport when precautions are not strictly adhered to. Bir Billing, nestled amidst the picturesque Dhauladhar range in Himachal Pradesh, has gained international recognition as a prime destination for paragliding. However, its soaring popularity has not been matched by adequate safety measures. Three paragliders had lost their lives in seven days in October last year.

The lack of awareness about the challenging topography of the Dhauladhar hills and the unpredictable weather conditions exacerbate the risks associated with paragliding. The presence of inexperienced pilots, coupled with the absence of proper regulation of paragliding schools, compromises the safety of tourists. The tendency of local agencies to absolve themselves of responsibility through liability waivers discourages them from prioritising safety over profit margins. Compounding the problem is the absence of facilities for prompt rescue operations, including standby helicopters equipped with winches. The inordinate delay in saving lives highlights the need for improved logistics. Illegal constructions along the landing site also endanger paragliders and tourists, disrupting wind currents and increasing accident risks.

It is imperative to strictly enforce international standard operating procedures for paragliding, which mandate stringent checks on pilots' experience, equipment and adherence to guidelines. The authorities concerned must ensure that Bir Billing becomes a paradise for adventure seekers, not a hub of accidents and tragedies.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 9, 1924

Reforms and untouchability

THE views expressed by the "submerged classes" in their farewell address to Lord Willingdon are a clear index of the immense danger of the continuance of untouchability to the cause of India's political advancement. The address emphasised that the depressed classes "were entirely opposed to the controlling hand of the British Government being removed from India". They also expressed themselves against the immediate Indianisation of the services and strongly desired that no nation-building department should be entrusted to a minister, but should be in charge of a senior European officer working under a European member of the Executive Council. We do not know of a single instance in which a minister or any other responsible Indian officer in any part of India has neglected the interests of the so-called "submerged classes"; and the address is nothing more or less than an attempt to exploit the depressed classes for the purpose of thwarting the legitimate aspirations of politically minded Indians, who have done, and are doing, everything in their power to improve the condition of the people on whose behalf the address purports to speak. But it must be admitted that unless the educated classes make more strenuous efforts to deliberate on untouchability and improve the lot of the untouchables, this sort of thing will continue and their past sins will terribly recoil on them. It is, indeed, a most lamentable thing that a large section of Indians should be forced to live under conditions that could be successfully exploited by the enemies of political reform.

OPINION

A new flashpoint in the Gaza war

Israel draws global ire for the attack on convoy of aid organisation distributing food



MANOJ JOSHI

DISTINGUISHED FELLOW, OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION, NEW DELHI

THE founder of the World Central Kitchen (WCK), Jose Andres, has alleged that the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) systematically targeted the three-car convoy of its personnel, killing seven volunteers last Monday.

He pointed out that all three vehicles were clearly marked as WCK vehicles and the Israelis were aware of their itinerary, route and humanitarian mission. The WCK is one of the main institutions that has been delivering food to the people of the devastated enclave.

Confronted with the surge of anger across the world, the Israelis quickly completed an internal investigation and acknowledged on Friday that the strike was a "serious violation of the IDF's rules and operating procedures". Israel said it had dismissed two senior officers and three others were reprimanded.

Earlier, the IDF chief of staff, Lt Gen Herzl Halevi, apologised for the strike and described it as "a mistake that followed a misidentification" and that it should not have happened.

Not surprisingly, the Israeli 'findings' came a day after US President Joe Biden spoke on the phone to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and warned him that if Israel did not change its course in Gaza, "we won't be able to support you".

Can one accept the claim that this tragic incident violated the IDF's operating procedures? The Israeli *mea culpa* does not mean much because the IDF has a history of strikes on hospitals



TRAGIC: Seven volunteers of the World Central Kitchen were killed in an Israeli airstrike last week. REUTERS

ambulances and journalists clearly identified as such. Even now, they have not quite said that the attack was not deliberate.

As the horrendous campaign in Gaza has shown, the IDF has displayed little concern for the humanitarian considerations relating to war. Besides denying food and water to non-combatants, they have used massive unguided bombs to destroy buildings to target Hamas leaders without bothering about the huge collateral destruction and casualties. Their operating procedure seems to suggest that killing a Hamas leader justifies collateral casualties and destruction regardless of their size. We can speculate that they may have assumed, falsely perhaps, that somehow top Hamas leaders were using the WCK convoy as a cover to move around.

The Hamas probably do use civilian cover and have possibly sheltered in hospitals and used ambulances to camouflage their movements. But surely, the IDF needs to be held to a higher standard than the Hamas. It does claim that it operates within international humanitarian law to avoid collateral casualties. Associated with this is the ques-

PM Netanyahu has repeatedly insisted that he will attack Rafah to root out the remaining Hamas militants.

tion of proportional counterforce in an insurgency situation. Wiping out an entire block of flats and killing innocent men, women and children to target a Hamas cadre is certainly a grossly disproportionate use of force. A perspective on Israel's counter-insurgency tactics comes ironically from renowned Israeli war historian Martin van Creveld. In a 2005 essay, he examined two ways of defeating an insurgency. The first was used by Syrian President Hafez

al-Assad to defeat the Muslim Brotherhood that threatened his rule in the early 1980s.

When the 'traditional' tactics of arrest, torture and execution did not work, Assad decided to go after the "head of the snake" — the city of Hama. The Syrian army surrounded the city and used heavy artillery to reduce it to ruins, thereby killing around 20,000 civilians, followed by the detention of another 15,000 and the deportation of 100,000. Around two-thirds of the city was demolished and the Muslim Brotherhood movement crushed. The brutality served to deter the Islamist opponents of the Assad family, though in 2011-12 a democratic revolution resulted in an insurgency which has torn the country apart.

Van Creveld contrasts this with the tactics used by the British to successfully overcome the Irish Republican Army (IRA) insurgency in Northern Ireland. The insurgency intensified in the early 1970s as the IRA went on a bombing spree. The accompanying riots and assassinations killed dozens of people. After a particularly bloody Sunday on January 30, 1972, the British

revised their tactics. They never again opened fire on marching or rioting crowds, never used heavy weapons like tanks in their operations, let alone airpower. Also, they avoided collective punishment like curfew, blowing up houses or destroying neighbourhoods for military advantage.

He does not say this, but one important factor is the fact that in the first case, the Syrian army was battling the 'other' — the Assad regime and most of its army comprises the Alawite minority in Syria, which is barely considered Muslim by its Sunni opponents. The British, on the other hand, see Northern Ireland as very much a part of the UK, even though the IRA was largely Roman Catholic.

This is the problem in Gaza, where many Israelis deny that the Palestinians deserve to be treated as fellow humans. Over the years, they have forcibly taken away their lands, imprisoned a large number of their people and have now systematically destroyed their largest urban conglomeration.

Six months after the Hamas terror attack of October 7, the war is in a state of limbo. Netanyahu has repeatedly insisted that he will attack Rafah to root out the remaining Hamas militants, but the US has termed it a 'red line', considering that it houses a million refugees.

When it comes to the current war, Van Creveld's position is more supportive of the IDF, though he believes that the eventual victor could well be the Hamas, whose task is to simply survive the IDF onslaught. The people of Gaza will have to live long with the consequences of this war and are unlikely to be reconciled to their fate in the long run. Crushing the Hamas militarily most certainly cannot be equated with their political demise.

Incidentally, the Indian military self-consciously avoided using heavy weaponry and attack helicopters even at the height of the Kashmir insurgency.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Anyone who has proclaimed violence as his method inexorably must choose lying as his principle. —Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Old habits that just don't die

PRIYA S TANDON

OLD people have a way of creating a little world in their bedroom. I recently visited an elderly couple and noticed the assortment of boxes, books, cards, calendars and medicines occupying every nook and cranny of their room. One table was crammed with jars of all shapes and sizes. There was *chooran*, *gur*, *shakkar*, peppermint, Isabgol, roasted *phulmakhana*, biscuits, *mithai*, rusk, dried fruit, etc.

While having tea, aunty said she had a tummy ache and asked the servant for Isabgol. He said there seemed to be some red-coloured *susri* (flour beetles) in the jar of Isabgol in the kitchen and that it would be better to discard it and get a fresh pack. She said: 'The other half of the pack is lying on our bedroom table. Bring it and let me check if that too has *susri*.'

The husband looked up from above his reading glasses and said unassumingly: 'I did notice some in it a few days ago, so I didn't have it.'

That was it! 'You saw *susri* in it a few days ago? Every night, I have the Isabgol in front of you. Why haven't you stopped me?' she asked.

He most conveniently switched to the 'I can't hear anything' mode and buried himself in his newspaper with an innocent face. His hearing aid worked well when he wanted it to. Most of the time, he played 'deaf'.

She fumed and ranted over all the sacrifices she had made for him. Turning an ear her way, he said casually: 'Did you say something?'

'Yes, I did! Shouldn't you have cautioned me about the *susri* in the Isabgol?'

'Hmm...' He merely proceeded to help himself to more *pakor*as. Aunty shouted: 'What am I saying? For all you care, I could have died eating these *susri*. If you had seen them, why didn't you warn me?'

He put on his 'holier than thou' face and said: 'These *pakor*as are delicious. Can I have some more?'

By now, I was in splits. Selective hearing was an art that he had mastered to perfection. They argued at every meal. Her eagerness to overfeed him and his failing appetite never found common ground. He conveniently heard her when he wanted to; otherwise, well, just blame the lousy old hearing aid.

Neither of them would change. Old habits die hard, if ever. As they say in Punjabi: '*Panchaan di gall sir matthe; par parnala othhe da othhe* (The wisdom of the elders is appreciated, but the gutter shall stay its course).'

She has continued with her unending endeavour of 60 years to reform him... and the panacea, as always, is the newspaper that provided cover to his face and ears!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Beware of the Dragon

Apropos of the editorial 'China's LAC moves'; the current standoff with China remains a matter of serious concern. Beijing's incursions into Ladakh and Doklam and the Dragon's claim over Arunachal Pradesh make it abundantly clear that China wants to keep India on tenterhooks. Beijing plans to further pursue its policy of expansionism. It is noteworthy how China has reaped humongous profits through its trade relations with India over the years, but it never misses any opportunity to scuttle India's impressive growth and stall its emergence as a leading global power. China's intent to foment trouble along the LAC is obvious. The Dragon is bent on undermining India's defence strategy in an invidious and calculated way without evincing any intent of waging a full-fledged conflict.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, LADWA

Address root cause of illicit trade

With reference to the editorial 'Kidney racket', the cases of organ trafficking and exploitation of donors have become increasingly common. The widespread prevalence of the illicit trade points to the existence of an organised network involving several people, including health professionals. Such a trade cannot thrive without the patronage of political bigwigs and law enforcement officials. Therefore, while dealing with such cases, the role of powerful kingpins and their links should also be probed. The culprits should be dealt with strictly. Organ donors usually come from a poor background, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation. The trade cannot be reined in until the government addresses the root cause — poverty.

AG RAJMOHAN, ANANTAPUR (AP)

Implement laws strictly

Refer to the editorial 'Kidney racket'; organ trafficking continues unabated despite the legal restrictions on commercial dealings in them. According to a news report from 2016, roughly over 10,000 kidney transplants are performed illegally across the world. The practice remains rampant in India. In a lot of cases, forged documents are created for the donors to present them as relatives of the patient. The

involvement of corporate hospitals in illegal transplants cannot be ruled out. Innocent and poor people are exploited by the agents, who pocket the lion's share of the money. Collective efforts from governments, healthcare professionals and the public are needed to combat the unethical practice. Further, strict implementation of laws and raising awareness about the crime are crucial steps for protecting both donors and recipients from exploitation.

O PRASADA RAO, HYDERABAD

Chinese interference in polls

With reference to the report 'China may use AI to influence poll in India, cautions Microsoft report'; the revelation made by Microsoft Threat Analysis Centre (MTAC) about China's potential use of AI to sway elections is alarming. While such efforts in Taiwan proved ineffective, the mere possibility of interference in democracies like India is a cause for concern. The sophistication of AI-generated content poses a threat to the integrity of the electoral process. It is imperative that we bolster our cyber defences and raise public awareness to combat this new form of geopolitical manoeuvring. The resilience of our democratic institutions depends on our collective vigilance against such covert operations.

GURDEV SINGH, MOHALI

Spectre of AI manipulation

The ominous spectre of AI manipulation looms large over the democratic process, as Microsoft's stark warning reveals China's potential to subvert elections in India and the US. With geopolitical interests at stake, the tech giant's cautionary note underscores the urgent need for vigilance. While past attempts in Taiwan and South Korea faltered, China's relentless refinement of AI-generated content poses a grave threat. MTAC general manager Clint Watts' insight into this perilous landscape serves as a wake-up call, highlighting the insidious tactics being employed by the Dragon. As elections approach, the integrity of our democratic institutions hangs in the balance. It is important that we fortify our defences against this digital onslaught and safeguard the sanctity of free and fair elections.

GAGANPREET SINGH, MOHALI

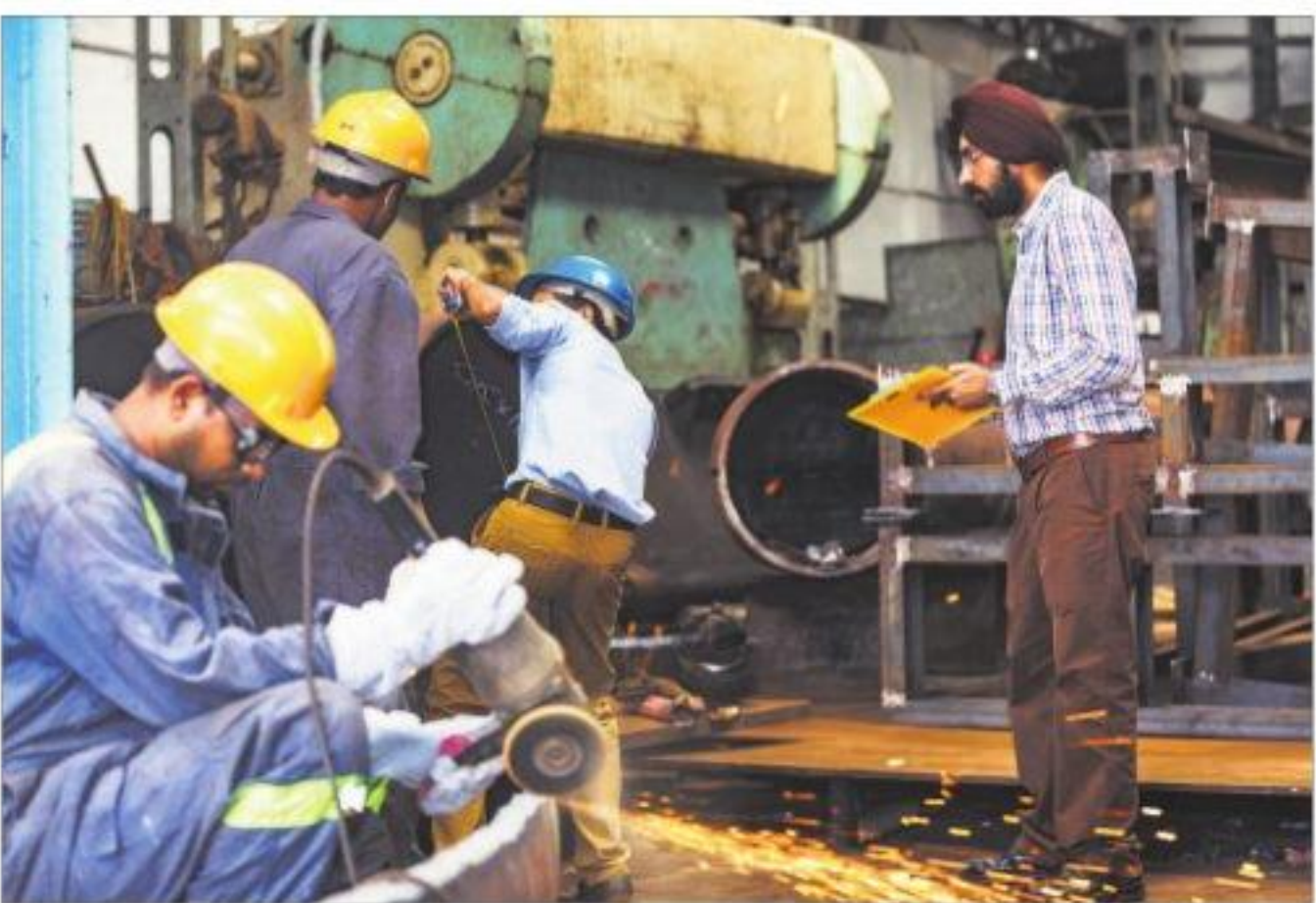
Need to focus on market-oriented skill development



VIKRAMJIT SINGH SAHNEY
RAJYA SABHA MP

CHARLES Metcalfe, ambassador to the East India Company, once told Maharaja Ranjit Singh: "In ancient Europe, there was the empire of Rome. It rose to greater and greater glory till the glory was that of Rome as a whole." Fascinated by the young man's views, the Maharaja thought about what made empires and kingdoms truly eternal, about how they could belong to their people—and the skills those people possessed to run and sustain economies and not merely armies. Little wonder then that the conditions in his time were so good that the people did not wish to migrate to British-held regions in search of comforts and modernity. The best workers were sent to European countries for acquiring new and diverse skills. While establishments connected to the military were state-owned, sectors like textiles, leather, wood and paper industries were largely privatised and competitive in methods, quality and pricing. The mixed economy absorbed the youth and upskilled them at a time when societies went

from peace to war rather quickly. In the words of Lord Roberts, this kingdom was the "finest in Asia". Today, as big talk on trillion-dollar economies and projections of grand progress take precedence over the reality of job losses and insecurity, some reflection is needed. Recently, the Institute for Human Development (IHD) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) released the India Employment Report 2024, which highlights that a big segment of India's youth is grappling with unemployment. The report suggests that self-employment was the primary source of livelihood for nearly 53 per cent of the Indians in 2022, and this may or may not provide a dignified living wage to many, let alone a social security net. The number of youngsters with secondary or higher education has almost doubled from 35.2 per cent in 2000 to 65.7 per cent in 2022. Youth unemployment has surged over the years, and the educated youth is in the grip of higher levels of joblessness. This is called 'educated unemployment'. We need to ask what a college/university degree is worth—more and more MBA degree holders are entering the market, even as the demand has dropped by 55 per cent this year. At IIT-Bombay, 36 per cent of the graduates are yet to get campus placement. Companies want people with specific skill sets. The focus needs to be on employability and not



IMPETUS: Manufacturing, which accounts for 17 per cent of India's GDP, must be boosted to create jobs. ISTOCK

merely degrees that require unlearning. The youth needs to identify emerging skills in high demand—sustainability, artificial intelligence, machine learning and other skills which a digitised world requires. A key takeaway from the report is that while the wages of informal labourers maintained a modest upward trend during 2012-22, the real wages of regular workers either remained stagnant or declined. As high as 62 per cent of the unskilled informal agricultural workers and 70 per cent of such workers in the construction sector at the all-India level did not receive the prescribed daily minimum wages in 2022. In the post-Covid era, the report points to a

rapid introduction of platform economy gigs that are tech-enabled and have introduced new dynamics into the way labour is paid and engaged. Increasingly, platform and gig work have been expanding, but it is, to a large extent, the extension of informal work, with hardly any social security provision. A two-pronged approach towards enhancing job security and market-oriented skill development is the need of the hour for the benefit of the youth. Within this pattern of work and employment, we have to find a way to make livelihoods sustainable, and only skill development can enable this. Gig workers can find work on various digital platforms. And the rapid increase in the usage of apps like Zomato

and Swiggy Instamart, we must remember that not merely delivery partners, but cloud kitchens, local home-grown brands, manufacturing and new-age professionals are also going to receive a massive push. With over 6.3 crore small and medium enterprises, this sector contributes around 30 per cent to the GDP, providing employment to 11.3 crore people. In the Niti Aayog's June 2022 policy brief on the platform economy, a suggestion was made to launch a 'Platform India initiative', built to accelerate platformisation by handholding, funding support and incentives, skill development and social financial inclusion on the lines of Startup India. A national push for better social security and funding must kick in. At the ground level, a robust network of upgraded ITIs (industrial training institutes) that offer market-oriented skills to the youth must be established in tandem with the industry as well as social impact organisations. Let's take a look at present-day Punjab. According to the Punjab Economic Survey report released by the state Department of Finance in March 2023, the services sector grew at 7 per cent in 2022-23 and employs 38.46 per cent of the workforce. This space is largely being driven by contractual work. The manufacturing sector, which accounts for 17 per cent of India's GDP, must be boosted to create

more jobs. The reverse migration to agriculture, as suggested in the IHD-ILO report, is proof that youngsters are not skilled enough to find jobs in other sectors and are reverting to farming for survival. In a 2021 projection report by BCG-Dell Foundation on the gig economy, it was stated that even in sectors such as oil and gas, small & medium businesses and healthcare, there would be greater demand for highly skilled gig workers. Of the 9 crore job opportunities, construction, manufacturing, retail, transportation and logistics would be the largest industry sectors with the potential to create around 7 crore jobs for gig workers in the next eight to 10 years. Today, of the one lakh young men and women who leave Punjab for foreign shores every year, barely any are trained in vocational skills that can find them employment and progress globally. If the skill gap between the youth and industry is fixed, there will be no dearth of jobs and progress right here. It is the collective responsibility of all stakeholders—the state, the industry and society—to ensure that the skill ecosystem is not left underutilised.

It is the collective responsibility of all stakeholders—the state, the industry and society—to ensure that the skill ecosystem is not left underutilised.

BJP wedged between two formidable fronts in Kerala



K GOVINDAN KUTTY
SENIOR JOURNALIST & AUTHOR

THE poll result in two of Kerala's 20 Lok Sabha constituencies is a foregone conclusion. Candidates of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) are set to win. It has always been so, barring an occasion or two when Marxist masterminds employed electoral leg- erdemain to wrest one relatively vulnerable seat. Otherwise, since India's early election years, the Muslim monolith has reigned supreme in Malappuram and the adjoining constituency of Ponnani. M Muhammad Ismail had won the Malappuram (Manjeri) seat thrice in a row (1962, 1967 and 1971). The Muslim League of Malappuram, so to speak, is different from its pan-India predecessor before Independence. When Jawaharlal Nehru was asked about it, he quipped: "It is a dead horse". Nehru's daughter, Indira

Gandhi, when she became the Congress president, explored the possibilities of an alliance with it, clandestine or otherwise. That threw up an alliterative slogan: "Dead horse to dad, war horse to daughter". And so it remains. Right now, it is a constituent of the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF). Who knows with whom it would not cohabit through periodic polls, except, of course, the BJP? It would certainly be a day of redemption for both the provincial green league and the saffron party promising Modi's guarantees. The rival CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) is trying every trick to weaken the bond between the league and the UDF, right now or whenever possible. Both combinations are stoking the embers of minority misgivings. While the LDF accuses the Congress of being in cahoots with the BJP, the grand old party accuses the former of having a secret deal with the saffron party. The BJP cannot brazenly address minority and majority grumblings all at once. In contrast to the certainty of victory of two league candidates is the unlikely prospect of the BJP opening its account in what has been



FACEOFF: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi is pitted against Kerala BJP president K Surendran (right) from the Wayanad constituency. ANI & PTI

described as the 'Red Riddle of India' and the 'Yenan of India'. The Hindu card has been played none too triumphantly. It was only in the 2016 Assembly elections that the BJP had managed to win a seat in Kerala (it drew a blank in the 2021 polls). Since the days of the legendary TN Bharathan, a scion of the Nilambur dynasty who used to fight every poll only to lose as a lamp-holding candidate (of the erstwhile Jana Sangh), there has been little

progress in electoral terms. In the early 1980s, a Hindu Front candidate won a breathtakingly large number of votes. Then began the efforts of the BJP's top brass to plant the lotus in the state and make it blossom in good time. The current campaign marks a prestige point. The ancient slogan, "You have tried all else many a time, try us this time", is not voiced with the same old verve, but it is a no-holds-barred push to change vot-

ing habits and traditions in the region. It is carrying the crusade right into the Congress-Communist den. But the BJP's relatively young state chief, K Surendran, may not be able to rattle the best 'batsman' of the Congress, Rahul Gandhi, in the hill constituency of Wayanad. Rahul fought and won the Adivasi terrain last time, giving his partymen a shot of hope and camaraderie at the same time. Nor can the CPI's Annie Raja make any dent in the hills, except leaving it for record that she also fought the maverick Gandhi. Thespian and action hero of yesteryear, Suresh Gopi, and Minister of State for Electronics and Information Technology Rajeev Chandrasekhar have been fielded by the saffron set-up with great hope. Shashi Tharoor has been an eminent presence in the state capital for the past 10 years, not one to be easily dislodged by Chandrasekhar. The Congress has much to be concerned about. One worry is the usual intra-party discord, worsened by the shortage of campaign funds. Also, there is a growing sense of ambivalence and fear of erosion of its mass base. Even Tharoor is not free from this fear. The worst

hit was Congress stalwart AK Antony, whose son Anil Antony was named a BJP candidate, with PM Narendra Modi flying down to welcome him into the party fold. AK Antony has clearly been humbled and silenced. The Congress is accusing the Marxists of having unholy relations with extremist elements that even the IUML dreads. All that makes a brittle bundle of allegations, denials and counter-allegations. So, where lies the truth? Kerala is a conundrum. What may look like a trifle may prompt threadbare discussions in political parlours and media forums. Kerala may be a tiny state with a small contingent to represent it in Parliament, but the dissection of every issue is thorough and exacting. Its fourth estate will see everyone and every turn of events with its own eyes. When William Blake coined his inclusive aphorism about seeing the world in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour, he was prescribing a model view of Kerala. Do not forget that decades before Blake, there was Kerala's humorist and satirist, Kunchan Nambiar, who talked about hell, heaven and everything with a Malayali mischief.

The Congress' major worry is the usual discord, worsened by the shortage of campaign funds.

QUICK CROSSWORD

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ACROSS

1 Interrupt (7)

5 Put forward (5)

8 Sharing common adversity (2,3,4,4)

9 A strong thread (5)

10 Absolutely determined (4,3)

11 Majestic (6)

12 Notorious (6)

15 Posy worn on a dress (7)

17 Stylistic talent (5)

19 In a way, but not very well (5,1,7)

20 Possibly (5)

21 Take over from (7)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Stiff, 8 Holed out, 9 Smirk, 10 Big stick, 11 Sweat, 12 Yew, 16 Urbane, 17 Anyhow, 18 Try, 23 Sheer, 24 Worse off, 25 Snoop, 26 No wonder, 27 Feint.

Down: 2 Time-worn, 3 Fire away, 4 Notice, 5 Cease, 6 Solid, 7 Stake, 12 Yet, 13 Way, 14 By chance, 15 Tone down, 19 Rafter, 20 Swing, 21 Brawl, 22 Being.

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YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

9 5 7 4 2 3 1 6 8

8 1 2 7 9 6 5 4 3

6 3 4 5 8 1 9 2 7

7 8 1 3 5 2 4 9 6

5 9 6 1 7 4 8 3 2

2 4 3 9 6 8 7 1 5

1 7 5 6 3 9 2 8 4

3 2 9 8 4 5 6 7 1

4 6 8 2 1 7 3 5 9

CALENDAR

APRIL 9, 2024, TUESDAY

■ Shaka Samvat 1946

■ Chaitra Shaka 20

■ Chaitra Parvishate 27

■ Hijari 1445

■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 1, up to 8.32 pm

■ Vaidhriti Yoga up to 2.18 pm

■ Revti Nakshatra up to 7.32 am

■ Ashwin Nakshatra up to 5.07 am

■ Moon enters Aries sign 7.32 am

■ Gandmoola up to 5: 07 am

■ Navratre start

FORECAST

SUNSET: 18:46 HRS

SUNRISE: 06:01 HRS

TUESDAY

WEDNESDAY

CITY

MAX

MIN

Chandigarh

35

18

New Delhi

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18

Amritsar

34

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Bathinda

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Jalandhar

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Ludhiana

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16

Bhiwani

35

19

Hisar

36

15

Sirsa

36

15

Dharamsala

28

15

Manali

17

04

Shimla

22

11

Srinagar

23

06

Jammu

33

17

Kargil

14

02

Leh

10

-01

Dehradun

35

16

Mussoorie

24

11

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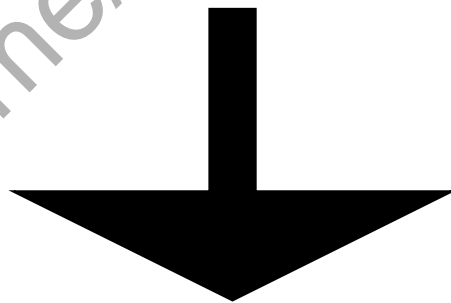
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