



Drowning: a neglected public health crisis

The untold tragedy of three IAS aspirants who drowned in the basement of their coaching centre in New Delhi's Old Rajinder Nagar is a macabre reminder that anyone can drown, anywhere. Ironically, this entirely preventable incident, which occurred due to callous negligence and lax regulations, took place two days after countries observed Drowning Prevention Day – a World Health Organization (WHO)-led global event, held annually to raise awareness about this leading cause of death.

Rising seas, maximum cities, spiralling poverty, risky livelihoods, and 120 million forcibly displaced people – along with children making perilous journeys to schools –are all contributing to the increasing frequency of drowning deaths. Studies have warned that in the not so distant future ravaged by cyclones, hurricanes, tsunamis, and floods, our exposure to water will amplify manifold. Children under 10 and adolescents, who already account for half of all drowning deaths, will be the most at risk.

Toll on children
In Vietnam and Uganda, children are dying in rivers and lakes. In Florida, toddlers drown in swimming pools and hot tubs at home. In India, the journey to school each morning can be treacherous – crossing crocodile and snake-infested rivers, navigating through flash floods, or risking capsizing in boats. In Bangladesh, where 43% of child deaths are due to drowning, most children under five drown within 20 metres of their own homes. Just as little children may slip unnoticed in a village pond or bucket left unattended, adolescents and young adults, particularly males may drown while fishing, boating, or under the influence of alcohol. Drownings also occur from water transport accidents due to unsafe boats and lack of flotation devices,



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The drowning prevention journey will be long, requiring resources, systemic fixes, and multi-sectoral cooperation

people trapped in cars during city floods, or women drawing water from dangerous sources. Enmeshed in the daily fabric of people's lives these incidents often do not get the same attention as the colossal tragedy of little Alan Kurdi's drowning or the heart-wrenching deaths of the El Salvadorian father Oscar Ramirez, and his two-year-old daughter Valeria.

Every hour at least 42 people drown. According to the WHO, 2,36,000 lives are lost to drowning every year and almost 82,000 of them are children aged 1 to 14 years. Despite having a death toll equivalent to two-thirds that of malnutrition and over half that of malaria, drowning remains a largely under-reported and neglected public health issue. Experts fear that available statistics inadequately capture the full extent of the problem. A big reason for this data paucity is the way drowning deaths are counted, excluding incidents of intentional drowning (suicide or homicide) and drowning caused by water transport accidents including the massive toll of refugees and stateless people. Lives lost by drowning during natural disasters like floods or tsunamis are not added to the global toll, even though at least 75% of deaths during floods are by drowning. WHO recognises that adjusted data could reveal that the actual burden is four or five times higher than current estimates in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and over 50% in all countries, irrespective of income.

Different approaches
Drowning deaths as a major public health concern found a voice on the global stage when WHO published the first-ever global report on drowning prevention in 2014. Soon after the implementation framework was published, several studies and pilot projects began. However, the historic moment came in April 2021, when the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on

drowning prevention and called for worldwide action. Several countries have adopted water safety plans. While Australia has focused its attention on its vast coastline and is promoting front-line water safety with surf lifesavers and lifeguards, Vietnam has prioritised swimming lessons for children. Bloomberg Philanthropies partnered with the Government of Vietnam for a national program on drowning which introduced the Swim-Safe curriculum. To graduate, a child must prove they can tread water for 30 seconds and swim unassisted in open water for at least 25 metres. Bangladesh has adopted a community-based model called "Anchal" in which childcare centres are set up to ensure institutional supervision of children aged 1-5 years. This simple model has led to an 88% reduction in drowning deaths among children under four. In December 2023, India joined the club of drowning prevention crusaders with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare releasing a 'Strategic Framework for Drowning Prevention.' People have always drowned but it is only recently the global public health community has been calling upon policymakers to view it through the lens of social inequity and not merely as accidental deaths. Global data tells us that 90% of all drowning deaths occur in LMICs. Even in economically developed countries, the poor and minority communities are more likely to die due to drowning. Like all public health crises, the drowning prevention journey will be long, requiring resources, systemic fixes, and multi-sectoral cooperation. Until then, a rapid response plan with low-cost solutions such as the use of strategic barriers around water bodies, daycare centres for preschool children, teaching children basic swimming skills, and making available safe water transport and flotation devices, could save lives every day.

Tightrope walk for Amaravati

A.P. faces a steep challenge in reviving the stalled development of the capital

STATE OF PLAY

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Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu has a big test in store in the form of the Herculean task of resuming and completing the delayed development of Amaravati during his tenure.

It is common knowledge that the ball which he set rolling in 2014-15 was stopped five years later by the YSRCP government because the then Chief Minister Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy came up with the idea of three capitals, including Amaravati as the Legislative Capital that would be a truncated one having only the Legislature Complex at its current location which is about 21 kilometres from Vijayawada city.

But, he could not take it forward for reasons that are all too apparent. In the process, the YSRCP government abandoned the Amaravati project.

Mr. Jagan Mohan Reddy firmly believed that pouring all resources into Amaravati would be counterproductive. He suggested developing Visakhapatnam, Kurnool, and Amaravati as the Executive, Judicial, and Legislative Capitals, respectively.

Unenviable task
Now, what makes the redevelopment of Amaravati an unenviable task for Mr. Naidu is mobilising the sheer amount of money required and regaining the trust of those associated with the project earlier. Phase-I of the Amaravati project was estimated to cost approximately ₹51,687 crore, of which the cost of the Amaravati government complex alone was pegged at about



₹14,010 crore. Tenders were first called for a value of nearly ₹41,171 crore, of which all works were grounded; a sum of ₹4,319 crore was paid and the balance was in the process of being paid in tranches.

That was when international funding agencies like the World Bank (WB), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Japan International Cooperation Agency, and KfW came forward to support the project.

Challenges ahead
Mr. Naidu faces the challenge of re-engaging international partners, such as the Singapore government and Japan, who played a significant role in preparing the Amaravati master plan. Restoring their support and mobilising funds for the greenfield capital project are some of the major hurdles. He rued that investor confidence had been lost and the State's brand image suffered due to Mr. Jagan Mohan Reddy's concept of three capitals, which ended up nowhere. On the financial front, the NDA government in Andhra Pradesh will meet the huge cost escalation of Amaravati's reconstruction (currently under assessment) and realise the value of funds locked up in incomplete works. These challenges are essentially stumbling blocks for the government, which has not fully recovered from the impact of bifurcation and is still

grappling with a fund crunch exacerbated by alleged financial mismanagement by the previous government. A silver lining is the support pledged by the Union government. Following Mr. Naidu's recent meeting with the Prime Minister, the Centre had come forward to bail out the Andhra Pradesh government with the Amaravati project. The Centre promised to provide special financial assistance of ₹15,000 crore through multilateral development agencies initially, with additional funding to be arranged later. Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's statement in Parliament rekindled the hopes that the Centre would help the State government in taking the project forward. Against this background, a joint team of the WB and Asian Development Bank (ADB) made a stock-taking visit to Amaravati last month to explore ways to extend financial and technical assistance for the capital's development. The 'preliminary scoping visit,' will be followed by further site visits and discussions with the government, and stakeholders. Only then will the contours of the potential WB-ADB support become clear. In the process, WB representatives duly gathered inputs on the likely future course of the State's political economy, being wary of the risks involved in funding such projects albeit with sovereign guarantee, and the consequences of the reversal of policies when a new government takes the reins. So, the crux of the issue is who will provide the funds for the construction of the capital and to what extent. After all, it is money that matters the most for the State government at this crucial juncture.

Fast-track courts: Justice on the clock

Several States, including Odisha, Kerala, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Telangana, had no functional fast-track courts in 2023

DATA POINT

Dr. Abhijit Biswas
Sabir Ahamed

Fast-track courts in India were established to address the phenomenal judicial backlog (**Chart 1**) and ensure the timely delivery of justice. These courts were designed to deal with heinous crimes, including sexual offences and crimes against women and children. However, the effectiveness of fast-track courts has been plagued by several factors, such as resource limitations, inefficient investigations, and insufficient staff at the judiciary. The demand for these courts occasionally resurfaces when incidents like the tragic rape and murder of a doctor at Kolkata's R.G. Kar Medical College happen, though the inherent limitations of the judicial system remain largely overlooked. **Chart 2** indicates that between 2018 and 2020, India saw a significant rise in the number of fast-track courts. In 2018, 699 courts were operational, growing to 907 by 2020. This increase was largely a response to public outcry over delays in high-profile cases such as Nirbhaya gang rape, which ignited a nationwide demand for quicker justice. However, this progress has slowed since 2020, with the number of functional courts dropping to 832 in 2023. This decline reflects the challenges States face in maintaining these courts due to financial and administrative constraints. While the Union government provides support, the responsibility of running fast-track courts rests with the States, many of which struggle to allocate the necessary resources. While States such as Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu have maintained a high number of operational courts, others have far fewer or, in some cases, none. For instance, in 2023, several States, including Odisha, Kerala, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya

Pradesh, and Telangana, either had no functional fast-track courts or were struggling to establish them. These disparities are a reflection of local resource limitations, varying levels of prioritisation, and differing administrative capabilities. **Chart 3** shows the number of functional fast-track courts over time across select major States. States with fewer financial capabilities struggle to keep fast-track courts functioning optimally. Even in States where these courts are operational, they are often overburdened by the sheer volume and variety of cases, resulting in delays. The jurisdiction of fast-track courts is disproportionately wide compared to their capacity, further delaying justice. Another challenge, many States have not expanded the scope of fast-track courts beyond sexual offences, limiting their ability to address other categories of high-pendency cases. By broadening their jurisdiction, these courts could alleviate some of the burdens on the regular judiciary and better fulfil their intended purpose of delivering faster justice across a wider range of cases. The future of fast-track courts has huge potential to ensure speedy justice. But, for these courts to live up to their promise, the States must prioritise their operation and ensure they have the necessary resources to function efficiently. The States must improve their sophisticated investigation, providing cutting-edge forensic services. One possible solution lies in leveraging technology. Digital case management systems, e-filing, and video conferencing could help reduce procedural delays, allowing fast-track courts to work more effectively. The road to justice is long, but with the right support, fast-track courts can help ensure that justice is delivered efficiently, providing victims the closure they deserve without unnecessary delays.

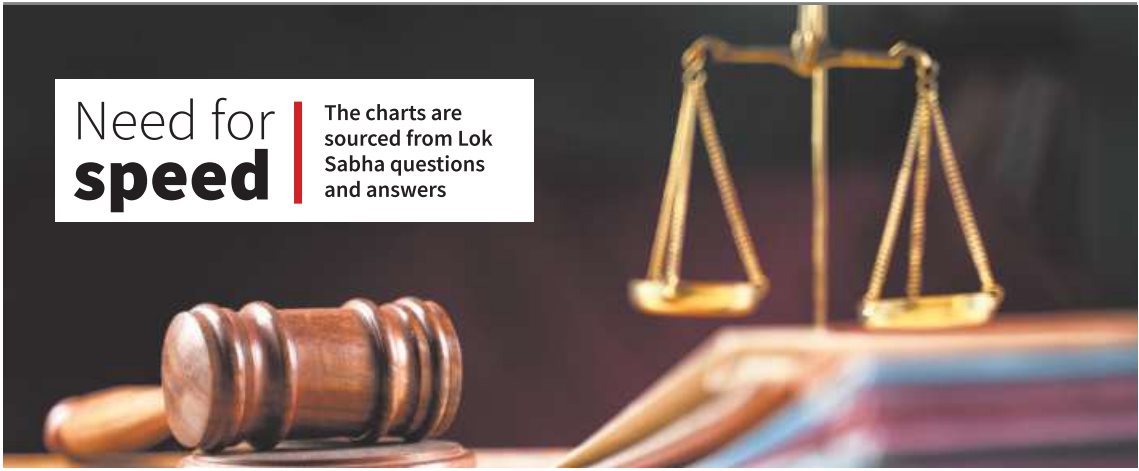


Chart 1: The chart shows the total criminal cases pending in High Courts (right axis) and District Courts (left axis)

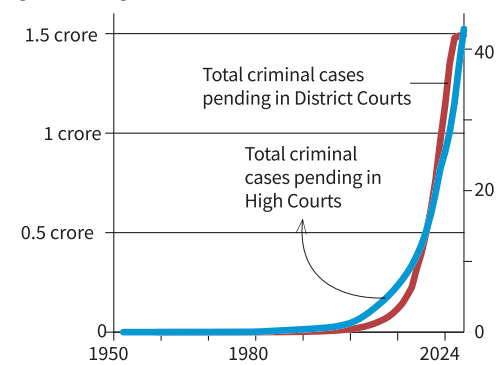


Chart 2: The chart shows the number of fast-track courts established between 2018 to 2023

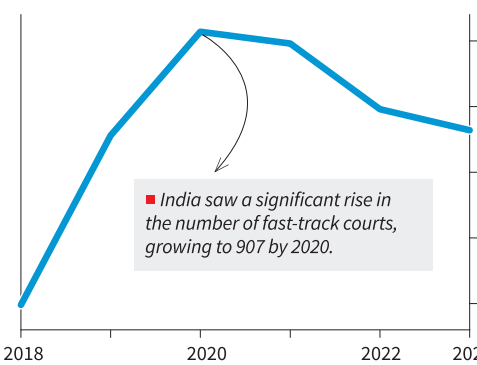
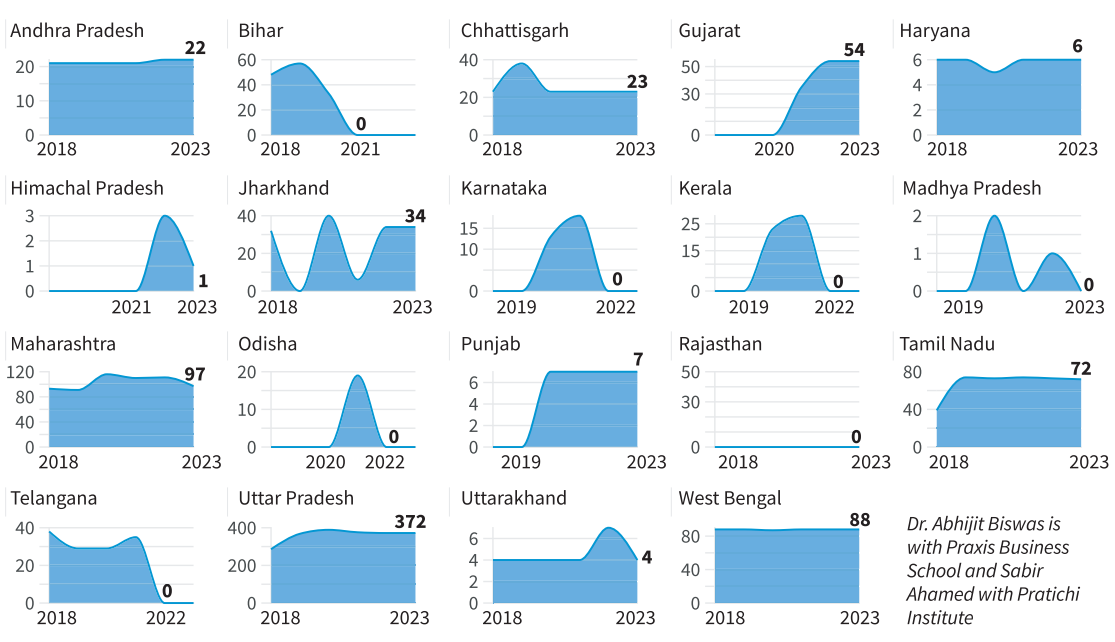


Chart 3: The chart shows the number of functional fast-track courts over time across select major States



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FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 19, 1974

Memorial for Tiruvalluvar

Madras, September 18: The Chief Minister, Mr. M. Karunanidhi, today laid the foundation for a memorial for Saint Tiruvalluvar at the Lake Maidan in Nungambakkam. To come up on a 15-acre site, recently reclaimed in the Lake area, the memorial will have an artistic hall, 225-feet long and 105 feet broad. The hall will be in front of a model of Tiruvalluvar Temple chariot, wherein the statue of Saint Tiruvalluvar will be installed. The entire work will be in granite from Vairakundu in North Arcot district. The 1,330 Tirukkural couplets will be inscribed in marble stones and fixed in the hall. Apart from an auditorium, arrangements will be made for an international research centre and a training school to be started there. Mr. Karunanidhi, who inaugurated the construction work, said the proposed building would reflect the architecture of Tamil Nadu. About 500 sculptors and 1,000 workers would be engaged for a year in putting up the structures. The hall, one of the biggest in the country, would also be used for holding seminars, discourses, etc. The Chief Minister referred to the work done by the State Government in reviving the ancient glory of Tamils. The State Government would bear the cost of the project, which is likely to be about half a crore of rupees. The renovation work of the Tiruvalluvar Temple in Mylapore was in progress, he said.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 19, 1924

Tata's sheet mills.

Jamshedpur, September 15: The sheet mill of the Tata Iron and Steel Co., Ltd., has come into operation from today. It is one of the units forming the "Greater Extensions" which the Steel Company launched into in 1920. This mill stands unique in India. It will roll sheet steel, and corrugated sheets will be one of its principal products of manufacture. As is well-known all corrugated sheets are at present imported, and the operation of this mill will put the Tata's independent of foreign sources of supply, and it is hoped that the country's demand will also be met. Some 63 operatives for this mill have recently arrived in Jamshedpur. These men are nearly all of them Tee-side Ironworkers and their pay ranges from Rs. 600 to Rs. 1,500 per month.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Funds allocated by the Cabinet for Venus Orbiter Mission

1,236 In ₹ crore. The ‘Venus Orbiter Mission’ by the Department of Space will involve placing a spacecraft in the orbit of Venus for better understanding of its surface. PTI

The increase in Bihar’s GST collection from last year

8.4 In per cent. The Bihar Commercial Taxes Department has recorded a GST collection of ₹15,463 crore between April 1 and August 31. An increase is due to registration of more small traders. PTI

The number of Palestinians killed in Gaza since October 7

41,272 The toll includes 20 deaths in the last 24 hours, according to the health ministry in Gaza. At least 95,551 people have been wounded in the Gaza Strip. AFP

The death toll from the floods caused by storm Boris in Europe

23 Since last week the storm has brought widespread flooding and torrential rain, with victims being from Austria, Poland and Romania. The flooding — which tore down houses — has since receded. AFP

FIRs registered under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita since July 1

5.56 In lakh. Since July 1 till September 3, a total of 5.56 lakh FIRs have been registered in the country under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS). PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Can Sheikh Hasina be extradited?

Why is Bangladesh’s International Crimes Tribunal asking for the extradition of Ms. Hasina? Does the treaty signed in 2013 by India and Bangladesh allow for an extradition request to be turned down? What could be the potential implications of such a request?

EXPLAINER

Aaratrika Bhaumik

The story so far:

The chief prosecutor of Bangladesh’s International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) has announced plans to seek the extradition of ousted leader Sheikh Hasina from neighbouring India. “As the main perpetrator has fled the country, we will start the legal procedure to bring her back,” Mohammad Tajul Islam said on September 8. Ms. Hasina had sought refuge in India in August after a mass uprising compelled her to step down. Since her departure, numerous criminal cases have been lodged against her and her aides, encompassing charges of murder, torture, abduction, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Additionally, India and Bangladesh have a bilateral extradition treaty in place that could allow for her return to face trial.

What does the extradition treaty say?

The ICT was established in 2010 by Ms. Hasina to investigate crimes committed during the 1971 independence war from Pakistan. Under the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act of 1973, Bangladeshi courts can proceed with criminal trials even in Ms. Hasina’s absence. However, this is bound to raise concerns about the fairness of the proceedings, and adherence to due process, while also complicating the enforcement of judicial orders. Therefore, the extradition of the former Prime Minister is crucial.

In 2013, India and Bangladesh signed an extradition treaty as a strategic measure to address insurgency and terrorism along their shared borders. It was amended in 2016 to ease the process of exchange of fugitives wanted by both nations. The treaty has facilitated the transfer of several notable political prisoners. For instance, in 2020, two convicts involved in the 1975 assassination of Ms. Hasina’s father, Sheikh Mujibur



Forced departure: Bangladesh’s former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in Dhaka on January 8. AFP

Rahman, were extradited to Bangladesh for execution. Similarly, India successfully secured the extradition of Anup Chetia, the general secretary of the banned United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), who had spent 18 years imprisoned in Dhaka. The treaty mandates the extradition of individuals charged with or convicted of crimes that warrant a minimum sentence of one year’s imprisonment. A key requirement for extradition is the principle of dual criminality, meaning that the offence must be punishable in both countries. Since the charges against Ms. Hasina are prosecutable in India, and the penalties for her alleged crimes are also substantial, she qualifies for extradition on these grounds. Additionally, the treaty encompasses within its ambit attempts to commit, as well as aid, abet, incite, or act

as an accomplice in such crimes.

Notably, the 2016 amendment to the treaty substantially lowered the threshold for extradition by removing the requirement to furnish concrete evidence against the offender. Under Article 10 of the treaty, only an arrest warrant issued by a competent court in the requesting country is sufficient to initiate the extradition process.

Can extradition be refused?

Article 6 of the treaty stipulates that extradition may be refused if the offence is of a “political nature”. However, there are stringent limitations on this particular exemption. A host of offences such as murder, terrorism-related crimes, and kidnapping, are explicitly excluded from being classified as political. Given that several of the charges against Ms. Hasina

— such as murder and enforced disappearance— fall outside the scope of this exemption, it is unlikely that India will be able to justify them as political transgressions to deny extradition.

Another basis for refusal is outlined in Article 8, which permits denial of a request if the accusation is not “made in good faith in the interests of justice” or if it involves military offences not considered “an offence under general criminal law.” India could potentially refuse extradition on the ground that the charges against Ms. Hasina have not been levelled in good faith and there is a possibility of her being subjected to political persecution or an unfair trial upon her return to Bangladesh. Such concerns are further exacerbated by recent reports that ministers from Ms. Hasina’s cabinet were physically arrested by bystanders while being transported to court for remand hearings.

What are the potential implications?

Sreeradha Datta, professor of international relations at O.P. Jindal Global University told *The Hindu* that the treaty does not guarantee Ms. Hassina’s extradition, as the final decision will hinge more on diplomatic negotiations and political considerations. “Even if India were to decline the extradition request, it would likely serve as a minor political irritant rather and is unlikely to dent bilateral relations, especially in critical areas of cooperation between the two nations,” she said.

Bangladesh is India’s largest trade partner in South Asia, with bilateral trade estimated at \$15.9 billion in the fiscal year 2022-23. Before Ms. Hasina’s ouster, both nations were poised to commence dialogue on a comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA) to foster economic ties. Following the regime change in Dhaka, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has spoken with the Chief Adviser of the new interim government, Muhammad Yunus, and pledged continued support for ongoing development projects.

THE GIST

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On Adani’s proposal to lease Kenya’s Nairobi airport

Why are there protests against a proposed takeover of the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport?

G. Sampath

The story so far:

Kenyans are protesting a proposed takeover of Nairobi’s Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA) by India’s Adani Group on a 30-year lease. Last week, airport workers went on a day-long strike, leading to flight cancellations that left hundreds of passengers stranded. The workers called it off when the government agreed to give them veto power on the final agreement.

What is the background?

The refurbishment and expansion of the Nairobi international airport has been in the works since 2013. The plans included building a new passenger terminal, another runway, and expanding the capacity to 20 million passengers a year. But for various reasons, the contract was cancelled in 2016, and the project was dormant until 2022. In June 2023, the

government announced it would publicly invite bids to revive the project. However, in July this year, a Kenyan whistle-blower posted on social media that the government had secretly signed a deal with the Adani group to manage the airport for 30 years. The news generated nationwide outrage, with local commentators criticising the move to “give away” control of a “strategic national asset” to a foreign company.

What are the terms of the deal?

According to media reports based on leaked documents, in March 2024, Adani Airport Holdings Ltd had submitted a Privately Initiated Proposal (PIP) to the Kenya Airport Authority (KAA) to refurbish the JKIA under a build-operate-transfer model with an investment of \$1.85 billion. Under the proposed deal, the Adanis would refurbish the airport, add a new runway, and possibly a terminal. They would fund this with their own investment and from

revenues generated from the airport, which they will control for 30 years. At the end of this period, the Adanis would get 18% equity in the airport. To protect their commercial interests from unforeseen competition, the Adani proposal included a stipulation that no airport shall be built within a 100km radius of the JKIA. It also projected a sharp hike in annual fees that would be transferred to airport users.

What are the Kenyans objecting to?

It has emerged that in February 2024, a consultancy firm hired by the KAA to advise on expanding the JKIA had recommended an open tender process for securing a public-private partnership (PPP). This is also the preferred method under Kenya’s PPP Act. Kenyans are asking why the KAA and the government ignored the experts’ recommendation as well as the country’s PPP law to go ahead with the Adanis’ PIP. Senator Richard Onyonka, an opposition politician, in an

interview to *The Hindu*, pointed out that Kenyans are concerned that the deal would give the Adanis a tax break for 10 years. He also claimed that the deal would allow the Adanis to fire all the employees currently on the rolls of the KAA — around 5,000— and rehire them on terms that could violate their rights. “Why didn’t the Adani team want to follow due diligence as laid out under the PPP Act, whereby there would have been three-four competitive bids, and Kenyans would have had a chance to interrogate the various offers and pick the best value-for-money option?” he asked. “It indicates that this is a corrupt deal and we believe money has exchanged hands” he alleged, echoing a growing sentiment among the Kenyan public.

What next?

The Law Society of Kenya and the Kenya Human Rights Commission have filed a joint application against the deal in the high court. The court has issued an order suspending further movement on the Adani proposal pending a judicial review. The Adanis hold that it is in Kenya’s best interest to go for a PIP rather than open tendering, noting, “PIP allows the government to secure terms beyond purely financial considerations, ensuring the welfare of citizens,” and that “competitive bidding” besides being time-consuming, “risks making the deal purely transactional, without room for mutual considerations.”

THE GIST

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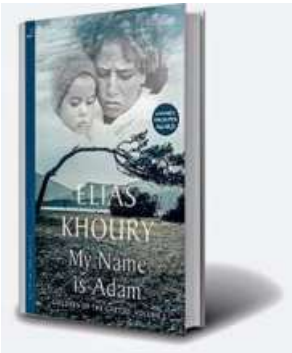
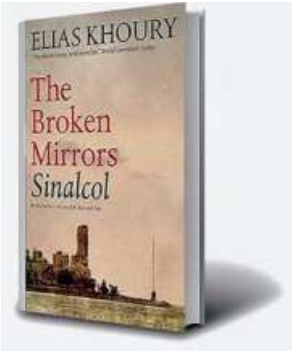
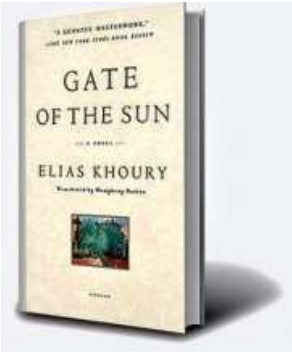
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BIBLIOGRAPHY



Bearing witness: Lebanese writer Elias Khoury. AP



Memory for forgetfulness: Elias Khoury’s incandescent prose for Palestine

The Lebanese writer’s magnum opus, *Gate of the Sun*, follows Palestinian exiles after the 1948 Nakba through camp and battlefield, entwining individual stories of love, loss, betrayal, struggle, sorrow, and joy with the battles and massacres that set their stamp upon the political map

Gautam Bhatia

In January 2013, a group of Palestinians and foreign activists erected 25 tents on Palestinian land in the West Bank, as an act of resistance against Israeli attempts to build settlements in the area. Two days later, the tents were violently destroyed by the Israeli army, and their inhabitants scattered, beaten, or arrested. In the teeth of this, the Palestinians persevered, and rebuilt – only for the second encampment to be demolished as well. This is an event that lives on in the annals of Palestinian attempts to resist their occupation, dispossession, and erasure from their own homeland.

The Palestinians named their first encampment “Bab al-Shams,” or “gate of the sun,” and their second encampment “the Grandchildren of Yunis.” Their inspiration was a novel by the Lebanese writer, Elias Khoury, called *Gate of the Sun*, and its protagonist, a Palestinian revolutionary called Yunis. Khoury – who spoke to the Palestinians on Skype during the brief existence of the encampment(s) – would later say that this was the greatest prize he had ever won, worth more than any award that the literary establishment could give him: life, imitating art.

Elias Khoury passed away on September 15, 2024, at the age of 76, after battling an illness. Amidst the tributes that poured in upon his passing, there is perhaps none more fitting than the living memory of Camp Bab al-Shams. Khoury was many things: a partisan of the

Lebanese National Movement during the country’s destructive civil war (in which he fought, and was wounded); a politically committed cultural critic and editor; a playwright; but what he will be remembered for, most of all, is his novels, which brought the Palestinian national cause to life in incandescent and unforgettable prose.

‘Epic of the Palestinian people’

Of these, his magnum opus is undoubtedly *Gate of the Sun*. In a hospital bed in a Beirut refugee camp, Yunis, an old Palestinian freedom-fighter, lies dying. By his bedside is his spiritual son, Dr. Khaleel, who believes that by telling Yunis stories about his past lives, he can resurrect the dying man through words and tales.

And so begins the “epic of the Palestinian people”: from the 1948 Nakba (“catastrophe”) – the great ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians from their homeland to make way for the state of Israel – to the formation of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, the Six-Day War, the Lebanese Civil War, the massacres of the Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps of Lebanon, and beyond. *Gate of the Sun* follows Palestinian exiles through village and camp and battlefield, entwining individual stories of love, loss, betrayal, struggle, sorrow, and joy with the battles and massacres that set their stamp upon the political map.

Gate of the Sun gives to its readers some of the most vivid images of homeland, of memory, of grief, and of hope. Early on, Yunis angrily critiques a tradition of a

refusal to eat oranges because they are symbols of lost Palestine with the memorable words “the homeland is not oranges; the homeland is us.” A grandmother stuffs her pillow with flowers because they remind her of her village; the pillow turns into a “heap of thorns.” The same grandmother also wears a broken watch – “as though she’d killed time at her wrist” – and now exists only in limbo. A refugee puts olives on the top of his tent, and sings the homeland. In the camps of Sabra and Shatila, Palestinians rename the lanes and the square after the ones in their old homes. These images are connected by the thread of Yunis’ life, a life that comes to symbolise the decades of loss and resistance that have characterised the Palestinian national movement. There is even a heartbreakingly prescient – and wry – observation about Gaza, “the first place to be collectively Palestinian.”

Mirroring a shattered world

In his other novels, Khoury would explore these themes further. *Little Mountain*, perhaps the most autobiographical of his works, paints a lurid, staccato portrait of the Lebanese Civil War, where young men run “clutching rifles and dreams” – dreams of destroying all prisons, forever – until those dreams meet the intransigent reality of shrapnel filled-rooms: it is a story told in bits and pieces for a shattered world. *The Broken Mirrors: Sinacol* is the story of a doctor who flees Lebanon upon the outbreak of the Civil War – and then, many years later, accepts an offer to return to a

changed Beirut. *Sinacol* tells us of an individual – and a nation’s need for mirrors, and the temptation of “turning things into symbols” as an escape from life and from responsibility. The Palestinian struggle is ever-present, as is the resistance to turning it into a symbol and an escape. *Sinacol* is best described with a line from its own text: “written with needles on the eyeballs of insight.”

In *My Name is Adam*, the last novel to be published before his death (a sequel will be published posthumously), Khoury returned to centre Palestine. *My Name is Adam* is set in one of the most horrifying events of the 1948 Nakba: the ethnic cleansing of the city of Lydda (now Lod), accompanied by a brutal massacre and a death march. Through the thread of devastation, Khoury pierces a needle of beauty with his words so that, along with him, his audience can “learn how to read the silence of victims.” “Art weaves us a shroud of words and colours” Khoury writes, “in which we wrap ourselves”: the most fitting of summaries for a book like *My Name is Adam*.

Elias Khoury’s passing comes in the midst of the ongoing genocide in Palestine. “Art doesn’t conquer death,” he wrote, and he would perhaps be the first to concede the helplessness of art to make the bombs stop falling.

But as Camp Bab al-Shams shows us, the language of art can speak when all other tongues have been torn out from their roots.

Every word that Elias Khoury has left us is testament to that.

Gautam Bhatia is a Delhi-based lawyer.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

“Here, take a look at this picture.”

“What’s so great about it? The guy isn’t very good-looking.”

“I know that. But look at his body. He’s got such wonderful muscles. Wouldn’t you like to have such bulging muscles?”

“I’m not particularly fond of mice.”

“We’re not talking of mice, we’re talking about muscles.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“Have you gone mad; What possible connection could there be between mice and muscles?”

“There is a connection. You see the word muscle is derived from the Latin ‘musculus’ meaning ‘little mouse’.”

“Muscle means ‘little mouse’! But that’s crazy. Look at this picture. Do you see any resemblance between this guy’s muscles and a mouse.”

“I don’t But some of the ancient anatomists did. They thought that some of the muscles resembled the shape of a little mouse.”

“Those ancient doctors were nuts.”

“Maybe. Anyway, you should be happy to know there’s a mouse in all of us!”

“That’s not at all funny.”

“Sorry. But seriously, are you a man or a mouse?”

“What sort of question is that?”

“Are you a brave man or a coward?”

“Is that what the expression ‘Are you a man or a mouse?’, means?”

“Yes.”

“Frankly, I don’t know if I’m a man or a mouse.”

“I see. Let’s suppose you saw this chap in the photograph beating me up, would you come and help me?”

“Well, I ... er...”

“You wouldn’t move a muscle to help me, would you?”

“Move a muscle?”

“If somebody doesn’t move a muscle, it means he/she stays absolutely still. The little child watched the ads without moving a muscle.”

“And like the child, I’d be watching your fight without moving a muscle to help you.”

“But why? Why won’t you help me?”

“Just look at that guy. He looks so aggressive.”

“You’re right. But then not all guys who look aggressive are really aggressive. Some of them are as quiet as a mouse.”

“And then there are those who look weak, but are really strong.”

“Like our local MLA, for instance. Now there’s a chap with a lot of muscle.”

“The MLA! You must be joking Why, he’s nothing but skin and bones.”

“When I said that the MLA has plenty of muscle, I didn’t mean that he is muscular. I was using the word ‘muscle’ figuratively to mean power and strength.”

“I wish I had some muscle too.”

“Exercise everyday and you’ll soon develop them.”

“I don’t want that muscle. I want the kind of muscle that politicians have.”

“You’ll never have that kind of power.”

“You’re right. I’ll never have that kind of power. I guess I’d better go home and study for my physics test.”

“Yes, you’d better. Otherwise you might end up as poor as a church mouse.”

“As poor as a church mouse?”

“As poor as a church mouse means extremely poor.”

Published in The Hindu on June 1, 1993.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Sindhu Nagaraj

- QUESTION 1**
- On this day in 1796, this U.S. President’s farewell address was printed in a newspaper, where he implored his country to maintain neutrality and avoid entangling alliances with Europe. Who was the President?
- QUESTION 2**
- This English romance novelist died on this day in 2015. One of her well-known books include *Hollywood Wives*, which was adapted into a miniseries later. Name the author.
- QUESTION 3**
- This person, known by the moniker the Unabomber was an American mathematician and domestic terrorist. His manifesto was published in *The*

- New York Times* and *The Washington Post* on this day in 1995, which eventually helped lead to his capture. Name the person.
- QUESTION 4**
- This medical drama debuted on NBC on this day in 1994. It stars notable actors like George Clooney and Juliana Margulies. Name the show.
- QUESTION 5**
- On this day in 1960, then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Pakistani President Ayub Khan signed a treaty to control the management of a river and its tributaries. Name the treaty.
- QUESTION 6**
- This American astronaut was born on this day in 1965. Her return to Earth from the ISS has been delayed until February 2025. Name the astronaut.



Visual question:

Identify this poet born on this day in 1911. Name his debut novel for which he is best known.

- Questions and Answers to the September 17 edition of the daily quiz:**
1. The first and last Agent-General of India in the princely state of Hyderabad. **Ans: Kanhaiyalal Maneklal Munsh**
2. This man was born in present-day Bangladesh and secured the surrender of the Hyderabad armed forces in Secunderabad on September 18. **Ans: Jayanto Nath Chowdhury**
3. He was the commander in chief of Hyderabad armed forces who surrendered to the Indian army in September 1948. **Ans: Syed Ahmed El Edroos**
4. These were armed volunteers, created by the Majlis Ittehadul Muslimeen in Hyderabad, who functioned as the Nizam’s stormtroopers. **Ans: Razakars**
5. This person unfurled the Indian flag in Hyderabad near the British Residency building on October 2, 1942 heeding the call of the Quit India movement and went to jail. **Ans: Padmaja Naidu**
6. This movie director threw pebbles at the planes which were bringing in the Nizam’s army weapons from Pakistan into Hyderabad. **Ans: Shyam Benegal**
- Visual: Name of this building. **Ans: Rashtrapati Nilayam**
- Early Birds: Dodo Jayaditya| Tamal Biswas| Tito Shiladitya| Sadhan Kumar Panda| M. Suresh Kumar

Word of the day

Prescient:

perceiving the significance of events before they occur

Usage: *His prediction looks even more prescient since the surge in oil prices.*

Pronunciation: bit.ly/prescientpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈpriːsɪənt/

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

Investigation deficit

Loose ends in SEBI's colo scam and other probes

The Securities and Exchange Board of India's (SEBI's) recent order against the National Stock Exchange (NSE), its office bearers and OPG Securities has brought the long-drawn investigation into the NSE colocation scam to an end — more than a decade after the event. The order has turned out to be an anti-climax; the regulator has dismissed the case against the NSE and its former top brass including Chitra Ramakrishna and Ravi Narain.



It has overturned its earlier directions asking the NSE to disgorge ₹625 crore, and its key managerial persons to disgorge part of their salaries for the relevant years. The stockbroker, OPG, who gained unfair access to NSE's colocation facilities by logging on to the exchange's secondary server consistently between 2012 and 2014 has, however, been asked to disgorge ₹85.25 crore along with interest, an increase from the ₹15.57 crore specified in the SEBI order in 2019. The recent order was not unexpected. The Securities Appellate Tribunal (SAT) had set aside SEBI's 2019 order and asked the regulator to examine if there is any evidence of collusion between the exchange, its officials, and OPG Securities. Multiple scrutiny of official emails and other communications by external experts threw up no evidence of such connivance. Besides, it was shown that all stockbrokers had access to the secondary server of the colocation facility and 93 of them frequently logged in through that route between 2012 and 2014. Therefore, SEBI had no option but to drop the case against NSE and its officials.

However, the case shows the investigative skills of the regulator in poor light. The NSE colocation case involved three orders from the SEBI, one from the SAT and studies by numerous external agencies including IIT Bombay, Deloitte, EY and ISB. Instead of wasting time and money, SEBI should have realised the challenges in establishing the link much earlier and closed the case. The entire case, based on a whistleblower's letter in 2015, was used by the detractors of NSE to tarnish NSE's reputation. Although the regulator had no concrete evidence, it went ahead with the disgorgement order in 2019 on the grounds that the exchange had not implemented adequate controls in the colocation facility, thereby granting an unfair advantage to OPG Securities. There were inconsequential details in the 2019 order which had sought to malign the character of one of the top officials of NSE. Such sketchy orders cannot bolster SEBI's reputation as the stock market regulator.

There are multiple instances of SEBI's orders being overturned by SAT, displaying lack of rigour in its investigation. Orders in cases such as the one on disgorgement in the Satyam case, cancelling the licence of Brickwork Ratings and the ruling against Subhash Chandra and his son in the Zee Entertainment case have been overturned by SAT for not following uniformity in approach, relying on presumptions rather than proof and going against established legal principles. SEBI needs to pull up its socks, clearly.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



India zips past China in wooing FPIs

The challenges in the Chinese economy and the geopolitical uncertainty around US elections tilt the scales in favour of India

POINT BLANK.



LOKESHWARRI SK

The news coming out of China is grim. According to *Financial Times*, foreign investors have pulled out over \$12 billion out of mainland China equities since the beginning of June 2024. The Chinese government, in a knee-jerk reaction, has stopped publishing daily data of inward foreign portfolio investments into the country, to douse the rising panic among domestic and foreign investors.

Foreign investment outflow is the natural fallout of the consistent underperformance of Chinese stocks in the last three years. The underperformance has resulted in the country's weight in important global equity indices moving lower. According to Reuters, China's weight in MSCI Emerging market index has declined from 39.1 per cent in December 2020 to 24.2 per cent in August 2024.

China's loss has been India's gain as far as wooing foreign portfolio investors go. While China's weight in the MSCI EM index slipped, India increased its weight from 9.2 per cent to 19.8 per cent in the last three-and-a-half years. According to Morgan Stanley, India has surpassed China's weight in another index, the MSCI EM Investable Market Index in September 2024, with Indian stocks' weight at 22.27 per cent compared with weight of Chinese stocks at 21.58.

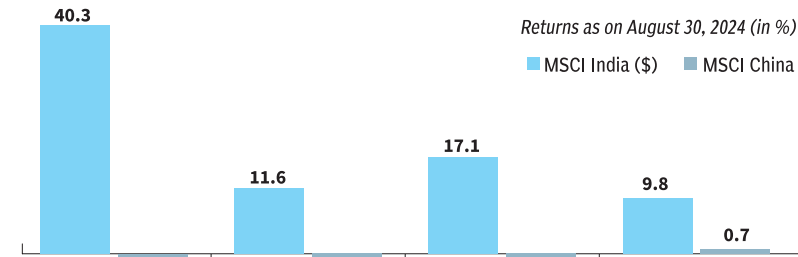
These higher weights are already translating into higher inflows into India. FPIs net purchased Indian equity worth over ₹2 lakh crore in FY24 and almost ₹60,000 crore in FY25.

INDIA OUTPERFORMS

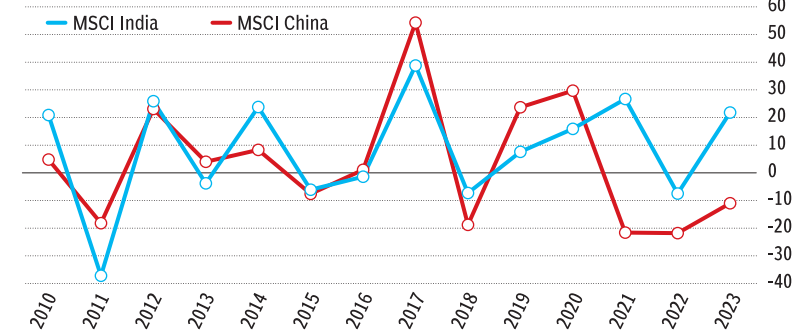
It is not without reason that foreign investors are turning to Indian stocks markets. While other markets including the Chinese markets were hit by the Russia-Ukraine conflict and global central bank tightening 2021 and 2022, India stocks have stayed resilient thanks to domestic money pouring into stock markets.

The pricier valuation of Indian stocks could be making some of the foreign investors cautious. At 27.8 times price earning multiple, the Nifty50 is trading at a premium to its long-term average. But sustained growth in many of the larger companies, improving margins thanks to lower finance and input costs

India outperforms



India overtakes China since Covid



Source: Bloomberg

and sustained demand from the affluent section seem to be keeping the large companies on a stable footing. Of greater importance is the sustained demand for Indian equities from the growing tribe of domestic investors who are investing through the mutual fund route.

This is reflected in the out-performance of MSCI India compared with MSCI China (see table). While India stocks have delivered a whopping 40 per cent return in dollar terms over a one-year period, MSCI China gave negative return of 2.57 per cent in this period. Returns from MSCI India were in double-digits over three-and-five-year periods too while the Chinese equity made losses.

But this was not always so. A look at the annual performance of MSCI India and China since 2010 shows that the returns from Chinese equity were

superior to India equities until 2020. The domestic consumption led growth in China, massive investments in infrastructure and capacity building for producing goods across the spectrum from commodities to new-age semiconductors and EVs, had foreign investors rooting for the country prior to 2020.

WHAT AILS CHINESE STOCKS?

The underperformance of Chinese equities began in 2021. A combination of factors such as the suppression of the Covid 19 infection in the first wave which led to an intense outbreak in 2021 and the regulatory clampdown on corporates in edtech, e-commerce and other tech-driven sectors made the stocks lose momentum in 2021. This was the period when other markets, including India's, were racing higher as post-Covid recovery gained momentum. The disruption caused by the Russia-Ukraine war on commodity prices delivered a big setback to China in 2022.

Besides this, there are intrinsic factors weighing on Chinese equities. The real-estate crisis, currently in its third year, has taken a toll on consumer and investor confidence. With large inventory build-up, developers not

While China's weight in the MSCI EM index slipped, India increased its weight from 9.2 per cent to 19.8 per cent in the last three-and-a-half years

Why monsoons throw cities out of gear

Instead of blaming floods on excessive rain or climate change, the lack of urban planning needs to be addressed

P ALli

The unprecedented flooding and water logging in Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Mumbai also highlights a distressing pattern. Cities such as Bangalore, Mumbai, Hyderabad and Chennai experience recurrent crises — a cycle of misery, loss of life, property destruction, relief efforts, and then a return to 'normalcy'. Why are cities never prepared for a deluge? While climate scientists and environmentalists argue that rain-induced flooding is a direct consequence of global warming, others attribute the devastation to unplanned urban development without proper hydrological planning. Is climate change the sole contributing factor, or are there other elements escalating the crisis?

Monsoon floods are accompanied by misery, the activation of disaster management services and deployment of security forces to manage casualties and damage. In the pursuit of 'smart cities', India's major urban areas have either neglected or indiscriminately encroached upon natural reservoirs. Gujarat faces recurrent floods due to garbage and untreated sewage choking

waterways. Bengaluru, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chennai and Guwahati too experience frequent floods as rampant encroachments diminish small water bodies and their feeding channels.

Whenever monsoon flooding occurs in cities, the narrative often centres around accusations of mismanagement, while others defend the situation by attributing it to excessive, unnatural rainfall or climate change. There is both a generalised and highly localised analysis of the causes — unplanned development and incomplete annual de-silting or drain-cleaning works.

This is followed by the announcement of grand mitigation projects in flood-prone cities such as the construction of large underground tanks at various flooding hotspots, integrated flood management projects, a strategic drainage development programme and a celebration of the resilience of the city and its citizens.

FLAWED PLANNING

Such discourse tends to deviate from a real analysis of the relationship between the city's eco-environment and urban development plans. Floods can be predicted. The claim they occur due to exceptionally high rainfall, climate



FLOODING. A major challenge in cities

change and factors beyond human control is to underplay the responsibility of stakeholders.

The intensity of floods is linked to how the city's moisture and water systems are planned, engineered and re-designed at different points in time. In several Indian cities, land reclamation, filling in of wetlands, encroachment over lakes and ponds and the building up of river channels are enabled by city planning and unauthorised development. As a result, while the built-up areas in cities are rising considerably, natural areas are decreasing significantly. This adds considerable pressure to already

burdened and incomplete drainage systems. Urban flooding is a highly complicated problem, requiring deep technical expertise and complex engagement with many stakeholder groups. Cities often lack the know-how to fully gauge and act on the danger they face. By conducting urban flood risk assessments, local governments can better understand and manage flood risk. This helps protect the lives, livelihoods, and assets of their communities and plan for long-term changes such as sea-level rise or increased storm frequency.

Urban planning with robust drainage systems, is a must. Governments must take a decisive stance against encroachments and, where feasible, ensure the proper rehabilitation of those displaced. Citizens who endure unexpected floods should actively support government initiatives to remove encroachments, recognising the importance of proactive measures to mitigate hardships. Unless cities learn to engage in more nuanced, localised planning, cities will continue to experience floods on a recurring basis.

The writer is Associate Professor in VIT Chennai. The views are personal

✉ **LETTERS TO EDITOR** Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

Chip manufacturing

This refers to 'Securing India's semiconductor future' (September 18). Commercial large scale domestic chip manufacture has caught the nation's imagination. Taiwan, a small nation, had the drive and foresight to grasp the relevance of penetrative technologies in human progress. It supplies 90 per cent of advanced chips, globally. Given this technical hold, it is able to find universal support against Chinese threat to its sovereignty. Time we seed our own research into the expanding universe of chips and associated electronic hardware. We cannot rest in our pre-eminent position in software alone. The advent and eventual subjugation by

AI will demand continuous leapfrogging in newer materials and technology to cut costs, size and energy consumption, even as the need for processing speeds keeps rising exponentially. Without home-grown technology or stable collaboration for its effective transfer, we will stay mere assemblers instead of pioneering futuristic designs in laboratories.

R Narayanan
Navi Mumbai

Geriatric care

The editorial 'Senior cover' (September 18) presents a comprehensive approach to the PM-JAY scheme. Where nothing is available, a scheme of this sort is

welcome. Also, the government should plan to create a separate wing in every government hospital for geriatric care. This should address periodic health check-ups and treatment, with medicines and diagnostic services coming free. The government should equip the geriatric wing in all its healthcare institutions with modern equipment.

AG Rajmohan
Anantapur, AP

Vande Bharat trains

This refers to 'Vande Bharat questions' (September 18). The Indian Railways' recent decision of awarding the tendering process of manufacturing Vande Bharat (VB) trains to non-railway companies is

quite appreciable, as it reduces the burden on ICF. With new variants of VB trains coming in, IR needs to be diligent enough in deploying them in profitable routes. Similar to non-sleeper buses plying between cities for overnight journeys, IR can deploy the regular VB trains on a trial basis on selected routes without warranting the immediate necessity of VB sleeper trains. If successful, it can be rolled out and the new Vande Sleeper version can take other routes exceeding overnight journeys. The best alternative for deployment of Vande Metro would be to replace all the current MEMU and DEMU trains.

RV Baskaran
Chennai

Boost invisible exports

That India's trade deficit widened to \$30 billion in August, thanks to increase in gold imports (September 18) is indeed a matter for concern. India is the largest consumer of gold. With the considerable reduction in customs duty on the yellow metal, its imports have increased causing a deficit in trade balance. India should try to enhance its invisible exports and reduce the deficit in the balance of payments, which is a more comprehensive record than the balance of trade. Since many European nations are experiencing recession, it is imperative that it produces quality services.

S Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

Intelligence imperatives

Active exchange of information becoming vital

RK Raghavan

A recent event in London has raised eyebrows. There was a joint open briefing by the heads of the CIA of the US and MI6 of the UK, on the global security situation at the Weekend Festival organised by the *Financial Times*.

It was unusual because seldom do serving top intelligence officers go public with their views on security matters.

This exercise could have possibly been at the instance of their political bosses. In the past intelligence officials were told to keep a low profile and contact with the media was almost prohibited.

EASING CONTACTS

This rigidity has somewhat eased in the recent past. Even then, what we saw in London was extraordinary and without parallel. It was certainly aimed at confidence building among allies and sending a message to Vladimir Putin that the West was united in countering aggression from Moscow.

A further objective could be to assure allies that they could bank upon the US and the UK for support in any eventuality.

The two officials did discuss Ukraine and West Asia. Their views expectedly echoed the West's stand on these vital issues and painted a grave picture of the security threat to most parts of the globe.

It was obvious that their intended audience was the opinion builders in the West. The press briefing was perhaps an effort to counter the growing dissent in the US and the UK to their official actions.

While commending Ukraine for its daring incursion recently into Russia, the two chiefs warned against complacency. They seemed to believe that Russia would hit back at an opportune time.

This is why in their view the situation remained dangerous. Also, Putin would not stop with countering Ukraine operations, but actually try to expand the theatre of conflict.

Added to this, there was evidence of Russian misadventure and sabotage in Europe with the help of its operatives and common criminals.

CHINA FACTOR

CIA and MI6 were not oblivious either to the growing might of China. In their estimate President Xi Jinping had huge ambitions not



SPYING. Will be on the rise

only to consolidate his own position but to expand his country's borders. Acknowledging the cosy relationship lately between Russia and China, the two chiefs called for united action between agencies in the West.

They highlighted the need for an active exchange of information.

It is against this backdrop that one has to view the latest Russian action to expel six UK diplomats from Moscow on grounds of spying.

Apart from being an indicator of the mutual mistrust that exists between the West and countries which owe allegiance to Putin, there is everything here to suggest that spying will be the order of the day.

LESSONS FOR INDIA

What is the lesson here for India which is facing aggression both in the North-East and North-West?

There are frequent skirmishes in both sectors.

Can we be smug about the fact that there has been no major aggression after the 2008 attack in Mumbai? We must note that we have had occasional unearthing of espionage networks, a fact which heightens the need for continuous alert.

How much help have Indian intelligence agencies received here from foreign outfits? It is very difficult to estimate because of the highly confidential nature of the relationship between intelligence agencies.

The CIA-MI6 ties are an exception.

We have shed our earlier conservatism and become open-minded and positive about strengthening mutual exchanges.

Our relationship with Israel is one example of this pragmatism which is essential to learning in a crafty and complicated trade such as intelligence.

The writer is a former CBI Director and a former High Commissioner of India to Cyprus



AJAY TYAGI

The recent Wayanad tragedy in Kerala shook the whole country. I happened to be the member-secretary of the Kasturirangan committee on Western Ghats, which had many prominent environment experts as members, and gave its report to the Government in 2013.

The tragedy brought back memories of the context in which this committee was set up in the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), extensive consultations it had with six State governments and other stakeholders, various site visits, and finally the unenviable task of coming out with a balanced report.

At the end of it, the committee was quite satisfied with its efforts and felt that the recommendations were pragmatic and amply implementable. Alas, that was not to be the case!

So why is it so difficult to implement the environment conservation measures in our country despite such tragedies occurring time and again.

There are several factors. To begin with, India is an 'environmentally stressed' low middle income developing country. It has 18 per cent of the world's population and 30 per cent of the world's cattle, but with merely 2.4 per cent of world surface area and 4 per cent of the water resources. The per capita annum average income is only \$2,500, with large income inequality.

DEVELOPMENT 'CONFLICT'

It is but natural that the developmental aspirations would meet environmental constraints.

'Environment' is an all-encompassing term not amenable to being uniquely defined. No wonder 'Environment' is not included in any of the lists — Union, State or Concurrent under the Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution; though its constituents like water, forest, sanitation, etc., are included in the lists. This creates jurisdictional issues between the Governments' legislative powers and functions.

Political parties often find it difficult to convince their electorates about the long-term benefits of environmental measures, especially if they conflict with other development schemes.

In contrast it is easier for parties to showcase their achievements through infrastructure projects and job generation schemes.

So, in a fast developing country like India, politicians have a serious problem of selling conservation proposals.

Turning environment into an electoral issue

ECO-PUSH.The Election Commission could tell political parties to clearly state their stand on environmental issues in their manifestos



REUTERS

Political parties and politicians, both at the State and Central levels, are stuck in the five-year electoral cycle. This cycle conflicts with the long-term objectives of environmental protection.

The Environment Protection Act 1986 was enacted by Parliament post the 'Bhopal tragedy' in 1984, with the objective of providing for the protection and improvement of the environment.

The bare Act is rather small with only 26 sections, and relies on subordinate legislation on various aspects for effective enforcement. Conceptually, this may be the right approach. 'Environment' being a wide subject, requiring interventions by the governments at different levels, hard-coding everything in the main Act could lead to avoidable inflexibilities and operational problems.

Unfortunately, this philosophy hasn't worked well. Though this Act has largely

withstood the test of time, with very few amendments till date, the same cannot be said about the rules, regulations, notifications, circulars, etc., issued by the governments under the Act.

These are modified on a regular basis based on developmental needs, projects of 'special' or 'strategic' nature, livelihood issues, people's representations, etc.

The Centre should have a relook at the Environment Protection Act with a view to hard coding the critical and essential environmental aspects as 'non-negotiable', clearly stated with no ambiguity, leaving no interpretational discretion to the stakeholders, governments and courts. Of course, this is easier said than done, and would need wide consultations and dispassionate analysis to ensure that the inflexibilities are justified. Anyway, leaving all type of flexibility to the political executive, through rule-making is certainly not working.

WEAK ENFORCEMENT

Enforcement of environmental laws is one of the weakest as compared to any other sectoral legislation. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) and State Pollution Control Boards (SPCBs) are perpetually short of funds and manpower. They depend on allocations

from the governments, and are low on priority amongst other competing demands on the Budget.

Many of the SPCBs have politicians as chairmen, usually the ones who couldn't get elected to the legislatures. Then there is the serious issue of rent seeking and corruption while according environment and forest clearances.

The issue of compensating the people who, for the larger public good, are made to give up their earning potential is a genuine one. There is enough literature on the subject, but no agreed implementation mechanism to compensate the affected people.

Many special category hilly States have been repeatedly raising this issue before the successive Finance Commissions, set up by the Central Government every five years to decide fiscal transfers to the States, with no success.

The Election Commission may consider mandating all recognised political parties to clearly state their stand on environmental issues in their manifestos, while contesting elections. Hopefully, this might at least help in sensitising the politicians and electorates about this serious subject.

The writer is a distinguished fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, and former SEBI chairman

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

September 18, 2004

Gammon to focus on overseas projects

Faced with shrinking margins that have hit Indian construction companies in the wake of increasing competition, construction major Gammon India Ltd is now sharpening its focus on overseas orders, as part of its strategy to increase volumes.

'Simplified tax laws must to boost investments, capital'

A section of India Inc feels that simplification and rationalisation of tax laws and procedures would impart transparency in tax administration and improve the quality of tax services. "The overall thrust of tax reforms should be on measures to stimulate demand and encourage private investment and capital formation," a FICCI official said.

Sundaram Clayton exports to touch Rs 100 cr in 2 years

For the TVS Group company Sundaram Clayton, 2003-04 has proved to be a watershed year in adding customers. The company secured orders from a number of big names in the automotive industry — Visteon, Holsten of the US, Tata Holset, Ford India and Volvo to name a few. According to Mr Venu Srinivasan, Director, exports will increase to Rs 100 crores in the next two years.

There was no edition of businessline on September 19, 2004

GenAI transforming supply chain management

K Ganesh
Aakash Kumar Varma

Global value chains are facing unprecedented challenges, with a series of disruptions exposing vulnerabilities and costing billions of dollars. The solution to these upheavals could lie in an advanced analytics system that tirelessly collects and processes information from a plethora of sources to minimise or neutralise the impact of such disruptions.

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is fast emerging as a potential silver bullet, with companies investing in GenAI across functions. A McKinsey report projected GenAI could add \$4.4 trillion to the global economy annually. That's greater than India's GDP in FY2023. And this is just an early estimate (the study only looked at 63 business use cases for GenAI).

From helping a leading automobile manufacturer to optimise production schedules, to enabling a global logistics company to optimise warehouse

layouts and picking/packing processes, GenAI has already showcased its potential to revolutionise supply chain management (SCM). A recent McKinsey SCM capability assessment saw GenAI-powered SCM beat over 90 per cent of traditional SCM practitioners.

GenAI can use existing datasets to generate new data, designs, or solutions for more flexible supply chains. One food and beverage multinational employed GenAI to create eco-friendly supply-chain scenarios that helped identify opportunities to reduce waste, minimise carbon footprint and optimise resource usage.

By integrating diverse data sources — economic indicators, social media trends and consumer behaviour patterns — GenAI enhances demand-sensing and accurate forecasting. A global consumer goods company used GenAI for more precise demand forecasting, a valuable capability in today's volatile markets.

Beyond forecasting, GenAI can



AI. Greater forecasting accuracy

simulate market scenarios — such as power shortages and competitor actions — and their impact on demand, allowing businesses to prepare for different outcomes and meet consumer needs despite market fluctuations.

Besides improving operational efficiency, GenAI can ensure compliance with growing regulatory demands for sustainable, ethical business practices through its ability to trace material origins. This enhances transparency and builds consumer trust. GenAI can also assist design teams to innovate on product designs.

The implementation of GenAI in SCM is not without challenges,

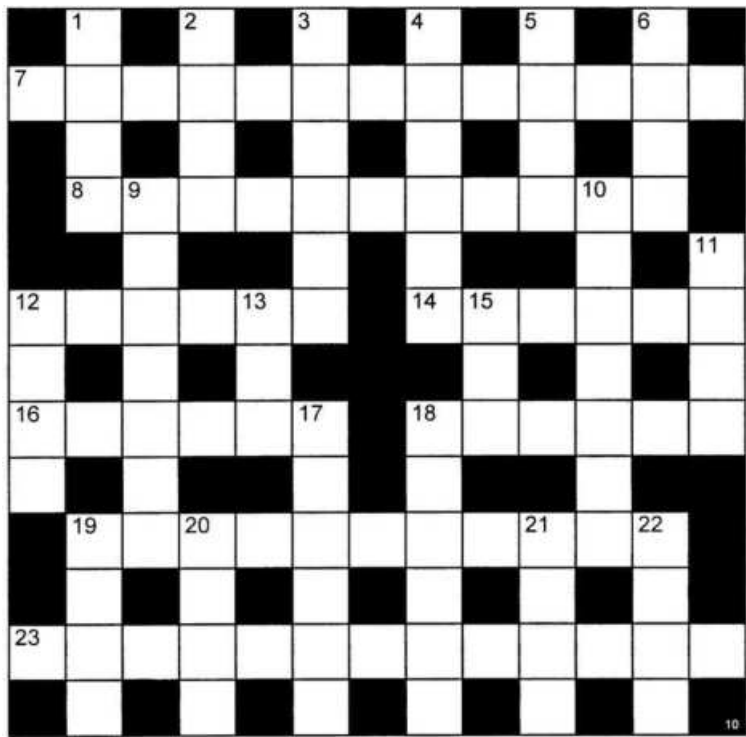
however. Much of the training data for GenAI models is sourced from web-crawl only post 2008, raising questions about data validity and applicability. GenAI models could also improve accuracy (60-70 per cent currently) with more specific training.

As the variability in prompts increases, issues around consistency become more pronounced. The computational intensity required to build and deploy GenAI models poses another challenge: being both expensive and resource-intensive, it could raise carbon emissions and complicate ESG compliance.

These concerns should not deter companies. They are rather a reminder to adopt a measured approach. GenAI isn't going away. Its transformative potential will only grow as the technology matures. Embracing it could help companies to surge ahead in an increasingly competitive market.

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BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2529



EASY

ACROSS

- 07. Series of connected things (13)
- 08. Next to last (11)
- 12. Aerated water bottle (6)
- 14. Catching, seizing (6)
- 16. English, Australian version (6)
- 18. Given a particular grade (6)
- 19. Open declarations (11)
- 23. Component larger than a brick (8-5)

DOWN

- 01. Wooden ring (4)
- 02. Analyse metrically (4)
- 03. Hot, pinched (6)
- 04. Speak emphatically and at length (6)
- 05. Portico, covered colonnade (4)
- 06. Bird of peace (4)
- 09. Large British moth (7)
- 10. Get denser (7)
- 11. Old (4)
- 12. Indifferent; tolerable (2-2)
- 13. Possess (3)
- 15. Flat winglike process (3)
- 17. Causing vomiting (6)
- 18. Give up post (6)
- 19. Push out lips in sullen displeasure (4)
- 20. Night-birds (4)
- 21. Slippery, greasy (4)
- 22. Foot-garment (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- 07. Series of things connected to a nice can not to be put out (13)
- 08. This letter X one will write to mute, tail being twisted (11)
- 12. It delivers a splash on ship when it turns (6)
- 14. The ways of the thief: they're infectious (6)
- 16. Australian English isn't reorganised (6)
- 18. Assigned a class in Ark, end as it may (6)
- 19. Pretences made at such skilled pursuits (11)
- 23. Construction of a number of flats needing this component (8-5)

DOWN

- 01. Cooper may have used it to dance round the ring (4)
- 02. Body picture will work like poetry (4)
- 03. Lets on how it was pinched (6)
- 04. Is, and isn't, wrong to press one's point (6)
- 05. It won't quite provide the ermine for the public ambulatory (4)
- 06. Messenger from Noah got right away from Channel port (4)
- 09. Size of paper Beethoven used for concerto (7)
- 10. Become more dense and become ill, having a lisp (7)
- 11. Elderly: how elderly? (4)
- 12. Thus, and thus again, it is neither good nor bad (2-2)
- 13. Admit nothing, and win one away (3)
- 15. It's in the manner of a winglike process (3)
- 17. It will make one sick to quote me turning up (6)
- 18. Leave what one's doing to rule around the South (6)
- 19. Look sulkily at a fish like cod (4)
- 20. Wise people are slow to turn (4)
- 21. Greasy prey lion had to hold up (4)
- 22. It's a blow to have to put one's foot in it (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2528

ACROSS 1. Ineffective 7. Subside 9. Fowl 11. Allot 12. Savant 14. Promulgated 18. Relate 20. Utter 22. Cave 23. Outback 24. Proliferate

DOWN 2. Nebular 3. Ever 4. Viola 5. Usual 6. Cloth 8. Intimate 10. Catapult 13. Fly 15. Entrant 16. Truck 17. Brake 19. Lover 21. Wolf

Wrong turn inwards

Exports no longer a manufacturing priority

India is fortunate to have a large base of domestic consumers, which, to some extent, insulates the economy from the tides of global demand. But this does not mean that growth and economic security can be attained without the help of a healthy focus on exports. Unfortunately, the numbers suggest that this process is not currently underway in India. In fact, if anything, matters have moved in the opposite direction. Within the private corporate sector, in spite of some notable success stories in sectors such as mobile handset manufacturing, there has been a shift away from, and not towards, exports. As this newspaper reported on Wednesday, while more than 18 per cent of sales in manufacturing were exported in 2012-13, that proportion dropped below 7 per cent in 2022-23. And, on the basis of the data set managed by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, this may fall further this financial year.

This reduced focus on exports in the manufacturing economy has had obvious implications in the aggregate. While services exports remain healthy for now, India retains a larger than comfortable trade deficit — which in August reached a 10-month high of almost \$30 billion. Some of the reasons for this are obviously transitory rather than structural. Over the past years, China has slowed as it has finally entered the phase of its development that requires it to rebalance away from savings- and investment-driven growth to boosting consumption. This naturally will reduce its appetite for such things as commodities. It also means that there is significant excess capacity to satisfy broader global demand. The steel sector reveals the ripple effects of overcapacity in China. India has turned a net importer of steel instead of a net exporter this year — as Chinese steel capacity needs to find an outlet because of shrinking local demand.

The other issue is ongoing supply-chain disruptions. Instability in West Asia has raised insurance and other costs, as well as introduced additional risk to shipping deadlines. Some exporters report fewer ships are calling at Indian ports, and there is more competition for outbound space. While all these issues must be addressed, deeper questions about a lack of structural focus on exports must also be asked. India is not a significant force in global value chains and has seen only modest success from the China plus one strategy of global corporations. India's size is an advantage, but can also become a curse. A focus on satisfying internal demand will keep an individual company in business. But it will not grow the economy as a whole. Sustained growth has never been achieved by any country through focusing entirely on internal demand.

In economic development, nobody pulls themselves up by their own bootstraps. Global demand and investment have always played a key role in creating the space for new projects and growth-enhancing capacity addition. This is particularly true of mass manufacturing. Making the changes to India's regulatory and business environment necessary to compete with China on cost and reliability in the global marketplace has been too long deferred, thanks to the power of the Indian domestic market. The outcome is clear to see: A manufacturing sector that increasingly depends upon domestic rather than global demand, and which will inevitably argue for tariff barriers that increase domestic costs and hurt Indian consumers, as has been the case over the past several years. For consumer welfare, greater economic resilience, a stable trade account, and sustainable growth, India needs to start looking outward for new markets.

Digging up due process

SC order on 'bulldozer justice' restores equity

The Supreme Court's latest interim order on a batch of petitions stating that no demolition should take place in the country without its express permission for the next 15 days restores the criticality of due process in the Indian justice system. Warning against "grandstanding" and "glorification" of this practice by political leaderships, the Supreme Court Bench specified that it had passed the direction invoking its special powers under Article 142 of the Constitution. Article 142 empowers the Supreme Court to pass any decree or order necessary for doing complete justice in a matter pending before it. In doing so, the two-judge Bench of Justice B R Gavai and Justice K V Viswanathan asserted its powers over the executive for acts that were deemed violating the ethos of the Constitution. The apex court clarified the order would not be applicable to encroachment on public roads, footpaths, railway lines, and other public property.

The apex court's forthright expression of disapprobation against demolitions is significant because it comes at a time when freelance vigilante justice has acquired a high degree of acceptability within sections of Indian society. The order calls into question the basic legality of the demolitions because there is no provision in Indian law that prescribes demolishing property as a punitive measure. This is an important signal to send to state bureaucracies and political leaders. "Bulldozer justice" has been extremely destructive, rendering people homeless and destroying small businesses, and eroding trust in the rule of law, such as it is. Calculations by the Delhi-based non-governmental organisation Housing and Land Rights Network shows that 153,820 homes were demolished in 2022 and 2023, displacing over 700,000 people. Some 59 per cent of these demolitions were undertaken on the pretext of slum clearance or urban beautification.

But punitive demolitions have been a favoured and blunt instrument of state administrations too — in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Haryana — and have often followed riots and similar law and order situations. The Supreme Court has condemned demolitions of both types. The solicitor general of India has argued that some demolitions were conducted in 2024, two years after notices were sent to the people concerned and that they had committed certain offences in the interim period, and that the demolitions and the crimes were not connected. The Bench, however, questioned the sudden demolition of the properties in 2024, suggesting that the two issues were not necessarily unrelated.

The communal element associated with several demolitions has been an issue that petitioners had raised before the apex court, especially in Prayagraj and Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh; Nuh in Haryana; Jahangirpuri in Delhi; and Jirpur village in Madhya Pradesh. They have argued that demolitions typically targeted the minority community following riots. Indeed, the force of their arguments prompted the solicitor general to protest that a narrative of communal targeting was being falsely created. The judges have countered that "outside noise" would not distract them. But given the increasingly febrile nature of the issue of bulldozer justice and the ambit of its application, the sooner the Supreme Court issues clear guidelines on the legal premises of this practice, the better.

Innovation, competition, and ambition

Building world-leading firms requires the ambition to compete with the best worldwide

I have often written about the need for Indian industry to invest more in in-house research and development (R&D). Indian industry invests only 0.3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in in-house R&D, compared to a world average of 1.5 per cent. Why do we invest so little in R&D? As the table shows, India has relatively few firms (23) in the top 2,500 firms that invest in R&D.

We have four challenges:

- We have no presence in six of the top 10 industries that invest in R&D: Technology hardware, electronics, construction, health care, general industrials, and industrial engineering.
- Where Indian firms are present, they invest less in R&D than the world average. In auto, the four Indian firms (Tata Motors, M&M, Bajaj, TVS) that figure in the top 2,500 R&D investors spend 3.8 per cent of their global turnover on R&D, which drops to just over 1 per cent without Tata Motors' JLR subsidiary in the UK. The world average for auto is 4.8 per cent. In software, the top Indian firms (TCS, Infosys, HCL) invest 1 per cent of turnover in R&D, compared to a top 2,500 average of 14 per cent.
- In pharmaceuticals, the top five Indian firms invest 6 per cent of sales in R&D. This is less than the world average of 17 per cent, but higher than any other industrial sector in India. The problem is that our pharmaceutical firms are relatively small. The average turnover of our five largest pharmaceutical companies (Sun, DRL, Aurobindo, Lupin, Cipla), at \$3 billion, is a fraction of the \$45 billion average of the top 20 pharmaceutical firms worldwide. Our top five firms invest an average of \$200 million in R&D, compared to an

international top 20 average of \$7 billion.

● We have a serious gap for our most successful firms (see my "India's Missing Giants", *Business Standard*, March 23, 2023). Our 10 most profitable non-financial firms make an average profit of 16 per cent of sales, and invest 2 per cent of profit in R&D. The 10 most profitable non-financial firms in the US, China, Japan and Germany make an average profit between 9 per cent and 25 per cent of sales, and invest between 29 and 55 per cent of profit in R&D. The difference in R&D spending proportional to profit (20 times) is simply huge. The problem is not one of sector, profitability, or size. Our most successful firms just invest little in R&D.

These four challenges — a missing presence in the most technology-intensive sectors, lower R&D intensity in the remaining sectors, limited scale in our most R&D-intensive sector, and a small investment in R&D by our most successful firms — between them result in Indian industry's low investment in in-house R&D. What can be done?

Laveesh Bhandari argued in these pages earlier this month ("Innovation is key: Why does India's private sector not spend more on R&D?", *Business Standard*, September 2, 2024) that the problem was competition. He says that Indian firms do not have an incentive to invest in in-house R&D as they already have continuing high growth in earnings by operating in a protected market. They need not cope with the uncertainty of R&D outcomes. This is a persuasive argument, but I would argue that the quality of competition is what really matters. Simply having more competition can drive efficiency; it need not drive product innovation. The nature of competition must change, and come



INDIA'S WORLD?

NAUSHAD FORBES

LEADING SECTORS FOR TOP 2,500 FIRMS INVESTING GLOBALLY IN R&D, BY COUNTRY (2022)

Sector	R&D spending 2022 (\$mn)	Total number of firms	Number of firms						
			Select advanced economies			Select emerging/Asian economies			
			US	UK	Germany	Brazil	China	India	
Software & computer services	2,55,804	327	186	8	6	1	71	3	
Pharmaceuticals & biotechnology	2,47,649	486	268	17	8	0	83	10	
Technology hardware & equipment	2,06,238	216	71	1	2	0	57	0	
Automobiles & parts	1,83,068	172	37	5	18	0	48	4	
Electronic & electrical equipment	96,219	254	46	8	9	0	104	0	
Construction & materials	35,229	66	4	0	2	0	36	0	
Health Care equipment & services	29,476	98	51	4	8	0	16	0	
Chemicals	28,338	112	20	2	8	1	34	1	
General industrials	24,200	63	13	1	5	0	16	0	
Industrial engineering	23,092	140	19	4	17	1	44	0	
Top 3 sectors	7,09,691	1,029	525	26	16	1	211	13	
Top 10 sectors	11,29,313	1,934	715	50	83	3	509	18	
Total	13,24,392	2,500	827	95	113	5	679	23	

Note: Figures in euros were converted to dollars using the EUR-USD exchange rate of 1.06 as of December 2022. This scoreboard reports R&D data consolidated at the firm level regardless of which country it is done in.

Source: EU Industrial R&D Investment Scoreboard (2023), with some correction for India

Reviving cities' blue lifelines

The paradox of environmental preservation and urban development has been discussed more times than one can count. Often, the dialogue ends with impassioned speeches calling for harmony with nature and greater responsibility in our actions. However, as the climate crisis intensifies, the speeches have turned into tales of caution, riddled with warnings.

In the past few months, as the monsoon swept across the country, the alarming rise in incidents of rivers flooding into cities has highlighted the urgency of the issue. The consequences of urban encroachment on rivers are dire, as seen in the recent floods in Vadodara and Vijayawada.

Last month, several parts of Vadodara were submerged, with water levels reportedly rising to 8 to 12 feet for three days. This caused massive power outages, issues with network connectivity, and, more dangerously, brought crocodiles and snakes into residential areas. A significant reason for the situation remained encroachment around the Vishwamitri River, which led to nearly century-old reservoirs — Ajwa and Pratappura — overflowing and flooding the river.

Similarly, encroachment over the Budameru Rivulet is considered the primary reason behind the recent Vijayawada floods, prompting Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu to declare "Operation Budameru" to remove encroachments on the rivulet. Even the national capital, New Delhi, has regularly faced floods, with the Yamuna overflowing during every monsoon season. According to the Delhi Development Authority's 2021 Master Plan, the Yamuna's floodplain in Delhi covers approximately 97 square km, accounting for nearly 7 per cent of the city's total area. However, as the Master Plan suggested,

encroachment over the river has restricted its flow in the city. In the process of growth and change in urban centres, human settlements and natural ecosystems bear the direct brunt. Such a disruption of river basins, which is important for ecological balance, brings about severe environmental and social consequences.

In 2021, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs released River Centric Urban Planning Guidelines for municipal planning and development authorities to ensure sustainable river management while regulating development along the river. With rising urban populations and expanding cities, overuse and exploitation of natural resources, especially rivers, are inevitable consequences. As pollution levels rise and rivers are increasingly channelised to meet urban demands, floodplains become degraded.

A 2022 study by the Central Pollution Control Board revealed that out of 603 rivers reviewed across all states and Union Territories, 279 had 311 polluted stretches. Factors like the discharge of untreated waste, illegal construction, and river channelisation through dredging and realigning rivers continuously damage water quality, the aquatic ecosystem, and groundwater.

As the pace of urbanisation increases, patterns of land use transform, leading to changes in river basins. One of the immediate and visible consequences of meddling with the basins of rivers is flooding. In cities like Mumbai and Delhi, rapid urbanisation has led to encroachments on riverbanks and the conversion of wetlands and floodplains into residential and commercial areas. This has reduced the capacity of these natural areas to absorb excess rainwater during monsoon seasons. Another critical dimension of deterioration in river basins is the dwindling freshwater resources. Already considered to be one of the most



CONURBATION

AMIT KAPOOR & BIBEK DEBROY

Haji Pir: A fighting response



BOOK REVIEW

VEENU SANDHU

Fifty-nine monsoons ago, India fought a bloody war with Pakistan, which had pushed some 30,000 infiltrators through the Ceasefire Line (now called the Line of Control, or LoC) on August 5, 1965. These infiltrators were Pakistani soldiers on a covert military operation called "Gibraltar". Their mission: To pluck Kashmir from India by precipitating insurgency in the state.

So secretive was Operation Gibraltar that outside of Pakistan's 12th Infantry Division, even its own army had no idea about it. India, still recovering from the wounds of the 1962 war with China, was caught unawares. Disguised as civilians, the saboteurs mingled with the local

population, and started looting, killing and targeting key infrastructure.

The conventional response to the situation would have been to get into defensive mode, and try to capture, liquidate or push the infiltrators out. Instead, an audacious counter-strategy was developed. India would go on the offensive. Its troops would capture the very landmass, a 500 sq km bulge jutting into India, through which the Pakistani soldiers had entered. Called the Haji Pir bulge, this landmass included the 8,652-foot Haji Pir Pass on the Pir Panjal Range, and fell in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

The battle of Haji Pir, one of the key battles of the 1965 war, would be a surgical strike. The Indian troops would cross the border from Uri in the north, in a mission codenamed Operation Bakshi after the brigadier (Zorawar Chand Bakshi, later lieutenant general) tasked with carrying it out, and from Poonch in the south (Operation Faulad) to assume control of the Haji Pir bulge.

Kulpreet Yadav's book, *The Battle of Haji Pir*, is an account of this unorthodox twin operation — largely of Operation

Bakshi. It is not the first. From the Indian armed forces' journal, *Sainik Samachar*, to books by military historians and by officers who fought in the 1965 war, numerous accounts are available.

What makes this book unusual, though, is the narrative form the author has adopted — recreating the battle as it unfolded, and presenting it in a manner that makes it accessible to a wider audience rather than just the men and women in uniform.

The author, a former Indian Navy and Coast Guard officer, reconstructs scenes and conversations, as one would in a novel, based on publicly available records and earlier books, besides interviews with veterans of the Haji Pir battle.

The soldiers who fought on those treacherous peaks, in torrential monsoon rain and bitter cold, are now in their 80s and 90s. By recording their war experience and weaving it into the narrative, after corroborating it with other sources, the author has managed to preserve their oral histories. (Disclosure: Among the veterans interviewed for this book is this reviewer's father.)

from innovative firms that compete on better products, not price.

Where a firm currently stands also matters. One of the better recent books on innovation is *The Power of Creative Destruction*, by Philippe Aghion, Celine Antonin and Simon Bunel. In a chapter titled "Is competition a good thing", they argue that firms react to increased competition differently depending on how far from the technology frontier (economist-speak for cutting-edge) they are. If they are far from the frontier, firms don't even try to compete. If they are near the frontier, they respond by innovating more to escape competition.

The other side of protection from imports is competing in export markets. Selling to international markets has many advantages. First is scale. The Indian market may be large, but it is puny relative to the rest of the world. The 15 Asian countries that make up the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) free-trade area are eight times our gross domestic product. The 10-country subset in Southeast Asia alone would be double India's market. There are more advantages: Selling in international markets provides great learning opportunities. Competing with the world's best is a spur to innovation like no other. But Aghion & Co argue that an expansion of export markets enhances innovation for firms close to the frontier. Export orientation does not enhance innovation much for firms far from the frontier.

After hearing Manmohan Singh's landmark Budget in June 1991, Forbes Marshall decided two things. First, we figured that the world's best firms would soon be coming to India, and if we could beat them overseas, we would easily beat them on our home ground. So, we began exports to drive learning. And, second, we committed to investing strongly in R&D and develop products we could sell worldwide. We used the time we had as the Indian market opened up to get as close to the technology frontier as possible. This opportunity still exists for much of Indian industry.

When I talk to my friends about why Indian firms invest little in R&D, I often hear a cultural argument, that it is our "trader mentality" or that we are short-sighted and do not see the merit in the long-term play that is R&D. I think the issue is different. Many industrialists think there isn't a problem to solve, that they are already investing adequately in R&D. So, I've made it my mission to show the huge gaps we have in R&D across industrial sectors, in our most successful firms, and overall R&D investment in the country, and all of Indian industry. Maybe this helps, but what can truly make an impact is the growing visibility of how R&D drives the success of leading firms. When this combines with a strong export strategy that shows Indian firms succeeding around the world, it becomes really powerful. The success story of a few dozen firms could fire Indian industry to build proprietary technology and deploy it worldwide. It is time we had hundreds of highly ambitious firms, operating at the technology frontier, and seeking enhanced competition from imports and in export markets as a spur to innovate yet more.

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water-stressed countries in the world, India has 18 per cent of the population but only 4 per cent of the world's water resources. The rampant over-extraction of water, pollution, and mismanagement of river systems have together raised the alarm about the imminent water crisis. Freshwater ecosystems are dramatically shrinking, further exacerbating the scarcity of water.

The shrinking and degradation of river ecosystems represent one of the biggest challenges that need national attention. It is imperative that river restoration and reclamation models are mainstreamed in urban design as we prepare our cities to accommodate 50 per cent of the population by 2050. These would include addressing river water dehydration, enhancing the aesthetic value of rivers to increase community awareness, and implementing sustainable drainage systems to improve the overall quality of river water.

River basin conservation also strongly influences the attainment of broader goals related to environmental conservation, climate change mitigation, and sustainable development. Rivers provide freshwater, regulate local climates, create biodiversity hotspots, and underpin agriculture and economic activities. India's secure environmental and economic future remains jeopardised without concerted efforts to protect and restore river ecosystems. The threats to river basin degradation demand an address on many fronts. On the one hand, they call for more rigorous regulation in urban development and land-use laws to forestall encroachment into natural drainage systems. On the other hand, they involve restoring and rehabilitating degraded river ecosystems through measures such as reforesting riverbanks, establishing protected areas in critical watersheds, and implementing sustainable water management practices. Equally important is raising public awareness and involving communities in safeguarding water resources.

The writers are, respectively, chair, Institute for competitiveness, and chairman, EAC-PM. With inputs from Jessica Duggal

under a cloud and passed over for promotion, so he had put in his papers. On his request, he was given a chance to raise a special force, with which he executed a daring mission for which he was promoted to lieutenant colonel and awarded the Vir Chakra.

Names of other decorated soldiers appear in the book, and it is here that an error has crept in: In the chapter on the Gitian feature attack, the author writes about 6 Dogra's Lance Havildar Naubat Ram, who charged on despite being wounded thrice and was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra for his bravery. The author writes that Naubat Ram was "tragically killed". He wasn't. Naubat Ram survived the battle and eventually retired as a subedar. His citation on the defence ministry's gallantry awards portal has details of his act of valour.

A book on the Haji Pir battle would be incomplete without mentioning the Tashkent agreement. The author refers to it upfront. After the UN-brokered agreement, India handed back control of the Haji Pir bulge to Pakistan on the assurance that it would not be used for infiltration. "Ironically," he writes, "...it remains a preferred route for terrorists and troublemakers".

commanding-in-chief, Lt Gen Harbaksh Singh, the author gives a quick overview of how India had upped its defence tactics after the 1962 China war. Replacing the police and Home Guard battalions manning the border posts with the J&K militia, a paramilitary force of trained locals raised after the Pakistani invasion of 1947, was one such critical move. This force

would conduct itself spectacularly in the 1965 and 1971 wars, and would be turned into a full-fledged army regiment, Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry, in 1976.

During the Haji Pir campaign, the Indian army carried out 15

battalion-level attacks, each of which is vividly described in short, sharp chapters in four sections. Notes from other sources offer context and additional information.

Lesser-known facts emerge, such as the genesis and role of the Meghdoot Force of commandos handpicked by Major Megh Singh. The officer had been



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Need consensus on synced polls

It’s a persuasive idea, but the Centre must bring all stakeholders on board before implementing it

Simultaneous polls, commonly referred to as “one nation, one election”, is a persuasive idea since it is expected to reduce election expenses, for both the exchequer and political parties, as well as limit disruptions in governance that are inevitable due to the model code of conduct that is enforced ahead of the polling and the deployment of government officials to organise the elections. However, the proposal, which was backed by the high-level committee chaired by former president Ram Nath Kovind in March, will necessitate a major overhaul of the electoral system and significantly impact federal relations. Hence, it is necessary that the proposal, cleared by the Union Cabinet on Wednesday, when it accepted the Kovind committee’s recommendations, is carefully thought-through and a political consensus is evolved on the matter before the government gets started on its implementation.

Simultaneous elections were a normative aspect of the Indian polity until the 1960s — the only aberration in the 1950s was when the CPI-led government in Kerala was dismissed by the Centre in 1959. The weakening of the Congress and the rise of parties representing new class and caste aspirations in the 1960s saw fractured mandates, leading to the formation of unstable coalition governments. The cycle of synchronised Lok Sabha and assembly elections was thus broken. In subsequent years, powerful central governments began to misuse constitutional provisions (Article 356) to dismiss state governments run by Opposition parties by manipulating the office of the governor.

This assault on the federal structure, most visible during Indira Gandhi’s tenure as prime minister and the Janata Party rule in the 1970s and 80s, was halted by the *Bommai* judgment of the Supreme Court in 1994, which limited the discretionary powers related to Article 356 and ended the President’s rule epidemic. The rise of regional parties and coalition politics after the 1980s also deepened the federal spirit that underlined the *Bommai* judgment, which explains why a return to simultaneous polls did not find traction in the political discourse. It was assumed that state politics operates in a realm different from that of national preoccupation, best left to state units, leaders and administrators to figure.

This layered and contested history explains the deep suspicion many political parties harbour about simultaneous elections. Hence, the Centre must converse with all stakeholders and address political, legal and administrative fault lines before proceeding with executive action.

Booker 2024 shortlist a historical moment

Five of the six authors in the 2024 shortlist for Booker Prize, announced on Tuesday, are women. This is a first in the 55 years of the Booker. The themes in these books encompass queer romance, thriller fiction, collective memory, and perspective shift, among other things. Clearly, the world has come a long way from when Virginia Woolf wrote *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), where she described the life of William Shakespeare’s imaginary sister, Judith, a gifted but discouraged writer who eventually kills herself.

The shortlist is a historical moment of empowerment, but one that is purely coincidental. Novelist Sara Collins, one of the jurors, has spoken about this moment and said that the six novels made it to the top due to “pure merit” but the realisation that five of them were written by women felt “gratifying, thrilling”. Indeed, this is a milestone moment in the centuries-long struggle of women to find literary representation in a man’s domain. For years, women wrote under pseudonyms — indicating the urge to express themselves over the pursuit of fame. The themes stressed the liberation of suppressed and repressed emotions as was the case with the character of Maggie Tulliver from *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), written by Victorian author Mary Ann Evans who took the name George Eliot to ensure that her work was “taken seriously”.

Today, it is hard to imagine a world where women did not write. Think of a library without Toni Morrison, Ismat Chughtai, or Margaret Atwood and the infinite universes these writers have allowed us to imagine. When we think of the feminist movement as empowering women writers, let us not forget the travails of authors such as Evans and Woolf whose courage enabled a million Judiths to speak their truths.

India and Quad: A tale of collaboration

The upcoming summit will reinforce the awareness of Delhi’s strategic options as it deals with its challenges and seeks to maximise its opportunities

The Quad summit to be held on September 21 in United States (US) president Joe Biden’s hometown, Wilmington (Delaware), will be the sixth since the meetings at this level were initiated in March 2021 by the Biden administration, within months of taking over in January that year. Including the upcoming one, Biden would have hosted four when he leaves office — there were two virtual meetings, in March 2021 and 2022, and the first-ever in-person Quad summit in September 2021. Two intervening summit meetings were hosted by Japan (May 2022) and Australia (May 2023). It will be India’s turn to host in 2025. The new US president and the incoming team will have to focus on a visit to India early in the term and explore additional deliverables and outcomes for the visit, providing continuity as the transition from the Biden administration takes place.

Biden hosting four summits is an attestation of the importance attached by the US to this framework for cooperation and coordination. It has also worked to India’s advantage. The US is now more willing to partner with India in terms of technology. The two coun-

tries launched the pathbreaking Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) in January 2023, which provides for cooperation in Artificial Intelligence (AI), quantum, biotechnology, semiconductors, space, and defence, among others. It has provided a cushion to handle disagreements on issues such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict. There was a proposal in the US Senate that India should be exempt from sanctions under the Countering American Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for major defence and other purchases from Russia because it is a member of Quad.

The significance and achievements of Quad today can be better understood if we recall the context in which it was first conceived, and the challenges it experienced. It had first come together in response to the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean and aimed at coordinating humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) response by the four navies of the US, Japan, Australia, and India that had displayed capacity on the occasion. A meeting of Quad officials took place on the margins of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum in the Philippines in 2007. Thereafter, it languished in the face of the sensitivity of some members, including Australia, to perceived opposition from China, with which they had strong trade and economic linkages. It was revived by the Donald Trump administration, which had made a pushback against China’s pred-

atory economic and trade policies and its unilateral assertiveness in the East and South China Seas and elsewhere, a major plank of its presidential campaign and subsequent policy. A meeting of officials of the revived Quad took place in 2017 on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit. After several meetings at this level, it was raised to foreign minister-level meetings in September 2019. Members have now met eight times at this level, twice in the Trump administration and six times since 2021.

It should be recognised that Quad is one of several frameworks of cooperation that US is involved with in the Indo-Pacific. It has treaty relationships with Japan, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and the Philippines. It launched AUKUS with Australia and the

United Kingdom in 2021, to provide Australia with capacity for nuclear propulsion conventionally armed submarines, and high-level defence technologies. It has also initiated a quadrilateral arrangement with the Philippines, Japan and Australia, focusing more on security responses to China’s actions in the East and South China Seas.

Quad, however, has its own significance. It has enabled the US to explore plurilateral convergences with India beyond the strengths of the bilateral relationship. From the Indian perspective, it has catalysed greater willingness in the US to do more with India bilaterally. Beyond the iCET, the US has now authorised technology transfer to India of GE F414 jet engines, which had been difficult earlier. Japan and Australia are also willing to do



Quad has enabled the US to explore plurilateral convergences with India beyond the strengths of the bilateral relationship

AFP

more with India bilaterally, because of Quad and the enhanced US willingness.

In addition to strengthening their relationships, Quad countries need to show positive benefits to other countries in the region flowing from the partnership. Otherwise, they would look at the Quad with scepticism, including because of negative Chinese reactions. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has called the Quad a force for global good. Among the Quad steps have been sharing vaccines during the Covid-19 pandemic, providing space-based maritime domain awareness data to Pacific Island countries to deal with climate, disaster forecasting, and illegal fishing, an Open RAN pilot in Palau, providing STEM fellowships, working on improving connectivity in the region. Measures have included practical cooperation on climate action, climate finance and technology transfer to countries to meet their climate commitments, addressing challenges of unsustainable debt financing. A Quad ASEAN Working Group has been established, and support for ASEAN centrality, and ASEAN-led regional architecture has been reiterated.

But they will be judged most by the benefits they bring to each other and their strategic interests. Six leader-level working groups have been set up on climate, critical and emerging technologies, cyber, health security, infra-

structure, and space. They have reiterated calls for an open, secure, free and inclusive Indo-Pacific that is prosperous and resilient, and upholding the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and peaceful resolution of disputes. They have consulted on issues of maritime security, counter-terrorism, proliferation threats in Asia, resilience of supply chains including of critical minerals.

The relevance of Quad is also signified by the fact that subsequently, the ASEAN, the European Union, and several European countries have developed their own strategies and outlooks for the Indo-Pacific.

In the intense global contestation playing out between the US, Russia, and China, India has sought to maintain its strategic autonomy by making an effort to sustain the relationship with Russia and deepen the partnership with the US and its partners, and strengthen itself economically, technologically and in the defence domain through these choices. PM Modi is expected to participate in the BRICS summit being hosted in Russia in October. The Quad summit in September will reinforce the awareness of India’s strategic options as it deals with its challenges and seeks to maximise its opportunities.

Arun K Singh is a former Indian ambassador to the United States. The views expressed are personal

Why India must track the cost of a healthy diet

Food prices have been in the news for some time now. The Economic Survey 2023-24 mooted, somewhat controversially, the idea that food should perhaps be excluded from inflation targeting, and recent reports note that the panel reviewing the Consumer Price Index (CPI) could consider reducing the weightage given to food to better reflect current household consumption patterns.

Notwithstanding these debates, the fact remains that food items have been and will remain key components of the CPI and the CPI-Food (CPI-F), seen as key barometers of cost of living and of overall inflation in India. For example, in 2022-23, food accounted for as much as 46% of the value of an average household’s consumption in rural India.

Despite its usefulness in tracking price trends in food prices, the CPI-F is of little value in assessing whether Indians can afford healthy diets, that is, diets that meet their nutritional needs. Both globally and in India, the cost and affordability of a healthy diet has been identified as a critical constraint to achieving diet quality. Countries where nutritious diets are least affordable (as a share of household expenditure) have a greater prevalence of stunting and micronutrient deficiencies. A recent estimate of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) suggests that more than half of India’s total population (55.6%) is unable to afford a healthy diet, higher than the South Asian average of 53.1%.

If one is to direct public policy to promote healthy diets, one must first be able to track their costs and affordability. Thus far, the government, both at the Centre and in the states, has focused primarily on the CPI-F. The government has further, justifiably, focused on tracking individual food groups that are deemed sensitive from the perspective of either international or domestic trade, but that do not sufficiently reflect nutritional or health concerns. For example, tomato, onion and potato (often referred to as TOP) are not particularly nutritious, but are widely consumed and their prices have often been a politically sensitive issue.

There is a case for routinely computing the cost of a healthy diet (CoHD) alongside the CPI-F. The CoHD calculates the minimum person, per-day expenditure needed to meet food-group-specific calorie recommendations from the national food-based dietary guidelines, or FBDGs. In the case of India, the FBDGs are developed by the Indian Council of Medical Research’s National Institute of

Nutrition (ICMR-NIN).

We used weekly prices collected and published by various arms of the government for 330 urban centres and 68 commodities for January 2018 to March 2023. For each commodity in our price dataset, we used the India Food Composition Tables to calculate the quantity (in grams) one would need to consume to meet the ICMR-NIN FBDGs. This allows us to identify the cheapest items within each recommended food group. We added the cost of these least-cost items across food groups to obtain the CoHD at a centre-week level and aggregated this across centres using population weights to obtain a national average CoHD.

A comparison of the weekly national CoHD and the monthly CPI-F, normalised such that the first week of 2018 is set to 100, makes it clear that the two are not proxies of one another, though they are positively correlated. First, the CoHD and CPI-F often diverge substantially and can move in opposite directions, rendering the CPI-F an unreliable indicator of inputs for nutritious diets. Second, not only is the CoHD generally higher and more volatile than the CPI-F, shocks such as Covid-19 tend to exacerbate the gap between the two. This suggests that in times of crisis, the CPI-F may underestimate the cost of procuring a healthy diet.

The CoHD can be used in a variety of ways. By comparing household food expenditure across food groups with the food-group-wise minimum expenditures needed to achieve a healthy diet, we can assess whether households need to spend more to be able to consume healthy diets — making a case for increased transfers — or whether existing expenditures are sufficient but need to be reallocated to healthier foods, which makes the case for improved information and consumer awareness. The CoHD is also a useful metric to incorporate in programme design and costing, including for social protection programmes.

Governments in several developing countries have recently embarked on systematic efforts to publish the CoHD routinely, offering useful examples of proactive surveillance of the cost of healthy diets. India already has the capacity to undertake a similar effort. Further, such an effort is not only possible but also necessary in a context where these data on prices are no longer available publicly.

It is imperative that the government takes the lead in publishing periodic reports on the CoHD, thereby offering a credible basis for understanding the key drivers of these costs and considering solutions to make healthy diets more affordable. This would be a simple but significant step towards attaining healthy diets.

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{ JAGDEEP DHANKHAR } VICE PRESIDENT OF INDIA

Climate change is an existential challenge... We have to bring about a scenario to contain the climate change menace...

Can creamy layer in the Dalit quota be justified?

The Supreme Court last month upheld sub-classification in the quota for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). However, some judges further recommended adding creamy layer exclusions, restricting reservations to only one generation or once, making it time-bound, and adding economic criteria. The government has said that it will not implement the creamy layer exclusion. But clearly, these suggestions amount to a full-fledged assault on the concept of untouchability-based reservation. An assessment of the assumptions behind the suggestions is needed.

Let’s look at the arguments. Justice BR Gavai argued “unequal treatment to unequal classes” is justified if few members are far too advanced and added that only this can achieve real equality as enshrined under the Constitution. Justice Pankaj Mishra said, “The better of the class amongst the backwards eats up most of the vacancies/seats reserved leaving the most backward with nothing in their hands.” Are these statements based on real data?

Official data shows SC reservation benefits the economically weak and less educated people. This can be measured by two criteria — share in jobs and level of education. In 2022, about 89% of SC employees in the central government were in the C and D categories of jobs, and only 11% in A and B. In the same year, about 68% SC employees held degrees below secondary and higher secondary levels. More direct evidence came from the National Sample Survey on Employment 2022-23. About 78% of government employees were from lower income groups and 22% from top income households. The share of lowest, middle and highest income households was 41.4%, 36.5% and 22%, respectively. The share of these SC employees with education below secondary or higher secondary levels is 60%.

Clearly, there are substantial benefits of reservation to economically weaker SCs, though their representation is confined to low-level jobs. Hence, the view that better-off Dalits eat up more seats or vacancies is misleading. A second suggestion was about using economic criteria as the rationale behind reservation. This view holds that better economic standing is good enough for discrimination-free mobility. But this is not justified either by theory or empirical facts. The justified economic discrimination tells us that group discrimination is based on group identity, such as race, colour, religion, ethnicity, caste or gender. In identity-based exclusion, such as untouchability, the untouchable group

as a whole faces discrimination, irrespective of the economic status of an individual.

Empirical evidence also supports this assumption. A study by ActionAid in 2000 on social and economic discrimination in 11 states and another 2013 study of government institutions in eight states revealed discrimination in access to public amenities, in employment, in purchase of inputs and sale of output by farmers, and in purchases from SC-owned businesses in the transport, eateries and grocery sector. Another study of 90 SC businesses by scholar Asim Prakash revealed discrimination. Vinod Mishra’s study revealed discrimination against SCs in renting of houses in urban areas. In urban areas, higher-ranked officers faced more discrimination in the private sector. Internal surveys in IIT Bombay revealed caste humiliation of SC students. Thus, caste discrimination is a ubiquitous phenomenon experienced by Dalit individuals irrespective of their economic background, with some variations. The studies also showed that many SC students, government employees, and entrepreneurs who faced discrimination were second-generation beneficiaries of reservation. The view that limiting reservations to one generation will make SCs free of bias is unfounded.

Similar is the argument on the time limit of reservation. If untouchability persists 70 years after abolishing it and the gap between SCs and the higher castes on human development indicators is significant, reservation will continue to be necessary. The problem SCs face is complex because they battle not only discrimination but also isolation, antagonism, and humiliation.

If at all there needs to be any reform, it can’t be in the form of a creamy layer. It would be fair to exclude economically better sections of SCs from caste-based subsidised financial and other assistance. However, this can’t be extended to exclusion from reservation. Data from 2022 found only 5% of SC workers are in government jobs. Although the share is low, it has brought some mobility. Individual mobility also induces group mobility because well-off people extend a helping hand to those who lag behind. I feel this spread effect of reservation is likely to be harmed by sub-categorisation and creamy layer. Therefore, any change in policy which involves a question of life and death for SCs should be determined by hard facts and not by unfounded assumptions.

Sukhadeo Thorat is former chairman, UGC. The views expressed are personal

OUR VIEW



Market froth demands a well-crafted response

Among other factors, scarce investment avenues other than equity and dubious practices amid a stock boom have raised the risk of a bust. Here's how authorities ought to respond

Market apocrypha describes many triggers that indicate when investor frenzy has reached its peak and a bubble is about to burst. One proxy indicator is hyperactive equity interest among wage earners who typically do not have reliable disposable incomes every month. Such investors tend to enter the market at its top and invariably end up losing their capital. The second sign is dubious companies making initial public offerings (IPOs) to cash in on feverish activity and raising substantial sums of money. Given the current state of the Indian stock market, it would seem both these pre-conditions have been more than fully met. All kinds of retail investors are rushing in to invest their meagre savings—not only in IPOs, but also in all sorts of penny stocks, often persuaded by online influencers and tricksters. The recent jolt of ₹4,800 crore gushing into an IPO by a small two-wheeler dealer looking to raise ₹12 crore does not appear to have changed anything. Indian equity markets in 2023-24 saw IPO numbers jump to 205 from 125 the previous year. The first half of 2024-25 saw IPO subscriptions in India double, while funds raised globally dropped 16%. This market froth has the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) worried; the regulator has hinted at manipulation by issuers of paper and threatened to tighten rules. Any market meltdown would spell multiple risks for the economy, but if millions of retail investors were to see their savings evaporate, it would pose a political risk for the government.

But, before jumping to any normative solutions, it might be instructive to get into the weeds first. There are many reasons for today's

stampede-like conditions in the primary insurance market. A significant factor is the absence of alternative asset classes that can compete with company shares to offer reasonable real returns, post inflation and taxes. This distortion is playing out in different ways. One manifestation is deposit growth lagging credit growth in the banking industry, forcing banks to rely on relatively expensive liabilities (like certificates of deposit), which raises borrowing costs, even though policy rates seem primed for descent. Another symptom is the enormous retail predilection for mutual funds (MFs), which, compelled by the same lack of asset options and a shallow secondary market for shares, re-routes these investments into IPOs, thereby reinforcing an artificial valuation bump. Reports also suggest that some institutional investors (including MFs) have been in collusion with shady issuers to pump up valuations and help promoters make unjustified gains by selling out to clueless investors.

It might be tempting to demand that the government or Sebi clamp down through direct administrative controls and orders. However, as history shows us, this is likely to create more distortions and aberrations. One immediate task for government officials and regulators is to stop glorifying market valuations, or singing paeans to how India's market cap ranks high among its global peers. This is a time for state-ments to be laced with caution and accompanied by warnings on the fragility of savings. Their role does not end there. The authorities should increase the severity of punitive measures to make any breach of rules prohibitively costly. They could start by making an example of transgressors—which may not be difficult to locate in the current hysteria.

THEIR VIEW

A sovereign wealth fund could serve India's long-horizon aims

It offers opportunities in a new global context and we mustn't let narrow arguments get in its way



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The government has reportedly initiated preliminary discussions to examine the viability of establishing India's own sovereign wealth fund (SWF). An SWF is a government-owned investment fund comprising funds or surpluses created by that entity to meet desired allocation outcomes. SWFs mark a seminal development in 21st century international finance and can play a pivotal role. Many capital exporting countries, including the US, are looking to establish SWFs and more systematic ways of enhancing returns on a long-term basis. In fact, there is rare bipartisan unanimity on using an SWF as an economic tool in the US.

It isn't the first time that this idea has been broached in India. Decibel levels on an SWF rose in policy circles during a phase in 2007-08, when our capital inflows exceeded \$108 billion in a single year but waned after the Global Financial Crisis. It gained momentum again in 2010-11, when the Planning Commission revived the idea of setting up a \$10 billion non-commodity SWF that it said could draw upon a part of the country's 'surplus' foreign exchange reserves (about \$300 billion then). The commission suggested that it could also be funded by cash-rich public sector undertakings or through budgetary allocations.

The idea has waxed and waned thereafter. The typical pushback has been

that SWFs are for countries that have mineral wealth or run trade and budget surpluses. But India runs persistent current account deficits and a sizeable fiscal deficit. Another argument against it has been that India's domestic markets are deep, so we do not need an SWF. There have also been other concerns related to its governance, structure, investment goals and policies.

Note, India has had structures similar to an SWF wherein the government has taken corporate India and financial institutions along in the creation of a pure-play investment vehicle, such as the National Investment and Infrastructure Fund, a government-backed fund set up in 2015.

As for the question of an SWF, a lot of water has flown since the 2000s and the global as well as domestic backdrops have changed significantly. The world is grappling with the mega-trends of decarbonization, de-globalization and demographic changes. India's own aspirations, needs and concerns have transformed. It is now a far bigger economy and a vital global player. India must nurture a large population, veer to a greener growth path, secure its supply chains and find avenues to generate employment at scale—aimed at lifting and broadening its wealth pyramid.

Importantly, it is not pragmatic to take a narrow view of an SWF by seeing it strictly in terms of the financial value, currency diversification and market returns it could generate via investments in equity, infrastructure, foreign currency and other assets.

There is a growing need to view its role in a much broader light.

First, an Indian SWF can play a key role in maximizing social, political, commercial and economic benefits, and not just financial returns.

Second, an SWF can be used to make direct investments in entities with specialized knowledge, specific resources, and critical technologies to bring them to India. It can invest in 'disruptive' fields such as quantum computing,

GenAI, telecom, space-tech and green-tech, among others. America's Joe Biden administration has spent months on designing a fund that would provide capital to advance US strategic interests like early-stage technologies.

Third, such a fund can be used to increase India's global heft and help the country achieve deeper economic integration. It can create and leverage opportunities to develop specific infrastructure projects that are of mutual interest to India and other countries, such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, and invest in other vital projects overseas as part of India's 'look-east' policy.

Fourth, it can specifically help address the issues of resource dependence and diversification of economic risk. The weaponization of critical mineral supplies, especially by China, is a major concern. Current Chinese dominance over a large number of product categories creates a risk of economic coercion and its monopolistic practices considerably limit the space for new entrants to emerge as manufacturing powerhouses. This can hurt green transition efforts. Resource-rich nations are also toying with the idea of a 'buyers club' to avoid a bidding war among G7 countries or strategic stockpiling by others. The US and EU are promoting localization and friend-shoring, even as they make moves to secure critical minerals and technology.

Lastly, an SWF can and should have a complementary relationship with the Reserve Bank of India, with a distinct mandate that attaches relative weights to liquidity, security and returns that differ from those of the central bank.

In a nutshell, there is more to the SWF debate than just spouting words on foreign exchange reserves and the Greenspan-Guiddotti rule. India's approach to an SWF needs to be guided not by where the country currently is, but where it aspires to be in the years and decades to come.

These are the author's personal views.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

There is nothing so disastrous as a rational investment policy in an irrational world.

JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES

THEIR VIEW

CPI inflation seems set to stay within a moderate range

RADHIKA RAO



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Supply-side forces had driven India's annual inflation to a high of 6.0% and 6.4% in 2020-21 and 2022-23 respectively, amid pandemic-led supply chain disruptions, high commodity prices, sticky service-sector pressures and elevated core inflation. Headline inflation has since drifted lower, notwithstanding sequential swings around the monsoon months and on weather-related triggers. From 6.4% in 2022-23, Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation eased to 5.2% in 2023-24 and is likely to settle in a range of 4.2-4.6% this year.

August 2024 inflation came in slightly above expectations, mainly on a divergence in food versus ground-level data. Food prices corrected much less than expected across sub-segments like pulses, vegetables, cereals, sugar, etc. Other segments were along expected lines, with continued disinflation in fuel and modest service-sector pressures. Core inflation (sans food and fuel) held steady at 3.4% year-on-year, pointing to a slight pass-through from telecom tariff hikes.

There were indications that diesel and petrol prices might be cut if global crude oil (currently at a three-year low) stays soft. Brent crude is down 10% month-to-date versus 2023-24's average. Food costs have eased in September and we will need to see if this is reflected in sub-trends.

Either way, receding base effects were expected to keep the headline print above 4% in September. Headline inflation's softer numbers in July-August and the likelihood of a small uptick in September suggest that the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) current quarter's inflation forecast of 4.4% will be undershot by at least 30-40 basis points.

Beyond base effects: There are three reasons to be sanguine over the inflation trajectory. First, the monsoon has been encouraging, with a sharp shortfall in June narrowing in July and August. As of 7 September, cumulative rainfall stood at 8% over its long-term average (LTA), even though the geographical spread is still relatively uneven, with the southern peninsula and central region in sharp surplus, while other regions are below their LTAs. Reservoir levels have gone up, with current live storage above 80% of full capacity at August-end, up from 63.4% at this point last year. This eases the kharif-to-rabi crop shift and bodes well for farm output.

Second, food costs are off the boil. High frequency data for vegetables has begun to cool off. So also cereals and pulses. Price spikes for staple vegetables have moderated. Timely rainfall, better inter-state supplies and stepped-up pulses output are expected to help keep volatile food components in check for the rest of 2024-25.

Rains have temporarily stoked vegetable prices again in August-September, but these are expected to moderate next month.

Lastly, core inflation and its second-order impact are likely to be benign. In a note earlier this year, we had assessed the reasons behind the considerable gap between core and headline inflation at the time. Back then, core inflation was expected to bottom out by around mid-2024 and then turn up on base effects, accompanied by a modest pick-up in consumption trends on the back of easing inflationary expectations, higher labour participation, positive wealth effects and easier financial conditions. To that extent, we had expected core inflation to

'catch up' with the headline rate and average 3.5% year-on-year in 2024-25.

Our view on core CPI has played out in the past two months, mostly driven by base effects and weak input costs (thanks to soft commodities). Wage pressures, on an inflation-adjusted basis, remain at manageable levels, calming concerns over a potential wage-push spiral or second-round effects from high inflation.

Our correlation study had shown that softer consumption also tends to impart a disinflationary impulse to core segments. Add to this the reading that inflationary expectations are anchored, even if they have stopped correcting further. The small pick-up in the May-July surveys was likely influenced by the weak monsoon start and resultant uptick in food costs (which has since faded).

Implications for policy: Our trimmed mean measure is running at a more benign pace than swings in the headline print. Three important developments will likely be under watch to gauge the direction of RBI policy.

First, the four-year term of the three external members of its six-member Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) is set to conclude next month and new members might be announced ahead of the October policy review. Two of the external members have been doves in the mix, casting a dissent vote in majority MPC decisions to keep rates on hold. We assume the incoming members will prefer to maintain the *status quo* in October, but this could be followed by a broader MPC shift in December as more inflation and growth data becomes available.

Second, the US Fed is widely expected to kick-start a rate-cutting cycle this quarter, with its policy panel's accompanying dot-plot likely to be parsed by observers to gauge which way it leans. Lastly, domestic data on India's growth momentum (out in October), inflation numbers in the interim and the rupee's exchange-rate stability will be important factors for policymakers.

We expect RBI's policy easing to start in December 2024 on the argument that policy needs to be less restrictive as real interest rates rise, rather than any need to respond to economic duress. Macroprudential measures to address excesses in certain segments, including microfinance, retail lending, etc, are likely to continue.

MY VIEW | ACUTE ANGLE

MINT CURATOR

Do leaderless movements have any chance of success in India?

Dissent can remind rulers that they are answerable to the people but can't bring our fragmented polity and society together



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A turbulent August has been followed by an uncertain September on both sides of the border between Bangladesh and West Bengal. In Bangladesh, a small student movement that began in early June became a mass uprising that forced prime minister Sheikh Hasina to resign and flee to Delhi. An interim government is trying to restore normalcy, but no one knows what comes next. In West Bengal, the brutal rape and murder of a trainee doctor in RG Kar Hospital has spawned weeks of daily processions and nightly vigils by thousands of middle- and upper-class residents of Kolkata (and elsewhere) who are unattached to any political party. The future of this story seems more predictable: it will lead to adjustments and modifications, but there will be no fundamental change.

These events are the most recent examples of what is being called 'the age of leaderless mass movements.' The political mobilizations of the past were led by political parties or organizations. They required planning, active and dedicated workers, and direct communication through top-down hierarchical structures with recognized leaders and goals. Think of the Satyagraha salt march led by Mahatma Gandhi or the Sampoorna Kranti movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan in the mid-1970s.

The new movements—if that is the right word for the phenomenon—have no leaders to begin with. They are typically sparked by a significant event that galvanizes into action the accumulated anger against political elites, corruption and injustice. The organization is done not by existing political parties or their machines, but through social and viral media. When journalists want to know what the movement desires, what the objectives are, they need to ask random protestors on the street or celebrities. There is no movement leader to ask.

The key to this new form of protest is new communication technology. The mobile phone is the contemporary instrument of mass mobilization. It can be used to deploy a flash mob that performs a dance at a railway station or mounts an arson attack on a police station, or to summon thousands to a demonstration or street march. So potent is its decentralized communication capacity that it is being hailed as the most revolutionary political technology after the printing press which remade religion, language and nation in Europe.

There are numerous examples of these new leaderless mass movements: the Arab Spring of 2011 (and later) that began in Tunisia and spread through Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and other countries and led to the removal of several rulers; the anti-corruption protests that brought down



Evo Morales in Bolivia in 2019; and the recent democracy movements in Hong Kong and Myanmar that were crushed. At a smaller scale, there were the 'Black Lives Matter' (sparked by the public murder of George Floyd by police) and 'Occupy Wall Street' movements in the US, and the Yellow Jackets protests of 2018 in France.

What lessons can we draw from leaderless movements? Why do some succeed and others fail? What does success mean? And what is the potential of such movements in India?

The Arab Spring provides some guidance. The name was given by Western observers to describe an uprising of youth in several Arab countries. A tinder box of anger against corruption and political suppression already existed. It was set alight by the self-immolation of a Tunisian roadside vendor. In Cairo, large scale protests, organized largely through social media by politically unaffiliated youth, began in Tahrir Square. After much violence by the military government against street protestors, Egypt's president Hosni Mubarak resigned—or rather, was ousted by the military. In the Western media, there were many ecstatic proclamations about the power of social media to propel social change.

Egypt's elections that followed in 2012 were won by the Islamic Brotherhood, a hierarchical old religious organization that had only played a marginal role in the protests. The unorganized, leaderless students who had protested and suffered (and died by the hundreds) were pushed aside. The new government of Mohamed Morsi lasted barely more than a year and was removed by the Egyptian military in a *coup d'état* in 2013. General Fattah el-Sisi became and is still president. The Arab

Spring in Egypt turned into an Arab Winter.

The power and role of the military was decisive in Egypt. As it was in the ouster of Evo Morales in Bolivia and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh. When a military packed with loyalists—as in all three examples—asks you to go, you have no choice. The masses, the typical balance against armed forces, are no longer with you. Conversely, when the military/police see their self-interest in supporting the regime—as in Hong Kong and Myanmar—protests die and rulers don't flee. In India, it is impossible to imagine a situation in which the military could compel a prime minister to resign.

The larger question may be whether it is possible to galvanize all of India on any issue that unites all its fragments, and that too without leadership. At a national level, the answer must be 'no.' Indian society's tapestry of religions, languages, castes, tribes and classes has distinctly varied interests, which have grown further apart in recent decades. Even Hindu identity is not monolithic. Had it been, there would have existed but one political party. It is possible that some economic catastrophe, such as runaway inflation, may unite a plurality of the population, but mass mobilization will not achieve much except through the ballot box and old-fashioned political parties.

In a democracy, dissent serves the powerful purpose of notifying rulers that they are answerable to the people. But dissent is not an ideology. From the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act movement to the ongoing struggle in West Bengal, dissent is a warning sign to the ruling classes. What it cannot do in India's fragmented polity is draw citizens from all social identities and classes. It is not a harbinger of revolution.

AI seems better than humans at tackling conspiracy theories

A study shows AI bots can make believers of falsehoods think again



FAYE D. FLAM

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Chatbots can be effective against rumours of pet-eating immigrants

ISTOCKPHOTO

Scientists surprised themselves when they found they could instruct a version of ChatGPT to gently dissuade people of their beliefs in conspiracy theories—such as notions that covid was an attempt at population control or that 9/11 was an inside job. The most important revelation wasn't about the power of AI, but about the workings of the human mind. The experiment punctured the popular myth that we're in a post-truth era where evidence no longer matters, and it flew in the face of a prevailing view in psychology that people cling to conspiracy theories for emotional reasons and that no amount of evidence can ever disabuse them.

"It's really the most uplifting research I've ever done," said psychologist Gordon Pennycook of Cornell University and one of the authors of the study. Study subjects were surprisingly amenable to evidence when it was presented the right way.

The researchers asked more than 2,000 volunteers to interact with a chatbot—GPT-4 Turbo, a large language model (LLM)—about beliefs that may be considered conspiracy theories. The subjects typed their belief into a box and the LLM would decide if it fit the researchers' definition of a conspiracy theory. It asked participants to rate how sure they were of their beliefs on a scale of 0% to 100%. Then it asked the volunteers for their evidence.

The researchers had instructed the LLM to try to persuade people to reconsider their beliefs. To their surprise, it was pretty effective. People's faith in false conspiracy theories dropped 20%, on average. About a quarter of the volunteers dropped their belief level from above to below 50%. "I really didn't think it was going to work, because I really bought into the idea that, once you're down the rabbit hole, there's no getting out," said Pennycook.

The LLM had some advantages over a human interlocutor. People who have strong beliefs in conspiracy theories tend to gather mountains of evidence—not quality evidence, but quantity. It's hard for most non-believers to muster the motivation to do the tiresome work of keeping up. But AI can match believers with instant mountains of counter-evidence and can point out logical flaws in believers' claims. It can react in real time to counterpoints the user might bring up.

Elizabeth Loftus, a psychologist at the University of California, Irvine, has been studying the power of AI to sow misinformation and even false memories. She was impressed with this study and the magnitude of the results. She considered that one

reason it worked so well is that it's showing subjects what they did not know, thereby reducing their overconfidence in their own knowledge. People who believe in conspiracy theories typically have a high regard for their own intelligence—and a lower regard for others' judgment. After the experiment, some of the volunteers said it was the first time anyone or anything had really understood their beliefs and offered effective counter-evidence.

Before the findings were published in *Science*, the researchers made their version of the chatbot available to journalists to try out. I prompted it with beliefs I've heard from friends: that the US was covering up the existence of alien life and that after the assassination attempt against Donald Trump, the mainstream media deliberately avoided saying he had been shot because reporters worried it would help his campaign. And then I asked the LLM if immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, were eating cats and dogs. When I posed the UFO claim, I used the military pilot sightings and a *National Geographic* special as evidence, and the chatbot pointed out some alternate explanations and showed why those were more probable than alien craft. It discussed the physical difficulty of travelling the vast space needed to get to Earth and asked whether it's likely aliens could be advanced enough to figure this out yet clumsy enough to be discovered.

On the question of journalists hiding Trump's shooting, the bot explained that making guesses and stating them as facts is antithetical to a reporter's job. If there's a series of pops in a crowd, and it's not yet clear what's happening, that's what they're obligated to report—a series of pops. As for the Ohio pet-eating, the AI did a nice job of explaining that even if there were a single case of someone eating a pet, it wouldn't demonstrate a pattern.

That's not to say that lies, rumours and deception aren't important tactics used by humans to gain popularity and political advantage. Searching through social media after the presidential debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, many people believed the cat-eating rumour, and what they posted as evidence amounted to repetitions of it. To gossip is human. But now we know they might be dissuaded with logic and evidence. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | BEHAVIOUR BY BRAIN

Why GenAI tools cannot create effective ad campaigns

BIJU DOMINIC



is chief evangelist, Fractal Analytics, and chairman, FinalMile Consulting.

Why is the masala kept in a separate pouch inside the noodles pack? What lessons does it hold for those developing AI algorithms?" These were questions I recently asked a class of management students. Though I told them not to use ChatGPT, at least 20 of the 60 students in the class used it to answer the question. How did I find that out?

I did not use any sophisticated technological tool to identify assignments written by humans and those written using ChatGPT. Although the words used in the ChatGPT-written submissions varied slightly, they had the same arguments. More notably, they had the same logical structure for those arguments. Much like the standardized output of an assembly line at a factory, what ChatGPT rolled out looked very similar. The answers lacked differentiation.

Generative AI (GenAI) is possibly one of the greatest leaps taken by the world of technology. It has already replaced a few human functions in many organizations. There are

many who believe that one function that is ripe for GenAI to dominate is the creation of advertisements. An ad is mostly about an image, a headline and few lines of copy. The generation of these should be easy for GenAI technology. Today, organizations that use human talent spend much money and time on creating ad campaigns. An expert photographer will charge a very high fee and take several days to shoot an ideal image. With GenAI, images can be generated in a matter of minutes, and that too at scale, resulting in huge cost savings.

It is true that GenAI is still unable to generate images that are fully accurate representations of original products. Given the pace of technological advancement, however, it is only a matter of time before GenAI perfects the accuracy of the images it creates. But GenAI has a bigger problem to solve. It is the same one that my management students faced—an inability to differentiate one's outputs.

The title of a book by Jack Trout and Steve Rivkin, *Differentiate or Die: Survival in Our Era of Killer Competition*, captures the core belief of every advertiser. All advertisers worth their salt know that the success of a brand depends on its ability to stand apart from its competition.

So, how good is GenAI at creating differentiated output?

Every small step that GenAI takes is determined by the vast data-sets it is trained on. It works by taking its next step based on what past data shows has the highest probability of being next. So, each step GenAI takes is the most predictable, which also means it is the least differentiated. Much like Ford Motor Company, which once offered cars of "any colour you like as long as it's black," the modern assembly lines of GenAI are generating undifferentiated output at scale.

There is a bigger hurdle that GenAI will have to cross before it can make its presence felt strongly in the advertising industry. Many think that creating effective advertising is all about generating an image and putting the rational response one wants from the target audience into its headline. So, if you are creating an ad for a smartphone, in this view, it is about putting out an image of the device with a headline shouting, "Smartphone with XYZ pixel cam-

era," or some other such benefit. If this is advertising, GenAI should be able to generate these in no time. But this is not how effective ads are made. The advertising development process is not as straightforward as it looks. There aren't many who understand what it takes to make a great advertisement.

They don't offer differentiated output and are clueless about the emotional relationships of strong brands

Good advertising is all about identifying the right stimulus, ideally an emotional one, that generates an appropriate response in the target's mind.

Take for example, the long-running "Shot on iPhone" campaign run by Apple Inc globally. It had a special series for the 2024 Paris Olympics that was all about "2036 Hopefuls," spotlighting aspiring athletes from around the world who are all under the age of 10. The emotionally appealing photographs of this series were shot by the acclaimed sports photographer Walter Iooss Jr. There were no rational claims made in any of the advertisements. Instead, they aspired to strengthen an emotional bond between the potential user and the brand.

For anyone driving past a billboard with such an evocative image, the non-conscious response generated would be along the lines of 'Apple smartphones have brilliant cameras.' This is quite different from the rational responses that traditional ad campaigns for smartphones seek to evoke.

Understanding this stimulus-response relationship is what crafting a great advertisement is all about. Only a few people with high levels of creative intelligence can uncover what works best to strengthen this brand relationship. GenAI still has a long way to go before it generates advertisements that are truly creative and effective.

What is the way forward for GenAI to help generate effective advertisements? Consider the deeper insight of the masala pouch in the noodles packet. The pouch is a reminder that human actions add value. It involves us in the preparation's vital aspect of taste-checking. Likewise, human creativity must accompany the use of any GenAI tools. GenAI might be able to generate images, headlines and make advertisements in a jiffy, much like a pack of instant noodles. But what will work better are ad campaigns that involve human creativity as an integral part of the creative process. That the output of such an approach will be 'tastier' is not hard to guess.

The Indian **EXPRESS**

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

PART AND WHOLE

Southern states have powered ahead of others. It will need a far-sighted politics to address imbalances, soften faultlines

OVER THE DECADES, there has been a remarkable change in the states driving India's growth story. Once dominant states have seen a decline, while others have emerged as economic powerhouses. A new working paper from the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister has examined these trends over the past six-odd decades. On the one hand are states like Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Punjab. As per the paper, in 1960-61, UP contributed 14.4 per cent to India's GDP. By 1990-91, it had fallen to 12.6 per cent, and in the years after its bifurcation it has declined even further. Similarly, West Bengal has seen its share fall from 10.5 per cent to 5.6 per cent over the period. The state's per capita income, once higher than the national average, is now lower than it. Punjab's economy, which had benefited from the Green Revolution — its relative per capita income rose from 119.6 per cent of the national average in 1960-61 to 169 per cent in 1970-71 — has slumped thereafter. Its share in the GDP has fallen from 4.4 per cent in 1970-71 to 2.4 per cent in 2023-24.

In sharp contrast is the growth trajectory of the southern region. After the 1991 reforms, the southern states have seized the opportunities that opened up and emerged as "leading performers". In fact, in 2023-24, these five states accounted for roughly 30 per cent of India's GDP. Alongside, the western states of Gujarat and Maharashtra have also fared well during the period. These regions have a significant presence in the manufacturing and services sectors. For instance, the IT sector is largely concentrated in the southern region. These states also account for a fairly large share of factories in India as per the Annual Survey of Industries. And most of the major exporting districts are located in the southern and western states. However, even as the southern states have powered ahead, they have seen their share in the divisible tax pool fall — from 21.1 per cent during the award period of the 11th Finance Commission (2000 to 2005) to 15.8 per cent during the period of the 15th Finance Commission (2021-26). In lower income states like UP, Bihar and West Bengal, transfers from the Centre — which includes their share in central taxes and grants in aid — account for a significant share of revenue receipts. While fiscal transfers are meant to ensure uniformity of public services across regions, the dwindling share of the southern states in tax revenue has emerged as a major faultline in Centre-state relations in recent years.

The concerns of the southern states are not limited to the distribution of fiscal resources. These states are also fearful of structural changes in the Lok Sabha following the delimitation exercise which could see them ending up with a relatively narrower share of seats. These challenges are set to deepen, if they are not addressed with a wise and far-sighted politics. At stake is the poise and healthy functioning of the federal system.

TWO YEARS OF CHEETAH

Creating a self-sustaining population in India's forests will require ironing out glitches, putting lessons to good use

TWO YEARS AFTER cheetahs were introduced in Kuno National Park, Madhya Pradesh, the country has at least 24 of the big cats. These striped animals were declared extinct from India in the early 1950s and the population in Kuno could herald the revival of the species in the country. These, however, are still early days for Project Cheetah. Many glitches will need to be ironed out and lessons of the past two years put to good use before the project can be called a success. Today, all the surviving African animals, introduced to kick-start the project, and their progeny, live in acclimatising enclosures. Cheetahs are free-ranging predators. The test of their survival is in the wild. Creating a self-sustaining population will require weaning away a significant number from protective care. Kuno's last free-ranging cheetah, seven-year-old Pawan, reportedly drowned in mysterious circumstances in August — the eighth adult animal, brought from Africa, to die since the project commenced.

Questions about breeding the big cat in alien conditions have dogged Project Cheetah since its inception — India was home to Asiatic cheetahs, and not the African subspecies that were introduced in 2022. The criticism was amplified after Pawan's death. A Special Investigation Team (SIT) constituted to probe the incident was disbanded in less than a day. The National Tiger Conservation Agency (NTCA), the project's nodal body, has not yet given a convincing answer for this hasty decision. Experts have alleged that the episode testifies to the persistent lack of transparency around Project Cheetah. NTCA has also been called out for shifting goalposts in the past two years. Project Cheetah's original goal, "to establish a free-ranging breeding population of cheetahs in and around Kuno", for instance, has been diluted to "managing" a metapopulation through assisted dispersal.

Course corrections should be par for the course in any project that aims to create a sustainable population of animals from scratch. But the problems ailing Project Cheetah cannot always be termed as teething troubles. A large measure of these stems from the authorities not giving adequate respect to expert opinion. Last year, for instance, a report in this paper highlighted the NTCA's reluctance to take on board the views of the South African and Namibian scientists behind the translocation. Studies have also revealed that the forest department is under-prepared to deal with the ways of the African animal. In the coming months, as Project Cheetah plans to move beyond Kuno to Gandhi Sagar Sanctuary, also in MP, the NTCA has its task cut out.

THE HOCKEY DECADE

It has seen India's dominance in the game in Asia and a resurgence on the Olympics stage

AROUND THIS TIME 10 years ago, when India's hockey team reclaimed the Asian Games crown — the country's first since 1998 — it felt like a seminal moment. The medal came on the back of twin Olympics setbacks — failure to qualify in 2008 followed by a last-place finish in 2012. However, few back then would have predicted the title would mark the beginning of Indian hockey's decade of dominance in Asia and a resurgence on the Olympics stage. In the last 12 months alone, India have added another Asian Games gold to their kitty, gone on to win an Olympics bronze for the second time in a row and, on Tuesday, defended the Asian Champions Trophy title by beating China.

It must be tough for an Indian hockey fan not to feel giddy. The national team has gone from strength to strength, improving in nearly all aspects of the game. In Asia, India's staggering rise has coincided with a collective fall in standards elsewhere, most noticeably in South Korea, Malaysia and Pakistan, where the sport has become a victim of the financial crunch. In this context, for a nation with bigger global goals, India's rise will be judged not by how easily they beat Asian teams but by how consistently they win against Australia and the European heavyweights.

There is vast room for improvement, however, for a team in transition after the Paris Olympics. This presents an opportunity as well as a challenge. If they step up, India can become a world force; if they slip up, all the gains could lead to nothing. The next target for Craig Fulton's men should at least be to reach the semifinals of the 2026 World Cup, a feat they haven't achieved since winning the trophy in 1975. How well they do there could also be an ideal marker to gauge whether India can upgrade their Olympics form in 2028. After a decade of rise begins a period of consolidation.

One election, many problems

One nation, one election is meant to concentrate power, reduce political accountability



MANOJ KUMAR JHA

IN YET ANOTHER attack on the federal structure of the nation and its constitutional values, underpinned by deliberation and consensus, the Union government has taken one more step in its quixotic One Nation, One Election journey. While the BJP-led NDA government pays lip service to "minimum government, maximum governance", its objective has been the maximum concentration of power. The BJP tried to do so first by pouring enormous resources into the election machinery through the illegal electoral bonds. It took money while being in power from corporates with alleged instances of quid pro quo. The whole arrangement amounted to undermining people's power. After the electoral bonds scheme was deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of India, the BJP-led NDA has decided to double down on the One Nation, One Election plank to again browbeat the ordinary voter who wants choice in selecting her political representatives.

It needs to be made clear that we need elections because we need democracy. Elections aid democracy in that they provide a robust mechanism for choice and representation. But there is a whole lot more to democracy than elections, such as spaces and opportunities for deliberation, being accountable to voters, and having the confidence of the citizenry between the elections. However, making elections the be-all and end-all of democracy turns the people's mandate into a five-year season's pass where there are conceivably no to low incentives for the government to engage in meaningful debate and discussion or to be responsive to the voters' requirements and aspirations. Crucially, there is also a very real prospect of citizens being burdened with an unpopular government, with little recourse.

Well-meaning advocates — and more cynical supporters — of One Nation, One Election point to many of the so-called electoral "reforms"'s benefits. Let us take them one by one.

The first is the pace of governance being retarded by the imposition of the Model Code

of Conduct (MCC). The Election Commission of India (EC) should take proactive steps towards modernising the MCC guidelines in consultation with political parties and civil-society stakeholders. A responsive and strict EC can also very easily address this issue by being proactive in monitoring the Centre's attempt to strategically target voters in states going to the polls. It should also plan and organise the polling in fewer days for all kinds of elections. Readers may recall that polling in several states in the last general elections stretched over an entire month.

Instead of pushing through so-called "big bang reforms", as is the wont of this government, electoral reforms are better carried out in a piecemeal manner. A Commission struggling to conduct the existing system of elections efficiently should bite off only as much as it can easily digest. One of the first steps the EC can undertake is to cluster together more of the state assembly elections. In sum, the problem with holding "frequent" elections is not so much to do with their frequency but with the inefficiency with which they are planned and organised.

One Nation, One Election folks also feel that aligning all the election cycles will save public funds. While this may be partially true, we must remember that an inclusive, accessible, and participatory system of governance will have a cost. The somewhat idealistic question to ask in this regard is: Can a country of India's political and economic stature not afford it? Must we cut corners and impoverish our famed and prized democratic culture? The pragmatic question to ask, however, is: Should we not aim to reduce overall election spending? The excessive amount of money spent during the elections is many times over the legal limits. What have independent institutions like the EC or the Supreme Court done about it in practical terms? Again, the issue is not about saving money but to regulate excessive spending.

While there are some upsides to conducting fewer and shorter elections, they can easily be achieved by making the sys-

tem more efficient, instead of overhauling or replacing it.

The downsides of One Nation, One Election, however, are numerous and serious. One, dominant parties at the national level stand to gain an overall advantage in simultaneously held general and state assembly elections. Two, states may have to contend with unpopular governments when they lose the trust of the people.

At a time when the EC and Supreme Court have either looked the other way or dragged their feet on issues that continue to deeply affect Opposition parties — trumped-up cases against the leadership, misuse of agencies, defection, breaking of parties, the list, alas, is long — the idea of One Nation, One Election is deeply ominous and must be resisted. The nation must have elections, but she must have democracy too.

The writer is Rajya Sabha MP Rashtriya Janata Dal



VINAY SAHASRABUDDHE

AYN RAND ONCE said that ideas are the greatest and most crucial power on Earth. Going by the number of out-of-the-box ideas conceived by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the past 10 years, one is convinced about the place ideas and new forms of thinking have in his approach. As PM Modi turns 74, it is pertinent to look at this aspect of his personality.

Progress and development have always had a central place in PM Modi's thinking. Conscious of the huge expectations of the people, Modi has reassured them with his simple two-point agenda: Good governance and development. However, a deeper analysis will reveal three strands in his ideas-turned-slogans-turned-programmes/schemes. The first category is that of lofty ideals, appealing to people to aim high and think big, accompanied by an appeal to work towards the mission. The second strand is about conveying the government's approach to the people. The third is public education.

He started with Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat, a project that later became a national integration programme of the Ministry of Culture. The beauty of this slogan lies in the fact that it not only motivates people to work for the welfare of India, but also reminds them that national unity is a prerequisite for making India *shreshtha*.

Right in the thick of the Covid-19 pandemic, PM Modi made a passionate appeal to make India self-reliant, working for an Atmanirbhar Bharat. During the challenging time, his passionate appeal had an electrifying impact, resulting in advancement of the schedules for vaccine-related research. And

A HIGHER GOAL, A NEW PATH

As PM, Narendra Modi has motivated people to think big

The other important strand of ideas mooted by PM Modi involves a thoughtful policy approach. His slogan of Sab Ka Sath, Sab Ka Vikas was a reassuring promise of democratisation of development while extending equal support to all. He added two important parts to this slogan — Sab Ka Vishwas and later, very importantly, Sab ka Prayas. This also reflects his conviction that national development has to become a movement of the people.

now, aspiring India is looking forward to becoming Viksit Bharat.

Another important term, "saturation", mirrors Modi's vision for national development. Underlying the aim of covering all beneficiaries under a welfare scheme, the term is also reflective of the principle of antyodaya where the deprived get top priority.

In his Independence Day address in 2022, PM Modi made yet another passionate appeal outlining what can be described as his national renaissance doctrine. He appealed to people to adopt *panch-pran* — five commitments — to correct what he believed ails this great nation. These pledges start with a resolve to make India great, erase all traces of servitude, be proud of our legacy, realise the strength of our unity and for citizens to abide by their duties.

This emphasis on the country's proud legacy was evident in 2014, when he mooted the idea of International Yoga Day (IYD) and again in 2023, in mooted the International Year of Millets (IYM). While IYD has established the importance of a unique wellness regime based on an indigenous knowledge system, the IYM has promoted a more nutritious dietary regime. His motivational appeals always have a practical aspect. His aggressive advocacy of Swachh Bharat has helped change the habits of the people. Yet another example of his ability to help people relate to great ideas is his Lifestyle for Environment, later given the shape of a global campaign. In subtle ways, PM Modi has also reminded affluent nations of the irresponsible lifestyles of their people.

The other important strand of ideas mooted by PM Modi involves a thoughtful policy approach. His slogan of Sab Ka Sath, Sab Ka Vikas was a reassuring promise of democratisation of development while extending equal support to all. He added two important parts to this slogan — Sab Ka Vishwas and later, very importantly, Sab ka Prayas. This also reflects his conviction that national development has to become a movement of the people.

Taking the development discourse beyond cliched terms, PM Modi has mooted the idea of women-led development. His approach is direct while asking fellow countrymen to change their outlook. Divyang or divyang-jan, the term coined by the PM, underscores his belief in inculcating self-confidence in people with disabilities. The term aims at removing the inferiority complex, reminds others that disabled persons possess some special abilities, making them perform better than others in certain aspects.

A reflection of a similar approach is found in the term "Aspirational" District/Block replacing the previous term, "Most Backward" District/Block. Calling a district "backward" not just undermines aspirations but also creates a negative mindset.

PM Modi had once said that he wants to work not just to score brownie points but for the larger interests of the people — for *lokhit* (good of the people) and not for *lokpriyata* (popularity). All this makes him a rare thinker-leader.

The writer is former president, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, and a BJP leader

SEPTEMBER 19, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

US IN INDO-PAK AFFAIRS

THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT is concerned that Washington continues to share strategic information with Pakistan. New Delhi has asked its mission in Washington for information on the reports that the US told Pakistan that its two reconnaissance satellites could not locate two squadrons of IAF's Jaguar aircraft at their bases, giving Islamabad the impression that India had suddenly deployed its Jaguars. The information turned out to be wrong.

TENSIONS IN CONGRESS

A SECTION OF Delhi Congress (I) leaders is up

in arms against H K L Bhagat, Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting and Tajdar Babar, the newly-appointed president of the Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee (I). About 100 Congress members criticised Bhagat's style of functioning. They said Bhagat was autocratic and ignored the voice of grassroot-level functionaries.

OWAISI REMOVED

THE ANDHRA PRADESH Governor Shankar Dayal Sharma dismissed the Majlis leader Sultan Salahuddin Owaisi as pro tem Speaker and appointed P Mahendranath to the post. Mahendranath, revenue minister in the NTR

Ministry, resigned from the Cabinet. His resignation has been accepted. Official sources said Owaisi was removed since the NTR government was doubtful about his impartiality during the assembly proceedings.

TWO SIKH TEENS HELD

THE AIRPORT SECURITY staff at Chandigarh airport arrested two school-going teenagers shortly before they were to board the Indian Airlines' Delhi-Chandigarh-Jammu-Srinagar flight. They had purchased tickets from Chandigarh to Jammu and the security police got suspicious seeing their general appearance.



Kamala Harris and a caste story

How India’s first anti-untouchability law came about in Kamalapuram, the place to which the US Vice President and Presidential candidate traces her ancestry



MANOJ MITTA

BETWEEN THE EXCITEMENT over the American election and the fraught history of race, Kamala Harris is now a familiar name around the world. The same name with a suffix that is common among places in India, Kamalapuram, hit the news just about a century ago and it was for reasons to do with caste. The otherwise obscure village of Kamalapuram is in the Salem district of Tamil Nadu, the very province where Harris’s mother Shyamala Gopalan was born in a Brahmin family in 1938. Fourteen years earlier, R Veerian, a native of Kamalapuram, suffered the ignominy of being barred from entering a road in that village. “Untouchables” were traditionally disallowed the use of that road as it was located in an Agraharam, the generic term for an exclusive Brahmin settlement. In the unicameral structure of the time in the provinces of British India, Veerian happened to be a member of the legislative council (MLC). He shot off a telegram to the chief secretary of the Madras government, protesting the violation of his civil rights. On April 16, 1924, the Bombay-based *Times of India* reproduced the text of Veerian’s long telegram, under the headline: ‘A Madras MLC’s Complaint: Intolerable Brahmin Tyranny’. In Veerian’s telling of the incident, he intended merely to pass through the “Agraharam public pathway” in Kamalapuram “in order to post letters” at a post office located there and “see” a school in the same vicinity. But “owing to Panchama pollution” (“untouchability”), a Brahmin identified as Monigar Rungier, the village *munsif*, blocked Veerian’s entry into that street. It mattered little to that Brahmin official that there was, as Veerian put it, “no other way except passing through Agraharam” to reach the post office or the school. This episode of “untouchability” triggered a chain of events, including a resolution that was adopted by the Madras legislature on August 22, 1924. The failure of this resolution to make any difference on the ground prompted Veerian to up the ante with a bill outlawing “untouchability”. Given the odds stacked against any Private Member Bill, its journey began with a strategic choice made by Veerian to slip in his anti-untouchability provisions under the guise of amendments to an existing civic law. Even so, to garner support from a legislature dominated by caste Hindus, it took a lot of negotiations and compromises. So much so that when the Bill was discussed for the first time on December 14, 1925, Veerian felt constrained to begin his address with conciliatory noises. “I beg to submit that I am not going to bring in the subject of caste nor am I going to raise the problem of untouchability in relation to caste.” That he had to disclaim what was so visibly the point of his initiative was a measure of the pressure he was under. The Select Committee that had been set up for the Bill deleted a clause empowering all classes to access public sources of water. The ambit of the Bill was thus reduced to the relatively less sensitive issues of throwing open public roads and markets to Dalits. When the Madras legislature passed the Bill on August 31, 1926, Veerian was instrumental in the enactment of the first-ever law anywhere in the country against untouchability.



C R Sasikumar

ity. Indeed, the Madras Local Boards Amendment Act 1926 marked a civilisational breakthrough. It outlawed exclusionary practices that had for generations been considered by caste Hindus as a pious obligation to preserve their purity. Besides criminalising untouchability, it prescribed penalties — even if they were only monetary fines. The press contemporaneously noticed the significance of this law enforceable across the rural areas of the Madras Presidency. Praising him for driving home “the social tyranny of the higher castes”, the *Times of India* said: “Mr Veerian deserves credit for drawing attention to the matter and the legislative enactment, which he has succeeded in piloting through the Council, should go a long way to remove many of the social disabilities of his Adi Dravida brethren.” Irrespective of the extent to which it removed the social disabilities of the untouchables in the Madras Presidency, the pioneering contribution of the 1926 Veerian legislation went unnoticed in history. This was despite the fact that it inspired another Dalit legislator in another province, G A Gawai in Central Provinces (which encompassed parts of today’s Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh), to get a similar law enacted in 1933. Instead, in the spirit of history being written by the victors, the credit for breaking ground on untouchability has been given to a leader from the Brahmin community, Chakravarti Rajagopalachari or Rajaji, the legendary associate of Mahatma Gandhi. It was on his watch as Premier of the Madras Presidency that in 1938, a full 12 years after Veerian’s legislation, came what is commonly presented as a trailblazer. The erasure of the Veerian and Gawai

The otherwise obscure village of Kamalapuram is in the Salem district of Tamil Nadu, the very province where Kamala Harris’s mother Shyamala Gopalan was born in a Brahmin family in 1938. Fourteen years earlier, R Veerian, a native of Kamalapuram, suffered the ignominy of being barred from entering a road in that village. ‘Untouchables’ were traditionally disallowed the use of that road as it was located in an Agraharam, the generic term for an exclusive Brahmin settlement. In the unicameral structure of the time in the provinces of British India, Veerian happened to be a member of the legislative council (MLC). He shot off a telegram to the chief secretary of the Madras government protesting the violation of his civil rights.

precedents helped historians sidestep one major deficiency in Rajaji’s enactment. Whereas the Veerian and Gawai laws criminalised “untouchability”, the Rajaji law was merely declaratory with no penal consequences flowing from it. The Rajaji law just declared that no court would recognise any custom or usage perpetuating “untouchability”. Since it did not, however, define any offence, there was no question of any punishment. Thus, far from building on the precedents set by little-known Dalits, the law that was valorised by historians, the Madras Removal of Civil Disabilities Act, 1938, was conceptually retrograde. The unicameral provincial legislature had by then given way to a bicameral system in the Madras Presidency. After the Legislative Assembly had passed the Bill on August 17, 1938, the Legislative Council did the same on December 12, 1938, after a dramatic debate that recalled the Veerian milestone. It was by J A Saldanha who had, in 1929, followed up on the Veerian law with a similar one for the urban areas of the Madras Presidency. He pointed out that in the Bill that had been “brought forward by Mr Veerian”, there was a clause “prescribing a penalty for the infringement of the rights laid down.” By contrast, in the Bill introduced by the Rajaji government, he lamented, “there is no provision for punishing a man who prevents the enjoyment of any of these privileges”. Incidentally, five days prior to this debate, Shyamala Gopalan was born not too far from the legislative building in the same Madras city.

Mitta is the author of *Caste Pride: Battles for Equality in Hindu India*



ADYA GOYAL

Some like it darker

The Emmys thought ‘The Bear’ was a comedy. We can’t disagree

THE 76TH EMMY Awards had the misfortune of being overshadowed by its predecessor that aired in January. Not so much for lack of entertainment — more so by the boredom of a jaded audience which has already gone through one Emmy Awards show this year. The sheer number of award shows nowadays also means most of them are essentially glorified watchlists. Hosts Eugene and Dan Levy and the *Only Murders in the Building* (2021) trio of Selena Gomez, Martin Short and Steve Martin, though, were somewhat of a saving grace. While there has been much less buzz about this edition, it has sparked a heated debate online: Should *The Bear* (2022) have been categorised as a comedy show? Given the laugh tracks and obvious nature of sitcom humour, I was inclined to disagree. However, I realised that the problem is not with the Academy’s categorisation as much as it is with our idea of what constitutes comedy. The classic American shows *Seinfeld* (1989), *The Office* (2005), *The Big Bang Theory* (2007), *Parks and Recreation* (2009), *Modern Family* (2009), etc., are very obviously a part of the comedy genre. But many have argued

that *The Sopranos* (1999), in essence a dark tale about an Italian mobster, is also a comedy. The traditional understanding of comedy comes from Aristotle’s notion of it as a reflection of the mundaneness of daily life. It is essentially an act of exaggeration of an otherwise dull moment. For instance, a stand-up comic satirises and amplifies a small detail of a regular situation to draw attention to its specific absurdity. The laughter is gleaned not from the situation itself, but from the observation of the comedian. On a busy street, look around you at any given moment and you will spot more than one person who takes themselves too seriously. Be it a lawyer rushing to court, corporate workers making their way to the office or a parent hurrying a child to school. There is a sense of the absurd in people believing that their actions are significant enough to really matter (for some, like rich people worsening the climate crisis unfortunately, it may be true — not so much for the rest of us). In *The Bear*, Jeremy Allen White plays the tightly-wound young chef Carmy who has taken it upon himself to save his family’s sandwich shop. He clearly takes himself very seriously, a trait common among those who con-

sider themselves “saviours”. But the conspicuousness of it is funny to those around him who are unable to take him as seriously. This clash of personalities leads to moments of discomfort and a mismatch of moods. That in itself is comical. The other characters, his restaurant partners, sous chefs, love interest, and family, are constantly in a liminal space of uncertainty around him, recognising the preposterousness of some of the actions Carmy undertakes unthinkingly. Does it always merit snort-out laughter? Not really. Is it a comedy nonetheless? Absolutely. There are other kinds of comedy as well — self-deprecating, dark, existentialist humour. Australian comic Hannah Gadsby, in her Netflix standup *Nanette* (2018) reveals alarming details about her life, discussing her sexuality, gender, and childhood that have shaped her as a person. Much of it is disturbing incidents from her past packaged as humorous content for the audience to be able to digest and learn from a person vastly different from them. It is comedy as much as *Modern Family* is comedy. One explores the dark side of being queer, the other tries to spin it as a not-so-serious detail.

Another similar example is from the show *Baby Reindeer* (2024) where actor-cum-writer Richard Gadd divulges the story of his abuse at a comedy show. The Netflix series is inspired by Gadd’s real-life experience of being sexually abused by an older man and subsequently stalked by an older woman. He discusses the visible shift in the atmosphere of the room when he begins the tale of his abuse, but he is not necessarily denying calling the show a “comedy show”. This is not to make light of seriously tragic incidents in people’s lives. Rather, it is to reimagine the space of comedy in our lives. The space it offers to be dark, existential, fatalist or merely amusing. Incidents in themselves are rarely funny, it is the context that decides whether it is comic relief or tragedy. The Bear is inherently an anxiety-inducing show exploring the pressures of running a restaurant. But the recurring failure of the characters to make the kitchen function seamlessly adds a level of absurdity that is so comical at times that it is tragic. And therein lies the irony.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“With the inability of our education system to bridge the gap between rural and urban education, the poor SEE results should not be a surprise. The students mirror the teaching they get, just as teachers reflect the conditions they work under.” — THE KATHMANDU POST

The leader and his image

Arvind Kejriwal’s resignation mirrors the rise and rise of image-centric professionalism as a distinct idiom of politics



HILAL AHMED

ARVIND KEJRIWAL’S RESIGNATION as Delhi chief minister (CM) can be interpreted in two different ways. The first may be useful to make sense of immediate political calculations. Kejriwal, it seems, has managed to counter the BJP’s aggressive rhetoric of the CM being out on bail. His resignation has given him breathing space to energise the AAP’s campaign in the coming state assembly elections. The resignation episode, in this sense, may be understood as a strategic division of labour. The new CM Atishi is expected to take care of the functioning of the state government in Delhi for a relatively shorter period, while Kejriwal, the face of the AAP, will devote himself to electoral mobilisation. There is another reading of this development. Kejriwal’s resignation, one may argue, will give him an additional advantage to rework his political image — a key feature of his politics since early 2010s. It is a well-known fact that Kejriwal relies heavily on two related sets of ideas — moral supremacy and systemic victimhood since the days of the India Against Corruption movement. Even at that time, he tried his best to carve out a niche for himself as the most committed and morally superior member of the movement. The BJP, AAP’s main opponent, especially in Delhi, has always been uncomfortable with Kejriwal’s popular representation as a vocal idealist victim. The party wanted to demonise him in such a way that he could not utilise his image of an *aam aadmi* in clear political terms. The Delhi liquor case is an example of this. Kejriwal is aware of the fact that the BJP’s active propaganda will create technical as well as political problems for him. In his typical theatrical style, he resigned to reassert his moral authority. It is likely that Kejriwal might project himself as a victim of authoritarianism in the coming election. These explanations of Kejriwal’s resignation also raise a set of much deeper issues: Do common people relate to the idea of moral sacrifices? Do they accept the self-nurtured positive images of politicians? How do they react to the negative publicity? To understand these questions, we must recognise an important feature of post-colonial Indian public life. Many observers of Indian politics have argued that political elites represent themselves as morally superior to legitimise their leadership claims. This “saintly” idiom of politics is often associated with M K Gandhi and Vinod Bhave. However, its prevalence as a strategic move for electoral purposes has not been given sufficient attention. In recent years, national leaders like

Narendra Modi, Kejriwal, Mamata Banerjee and even Rahul Gandhi have made serious attempts to reinvent this political idiom. Modi celebrates his humble socio-economic background to communicate to voters that he does everything for the country. Kejriwal, on the other hand, highlights his image as a victim of a corrupt system. He calls upon the voter to accept him as one of them, an *aam aadmi*. Rahul Gandhi highlights the fact that his family has been the victim of terrorism. He now asserts his new political identity as an advocate of social justice and equality. Regional leaders also raise similar claims and arguments to get political acceptability. These examples show that despite growing professionalisation of politics, especially its electoral version, this particular idiom is thriving in public life. However, the nature and substance of it has changed in a significant way. Contemporary politicians tend to produce an interesting configuration to establish a balance between their preferred images as dedicated public figures and professional requirements of electoral politics. Kejriwal, for instance, presents himself as a humble and committed public servant keen to transform the lives of common people; yet, he finds himself surrounded by politicians who do not allow him to achieve his pious objectives. Kejriwal’s resignation is an attempt to regain this positive portrayal. That is the reason why he said that he would not assume the role of CM until he received a “certificate of honesty” from the electorate again. This portrayal, however, does not go well when we look at the internal power structure of the AAP. Kejriwal has established complete control over the party. Internal democracy, which was highlighted as one of the distinctive features of the AAP, has been systematically replaced by a culture of hero worship. Atishi’s initial comments confirm this — she made it clear that Kejriwal is the “real” CM of Delhi and her objective is to help him regain power again. This image-centricity has become an unwritten norm of politics, which is not specific to the Kejriwal-dominated AAP. One finds very similar trajectories in different parties, especially in the Modi-led BJP. Does this kind of politics work? There is no clear answer. CSDS-Lokniti-NES 2024 data shows that the image of leaders does play a role in determining the political choice of voters. Modi’s image as a poor *chaiwala* helped him secure sizeable subaltern support. The success of Bharat Jodo Yatra contributed significantly in creating a new image for Rahul Gandhi as a radical social-justice leader. This is also true for Kejriwal. On the other hand, the electoral verdict of 2024, particularly the BJP’s performance, reminds us that the image of a particular leader does not always help his/her party to win an election. This seemingly contradictory evidence confirms that image-centric professionalism has evolved as a distinct idiom of politics in contemporary India.

The writer is associate professor, CSDS

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A WORTHY SUCCESSOR

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘CM Atishi’ (IE, September 18). As the AAP government’s term nears completion in Delhi in February, it will be headed by Atishi, the third woman to reach the position after Sheila Dixit of the Congress and Sushma Swaraj of the BJP. Her main task is to hold the chief minister’s seat for Arvind Kejriwal until he can return to office, depending on the outcome of elections later this year. Kejriwal is currently on bail and unable to perform his duties as CM, such as going to his office, meeting colleagues, or signing files. Having a trusted person like Atishi in charge was his only option. She now faces the heavy responsibility of stabilising the government and ensuring the party’s victory with an even greater margin.

Rhokan Das, Kolkata

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘CM Atishi’ (IE, September 18). Atishi, who holds at least 14 key portfolios in the outgoing Arvind Kejriwal-led government, is likely to be a worthy successor. She played a pivotal role in revamping the state of education in government-run schools in the national capital and also is credited for initiatives such as the ‘Happiness Curriculum’ in Delhi schools. She was AAP’s prominent face and BJP’s fiercest critic when both Manish Sisodia and Kejriwal were behind bars in the excise police case. Kejriwal’s fate now hinges on whether Delhi’s voters still see him as the anti-corruption crusader they once embraced, or as a leader whose luck may have run out.

SS Paul, Nadia

AS DIDI, NOT CM

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Mamta, the establishment’ (IE, September 16). The old saying that we become what we loathe has come to life once again with Mamata Banerjee’s recent bungling of the R G Kar case. Having risen as a phoenix from the ashes of populist struggles, Banerjee was touted as the single-most powerful leader in Opposition. The TMC’s high-handedness was noticed in the general elections with numerous reports of booth violence. There was a change in approach when Banerjee called the protestors for a meet-up and projected herself as their “didi”, not CM. A populist leader like her cannot afford to play with people’s feelings. She also needs to realise that her fellow party members have opinions too, which cannot be dismissed.

Ramanpreet, via email

BALM FOR MANIPUR

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Manipur: Dark Side of the Moon?’ (IE, September 15). It throws light on the long-term failures of the state on ethnic and governance issues. The fault lines between communities have not been addressed and the Centre and state governments have ignored economic problems in the northeastern state. The government should promote reconciliation between communities and initiate conversations among the affected parties. It should also crack down on those responsible for the more than year-long violence. Manipur needs a balm.

Rohan Naidu, via e-mail



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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

EXPLAINED FOREIGN POLICY

Why India wants ‘review & modification’ of Indus Waters Treaty

HARIKISHAN SHARMA
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 18

A YEAR-AND-A-HALF after New Delhi issued a notice to Islamabad seeking the “modification” of the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) in January 2023, India has once again sent a formal notice to Pakistan, this time seeking the “review and modification” of the treaty. The latest notice, issued under Article XII (3) of the IWT (like the one issued last year), is qualitatively different — the word “review” effectively signals New Delhi’s intent to revoke and renegotiate the 64-year-old treaty. Article XII (3) states: “The provisions of this Treaty may from time to time be modified by a duly ratified treaty concluded for that purpose between the two Governments”.

What is the IWT?

The treaty between India and Pakistan was signed on September 19, 1960, for the use of water available in the Indus and its tributaries. It was signed in Karachi by then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and then Pakistan President Mohammed Ayub Khan after nine years of negotiations arranged by

the World Bank. According to the IWT, India enjoys the “unrestricted use” of the three “Eastern Rivers [Beas, Ravi, Sutlej]... except as otherwise expressly provided” whereas Pakistan got control of the three “Western Rivers” [Indus, Chenab, Jhelum]. According to Article III (1) of the IWT, “India is under obligation to let flow” waters of the Western Rivers to Pakistan. In effect, the treaty gave India about 30% of the water carried out by the “Indus Rivers System” while Pakistan got 70% of the waters. **Why does India want to renegotiate the treaty?** Sources said India’s latest notification highlights “fundamental and unforeseen changes in circumstances” that require a reassessment of obligations made under the IWT. Among New Delhi’s concerns, sources said, are the “change in population demographics, environmental issues and the need to accelerate development of clean energy to meet India’s emission targets, and the impact of persistent cross-border terrorism”. Moreover, the two notifications come amidst a prolonged controversy over the construction of two hydel power projects by India

in Jammu & Kashmir — one on Kishanganga, a tributary of Jhelum, in Bandipora district, and the other (Ratle Hydroelectric Project) on Chenab in Kishtwar district. Both are “run-of-the-river” projects, meaning they generate electricity (330 MW and 850 MW respectively) using the natural flow of the river, and without obstructing its course. However, Pakistan has repeatedly alleged that both these projects violate the IWT. **What was behind the notice in January 2023?** At the time, New Delhi cited Islamabad’s continued “intransigence” in implementing the IWT by raising repeated objections to the two hydel projects. In 2015, Pakistan requested the appointment of a “Neutral Expert” to examine its technical objections to the projects. A year later, it unilaterally retracted this request and proposed that the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) adjudicate on its objections instead. India refused to engage in the PCA mechanism and made a separate request for the matter to be referred to a Neutral Expert. Sources said Pakistan’s proposal for a PCA mechanism was in contravention to the

graded dispute settlement mechanism provided in Article IX of the IWT. According to the treaty, there is a sequential, three-level mechanism where disputes are first decided at the level of the Indus Commissioners of the two countries, then escalated to the Neutral Expert who is appointed by the World Bank, and only then escalated to the Hague-based PCA. The initiation of two simultaneous processes on the same questions — and their potentially contradictory outcomes — is not provided under any article of the IWT, and thus created an unprecedented, legally untenable situation. The World Bank in 2016 “paused” the initiation of the parallel processes and requested India and Pakistan to seek an amicable way out. However, despite multiple attempts by New Delhi, Islamabad has refused to discuss the issue during the five meetings of the Permanent Indus Commission from 2017 to 2022, a source said. In fact, at Pakistan’s continuing insistence, in 2022 the World Bank decided to initiate both the Neutral Expert and Court of Arbitration processes. This, along with the recommendation of a parliamentary stand-

ing committee in 2021, led to the January 2023 notice, the first in over six decades. In 2021, the Departmentally Related Standing Committees on Water Resources had noted that “although the IWT has stood the test of time... the Treaty was framed on the basis of knowledge and technology existing at the time of its agreement in the 1960s... Present day pressing issues such as climate change, global warming and environmental impact assessment etc. were not taken into account by the Treaty.” The committee, headed by the BJP’s Sanjay Jaiswal, had thus found that there is a need to “renegotiate the Treaty so as to establish some kind of institutional structure or legislative framework to address the impact of climate change on water availability in the Indus basin and other challenges which are not covered under the Treaty.” **So, what has changed since January 2023?** Here is a brief chronology of important events to have taken place since January 2023. **APRIL 17, 2023:** The sixth meeting of the Union Ministry’s Steering Committee on matters related to the IWT takes place. The

Committee met under the Jal Shakti Secretary, and saw the Foreign Secretary of India in attendance. “The meeting took stock of the ongoing modification process of the IWT,” the MEA said after the meeting. **JULY 06, 2023:** The PCA rules that it has the “competence” to consider matters concerning the Kishanganga and Ratle hydel projects. India responds by reiterating its “consistent and principled position” that the constitution of the “so-called Court of Arbitration” is in contravention of the provisions of the IWT. **SEPTEMBER 20-21, 2023:** A delegation from India, led by the Secretary, Department of Water Resources, attend a meeting of the Neutral Expert proceedings in the Kishanganga and Ratle matter in Vienna. Senior Advocate Harish Salve acts as India’s Lead Counsel in the meeting convened by the Neutral Expert, and attended by representatives of both India and Pakistan. After the meeting, India reiterates its “treaty-consistent” decision to not participate in the parallel proceedings conducted by “an illegally constituted” PCA on the same set of issues pertaining to the Kishanganga and Ratle projects.

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

EARTH TO TEMPORARILY GET A ‘MINI-MOON’: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

ACCORDING TO a new study, the Earth’s gravitational field will temporarily capture a small asteroid, called 2024 PT5, in late September. The asteroid will stay for two months before flying off into space. While gaining such a “mini-moon” is not new for Earth, the phenomenon is rare — in most cases, asteroids either miss our planet, or burn up upon entering the Earth’s atmosphere. A team of scientists discovered 2024 PT5 on August 7, and published their findings in the journal *Research Notes of the American Astronomical Society* earlier this month.

Carlos de la Fuente Marcos, professor at the Complutense University of Madrid and lead author of the study, told *space.com* that 2024 PT5 has come to visit from “the Arjuna asteroid belt, a secondary asteroid belt made of space rocks that follow orbits very similar to that of Earth” at an average distance to the Sun of about 150 million kilometres.

The asteroid could possibly be a “piece of ejecta from an impact on the moon”, Paul Chodas, the director of the Center for Near Earth Object Studies at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), told *The New York Times*. This means that 2024 PT5 could be a small fragment of the actual Moon. Some researchers suggest that chances are 2024 PT5 does not qualify as a mini-moon. An asteroid has to orbit the Earth fully at least once — 2024 PT5 will perform a horseshoe-shaped orbit. Lance Benner, the principal investigator of the asteroid radar research program at the JPL, told *The NYT*: “It certainly won’t complete one full revolution in the Earth-moon system this fall, so I’m not sure I would classify it as a mini-moon.”

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Why is this significant? The observations of 2024 PT5 will help scientists expand the knowledge of asteroids that pass close to the Earth and those that sometimes collide with it. Many asteroids contain valuable minerals and water, which companies hope to extract one day and use for purposes such as rocket fuel.

EXPRESSNEWS SERVICE



The far side of the Moon, illuminated by the Sun. NASA/NOAA

What is a ‘mini-moon’? Mini-moons are asteroids that fail to escape Earth’s gravity and end up orbiting the planet for some time. They are usually very small and hard to detect — only four mini-moons of Earth have ever been discovered, and none are still orbiting Earth, according to a report by The Planetary Society. “Some may actually have been space debris. The Gaia spacecraft was once mistaken for a minimoon, and so were rocket stages from the Chang’e 2 and Lunar Prospector missions,” the report said.

What do we know about 2024 PT5? The asteroid was discovered with the help of the NASA-funded Asteroid Terrestrial-Impact Last Alert System (ATLAS). It is estimated to be just 33 feet long and is too small to be visible to the naked eye or through typical amateur telescopes. However, the asteroid is within the brightness range of telescopes used by professional astronomers.

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AJOY SINHA KARPURAM & ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 18

THE UNION Cabinet on Wednesday set the ball rolling on holding simultaneous elections to Lok Sabha, state Assemblies, and local government bodies, clearing the proposal of the High Level Committee on One Nation, One Election headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind. In its report submitted to President Droupadi Murmu on March 14, the Kovind Committee recommended a series of constitutional amendments to facilitate simultaneous elections at the central, state, and local levels. Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw told reporters that the move to simultaneous elections would be effected in two phases — in the first phase, Lok Sabha and Assembly elections will be aligned; the second phase, which will be held within 100 days of the first, will cover local body elections.

What happens after this? The One Nation, One Election project hinges on two Constitution Amendment Bills being passed by Parliament, for which the government will need wide agreement across a range of parties. Since the BJP does not have a majority on its own in Lok Sabha, it will have to talk to its allies in the NDA, as well as the opposition parties. One way to build the required consensus is to refer the Constitution Amendment Bills to a parliamentary committee — this could be a parliamentary standing committee or a joint parliamentary committee. These House panels will have members of the opposition, and a consensus could come out of the discussions. The Centre will have to reach out to the states as well. To ensure that local bodies too, are included in the scheme of simultaneous elections, at least half the total number of states will have to ratify the required amendment to the Constitution (*more later*). While the BJP is currently in power in more than a dozen states, the coming Assembly elections in Haryana, Maharashtra, and Jharkhand, could alter this arithmetic.

What changes will be needed in the Constitution? The first Constitution Amendment Bill to

HOW THE NUMBERS STACK UP IN PARLIAMENT

WHAT PARTIES TOLD PANEL **32 OF THE 47 parties that gave their opinion to the Kovind panel supported the idea; 15 opposed it. NDA ally TDP didn't give its opinion, but told *The Indian Express* that it backed One Nation, One Election in principle. The BSP was initially against it, but now has come out in support.** **ALL 32 PARTIES** were either BJP allies, or friendly towards the party then. Now, the BJP has turned against the BJP. Of the 15 parties against the move, five are in power in states, including Congress.

PARLIAMENT PICTURE NOW **PARTIES THAT BACKED** the idea of simultaneous elections before the Kovind panel have 271 members in Lok Sabha now. This number includes the 240 MPs from the BJP. **THE NDA**, including TDP and others who neither supported nor opposed simultaneous polls before the Kovind panel, has 293 MPs in Lok Sabha.

NUMBERS GAME IN LOK SABHA **A TWO-THIRDS** majority of members present and voting is needed for the required constitutional amendment to go through — in the full House of



Kovind presents report to President Murmu in the presence of Home Minister Amit Shah. File

543, that works out to 362 MPs. **NDA HAS 293 MPs** — so there is a possibility of passage of the amendment only if 439 MPs vote on the Bill, and the remaining 104 abstain. Alternatively, the government will have to convince non-NDA parties to back it. **ARITHMETIC IN RAJYA SABHA** **NDA HAS 121 MPS**, including the six nominated members. The opposition INDIA bloc has 85 MPs. **IF ALL 250 members are present, a simple majority would be 125 and two-thirds would be 164 MPs.** Currently, there are 234 MPs in RS.

transition to a simultaneous election system will require a ‘special majority’ of both the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. For this, two conditions have to be satisfied under Article 368 of the Constitution. First, half of the total membership of both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha must vote in favour of the amendment. Second, of the members present and voting, two-thirds must vote in favour of the amendment. The second Constitution Amendment Bill will ensure that all local body elections (for municipalities and panchayats) are held within 100 days of the simultaneous elections. For this amendment to go through, an

additional condition apart from the two mentioned above must be fulfilled. This is because “local government” is a subject under the State List in the Seventh Schedule, which means only states have the power to pass laws on this subject. To amend the Constitution such that local body elections can take place alongside simultaneous elections, Article 368 stipulates that “the amendment shall also require to be ratified (agreed to) by the Legislatures of not less than one-half of the States” in the country.

What will happen in the event these Bills are passed by Parliament?

As SC hears a case on UP madrasa law, a profile of these institutions

ASAD REHMAN
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 18

THE NATIONAL Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) has told the Supreme Court that education imparted in *madrasas* “is not comprehensive and is therefore against the provisions of Right to Education Act”, and that textbooks in these institutions teach about the “supremacy of Islam”. The NCPCR made its submission on September 11 in a clutch of appeals against an Allahabad High Court order of March 22 that had declared the Uttar Pradesh Board of Madarsa Education Act, 2004 “unconstitutional” on the ground that it violated “the principle of secularism” and fundamental rights guaranteed under Article 14 of the Constitution. A Bench of Justices Vivek Chaudhary and Subhash Vidyarthi directed the state government to “take steps forthwith for accommodating the *madrasa* students in regular

schools” recognised under the UP primary and high school and intermediate education boards. The UP government had submitted “that no doubt the Madrasa Board is providing religious education and instructions to students, but the state has sufficient powers to impart such education under the Constitution and is rightly permitting such education”. On April 5, a Supreme Court Bench led by Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud stayed the High Court’s order. **Madrasas in history** *Madrasa* is an Arabic word for an educational institution. In the early centuries of Islam, mosques served also as places of education, but from the 10th century onward, *madrasas* came to acquire a distinct identity as institutions of religious and secular learning in the Islamic world. The earliest evidence of *madrasas* comes from Khorasan and Transoxania, corresponding to modern eastern and northern Iran,

central Asia, and Afghanistan. The bigger *madrasas* also had facilities for housing students, especially those from poor backgrounds. **Largest number in UP** As of 2018-19, there were 24,010 *madrasas* in India, 19,132 of which were recognised *madrasas*, and the remaining 4,878 were unrecognised, then Minister of Minority Affairs Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi told Rajya Sabha on February 3, 2020. Recognised *madrasas* come under the state boards for *madrasa* education; the unrecognised ones follow the curriculum prescribed by the bigger seminaries such as the Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama (Lucknow) and Darul Uloom Deoband. As many as 60% of the country’s *madrasas* were in Uttar Pradesh — 11,621 recognised, and 2,907 unrecognised *madrasas*. The sec-

ond highest number of *madrasas* were in Rajasthan — 2,464 recognised, and 29 unrecognised *madrasas*, according to statewide data presented by Naqvi. Several states and Union Territories, including Delhi, Assam, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana had no recognised *madrasas*, the data showed. **Two broad categories** There are two categories of *madrasas* in India — Madrasa Darse Nizami, which are run as public charities, and are not bound to follow the school education curriculum of the state; and the Madrasa Darse Aliya, which are affiliated to the state’s *madrasa* education board (such as the Uttar Pradesh Board of Madrasa Education). More than 20 states have their own *madrasa* boards. State *madrasa* boards are governed by the state government con-

cerned; teachers and other officials at recognised *madrasas* are appointed by the state government. Some 1.69 lakh students sat for the UP *madrasa* education board examinations — equivalent to Class 10 and Class 12 — in 2023. UP and some other states also have a separate Sanskrit board. **NCERT, state curricula** Education is similar to school and higher education. *Madrasa* students study to be *Maulvi* (equivalent to Class 10), *Alim* (equivalent to Class 12), *Kamil* (Bachelor’s degree), and *Fazil* (Master’s). The medium of education in the charitable Madrasa Darse Nizami is Arabic, Urdu, and Persian. The Madrasa Darse Aliya use either textbooks published by the state textbook corporation or agency, or the curriculum and textbooks of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). Most *madrasa* boards in the country now follow the NCERT curriculum.

Mathematics, Science, Hindi, English, and Sociology are compulsory subjects. There is also an optional paper, in which students have the choice of studying Sanskrit or *Deeniyyat* (including the Quran and other religious teachings). Hindu religious scriptures and other religious teachings are taught in the Sanskrit optional paper. **Funded by state govts** The bulk of the funding for *madrasas* comes from the respective state governments. The central government has a Scheme for Providing Education to Madrasas/Minorities (SPEMM), under which financial assistance is provided to *madrasas* and minority institutions across the country. There are two sub-schemes under SPEMM — a Scheme for Providing Quality Education in Madrasas (SPQEM) and Infrastructure Development of Minority Institutes (IDMI). SPEMM was transferred from the Ministry of Minority Affairs to the Ministry of Education in April 2021.

EXPLAINED EDUCATION

Not the last word

One nation, one poll is good in principle, but the Cabinet decision should be just the start of a long consultation process

IN PRINCIPLE, THE one nation, one poll proposal, cleared by the Cabinet on Wednesday, makes sense. Admittedly, a near-constant election cycle, and the short-termism this engenders, places a great burden on the exchequer. Consider the benefits from the perspective of cost, governance, and administrative convenience. The cost of holding general elections to the Lok Sabha is around ₹4,000 crore for the central government. Each Assembly election would also cost considerable amount of money according to the size of the state. While this is the official expenditure of the government, the expenditure by parties and candidates are many times higher. It's obvious that simultaneous elections would entail a reduction in these costs. Also, given the competitive nature of electoral democracy, continuous elections affect policy discourse.

As at least five-six state elections happen every year, even ministers are in permanent campaign mode. The Kovind committee, which examined the proposal, recommended a two-stage process in 2029 by which one nation, one poll can be achieved. By reducing disruptions at work, the new schedule would ensure better productivity and development work would be smoother without repeated impositions of the model code of conduct. It would free up security agencies from voting-related duties and also allow politicians to focus on meatier work rather than poll-related gimmicks. These are important factors in the economic life cycle of an emerging country like India, which can do better with fewer distractions.

Despite the obvious benefits, there are many other issues to consider from democratic and constitutional perspectives. The bigger question is whether simultaneous elections will impose an artificial unitary character on a federal system of multiple diversities. The Kovind committee engaged cursorily with this concern even though by its own admission, 15 political parties have opposed the move. There were important dissent notes which seem to have been brushed aside. For example, former Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court AP Shah told the committee that simultaneous elections hinder political accountability as fixed terms offer representatives unwarranted stability without performance scrutiny. This is a valid concern which hasn't been addressed. The panel recommended simultaneous polls for the Lok Sabha and state Assemblies as the first step followed by synchronised local body polls within 100 days. The latter, which requires ratification by not less than one-half of the states, might prove to be a difficult one to achieve. An exercise that involves 3 million candidates can be impossible to deliver in such a short time because of voter fatigue and the logistics involved.

There are other issues, too. Conducting elections simultaneously to the Lok Sabha and all state Assemblies would result in national issues overshadowing regional and state-specific issues. Besides, to force states and Union Territories to hold elections at the same time as the Lok Sabha vote would require most legislatures to artificially shorten their ongoing terms, betraying the democratic mandates they are currently serving. Worse, this could be unsustainable. If a state's government collapses halfway through its term, do the people need to wait until it's time for the next Lok Sabha election before they get a chief minister? And if the central government collapses mid-term, should state governments fold up too? Clearly, the Cabinet clearance to the proposal should not be the last word on a proposal with far-reaching consequences that go beyond political-ideological lines. In days to come, the legitimate concerns of those who disagree must be heard respectfully, and heeded.

Amazon unwinding WFH won't cure productivity blues

REAL-ESTATE DEVELOPERS, rejoice. Amazon.com Inc. — once seen as the enemy of commercial property — is bringing workers back to the office five days a week from next year in an effort to tackle corporate “bloat” and workplace inefficiencies. This is part of a broader trend, as companies thin the ranks of middle managers and tighten the screws on remote work to strengthen the beloved trifecta of efficiency, productivity, and collaboration post-pandemic. But tech's water-cooler cheerleaders should be careful what they wish for.

While work-from-home's downsides are now increasingly obvious, research suggests that there are also upsides that explain why workers equate it with a 5% increase in their salary, according to *Bloomberg Intelligence*. Think less time commuting, more time with the kids, and more flexibility for those only able to work part-time. Though the pros and cons result in a broadly neutral effect on worker productivity, according to Stanford University economist Nick Bloom, it could have powerful effects on labour-market inclusion and job matching in the long run.

Dropping the hammer on remote work is probably more about making life easier for managers than it is about helping workers be more productive. Business leaders have faced a lot of unknowns since Covid-19; they now worry about the impact on innovation and some feel like they're “losing control of their people”, says Manchester University professor Bart van Ark. A metrics-driven company like Amazon that's known for its demanding culture is probably especially worried.

So while good for downtown city areas, more time in the office won't suddenly move the needle on the broader economic “productivity puzzle” — the slowdown in labour productivity seen in recent decades, especially in Europe but also to a lesser extent in the US, as an increasingly tech-driven world fails to super-charge growth. Economist Daron Acemoglu's sceptical take is that AI may produce a “nontrivial but modest” 0.71% increase in total factor productivity over 10 years. It may be that what's best for productivity growth in the long run requires something else entirely: A more competitive environment for tech.

Two articles on productivity published by the International Monetary Fund suggest big tech firms aren't as effective as they could be in spreading innovation for reasons other than remote work. Yale University's Michael Peters writes that dominant companies are holding back the business dynamism that creates and spreads new ideas: US firms are on average larger, older, and more shielded from competition than they were in 1980, discouraging entrants. That also slows down the reallocation of workers as labour's share of the economy falls, especially in an industry like tech where superstar firms like Amazon or Alphabet Inc. have thrived. Trying to fix this might mean exactly the kind of tough antitrust enforcement by the Federal Trade Commission that Amazon is contesting.

And University of Chicago's Ufuk Akcigit suggests that tech firms are plowing resources into maintaining dominance rather than the next tech revolution, whether through innovation-stifling hiring or lobbying to protect market share. One might point to tech's recent poaching of AI leadership teams to avoid antitrust scrutiny or swelling presence in Washington, DC, where Amazon's lobbying spend ballooned to \$16.1 million from \$2.5 million in seven years, according to Dana Mattioli's *The Everything War*. Akcigit says this dominance might explain why a 10-point increase in American inventors working for big incumbents hasn't delivered the kind of innovation a more competitive tech scene might deliver, and why industrial policy might need to rebalance things.

This is obviously not what Amazon's CEO had in mind when he called for the company to get back to behaving like “the world's largest start-up”. But if more innovation fails to emerge from the tech world's combination of workplace collaboration and AI-solutionism, a little more corporate competition in the name of productivity might be the next thing we should try.

ONE OF THE core priorities in this year's Budget is “productivity and resilience in agriculture”. Under this, the government plans to promote natural farming, enhance the production of pulses, oil seeds, and vegetables, transform agricultural research, and prioritise climate-resilient crops. While these are important and much-needed goals, the road to productive and resilient agriculture goes through a reformed fertiliser sector, especially urea. Here's why.

Since the Green Revolution, the nation has relied on urea to provide the nitrogen necessary for higher crop yields. Today, urea accounts for 56% of all fertilisers, and nearly 80% of all the nitrogenous fertilisers used. However, this over-reliance has a very high cost for the economy and environment.

Urea causes three major environmental problems: nitrogen pollution, ozone layer depletion, and climate change, largely because of its overuse and inefficient use.

The overuse of urea in India has reached unsustainable proportions. While the recommended ratio of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium (NPK) fertilisers is 4:2:1, in 2022-23 the ratio of actual applications was 11.8:4.6:1. On top of this, the nitrogen use efficiency (NUE) is only 35%, compared to more than 50% in North America, and close to 80% in a few European countries. This means that only about 35% of the nitrogen in urea is used by crops; the rest is lost to the environment, leading to water and air pollution, and soil degradation.

Today, nitrate pollution of surface water and groundwater has reached alarming levels in many states of India, especially in Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh. It is estimated that the cost of

THE REAL MAINSTREAM

A GREEN UREA MISSION HAS ECONOMIC, ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFIT OF \$1 TRILLION OVER 25 YEARS

Decontrol urea



CHANDRA BHUSHAN

CEO, iFOREST
X: @Bh_Chandra

water pollution due to urea in India is about \$30 billion yearly, more than the turnover of the urea industry. There is also widespread soil sickness due to imbalanced application of urea, which has been highlighted by the prime minister numerous times.

Urea production and use also emit greenhouse gases (GHGs). For every one tonne of urea produced and used in agriculture, five tonnes of CO2 equivalent GHGs are emitted. Currently, urea accounts for 4.3% of India's GHG emissions and 22% of the country's agricultural GHG emissions. Moreover, the application of urea in fields leads to nitrous oxide (N2O) emission, which is a potent ozone-depleting substance (ODS), causing ozone holes in the stratosphere. N2O is now the largest ODS emitted through human activities globally.

The burden of urea on the economy is equally staggering. Urea subsidy has skyrocketed from less than ₹500 crore in 1980-81 to ₹168,692 crore in 2022-23. Today, urea subsidy is about 85-90% of the cost of production; it used to be 20-40% of the production cost in the 1980s. The problem is compounded by the fact that this production is based on imported natural gas. In 2022-23, 84% of urea was produced from imported natural gas, and about 21% of

total consumption was imported urea. So, nearly 90% of urea consumed in the country was either imported or produced using imported natural gas.

Urea, therefore, sits at the intersection of food, energy, and environmental security. Thus, decarbonising urea production to reduce reliance on imported natural gas and optimising consumption is critical to a resilient agricultural sector. The good news is that technological advancements in the manufacturing and application of urea can solve many of the above-mentioned problems.

Green Urea Mission

A detailed study by me and my colleagues found that it is possible to halve urea consumption in the next two decades from the current levels without compromising food production by strengthening existing policies such as promoting natural farming, enhancing NUE, and reducing the proportion of urea in nitrogenous fertilisers. Most importantly, it is economically viable to transition the existing urea manufacturing plants based on natural gas to green hydrogen and renewable energy by 2050. Our plant-by-plant modelling results show that green urea, produced from green hydrogen, is the cheapest route for India to produce urea from 2027 onwards. The average levelised

The Green Urea Mission's success will depend on the extent of government control over the urea sector

cost of green urea between 2025 and 2050 is about \$475/tonne compared to \$540/tonne for grey urea produced from natural gas.

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To achieve the desired results, the government will need to launch a Green Urea Mission, integrated with the National Green Hydrogen Mission, to transition the urea manufacturing sector to green urea. The mission should also have a 30:30:30 target for 2050: increasing the area under non-chemical farming to 30%, improving NUE by 30%, and reducing the proportion of urea in nitrogenous fertilisers by 30%.

If the Green Urea Mission is adopted, imports will be eliminated, subsidies will be reduced by 65%, and GHG emissions will decline by over 60%. Water and air pollution will also be significantly mitigated, and land degradation will be reversed. Most importantly, it will drive the growth in the two emerging industrial sectors — green hydrogen, and carbon capture and utilisation. The monetary value of these benefits is about \$1 trillion in the next 25 years.

However, the mission's success will depend on the extent of government control over the urea sector. Currently, the industry is highly regulated, has low profitability, and lacks incentives to innovate and modernise. The average age of urea plants is 30 years, with 45% of units over 40 years old, operating through renovation and modernisation (R&M). Our modelling results show that R&M is the most expensive way to produce urea.

The most viable path forward is to decontrol the urea sector and allow market competition, similar to other fertilisers. This would drive technological advancements, improve efficiency, and reduce prices. Such measures are necessary for building a future-ready agricultural sector.

Foundation for a robust pensioned society



MADAN SABNAVIS

Chief economist, Bank of Baroda

A pensioned society would allow the govt to consider making changes to labour laws, where the absence of social security network has held back reforms

IN INDIA, AROUND 150 million people are above the age of 60 and typically would have retired from their employment. Some could be working still as advisers, teachers, or consultants. But for all purposes, when one retires from employment, a regular flow of income stops. At the same time, life expectancy has increased greatly over the years. There are two major challenges for this section of society. The first is having an income which allows individuals to at least maintain the standard of living they had at the time of leaving service. The second is managing their health, as the probability of falling ill increases with age. It is true that healthcare systems have improved substantially to offer solutions, but the issue is having the wherewithal to bear the cost.

A social security network is relevant here to address issues of citizens. There is a need to have a regular flow of income post-retirement; and this is where pension funds have a critical role to play. The government has made it mandatory for companies to make certain deductions for pensions for employees, while the National Pension System (NPS) has been adopted by several organisations. In NPS, individuals contribute to the fund with the company contributing an equivalent amount. The corpus builds over time and upon retiring a person would be entitled to a combination of a lump-sum payment and a deferred pension payment.

This is important because the class of retirees is a fairly large section, which helps in generating consumption in the economy. And this number builds every year as people enter this age group. This will be subdued if there is dependence on younger family members or if their savings are not adequate. While working couples would find it easier to manage their expenses post-retirement, for a single working person the pension would be even more critical. Secondly, pensions combined with health policies would be very important instruments for maintaining health over the years.

In this context, the various options open to individuals are quite exhaustive. At one end is the Old Pension Scheme which is applicable to several government employees. It provides an assured amount post-retirement based on a fixed formula. The recently announced Unified Pension Scheme (UPS) is another pragmatic measure which takes contributions from the person and assures a pension to not just the individual but also their spouse after the pensioner's death. Between the two is the NPS, where individuals have a choice when investing in a fund. Here, money that is saved goes into

equity or debt, depending on the risk appetite of the investor. A corpus is created, which is then distributed over time according to the terms decided at the time of joining the scheme. At the other end is the provident fund, which provides a corpus to the contributors but leaves it to the individual to decide what to do with the money upon retirement.

The pension contributions have a dual role to play. While the final corpus serves as the basis for pensions or reverse annuities to the contributors, the amount invested by the fund is also important. The investments made in debt could be government papers, which is where the conventional funds channel their resources. Alternatively, it could be in corporate debt papers and other market instruments. This is important. Money invested in government papers helps fund the fiscal deficit, as the debt is partly subscribed by these funds. The money invested in corporate debt is normally channelled for investment. Either way, pension funds are investing in nation-building.

The NPS option of investing in equities has been another boost for the stock market, as the funds tend to invest in stocks of companies which

are steady in terms of business and have been performing well over the years. Hence these investments are also helping in providing funds for higher growth in the country.

Given the demographic structure, where a larger working population is an advantage for India, it is necessary that this workforce actively invests in creating a pension fund at an early age. This will help in sustaining families at a later stage when they stop working. The government, along with the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority, has provided the appropriate regulatory framework to provide various options to individuals so that they become self-sufficient at the time of retirement. As the working class invests in pension schemes, which is a fixed ratio of the income earned, the contributions tend to increase with the remuneration received. Hence, in a way, there is some automatic adjustment for inflation.

This is a social security network put in place by the government that is gaining a lot of traction. Creating a pensioned society would also enable the government to consider making changes to the labour laws, where the absence of such a social security network has held back reforms. Hence, having a strong pension system helps create a secure future, enhance savings, channel funds for nation-building, and acts as a precursor to more labour reforms.

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Fostering momentum

Apropos of “Welcome return” (*FE*, September 18), the return of marquee names like Ford Motor and Carrefour to India is a positive sign, but more needs to be done to sustain this momentum. To enhance India's attractiveness as an investment destination, the government should streamline regulatory frameworks, develop infrastructure further, and introduce tax incentives for research

and development initiatives. Public-private partnerships can also boost innovation, while sector-specific special economic zones can drive growth. State governments can offer customised incentives, develop industry-specific skill development programmes, and improve ease of doing business through single-window clearances. To mitigate concerns around business expenses, the government can implement measures to reduce energy costs,

enhance supply chain efficiency through digitalisation, and promote competitive labour markets. Effective collaboration between businesses, governments, and stakeholders will be crucial in driving India's success. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

Delhi's new CM

The Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) decision to pick Atishi as the Delhi CM after Arvind Kejriwal's resignation isn't surprising, given her prominence. She

should solve infrastructure problems and invigorate the bureaucracy. The AAP needs a boost in governance because its anti-graft initiatives have lost steam. However, Atishi is a relatively young and first-time MLA. Can she energise bureaucracy and address infrastructure issues? Will her leadership cause political rifts even if it may be well received by women? —Anshu Bharti, Begusarai

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

COMBINED EFFORT IS NEEDED TO UNDERSTAND EPIDEMIOLOGY OF NIPAH

KERALA is facing a serious health concern as yet another case of the deadly Nipah virus was confirmed earlier this week. The latest fatality was reported on September 9—this was the sixth such case in the state since 2018. This time, the victim was a 24-year-old man from Malappuram whose house is barely 20 km from Pandikkad, where a 14-year-old had died this July. The victim was diagnosed with the virus during a test at the Kozhikode Medical College that was later confirmed by the National Institute of Virology, Pune. The health department has kept nearly 175 people under observation. The district collector has notified containment zones and holidays have been declared for all educational institutions and masks have been made mandatory in the region.

Nipah, named after a Malaysian village where it was first identified in 1998, is transmitted to humans mainly from fruit bats, pigs, contaminated fruits or other humans. The symptoms include headache, muscle pain, vomiting, pneumonia and neurological issues such as encephalitis. It often goes undetected as it mimics the symptoms for pneumonia and encephalitis. No vaccines or drugs are available for it yet.

The first Nipah cases in Kerala were reported in Kozhikode district in May 2018, resulting in the death of 17 people in the season. But there were instances of recovery, too. The virus came back in 2021 and took the life of a 13-year-old boy, again in Kozhikode. In 2023, the district saw six more cases and two fatalities. The recurrence in the Kozhikode-Malappuram area remains puzzling. Despite efforts, the root causes of the localised impact are still unclear. This has hindered effective long-term management. Investigations into the outbreaks have detected antibodies for Nipah in fruit bats, but no conclusive source has been identified beyond this preliminary link. Understanding the root cause of the disease would partly lie in deeper knowledge of the region's wildlife. It's important to trace the link between animal and human transmissions to develop effective prevention strategies for a virus that is estimated to have a fatality rate as high as 75 percent, with the potential to trigger a pandemic. So the concerned central and state agencies should work together to understand the epidemiology of the disease.

HARMONY RULES DESPITE COMMUNAL SKIRMISHES

KARNATAKA suddenly finds itself in the grip of communal clashes. A rash of unsavoury incidents over the past week threatens to disrupt peace. First, Nagamangala in Mandya district was rocked by communal violence during a Ganapati immersion procession; there was wanton destruction with shops and vehicles set afire. Now, inflammatory social media posts are creating unrest in Bantwal and Katipalla in Dakshina Kannada. Two festivals, Ganesh Chaturthi and Eid-e-Milad, falling in the same week led to a tinderbox situation, with both communities taking out processions. Provocative behaviour and comments marred the festive spirit of the processions, with stone-throwing and sloganeering near places of worship. The police arrested over 50 rioters and the government vowed to crack down on communal elements. Peace meetings were held and Home Minister G Parameshwara claimed the situation was back to normal. With the festive season kicking off, the authorities should be more alert and restrict religious processions and protests, and also act ruthlessly against right-wing extremism and self-styled leaders spreading malice on social media.

The state has been largely peaceful since the Congress took the reins in May 2023, though mischief-makers have attempted to create disturbances. While the coastal belt is known to be restive, communal violence in Mandya is a new phenomenon. Changing socio-political dynamics have injected divisiveness into this largely agrarian district, where the Deve Gowda family has held sway. Another reason could be the approaching bypolls to Channarayana and other assembly constituencies; raising the political temperature benefits some political parties.

Yet, the people of Karnataka can take heart from the fact that petty politicking cannot match up to the liberal and diverse spirit of the state. This same festive week saw many examples of religious harmony. In Karwar, the communally-sensitive district of Uttara Kannada, Hindus and Muslims held a grand procession before immersing a Ganesha idol, while the local Eid-e-Milad committee was headed by two Hindus. The communities have celebrated festivals together for 24 years, just like villagers in Gadag district. In Narasimharajapura of Chikmagalur district, also known for disturbances, a Muslim woman led the installation of a Ganesha idol. Festivals are occasions to spread harmony, and the heartening number of peaceful celebrations keeps alive the hope that divisive forces can be defeated.

QUICK TAKE

MESSAGE FROM EXPLODING PAGERS

A curious case of thousands of pagers exploding almost simultaneously in Lebanon on Tuesday has the world scratching its head. A dozen people, including two children, were killed and 2,750 others were admitted to hospitals as a result. Intelligence experts said it was Israel's Mossad spy agency targeting Hezbollah operatives. The case reminds us of exploding phones killing a PLO representative after the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre and a Hamas bombmaker in 1996. Among the consequential acts this time was the Iranian ambassador to Lebanon getting injured. The Global South is near-unanimous in its call for reining in Benjamin Netanyahu's belligerence; the latest provocation should move the Global North to action, too.

GLOBAL debt has reached around \$313 trillion or 330 percent of world GDP, up from around \$210 trillion a decade ago. Around half the rise is in developed economies, such as the US, Germany and France. Emerging markets, such as China, India, Russia, Argentina, Malaysia and South Africa, have also registered large increases. Since 2000, China's total debt has nearly tripled to around 288 percent of GDP.

Public borrowings, particularly in developed economies, have grown. As a percentage of total output, government debt in Japan, the US and the UK has reached 252 percent, 127 percent and 106 percent, representing increases of 116 percent, 71 percent and 69 percent between 2000 and 2024.

The drivers include increased reliance on debt-funded economic activity as well as the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, and the pandemic. The world's current level of borrowings are highly problematic.

Debt can be useful in matching needs and available funds over time. Loans used to finance expenditures that generate adequate cash flows to ultimately repay the loan with market interest rates are sustainable. But instead, much new debt has been directed to potentially unproductive uses.

Household and personal debt has financed housing and consumption. Borrowers have taken out increasingly large mortgages, reliant on the collateral value of property that is arguably overpriced as a result of nearly two decades of abnormally low interest rates and manipulation of supply. Households equate borrowings to income to support their spending because of stagnant incomes, reflecting the reduced share of GDP accruing to labour relative to businesses and inflation pushing up the cost of goods and services.

Instead of investing in infrastructure and other strategic areas, governments have borrowed to finance recurrent expenditure, transfers, tax cuts and replace lost earnings during the lockdown. Governments are now spending on wars and defence due to deteriorating global security and extreme weather events. There is no sign of this spending abating. The US has spent about \$10 trillion since the pandemic and current government spending is running about \$2 trillion above long-term annual levels.

Even where borrowing has financed infrastructure such as in China, the spending has often been misdirected. It has created over-capacity in certain industries, which has affected the economics of projects. Some investments are unlikely to be useful for some time, by which time the facilities may be outdated or in disrepair.

Most of the heavy borrowings by nations in recent years have not been put to productive use. This has made the world much more vulnerable to future shocks

THE ALARMING INCREASE IN GLOBAL DEBT

SATYAJIT DAS

Former banker and author



SOURAV ROY

Rather than improving or expanding production or funding research and development, corporations have frequently used debt for financial engineering—repurchasing their own shares to inflate earnings or for mergers and acquisitions.

Economist Hyman Minsky distinguished between hedge finance (current cash flow covers principal and interest), speculative finance (cash flow covers interest but not principal) and Ponzi finance (cash flow does not cover principal or interest). Today, debt-financed speculation with exaggerated reliance on asset price rises to meet future obligations has reached the final stage.

High levels of indebtedness have several consequences. They limit economic flexibility with normalised rates, raising interest payments. Borrowing costs on govern-

ment debt alone reached \$2 trillion at the end of 2023 and is expected to rise to over \$3 trillion by 2028.

Rising debt levels also reduce the capacity to deal with unexpected events, such as the pandemic and natural disasters. Declines in the value of government debt could destabilise holders like financial institutions and central banks. Ongoing fiscal deterioration and currency debasement risk loss of confidence amongst foreign investors in sovereign debt.

There are also limited options for managing these high levels. They can only be amortised from growing income or reduced by inflation. Moribund growth will not reduce debt levels significantly, given economic activity is credit driven. Over time, more borrowing with diminishing returns

DOCS' STIR PUTS BAND-AID ON A FESTERING WOUND

KAJAL BASU

Veteran journalist

THE longest doctors' strike in India's post-independence history is into its sixth week. Junior doctors from 26 hospitals-west-medical colleges across West Bengal are calling for "justice" for the victim of the indescribably horrific rape-murder at Kolkata's premier hospital-teaching college. The government, unwilling to allow a televised confabulation with the strikers, has finally conceded to most of their demands, including the depowering of senior bureaucrats and the Kolkata police commissioner, who the strikers view as responsible for fiddling with the evidentiary trail.

Convinced that they are backed by most Bengalis, the doctors think of the strike as a "people's movement". Others see the agitation as confined to middle-class Kolkatans with no involvement of the hardscrabble in mofussil Bengal, the main sufferers from the state's decrepit and corrupt medical superstructure—a malcondition that tracks back to the Left Front years, now perpetuated by the TMC government.

This agitation is agitprop (a protest form that has many global precedents): it has rocked many fence-sitters off their porches; and has hardened oppositional views. But what is it actually accomplishing?

As complex as the event is—there are cases ongoing in the Supreme Court and a special court in Kolkata—perceptions about it have developed into a Manichaean standoff, never good news for those pursuing the truth or its closest approximation, in a biome infected with the maggots of evidential fake-news, the pull-and-push of political agendas, luring and infinitely-manipulative state power; and the moost brought about by un-self-doubting protective self-belief.

The protest is tailor-made for oppositional parties—the BJP and CPI(M)—to exploit. For all their assertions of apoliticality, there is enough evidence that the protestor's ranks have been infiltrated, if not actively subsidised, by the two parties, whose predictable realpolitik objective is destabilising the Mamata Banerjee government. While the protestors have denied this, they have Mamata's back to the wall because of the BJP's strength in the state. Mamata has been reduced to being uncommonly accommodating because she knows that cracking the whip would only feed the BJP wolf.

The protesting doctors have accomplished much of immediate import; and yet have accomplished nothing of lasting value. The Bengali tendency to historicise pro-

testing carries the risk of over-conflation with past movements. A liberal observer compared the doctors' representatives who sought to consult their compeers before deciding the future course to Mexico's Zapatista movement—forgetting that it remains, after 30 years, a frozen conflict.

A Left critic of the TMC government said that with the transfer of two senior bureaucrats and the police commissioner, accountability had been fixed, and that fixing

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Deteriorating infra

Ref: Lack of audits, financial leakages threaten road safety (Sep 18). The editorial exposed the ugly face of road infra development in our country. Most worrisome is the audit report on Bharatmala Pariyojana and the status of the new Atal Setu bridge that began to crumble in its first monsoon itself.

Hemanth Bhide, Mangaluru

Contain corruption

The editorial has rightly pinpointed that in addition to education and new road culture, plugging the financial leakages in the construction of roads is also needed. While Nitin Gadkari, the Union road transport and highways minister, deserves accolades for his initiative in expanding the road network, the number of deaths on road accidents is more compared to deaths due to war and militancy.

Rajakumar Arulanandham, Palayamkottai

J&K transformation

Ref: Extending era of hope in J&K polls (Sep 18). The narrative conveys the real picture of J&K's developments, particularly in the last five years. The commendable aspect is its integration with the rest of India to accelerate the progress. There has been a significant transformational shift in youthful minds, demonstrating new and positive energy.

K Venkatasubramanian, Chennai

Greedy publishers

Ref: The good, bad & greedy of academic publishing (Sep 18). The financial motives behind institutions like Elsevier overshadow their positive contributions to academia. While Scopus-indexed publications promote research excellence, they favor those with wealth and resources. This is not an isolated issue; it reflects a broader systemic problem where profit is prioritised over knowledge dissemination.

Suraiya Chishty, Bengaluru

Research access


The reliance on Scopus-indexed publications as a quality standard increases the cost of scholarly research, affecting scholars from less affluent regions and institutions. To address this, academic frameworks must prioritise equitable access across all regions.

Narayanan Kizhumundayur, Thrissur

Art cinema

Ref: Saving IC 814 and other flights of imagination (Sep 17). Cinema taken purely in art form based on one's ideas and imagination will never be enjoyed by the public. Take the case of a few classic Malayalam movies like Thambu, Nirmalyam, etc. A few of them got awards too, but how many people really went and saw those movies of their own interest?

Sreenivasan R, Bengaluru



A thought for today
Indians of the north and the south have in the main ignored the Nagas, or seen them as a kind of pestilence best tackled by the army
G KANATO CHOPHY, anthropologist

Afspa Is Obsolete

Absence of accountability in a grim Nagaland case, shows how this law is hurting the Northeast

It beggars belief. That 13 civilians would be killed and there would be no criminal prosecution in the case. It is time to consider a full repeal of Afspa because it is Afspa that enables such outcomes. On Tuesday, the Supreme Court quashed FIRs and set aside all proceedings against 30 army personnel involved in a botched operation in Nagaland's Mon district in Dec 2021, after the Union home ministry refused sanction for prosecution. The question is whether such a "state of exception", to use the apt phrase of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, is still justified in the Northeast.

In Nagaland, mass insurgency has retreated as GOI has brought militants to accord, and the state govt, like most others in the region, is in alliance with the Centre. In Manipur, the extreme ethnic violence and segregation speak terribly for Afspa's effectiveness. Whatever its accomplishments in the past, today Afspa appears to be delivering less public order, more public alienation.

In the Mon case, an SIT constituted by the state govt probed how intelligence input about the presence of NSCN K-YA and Ulfa militants ended up in a 21 Para Security Force team opening fire on villagers returning from work in a coal mine. It connected indiscriminate and disproportionate firing to failures to follow the standard operating procedure and the rules of engagement. An army inquiry found it to be "a case of mistaken identity". What has been the course correction since then? We do not know. The court said, "the concerned wing of the armed forces would be at liberty to take or not to take any disciplinary proceedings against its officers." If such suspension of accountability and victims' rights are called unconscionable, we can see why.

It also needs underlining that Afspa has its roots in the colonial Armed Forces (Special Powers) Ordinance, promulgated to suppress the Quit India Movement. Institutional arguments to cling on to its sweeping powers today would have more legitimacy, if sanctions to initiate criminal prosecution were provided in a more rational way. If sanction were to be given in the Mon case, for example, the court made it clear that "the proceedings pursuant to the impugned FIRs may...proceed in accordance with law and be brought to a logical conclusion." In other words, Afspa can cover up any wrongdoing. Agamben's notion of homo sacer is also a person no longer covered by legal or civil rights. No Indian should suffer this condition.

One Nation, Many Notions

Simultaneous polls are a good idea. Implementation will be terribly tricky & impossible sans oppn agreeing

As GOI clears Kovind panel's One Nation One Election proposal, a bill on the same is expected in Parliament this winter session. But the reality of a single election for Lok Sabha and state assemblies is a complicated road ahead. Simultaneous polls is sound policy – for governance, administration, convenience and cost. ECI has maintained it can conduct simultaneous elections at an all-India level. Yet, when announcing the poll schedule for just 180 assembly constituencies – 90 in Haryana, and 90 in J&K, EC's explanation to put off Maharashtra's high-stakes poll was one, troop mobilisation, and two, weather. Reality is, simultaneous polls are a gargantuan exercise. There will likely never be enough troops.

Extreme weather events are only on the increase. As big is the issue of dissolving elected assemblies, EC had said the earliest it can hold such a poll is 2029. Hypothetically, it means dissolution of assemblies of Rajasthan, MP, Chhattisgarh and Telangana after five months of these states' elections, or advancing elections to a Maharashtra or Delhi. No elected govt, regardless of political party, is likely to be on the same page as the Centre on this.

Five constitutional amendments don't need states' ratification – Articles 83 and 85 on duration and dissolution of Parliament, Articles 172 and 174 on duration and dissolution of state legislatures, and Article 356 on imposition of central rule in states. But an amendment needs two-thirds of Parliament to ratify – no easy task given LS's 234-strong opposition will have its say.

Further, altering duration of local bodies needs states' ratification. Even state election commissions may balk at making ECI the final arbiter of electoral rolls – a centralised all-India electoral roll is seen as diluting India's federal structure; that it goes against the idea of a 'Union' of states. GOI must know a list of positives alone isn't enough to make simultaneous elections a reality. It needs all political parties on board.

Cat-atic election

Something is Rottweiler in the state of America

Bachi Karkaria

If US didn't have Donald Trump, it would have to invent him. How else would it get world attention on the presidential election – and its unending supply-side for the humour industry. MAGA, maybe. MAHA, definitely. In our time-neutral news cycle, somewhere someone is flashing the latest inanity/insanity/incoherence. Or recycling past stuff with the full assurance that custom hasn't staled the infinite variety. Take the latest catcall. Continuing his running mate's earlier dissing of Kamala Harris as a 'childless cat-lady', at last week's debate Trump spewed his now immortalised Hated-Haitians-eating-pet-felines-in-Springfield allegation. The charge originated in the social media post of a local woman who hadn't witnessed such a beastly act herself but only heard about it – thirdhand. The issue has catapulted into a clear case of 'Chinese whispers' shanghai-ed.

Dogged pursuit of your competitor is par for the course in the rottweiler world of politics and business. Or entertainment, which has subsumed the other two. Trump & Pardner have now created a different category, though actual felines would treat such unprecedented, un-presidential venom with DNA-ed disdain. Cats don't give a rat's ass whether you smother them with affection or kick them around; they just walk away with an insouciant twitch of tail. Clinton's pet didn't care if he pulled up his Socks (or his trousers). Across the 'pond', 10 Downing Street's resident tabby, Larry, was clear winner in power struggle with arriviste Nova, Sunaks' Labrador Retriever.

As for Haitian dining habits, its cuisine is its history's stew of European influences. It certainly doesn't include Persian pilaf or Siamese soup, but Trump, a 'burn at the steak' man wouldn't know. Vance too got his taunt totally wrong. Far from the antithesis of gloried motherhood, Hindu mythology's Shashthi, protector of women and children, rides astride a cat. Egyptian goddess Bastet presides over home, childbirth and fertility, and is the original 'cat-lady', feline head on female body. In that avatar, Kamala could take the mickey out of the mouse that roared. Swiftly.

Alec Smart said: "Does SEBI stand for Security Exchanged to Benefit Individuals?"

US Polls: It's Advantage Trump

● Swing states now have more yes-Trump officials ● Rules have been changed to make result challenges easier ● Most polls showing Kamala ahead are based on only 15 of 1,000 phone calls being answered

Dan Cassino

Opinion polls of the upcoming US presidential election now show Kamala Harris leading Trump. Her campaign certainly seems to have the momentum in the race, support for independent candidates that might peel off some Democratic voters has evaporated, Trump seems unable to reach voters outside the base he's had for eight years.

But the polls were conducted before what "appears to be an attempted assassination" of Trump this Sunday. Even otherwise, Democrats actually have good reasons to be worried.

Trump's chance to pull out a win relies largely on the antiquated system of the Electoral College, which means that the candidate who gets the most votes doesn't necessarily win the election. Americans are generally proud that we've been governed by the same constitution – with some minor revisions – for almost 250 years, but that's a bit like being proud that you have a really old car: it's impressive that you've kept it running, but that doesn't mean that it's any good.

For most of US history, the Electoral College outcome reflected the popular vote, with only one or two instances in which the candidate who got the most votes didn't become president. In recent years, though, the system has failed repeatedly. Since 1988, the Republican candidate for president has won the popular vote just once, in 2004, but George W Bush and Trump were able to win elections because of the vagaries of our pre-democratic system.

The Electoral College vote is based on the winner of each state, rather than the whole country, so a few states that have a balance between Democrats and Republicans are the only ones that really matter. In those states – places like Pennsylvania, Michigan, Georgia and Arizona – voters are bombarded with campaign ads on TV, phone calls from the parties, postcards written by voters around the country, and candidate rallies. In the rest of the country, including the most populous states of California, New York and Texas, there's no outward sign that an election is going on at all.

So, the fact that polls show Trump being down by a few points in the popular vote doesn't really matter, so long as the race is close in those swing states, and, by all indications, it is. Trump could lose by millions

nationally, and still win by edging out his opponent by a few thousand votes in the decisive states, as he did in 2016.

Even if Trump gets fewer votes in those states, he could pressure officials in those states to award him a win anyway, as he tried to do unsuccessfully after the 2020 election. Several of those states have changed their rules to make challenging the results easier, or replaced officials that previously resisted Trump with people more amenable to working with him. This means that even getting more votes in the swing states might not be enough for Harris to claim the presidency.

It's also not at all clear if the debate – or any events during the

campaign – will make much of a difference for Trump's support. News consumption in US has become highly partisan, with Democrats and Republicans getting very different info about important issues, or even hearing about different issues altogether.

Republicans and Democrats are already seeing very different coverage of the debate. In polls taken immediately after the debate, most Republicans thought that Trump had done better than Harris. Their social media feeds and the news channels they watch will reflect that. It might seem impossible for millions of people to avoid or ignore what everyone else saw, but conservative media in US has spent decades telling Republicans that mainstream media sources cannot be trusted.

In the next week or so, we're likely to see polls moving towards Harris, but that has more to do with who decides to answer a poll than any persuasion that might have happened. Top quality US polls are still carried out by telephone, and because of caller ID, very few people answer when a poll calls. On average, only about 15 people pick up for every 1,000 calls made.

When a candidate does poorly in a debate, the people who prefer that candidate become less likely to participate in polls, not because they've changed their minds, but just because they don't want to talk about politics at a moment when they're disheartened. Because response rates are so low, even a small shift in who answers can lead to a big change in the poll results, and such changes don't really tell us anything about what's likely to happen in the election.

Add to that the fact that polls underestimated Trump's support in past elections, and Democrats would be foolish to think that even a big lead for Harris means the race is a foregone conclusion.

In a modern electoral system, Trump wouldn't have won in 2016 and would have little chance today. But our antiquated system, combined with the modern problem of a polarised media environment and reliance on social media mean that the race will be determined by a few votes in a few states, and polls showing Harris up by even a wide margin nationally don't necessarily tell us what will happen on Election Day. It's almost certain that Harris will get millions more votes than Trump does in the final tally, but our system means that he may become president anyway.

The writer is Professor of Government and Politics at Fairleigh Dickinson University and Executive Director of the FDU Poll

'We are likely to have a split verdict... Governor's rule will be dangerous...Parties should try hard to form a secular govt'

Representing the third generation of PDP founder Mufti Mohd Sayeed's family, **Ittija Mufti** took the electoral plunge from Bijbehara during the first phase of J&K elections yesterday. She spoke to **Subodh Ghildiyal** about the challenge PDP faces this time and how she intends to be different.

● **Abrogation of Article 370 is the one issue that people are talking about during the assembly elections, and it has brought the focus back to PDP's decision to tie up with BJP in 2014. Do you think Mufti Mohd Sayeed made a grave error then?**

You cannot link abrogation of Article 370 to our alliance govt with BJP. That happened a year after our ties ended and the govt fell. My grandfather only wanted to have a moderating influence on the Centre. Unfortunately, it did not happen. If power is what he was after, he would have joined hands with Congress. Somewhere, he expected that Modi would tread the same path as Vajpayee, but that was obviously not the case.

● **You have made your electoral debut in a tough election for PDP. Do you regret that?**

It is not a regret, but, yes, this is not an ideal situation because there is so much dependency and PDP is going through a difficult time. But I am happy that if I win, which I will, people won't say it was handed to her on a platter. I do wish the situation in Kashmir was better. These elections come at a time when there is a lot of fatigue with mainstream politicians. It hasn't helped that Kashmiri politicians have been vilified incessantly by Delhi. So, I have to prove my merit. I will have to earn people's respect.

● **What do you think of your prospects at Bijbehara?**

I think I am going to make it. We have won four times consecutively.

There has to be a bit of anti-incumbency. So, I have inherited that anti-incumbency, even if it is my first election. It's not an easy seat to win, though people say it is a family constituency.

● **Why did the Gupkar Alliance come apart?**

It was a good initiative that had potential. For Mehbooba Mufti it was a way to share the same platform with others and look beyond elections. But others didn't have the same intention. This is sad because if the political parties of Kashmir don't unite now, when will they?

Q&A

● **Do you think all parties in Kashmir should join hands after the polls? Your prediction of results?**

I think we should make a strong effort to form a secular govt. If there is a hung assembly, it will only pave the way for governor's rule, which will be dangerous. We have to wait for the results. As there is no wave for any party, it is expected to be a split verdict. I just hope it does not lead to more unpredictability.

● **Do Engineer Rashid's Awami Ittehad Party and Jamaat-e-Islami's support for it and Independents pose a threat to PDP?**

I don't think they are a threat at all. We have our cadre. As it is, Engineer's party is more established in the north. This whole thing of delegitimising somebody (by saying Engineer is BJP's proxy) just because he is

against us, I don't believe in it.

● **But Mehbooba Mufti has questioned his intentions, calling him Delhi's pawn?**

She has her line and I have mine. We are different people and we are not supposed to have the same opinion all the time.

● **You are given to very animated sloganeering in your roadshows. Is that a signature style you are developing?**

My workers feel energised with that. A young girl shouting slogans atop a car appeals to people and fills them with energy. I don't like a run-of-the-mill political campaign where people perch themselves on top of a podium and drone on and on. I like to be different.

● **How do you see yourself in politics?**

I don't have delusions of grandeur. I was born in a political family and know how it consumes people. I just expect to be respected and not misunderstood. Not loved. That would be expecting a bit too much in J&K where people have seen so much trauma. I hope nobody ever says I was dishonest.

● **How do you react to Modi's constant sniping at political families and dynasts?**

I have thick skin, so these things don't affect me. But what about Anurag Thakur or Chirag Paswan? BJP's allegations must be seen through what suits the party. If you support BJP, you are not a dynast. What matters is that I have contested the polls. People will decide whether they want Ittija Mufti or not.

Calvin & Hobbes



A Note Of Enlightenment To Enrich Your Thoughts

Swami Bhoomananda Tirtha

The mind is always given to thoughts. Just as the blood in our body is constantly in circulation, the lungs breathe in and out, and the mind, too, will always be given to thoughts. It is the very characteristic of the mind to produce thoughts incessantly. Thoughtfulness is the nature of the mind. What is thoughtfulness? Whatever we call the mind, it has the nature of linking the past with the present and then projecting into the future. The future itself flows out of the present, and the present has evolved from the past. So, our mind continuously links the present with the past and future. In this process, memory has a dominant role.

What is memory? Memory is the mind's stock of the events that have taken place already. It is impossible to

remain interactive in this world unless the mind is active. Our lives will become meaningless. Can you imagine what may happen if we have no memory? So, the mind will be in a constant state of circulation between the past, present, and future.

Ensure this: There should be a note of enlightenment and enrichment in all the thoughts that arise in your mind. Thoughts that involve victimising and agitating are not welcome. Whenever these thoughts come, you should feel free to let them know. Mind is unphysical, metaphysical. You cannot physically enter the mind and do anything. So, dissuade these thoughts. If you go on dissuading the undesirable thoughts, after some time, finding that they are ineffective, their number will be reduced



THE SPEAKING TREE

and finally, they will become extinct. How can this be achieved? Suppose the mind goes on thinking about a subject for a long time. After some time, the mind will feel tired and become quiet. When the same job is done with concentration for a few hours or days, after some time, you will become tired and stop working. Similarly, after continuously thinking for a long time, the thoughts in the mind will reduce, become lighter and feebler and gradually reduce, naturally. What is required is a progressive transformation of the mind, as a result of which good, useful and enlightening thoughts will alone come.

The best way to deal with the mind is to remain unaffected by thought processes. Never feel antagonised or

confronted by mental functions. Consider them useful, necessary, and indispensable. Recognise their nature and then encourage useful, benevolent, and peaceful thoughts and dissuade others. Dissuade whatever is undesirable. Gradually, they will stop coming. But it will take time depending on your mental makeup, your attitude and assiduous nature of your application. Similarly, encourage the thoughts that generate and preserve sublimity. This is the right treatment to the mind and not trying to quell, stop, or control the mind. We want to remain unaffected by whatever the mind does. Control is never the means with regard to the mind and its functions.

Another approach is: Go on tracing the thought to its origin and try to look for the thinker. Every thought should lead you to its source. That is also a method whereby from thoughtfulness, you can be led to thought-freeness.

Sacredspace



The all-pervading energy source of existence or Shakti manifests itself as creation. Shakti is the divine mother who gives birth to and nurtures the newborn – whether it is a newborn baby, a brand-new relationship, a fresh idea, or a magical manifestation.

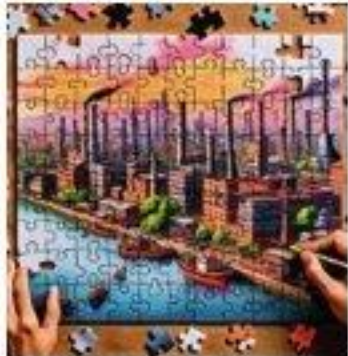
Deepak Chopra

Our Industrialisation Valley Civilisation

States have to work out their own strategies

The latest Economic Advisory Council to PM working paper looking at the share of the national economy that states provide is more than just a ‘who’s best, who’s worst’ report card. It provides clues to what needs to be done, and what avoided. States have followed three broad development trajectories both under central planning and market-led growth. The first has been slow to industrialise, leaving a large portion of their workforce dependent on agriculture. The second lot has industrialised, but hasn’t been able to improve labour productivity through commensurate investment in social infra. The third has managed to industrialise and raise human development. This subset is consistently powering ahead by absorbing surplus farm labour and skilling it to feed further industrialisation.

Development strategies for each of these groups have to be tailored. Agrarian states will need bigger transfers



from GoI to clamber on to industrialisation. Productivity-challenged industrialised states have to deploy more state gov spending on health and education. Advanced states must work on raising productivity to support export markets. Development planning should also address regional disparity between

peninsular states and the hinterland, which provides the former a natural advantage on account of their access to maritime trade.

Share of gov spending relative to states’ economic output is inversely related to their level of industrialisation. Laggards are overdependent on central transfers while leaders feel they’re being penalised for their achievements. This isn’t strictly true—India Inc principally caters to the domestic market in which consuming states prop up demand and keep wage costs low through migration. Improvements in living standards in lagging states through larger fiscal transfers and market-unifying reforms like GST spur existing industrialisation. Reducing infra deficit, both physical and social, can push industrialisation here. But states will themselves have to work out strategies to enhance ease of doing business.

Fortify the Nation by Diversifying Our Food

Bill Gates is one person who knows that social development, better health indices and livelihoods are good for business all around. Marking the release of Gates Foundation’s Goalkeepers Report 2024 this week, Gates recommended increasing food fortification and ensuring a more diverse diet through the public distribution system (PDS) to achieve India’s nutritional, public health and economic goals. Gates’ assessment is correct. Food fortification has a high benefit-to-cost ratio. The Copenhagen Consensus estimates that every ₹1 spent on fortification yields ₹9 in economic benefits.

Fortification is the intentional increase of micronutrients (vitamins, minerals, etc) in food to improve nutritional quality and provide a public health benefit. GoI promotes fortification in rice, salt, wheat, oil and milk. There’s also been a national iron and folic acid supplementation programme for pregnant women since 1970 to combat iron-deficiency anaemia. This is crucial, given that 58.4% of Indian children (6-59 months) and 53.1% of women of reproductive age are anaemic, and 35.7% of under-5 kids are underweight.

But food fortification must be part of a larger programme to address micronutrient malnutrition within the broader food systems agenda, aimed at improving access to a nutritious, diverse diet. PDS is responsible for the lack of dietary diversity, and GoI and states must collaborate on policy changes to ensure more local foods are available. This can’t happen without changes in agrarian patterns and supportive state policies to nudge farmers to diversify. Industry support for fortification is also essential to ensure standards are met. Rigorous monitoring is also necessary to review micronutrient levels. After all, we are what we eat.

JUST IN JEST

Norway, an oil-producing giant, is first country with more EVs than ICE cars

Smart to Not Practise What You Preach

One of the underrated strategic values of nation-statism—the practice of a centralised political unit ruling over a politically sovereign territory—is that its laws, rules and trends apply within its own domain, but have little, no, or even opposite bearing when applied ‘abroad’. Take Norway. It became the first country this week to have more EVs than cars running on any other fuel. Of the 2.8 mn registered cars, 754,303 now run on electric juice alone, while 753,905 run on petrol. Which is great—for Norway. The country also happens to be the fifth-largest exporter of oil and third-largest of natural gas. In fact, almost all the oil and gas it extracts is shipped off to other countries.

The fact that one may sell what one may not want oneself may seem like not practising what you preach. But the magic circle of the ‘nation state’ and ‘national interest’—in the case of Norway, less polluting vehicles as well as more cash selling oil elsewhere—makes solid logical, moral and economic sense. While a country like India is still largely a consumer nation—of oil, both as fuel for vehicles and bodies via cooking, among many other harmful things—countries like Norway have got it right: keep the good things for ourselves, and sell the bad things that remain popular elsewhere. In other words, have your cake, but don’t eat it too.

Finland’s pioneering income-based fines are an effective deterrent and good revenue collector

What You Pay Is What You Got



Sanjoy Narayan

Helsinki: It’s an urban legend that works best in Finnish, but here it is anyway. A few decades ago, when Finland’s system of income-based fines for offences such as traffic violations had already been in force for a while, a highway policeman stopped a man for speeding. He first asked to see the man’s driver’s licence and papers, and told him that he was speeding. Then, to fix a fine in proportion to his income, asked him how much he earned.

This was an era long before every resident’s personal details were easily accessible to authorities such as cops who often had to go by word of honour and self-reporting. The policeman asked, ‘Well, what do you do for a living?’ The man replied meekly, ‘Oh, I just sell

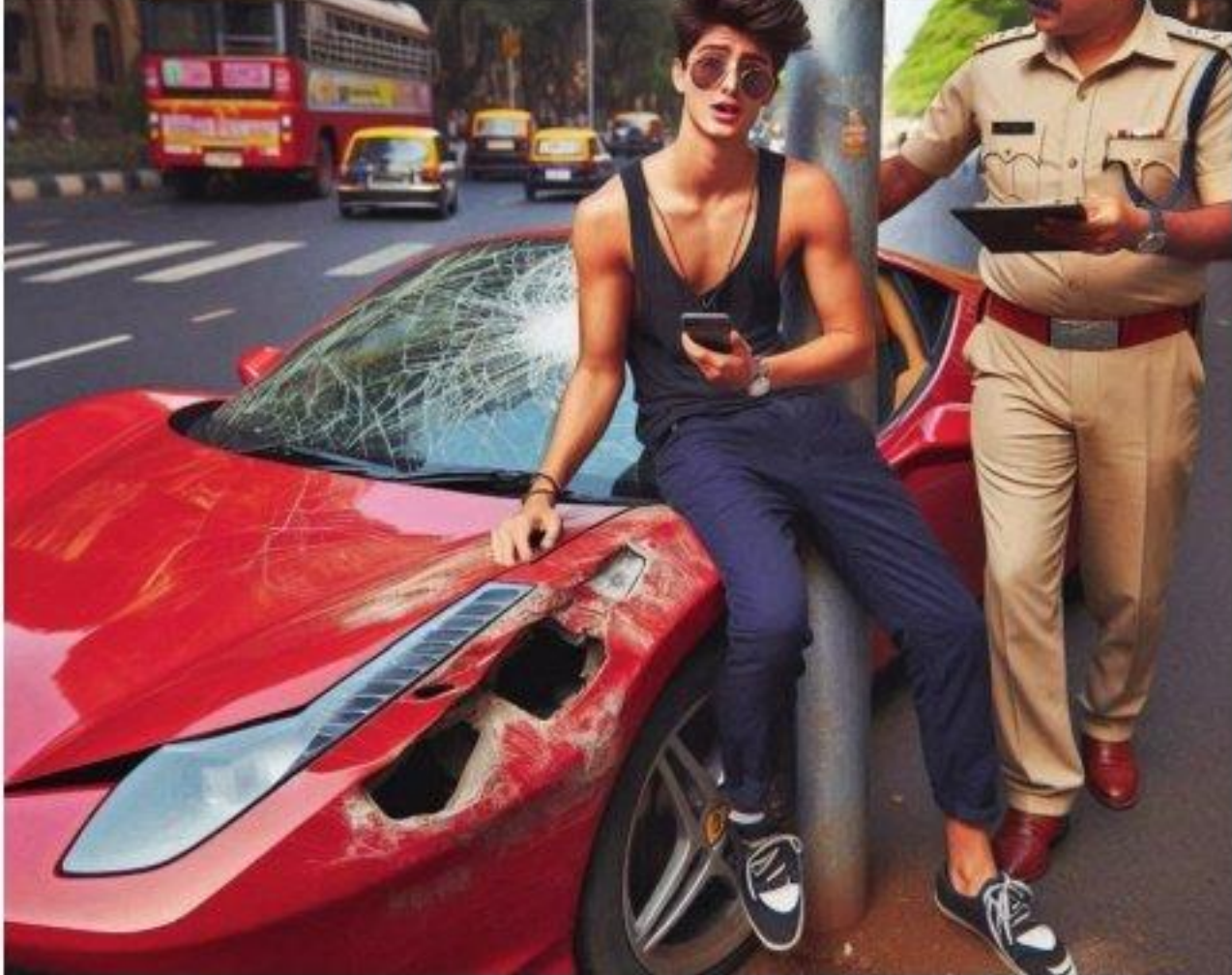
Last summer, 76-yr-old Finnish millionaire Anders Wijköf was fined ₹121,000 (about ₹1.1 cr) for going over the speed limit by 30 kmph



some pots and blankets. ‘Ah, well, thought the cop, he mustn’t be making much, and let him off’ with a warning and a very small fine.

The man drove off, pleased as punch because the policeman hadn’t asked him what kind of pots and blankets he sold. He sold huge wood pulp boilers—the Finnish word for pots and boilers is the same—and industrial wet blankets that paper machines use to press down and smoothen the paper. He was a wealthy man.

That was then. Now, in highly-digitised Finland, authorities can easily estimate the earnings of a resident and levy more accurate income-based fines,



Let it Helsinki in

known as ‘day fines’ (päiväsakko). Income-based fines link traffic and petty crime fines to the offender’s income and wealth with the aim of making the financial impact of the fines more equitable across different income levels.

Last summer, when 76-yr-old Finnish millionaire Anders Wijköf was fined ₹121,000 (about ₹1.1 cr) for exceeding the speed limit by 30 kmph, it made global headlines. Wijköf, whose businesses include real estate and trading, has an estimated net worth of nearly ₹10 mn. In modern Finland, unlike in the apocryphal story of the pot and blanket salesman, the police can instantaneously check an offender’s income by connecting their smartphones to a central taxpayer database.

The first passenger cars were brought into Finland in 1900, and the first driver’s licences issued in 1907 when Finland was still a duchy under the Russian empire. Three years after it became independent, in 1920, it became the first country to introduce income-based fines for offences such as traffic violations.

The system aimed to ensure that fines have a similar deterrent effect, regardless of the offender’s income. In some instances, it has led to increased fine

revenues, especially from high-income offenders. More importantly, according to several studies, income-based fines have led to increased compliance and reduced recidivism.

Not long after Finland introduced the system, other European countries followed suit. Sweden introduced a similar system in 1931, Denmark in 1939, Germany in 1975, and Switzerland in the 1990s. France introduced it in 1983 for certain offences, and expanded its scope in 2007.

‘Day fines’ are called that because typically they are calculated based on a person’s daily income. The fine is determined by two factors: the number of day fine units assigned to the offence, depending on its severity; and the daily income of the offender.

Daily income is usually calculated as a fraction of the offender’s daily disposable income, often around 1/60th of the monthly income.

In highly-digitised Finland, authorities can easily estimate earnings of a resident and levy accurate income-based ‘day fines’

Folks, the Rupee’s Undervalued



Dhiraj Nim

An exceptionally stable exchange rate for the rupee has sparked a debate: is it overvalued or undervalued? Some measures, such as RBI’s trade-weighted real effective exchange rate (REER) index, suggest the currency is overvalued by around 7%. But other nuanced approaches point to it being undervalued to a similar extent.

REER index is the weighted average of bilateral exchange rates adjusted for inflation differentials with key trading partners. A stronger domestic currency, or higher domestic inflation, relative to foreign, leads to a rise in REER index, implying an erosion of currency competitiveness. A reading above (or below) 100 implies an overvalued (or undervalued) currency. The latest reading in July 2024 was 107.3. But the simple index has a conceptual gap.

The Harrod-Balassa-Samuelson (HBS) theorem suggests a rise in productivity and incomes in a ‘price-taking’ sector engaged in foreign trade (e.g., IT services) leads to higher domestic

inflation as the general price level rises due to higher demand for non-traded goods and services (e.g., eating out, salons, etc). This general price rise can exaggerate loss of currency competitiveness if viewed only from the REER lens without adjusting for higher productivity.

A ‘productivity tweak’ to the rupee’s REER makes sense as India’s productivity growth relative to its trading partners has been rising over time. RBI’s trade-weighted REER index adjusted for productivity growth differential with India’s top 20 trading partners (accounting for over 80% of total trade) yields an adjusted REER value of 94, implying the rupee is undervalued by 6%.

The IMF-style macro balance approach, too, has strong appeal with respect to understanding the fair value of a currency. It seeks to answer the question: by how much should REER change so that underlying current account balance (UCAB) matches equilibrium current account balance (ECAB)?

‘Think of UCAB as current account balance adjusted for the business cycle. It’s calculated by removing the possible impact of domestic and foreign output gaps from the actual CAB (ACAB). It also assumes past REER changes are fully reflected in trade volumes. India’s UCAB for FY24, for instance, was found to be nearly balanced, while ACAB was –0.7% of GDP.

If the domestic output gap is positive, or the foreign output gap is negative, UCAB is better than ACAB, and vice versa. In fact, given India’s stronger growth than the rest of the world, its cyclically adjusted current account deficit (CAD) has been lower than the actual in recent years.

ECAB is a structural measure of CAB, warranted by factors such as stage of economic development, demography, structural fiscal balance and interest rate differentials. For India, it’s currently trending between –2% and –2.5% of GDP.

The wide gap between UCAB and ECAB implies that India is running lower CADs than it should. For that gap to correct, REER needs to appreciate by about 7% in FY25. So far, it has appreciated by about 1% on average, reflecting that the rupee remains undervalued by around 6%.



But chill, it’s ok

lecting that the rupee remains undervalued by around 6%.

It’s worth noting that the macroeconomic balance approach only helps identify episodes of large REER misalignments. It is agnostic to the ‘quality’ of CAD, and doesn’t prescribe how best to achieve required REER correction.

For example, if REER index were to appreciate by 6%, it would realistically strengthen imports of consumer and finished goods to the detriment of domestic manufacturing, while also making exports less competitive. This will be at loggerheads with domestic policy focus. In contrast, a widening of CAD, say due to a stronger business capex cycle and capital goods imports, will be a favourable outcome.

Overall, the rupee looks to be undervalued, not overvalued, and eases the concern a strong currency could be hurting the economy.

But the rupee is not substantially misaligned from its fair value to warrant any major correction on a real effective basis. It can remain undervalued on nuanced fair value gauges for longer if RBI keeps the rupee spot exchange rate stable around current levels, domestic inflation continues to fall, and India’s superior productivity differentials (even if concentrated in a select few sectors) continue to hold up.

The writer is economist, ANZ Research

Hell is Empty, Devils Are All There



Seema Sirohi

If the first failed assassination attempt against Donald Trump was divine intervention, the second within two months seals the deal for supporters that he is god’s own candidate. It’s now the voters’ ‘sacred’ duty to elect him in November: House of Representatives speaker Mike Johnson set the tone, saying it was ‘providence’, plain and simple. Cheating death twice is not an accident nor luck, they are saying.

Trump lost no time in laying the blame directly at the door of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. He declared the gunman ‘believed’ and ‘acted’ on their ‘highly inflammatory’ rhetoric. Trump was referring to Biden’s past remarks calling him a ‘threat to democracy’ and making him a target. He went on to call B&H the ‘enemy from within’ that will ‘destroy our country’.

But rhetoric doesn’t come cheap. Trump was quick to send email ‘alerts’ to fundraise off the new hook. ‘I will NEVER SURRENDER!’ but remember to show your love with \$25. And so it goes, this turbulent election season marred and scarred by violence, hate and worse.

The reason why Ryan Wesley Routh hid in the bushes in a Florida golf course to take aim at Trump is yet unclear. But it hardly matters—there’s an election to be won. For the record, what’s emerging is a portrait of Routh as a disturbed and delusional man who met a gun like so many do in America. Common as white bread and predictable as night following day. Also, for the record, Routh is registered as an independent in North Carolina.

Less than 50 days before voting day, the US presidential election is again shaken and stirred, almost at a desperate point with ample reminders that both sides indulge in shocking rhetoric albeit to differing degrees. If the first reaction of Elon Musk, a Trump supporter, was to say on X, ‘And no one



America’s gone Punch & Judy

is even trying to assassinate Biden/Kamala’ followed by a quizzical emoji, a Democrat mocked, ‘No ears were harmed. Carry on with your Sunday afternoon.’ Both posts have been deleted in national interest.

Things are in the basement. Determined to get a bounce, the Trump campaign dropped an explosive ad on Monday with the catchline, ‘Kamala and the Democrats are the Party of Violence’. It was full of clips of prominent Democrats indulging in questionable rhetoric against Trump.

Biden says at a rally that if they were in high school, he would take Trump ‘behind the gym and beat the hell out of him’. Harris jokes on a TV show in 2018 about Trump meeting his end in an elevator if she rode with him. Nancy Pelosi is talking about ‘uprisings’ against Trump, while Hillary Clinton declares you cannot be ‘civil’ to a political party that ‘wants to destroy you’. Madonna says she has thought ‘an awful lot about blowing up the White House’. It’s edgy and the clips are real.

On the other side, Trump routinely calls for violence against immigrants and journalists, demeans military leaders, and mocks those with disabilities. He does it so often, the shock is gone. Last year, he vowed to ‘root out’ his political opponents who he said ‘live like vermin’ in American society, echoing

the words of fascists. From the time Trump announced his bid in 2015, he has painted immigrants as parasites on the system and nothing more.

He said Mexico was sending ‘rapists’ and drug dealers into the US, rhetoric that is said to have incited violence against immigrants in the years that followed. He told his supporters to ‘just knock the hell out of’ anyone daring to protest at his rallies.

When Trump was in office, White supremacists organised and got emboldened. When he lost in 2020, he incited his supporters gathered at the White House on Jan 6 and sent them on a rampage to Capitol Hill. They were ready to ‘hang’ his veep for certifying the election.

The most recent example is, of course, Trump’s bizarre claim during the presidential debate that Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, were stealing their neighbours’ pets to eat them. It started as a Facebook rumour that was picked by Trump and repeated. A series of bomb threats followed, shutting schools and normal life. But no hair off Trump’s coiffure with running mate JD Vance faithfully playing second fiddle.

Does it matter that Vance tried to contextualise it all as an immigration problem—20,000 Haitian immigrants have settled in Springfield in recent years, straining local services and schools. It doesn’t, because it’s not about real issues. Plus, there’s no light in the basement to sort things out.



Quest for The Absolute

SANDHYA VASUDEV

One way of zeroing in on a solution is to rule out all impractical ones. When planning a hotel stay or making a purchase, we keep eliminating parameters that do not suit us so that the ultimate desired product easily emerges from the labyrinth of options.

In the spiritual context, there is Neti Neti; when translated from Sanskrit, it means not this, not that. Human life goes beyond eating and mating; it is intended for the realisation of the ultimate Reality described differently by varied schools of philosophy. According to the followers of the Advaita school of thought, the Self is the ultimate reality; it is God or the Supersoul.

Madhvacharya’s Dvaita philosophy propagates that the soul, jiva, and Paramatma are different, and the soul is always subservient to the Supersoul, the primal creator of the universe. Neti Neti is mainly followed in Advaita Vedanta, wherein one by one, all that we see around us is negated as being materialistic. Carefully, one after the other, each thought is negated as not being the reality until gradually only the ultimate reality, the Absolute, remains, which cannot be described but is referred to as Tat Tvam Asi.

An individual should always be on a continual quest for the Absolute in whatever way she likes.

STEP UP TO THE PLATE

El Chato Bogotá, Colombia

Throughout Bogotá, tiny corner restaurants serve amazing Colombian food. For outsiders, El Chato is a must-try for local cuisine. This contemporary Colombian bistro, led by Paris-trained chef Alvaro Clavijo, debuted on the World’s 50 Best Restaurants list in 2023, and climbed eight places in 2024.

El Chato interior spans two floors, with the second level offering a view of the kitchen and the eatery’s fabulous spice library.

Committed to redefining local flavours, Clavijo explores his country, searching for new produce to include on the extensive à la carte and tasting menus. The focus is on creating



ing dishes that enhance Colombian ingredients, such as chicken hearts with candied native potato and suero costeño, a fermented-milk-based condiment; mussels with coconut rice and arracacha, a root vegetable; and lobster with tamarind and ant.

Colombian ingredients are also prominent in the varied cocktail menu, with sweet and sour options like the Sour Uchuvas, made with gin, egg white, orange peel and physalis. El Chato encapsulates Bogotá’s spirit—vibrant, inventive and rooted in tradition.

Chat Room

Caged Parrot Hurts Its Master as Well

Appropos the Edit, ‘Free the Bird from Its Attack-Dog-Cage’ (Sep 18), CBI’s pliability in succumbing to the government of the day has tarnished its past image of being a competent and professional investigating agency. GoI utilising CBI’s services to target opposition leaders at a time of its choice exposes its political design in maligning its adversaries. The result is that both have lost credibility in the public eye. We don’t need to add a procedural step for politically sensitive cases that may require GoI seeking CBI’s opinion as to whether the case is worth investigating based on its preliminary probe, nature of the alleged offence and number of pending enquiries. There’s no point in starting another enquiry and carrying them on endlessly.

Y G CHOUKSEY Pune

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Delhi's new CM

Atishi has her work cut out, so does Kejriwal

OUT on bail in the excise policy case, AAP chief and outgoing CM Arvind Kejriwal has entrusted party leader Atishi with the onerous task of putting Delhi's governance back on track. Welfare schemes and development works have been in limbo in the national capital for almost six months following Kejriwal's arrest by the Enforcement Directorate (ED). The growing public discontent with the AAP government has prompted him to step down and throw the ball in the voters' court. With the Assembly elections just five months away — unless they are held ahead of schedule — he is seeking a 'certificate of innocence' from the people of Delhi.

It will be a race against time for CM-designate Atishi to ensure that various pending projects are expeditiously completed and the flagship schemes cover all intended beneficiaries. New promises will have to be announced in a bid to retake control of its populist narrative. Considering Kejriwal's many run-ins with the Lt Governor, it is too much to expect that Atishi will have a cordial relationship with the Centre's appointee. Another big challenge will be to carve a niche for herself and dispel the notion that she is a rubber-stamp CM under her mentor's control.

Kejriwal would be well advised to focus on revitalising his party, whose 'politics of honesty' has been severely undermined by the accusations levelled against him and other AAP leaders by the ED and the CBI. AAP which was accorded the status of a national party last year, is trying to gain a foothold in Haryana after drawing a blank in Delhi and winning only three out of 13 seats in Punjab in this year's Lok Sabha elections. The strategy of playing the victim card and accusing the BJP-led Centre of political vendetta has to be complemented by earnest efforts to redress people's grievances in Delhi as well as Punjab. AAP's emphasis, now more than ever before, should be on corruption-free governance and hassle-free delivery of services.

Exploding pagers

New facet of Israel-Hezbollah conflict

THE explosion of pagers across Lebanon on Tuesday, which killed at least nine persons and injured over 2,750, marks a concerning escalation in the Israel-Hezbollah conflict. This attack, targeting Hezbollah's communication devices, reflects a sophisticated new tactic in the region's protracted struggle and exposes vulnerabilities in the group's operational security. Hezbollah, a dominant force in Lebanon with ties to Iran, has historically relied on low-tech devices like pagers to evade Israeli tracking systems. The pagers carried by Hezbollah fighters, medics and civilians exploded simultaneously across several strongholds in Lebanon, including Beirut's southern suburbs and the Bekaa Valley. The blasts also extended into parts of Syria, where Hezbollah fighters were also affected. The simultaneous explosions suggest a breach of Hezbollah's communication network, with Israeli intelligence suspected of orchestrating the attack.

While Israel has not claimed responsibility for the explosions, reports point to an elaborate operation involving the tampering of pagers during their manufacturing process. These devices were allegedly rigged with explosives and detonated remotely in a coordinated strike. This attack demonstrates Israel's technical prowess and its willingness to strike Hezbollah at the heart of its infrastructure amid the broader Israel-Gaza conflict.

This episode underscores the fact that conflict in the region has escalated to a dangerous level. As Hezbollah vows retaliation, the danger of a full-scale conflict looms large. The situation in West Asia, complicated by the Gaza conflict, can spiral out of control as Hezbollah and Israel continue their tit-for-tat engagements. This attack also highlights the increasing use of technology as a weapon of war. The ability to target individuals using communication devices adds a dangerous dimension to asymmetric warfare as it takes the conflict to civilians, making it harder to predict how this conflict will evolve.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 1924

A case for a thorough inquiry

IN connection with the great tragedy which was enacted in Kohat last week, and on one aspect of which we have already had something to say, there are a number of points which call for an immediate, thorough and searching inquiry. The first is whether any provocation existed which could be held to justify or even explain arson, murder and other heinous offences which were perpetrated at the place in the name of religion. The grievance which is stated to have eventually led to the crisis was the publication of a poem containing abuse of Muslim holy places and scriptures. We have since seen the poem. Unfortunate and indefensible as the matter of the poem is and extremely ill-advised its publication was, we have no hesitation in saying that it could not possibly provoke any but the most fanatical mind, deliberately worked up to a pitch of excitement and indignation, to the perpetration of the kind of barbarities that were actually committed at Kohat. Let us not be misunderstood. We are strongly against the publication of the matter which has the remotest likelihood of injuring even in the slightest degree the feeling of any class or community in the country. But while for this reason we condemn the publication, we find in it no justification whatever for the acts of crime sublimated into madness that was perpetrated by so large a number of persons in broad daylight, especially when it is borne in mind that although the responsibility for the offensive publications rested only with an individual or individuals, the Hindus as a body had expressed regret for it by means of a resolution, as required by the Muslims.

Research funding needs a clear pathway

The ANRF or the govt should have a blueprint on how private sector funding would be raised



DINESH C SHARMA
SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

LAST week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi chaired the first meeting of the governing body of the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF), a new research funding agency. When it was announced by the Central Government in 2019, it was conceived as an umbrella organisation to 'fund, coordinate and promote' research in thrust areas relevant to national priorities as well as fundamental research. Now, the government has described it as "an apex body to provide high-level strategic direction of scientific research" in line with the recommendations of the National Education Policy (NEP).

Coupling the ANRF with the NEP, the governing body decided to pair universities where research is at a nascent stage with top-tier institutions for mentorship. The board directed that ANRF strategies should be aligned with the goals of Viksit Bharat 2047. The foundation will initiate strategic interventions for the global positioning of India in key sectors and launch research programmes in electric mobility, advanced materials, solar cells, smart infrastructure and sustainable agriculture.

Providing state support for scientific research to generate new knowledge and address societal problems has been the fundamental goal of science and technology policies since the adoption of the first Scientific Policy Resolution in 1958. Subsequent policies focused on developing institutional mechanisms and strategies, and aligning research with contemporary realities as well as emerging demands. Some recent examples of this evolving



START: PM Narendra Modi, accompanied by Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, chaired the first meeting of the Governing Board of the Anusandhan National Research Foundation on September 10. PTI

process are the creation of new bodies like the Science and Engineering Research Board (SERB) in 2008 and science universities and institutions like the Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research (IISERs). Besides the SERB, the research funding ecosystem includes diverse agencies like research councils for medical and agriculture research as well as the Department of Biotechnology.

The prevailing national research system faces multiple challenges — bureaucratic delays in the release of funds, a lack of transparency in the award of grants, restrictive procurement rules, taxation issues, problems in international collaboration, etc. The biggest hurdle is dwindling or stagnating levels of funding. Could the SERB and other funding agencies have been reformed before superseding them with an umbrella, centralised body? Is the ANRF a solution to all this? Ideally, a critical evaluation of the SERB in advancing scientific research in India should have preceded the creation of a body that supersedes it. The government has also not clarified how far social science research would be covered under the ANRF when dedicated research councils are functional for social science and historical research. This

The national research system faces multiple challenges, such as bureaucratic delays in the release of funds and a lack of transparency in the award of grants.

clarity is needed because the governing body decided to establish Centres of Excellence to support interdisciplinary research in humanities and social sciences and a representative of the Indian Council of Historical Research attended the board meeting. The elephant in the room is the level of funding required for scientific research. The government has repeatedly been saying that the ANRF would get funding of Rs 10,000 crore a year with the caveat that 65 per cent of it would come from the private sector. If this is so, the ANRF or the government should have a blueprint on how private sector funding would be raised. The first board meeting had hardly any industry representation and the official version of the meeting makes no mention of any discussion on the ways to make

the private sector cough up Rs 6,500 crore every year for funding research in public institutions and universities. All that the Prime Minister had to say on funding was that "the scientific community of the country should have faith that there will be no dearth of resources for their endeavours".

Often, the US National Science Foundation (NSF) is cited as a model for research funding; the ANRF is said to be inspired by it. A former head of the NSF, Subra Suresh, has been made a member of the ANRF governing board. Incidentally, the current head of the NSF, Sethuraman Panchanathan, is also a scientist of Indian origin. While the NSF is an important source of research funding in America, it is not the sole one. Multiple government agencies fund research — the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and now there is the Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy (ARPA-E). While the NSF focuses on basic research and some applied research, the NIH is dedicated to translational medical research and technologies. Other agencies fund defence and energy-related applied research. It is not a perfect research ecosystem but has adequate lev-

els of transparency, accountability and external review.

Borrowing just the NSF model without attendant checks and balances is not a good idea. Instead, we should strive for a heterogeneous research funding system, building on our strengths. For example, India followed a diverse research council system to promote sector-specific research — agriculture, medical, industrial research etc. This system needs to be revived and nurtured to make it responsive and serve national needs, instead of replacing it with a monolithic, centralised and opaque structure.

We also need to evolve new criteria for measuring research output. For a long time, scientists have followed the dictum of 'publish and perish'. This is so because grants, promotions and awards are linked with the number of research papers published. The same goes for another important matrix — patents. It's no use gathering more patents if they have no economic value. Now there are 'altmetrics' which reflect media coverage and social media buzz around one's research. Publications, citations and patents are important measures, but they give an incomplete picture of the quality and usability of research.

Artificial intelligence, storage technologies, solar energy, advanced materials, etc. are often cited as areas Indian funding agencies and researchers should focus on. The ANRF should cut through such generalities and identify niche areas where India needs to develop research and technological capacity in short, medium and long terms — areas that need a major leap or just incremental improvements, technologies that require substantial and sustained funding, and areas not covered by ongoing academic efforts in research institutes or industrial firms. Such clear mapping of critical areas across sectors is a prerequisite to serving the twin objectives of deploying scientific research for societal needs and attaining technological capability.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known. — Carl Sagan

The letterbox that went missing

GS AUJLA

ONE fine morning, I got up and looked out of the window to find that the letterbox outside our house was mysteriously missing. It had been there conspicuously for the past six-and-a-half decades, but it had left behind a hole in the pavement. I feared that it had been stolen and would surface in a foreign auction house along with a piece of furniture or manhole cover smuggled out of Le Corbusier's city and sold at a princely sum.

For me, the red letterbox was a heritage item that had been a public receptacle of many a missive religiously cleared once a day for their onward destinations. It was an extremely useful facility that saved us the labour of going to the post office. We were so confident that this safe recipient of our epistolary communications would ensure the safe delivery of its contents once they were consigned to it. Whether they were postcards or carefully taped and glued love letters, the letterbox was the custodian of all the secrets entrusted to it.

I posed frantic queries in the neighbourhood to know how the disappearance had taken place in a securely guarded neighbourhood inhabited by some august members of the judiciary. My police instincts were soon put to rest by my neighbour's gatekeeper, who confirmed that the letterbox was not taken away stealthily at night but had been removed in broad daylight by the postal authorities themselves.

As a follow-up action, an email was sent to the senior-most postal officer in a typical top-down approach. Not satisfied with this, it was soon followed by a phone call. The officer was a picture of courtesy and informed me that the letterbox was removed as part of the rationalisation process and was one of the few that were marked for discontinuation. The presumption was that since the sector we were living in had just a few dozen houses, it was perhaps not attracting enough post to be cleared on a daily basis. I requested him to restore it for its unquestionable utility as much for its presence as a fixture of heritage that this city is so jealously trying to protect. The officer was kind enough to realise the sanity and sincerity of my entreaty and promised to reconsider their decision.

Lo and behold, in a pleasant surprise, the letterbox arrived back at its original location a couple of days later with a fresh coat of paint. Showering my blessings on the officer and the letterbox, I promptly sent an email of gratitude. In the age of instant communication, this antique survivor is a sentinel of the dying art of correspondence. I am extremely beholden to the postal fraternity for its sensitivity to let this heritage relic be there in the vicinity. The day the letterbox came back will go down as a red-letter day in our lives.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Atishi's appointment

Atishi's appointment as the Delhi Chief Minister marks a pivotal moment in our political landscape. As a founding member of AAP, Atishi embodies the spirit of the anti-corruption movement that had propelled the party to prominence. Her leadership promises continuity and stability amid the turbulence surrounding Arvind Kejriwal's legal battles. Atishi's commitment to governance under Kejriwal's guidance will ensure that Delhi's progress remains unhindered. Her proven track record in education and public welfare projects speaks volumes about her capability to lead. This transition also highlights AAP's resilience and its dedication to democratic principles. As Kejriwal focuses on securing a fresh mandate, Atishi's stewardship will be crucial in maintaining public trust and delivering on promises. Delhi stands on the cusp of a new era, with Atishi poised to steer the Capital towards greater heights.

SARGUNPREET KAUR, MOHALI

A key moment for Indian politics

Atishi's appointment as the Delhi CM marks a significant moment for Indian politics. As a founding member of AAP and a pivotal figure in Delhi's governance, her rise to a position of leadership comes at a crucial time. Kejriwal's decision to step down amid ongoing legal woes speaks to a broader narrative of political persecution, which he has framed as an attempt to derail his electoral mandate. Atishi's experience, vision and dedication to public welfare will be tested as she navigates this role under the shadow of controversy. However, it is her clean image and focus on governance that set her apart. She has the opportunity to demonstrate AAP's commitment to honest governance. This change in leadership may indeed redefine the political landscape ahead of the elections.

AMANJOT KAUR, BY MAIL

AAP's gamble

The Aam Aadmi Party's decision to pick Atishi as the Delhi CM is not surprising, given that she is a prominent political figure. She has her work cut out. She needs to solve infrastructural problems and invigorate the bureaucracy. The party's anti-graft initiatives have lost steam. The onus is now on her to restore and burnish AAP's image as an anti-corruption party. As a young, first-time MLA,

her lack of experience is a matter of concern. So, it remains to be seen if she will be successful in steering the party to victory in the polls.

ANSHU BHARTI, BEGUSARAI (BIHAR)

Value sacrifice of soldiers

Refer to the news report 'All ex-Agniveers to get jobs: Shah slams Cong for spreading lies'; true soldiers sacrifice the best years of their youth to train and defend the country. However, the lack of pro rata pension as per the One Rank One Pension for Short Service Commission Officers and the promise of jobs for all ex-Agniveers are nothing more than a superficial arrangement. It reflects the failure of the policymakers to grasp the true spirit of a soldier's dhama — once a soldier, always a soldier. It is important to not divide the military into two groups, as it can impinge on our troops' sense of unity and camaraderie.

LT COL GURPARKASH SINGH VIRK (RETD), BY MAIL

Scrap Agnipath Scheme

Apropos of the front-page news report 'All ex-Agniveers to get jobs: Shah slams Congress for spreading lies', the Home Minister's statement should be taken with a pinch of salt. The Agnipath recruitment scheme has been mired in controversy since the very beginning. There were hopes that the scheme would be amended to extend the period of service. But there has been no progress so far. The job prospects of ex-Agniveers remain bleak. The Centre must prioritise the scrapping of the Agnipath Scheme and the fulfilment of the farmers' demands. After all, these are two of the many issues that will weigh heavily on the minds of voters in the upcoming Assembly elections.

PREM SINGH DAHIYA, ROHTAK

Ensure safety of health workers

The West Bengal Assembly recently passed an anti-rape Bill. But there is no point in bringing in new laws to tackle crimes if they are not enforced strictly. There is widespread speculation about the authorities' attempt to shield the perpetrator in the Kolkata rape-murder case. It is shocking that there was a bid to cover up the matter. And worse yet, protesters managed to storm the college campus, sparking concerns about the destruction of evidence. Besides, the government must take steps to ensure the safety of doctors so that they can discharge their duties without fear of violence.

KARNAIL SINGH, KHARAR

Erosion of integrity plagues state police forces



GURBACHAN JAGAT
FORMER GOVERNOR,
MANIPUR, AND EX-DGP, J&K

A couple of weeks ago, the Supreme Court took suo motu cognisance of the Kolkata rape-murder case and transferred its investigation to the CBI. It was rape and murder most foul that shocked the nation to its core. Spontaneous anger and anguish found expression in violent and non-violent agitations, especially in the community of doctors who struck work throughout the country. The quick results expected from the CBI have not come. Following this intervention, many heinous crimes like rapes and murders have taken place in the country. But they have not received the same attention of the courts or social groups.

The apex court's intervention in earlier cases has failed to prevent rapes and other crimes. And this intervention is not likely to stop such crimes in future either. The transfer of this case to the CBI, although fully justified, set my mind on a different train of thought — why have the Supreme Court and the high courts lost faith in the professionalism and integrity of the state police forces? Why have the people lost faith in the state police and

police station or, for that matter, the state governments and the lower judiciary? Did it happen overnight or has it come as a gradual process that has snowballed because of the politician becoming all-powerful with the help of criminal elements inside and outside the police and the government?

Looking back, at first, only very important cases of corruption were transferred to the CBI by the courts or the state and Central governments. Officers in the state used to take offence at such transfer of cases because they thought it cast a poor reflection on them. The CBI also got good results because it was not overstretched as it had started out as a specialised agency to tackle high-level corruption. Because of continued strengthening of the political arm and its accompanying moral decline and loss of integrity, people started approaching the courts directly for the transfer of cases. The Central and state governments also took recourse to this remedy to achieve their desired results because the overall decline in the body politic has adversely affected the CBI as well.

Officers were specially brought in so that a more pliable structure could be created. The CBI also expanded and opened offices in most of the states. However, this only whetted the appetite of the Central Government, and a new agency was born — the National Investigation Agency (NIA); its purpose was also to investigate, but with greater stress on terror



UNDER A CLOUD: The transfer of the Kolkata rape-murder case to the CBI begs the question — why have the Supreme Court and high courts lost faith in the professionalism of the state police forces? **PI**

activities with inter-state ramifications. Here also, it was the discretion of the Centre to assign cases. There have been frequent statements from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) that NIA offices would be opened in all states.

We already have the Narcotics Control Bureau and a freshly empowered Enforcement Directorate armed with extensive countrywide powers, as also the Intelligence Bureau and R&AW (Research and Analysis Wing). We also have the paramilitary forces (PMFs), which have a national remit. The PMFs are there to tackle law and order situations that are considered to be beyond the state police forces. The state can also ask for these forces

The orders of the higher judiciary regarding police reforms have been lost in the maze of bureaucratic juggling.

from the MHA or the ministry can directly inject them into the state with nominal approval of the state government. The CRPF, CISE, BSF, SSB, ITBP, etc, have been in some states for decades without a break. They work under the command of the state police. But otherwise, they are independent in their day-to-day functions. What about the state governments and the fact that law and order is a state subject under the Constitution? The police station and the district SP are the cornerstones of the edifice of the police department.

Again, because of extra-departmental intervention, both have been rendered as adjuncts of the ruling party. This has come at the cost of the professionalism of the

state police and led to its decline, especially at the cutting edge, that is, the police station and the district SP. These remain points where the police and public interact. But the interactions leave a lot to be desired. This is not an interaction in which the citizen has confidence that he will get justice. Rather, he goes as a client or a supplicant.

A well-manned and well-led police station has the best informants. And it is information, accompanied by good operations, that leads to success. We have seen even in insurgencies in J&K, Punjab and the Northeast and Maoist movements in central India, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh that operational intelligence is the best when it comes from the police station. This is why all operational groups, including the Army, have the local police station as a significant component. In both normal and complex crimes and insurgencies, success has been achieved when the fulcrum of police work, that is, the police station, is fully involved. If this is correct, why weaken it? The reason is that the powers that be want a pliant, docile force loyal to them and not to the law of the land. The Centre, by creating a plethora of investigation agencies and a policy of pick-and-choose about which cases they want to investigate, has weakened the state probe agencies. The state governments have also done great damage by interfering in the internal administration of the police department and posting

undesirable elements to top positions. The police stations have virtually been overrun by these forces. This is not to say that the growing needs of a modern India, consisting of a far higher population than what existed at the time of Independence, demand better and more professional and specialised forces, for instance, in case of cybercrimes. But the key is professional agencies where political oversight is kept minimal and high standards of Centre-state coordination are established.

In all things connected to police reforms or investigation of crime or maintenance of law and order, one common obstructive element runs through them — the political establishment. Unless and until political will is found to resolve this and to put an end to interference in the internal administration of the working of the police, things will only deteriorate. Even the orders of the higher judiciary regarding police reforms have been lost in the maze of bureaucratic juggling. In our system of government, the ultimate power is with the elected political party. That is not to say that this power is unfettered because the Constitution and various laws of the land lay down specific guidelines for the purpose of governance. Above all, the ruling parties are elected by the people, who want peace and a just administration. Will the people have to take to the streets for reforms and justice? Hope the elected governments will understand the message the street is sending.

Two assassination bids, a different Trump each time



DIPANKAR GUPTA
SOCIOLOGIST

THE two assassination bids on Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump are now hot campaign news in the US. When his ear was nicked in the first attempt on July 13, he defiantly pumped his fists in the air and left the stage unfazed. At that time, a non-threatening Joe Biden was his opponent, so Trump didn't care much to accuse or implicate him when this happened.

When Trump addressed a rally after that narrow escape, he was gracious all over. He thanked people for their support and said he would recount that event just once and never again, for it was too painful. He even praised his security detail, but nowhere did he accuse Biden, directly or indirectly, for what happened.

Trump also said at the time that he felt safe as "I

had God on my side". He could have added that Biden, too, made him feel safe. All that seems like long ago, especially after Trump's loss to Kamala Harris in the debate. This still rankles, for Trump also took a shot at ABC News for being partial to Kamala, the 'Marxist'.

That was then and this is now. When the second attempt took place, though no bullet was fired, Trump reacted differently. Short of putting on war paint, his demeanour was aggressive all the way. He blasted Kamala and the 'radical lefts' by her side and said that on their account "bullets are flying and it will get worse." Very ominous, indeed!

It is clear that Trump is missing Biden, who was like a tethered bait bleating to be killed. Instead, he now has a feisty and very credible challenger before him. Kamala is no Biden and could plausibly steal the presidency from him. Predictably, Trump did not take kindly to this and scattershot every barb he could summon at Kamala.

Biden, though, gets a free pass. Trump actually praised him for the concern he showed when news of the second failed assassination



GROUND REALITY: With Biden out of the race, Trump's campaign has become more difficult. **REUTERS**

became known. "Biden was very nice," Trump said, "he called up to make sure I was okay... couldn't have been nicer." Without Biden in the race, Trump's campaign has become more difficult.

First Elon Musk and then JD Vance, the Republican vice-presidential nominee, went for overkill and damaged Trump's chances to leverage the aborted assassination. They loudly wondered why Kamala and Biden were so far unharmed and not in the crosshairs of somebody's rifle. This kind of veiled

The real winner in the wake of the second go at Trump's life is the Secret Service. It's like Christmas come early for them.

insinuation upset many.

The slight bump in Trump's ratings after the second assassination bid soon levelled out because of Vance and Musk. Worse, encouraged by Trump and his allies, following the second foiled attempt on his life, right-wing militias, led by a group called the Proud Boys, started patrolling the streets of Springfield, Ohio, and threatening migrants.

So far, there have been about 30 bomb threats there, creating a pall of imminent violence. Even though Ohio Governor

Mike DeWine, a Republican like Trump, has said there is no evidence of Haitian migrants eating pet dogs and cats, 80 per cent of Trump's supporters believe they do, because he said so in his debate against Kamala.

Many of those who call themselves the Proud Boys were also involved in the Capitol Hill insurrection nearly four years ago. They were the hammer heads of the wrecking crew that went berserk that day. Soon after, for the record, Trump pardoned one Roger Stone, a Proud Boys mentor, who was convicted for stoking the mob on Capitol Hill.

Trump's ability to command and control his crowd is primarily because he speaks a language that tugs at sentiments bereft of deliberation. He spouts a mother's milk ideology that harks back to fixed stereotypes that seem to comprehensively explain away complexities.

His credibility with his followers is of cultish proportions. The more he alleges that Kamala's left rhetoric kindled violence, the more he points at migrants eating pets or Democrats killing babies, the stronger his base gets. Inversely, such statements also firm up the oppos-

ing side for they find Trump too bold and brazen.

This is why in the coming elections, there will be no waverers. Trump has made sure of that; you either love him or hate him, nothing in between. So, whether the election is held today or in November, the outcome will be the same. Of course, neither side can let go, because you need energetic supporters to pull the lethargic ones to come out and vote.

The real winner in the wake of the second go at Trump's life is the Secret Service. It's like Christmas come early for them. Biden from the White House, Kamala and Trump in between stump speeches, are all asking for more money and resources for this establishment. For the bosses of the Secret Service, it's a dream come true.

There is, however, a wrinkle which Trump's current aggressive stance gives us a foretaste of. He has also said that should he lose, there may even be a 'blood-bath'. In all likelihood, this is protein shake talk for cosmetic muscle bulk and nothing really dramatic will happen. On the other hand, the race is so even, Trump may well win.

In which case, will gangs like the Proud Boys be out of work?

QUICK CROSSWORD

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8

9

10

11

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13

14

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16

17

18

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23

ACROSS

1 Unwavering (9)

8 For this reason (5)

9 Tearfully sentimental (7)

10 Meeting of spiritualists (6)

11 Detective (6)

12 An incendiary (8)

15 Evergreen shrub related to tea (8)

18 Captured (6)

20 Over a wide area (6)

21 In the absence of (7)

22 Cunning behaviour (5)

23 Reduce in status (9)

DOWN

2 Straggle (5)

3 Zeal (6)

4 True to fact (8)

5 Steal (6)

6 At tedious length (2,3,2)

7 One's utmost (5,4)

11 Notable transformation (3,6)

13 Immediate impression (8)

14 Involve in conflict (7)

16 Rich (6)

17 Originator (6)

19 Harass persistently (5)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Surplus, 4 Fetch, 7 Lame, 8 Ambrosia, 10 Redcurrant, 12 Nuance, 13 Galaxy, 15 Out on a limb, 18 Exorcism, 19 Miss, 20 Terse, 21 Portray.

Down: 1 Solar, 2 Remedial, 3 Sombre, 4 Far and away, 5 Tosh, 6 Healthy, 9 Dutch uncle, 11 Familiar, 12 Neglect, 14 Toss-up, 16 Bossy, 17 Dour.

SU DO KU

7 6 4 3

8 2

1 2 3 8 4

3 4

2 5 6

6 1 2 5 7

3 1 8 4

MEDIUM

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

8 6 2 4 9 5 1 3 7

4 1 7 8 3 6 5 9 2

5 3 9 2 1 7 6 8 4

7 5 8 6 2 1 3 4 9

9 2 6 5 4 3 7 1 8

1 4 3 7 8 9 2 6 5

6 9 4 1 5 2 8 7 3

2 8 1 3 7 4 9 5 6

3 7 5 9 6 8 4 2 1

CALENDAR

SEPTEMBER 19, 2024, THURSDAY

■ Shaka Samvat 1946

■ Bhadrapad Shaka 28

■ Aashwin Parvishte 4

■ Hijari 1446

■ Krishna Paksha Tithi 2, up to 12.40 am

■ Vridhdha Yoga up to 7.19 pm

■ Uttarabhadrapad Nakshatra up to 8.04 am

■ Revti Nakshatra up to 5.15 am

■ Moon enter Aries sign 5.15 am

■ Panchak ended 5.15 am

■ Gandmoola start 8.04 am

FORECAST

SUNSET: THURSDAY 18:22 HRS

SUNRISE: FRIDAY 06:09 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	32	25
New Delhi	33	23
Amritsar	35	25
Bathinda	35	26
Jalandhar	35	24
Ludhiana	35	25
Bhivani	31	25
Hisar	32	23
Sirsa	36	27
Dharamsala	29	17
Manali	26	14
Shimla	23	14
Srinagar	28	12
Jammu	32	23
Kargil	26	10
Leh	20	06
Dehradun	32	22
Mussoorie	22	15

TEMPERATURE IN °C

The next gen chief minister

By naming Atishi as Delhi’s new CM, Kejriwal seeks to appeal to women voters and refresh the party’s leadership

In a surprising but strategic political manoeuvre, Atishi, the dynamic and well-regarded education reformist, has taken over as the youngest Chief Minister of Delhi. This shift marks a significant moment not only in Delhi's political history but also in the larger context of Indian politics. Arvind Kejriwal’s decision to pass the baton to Atishi is being viewed as a calculated move, one that signals both a generational shift and a fresh approach to governance. Kejriwal’s choice of Atishi is rooted in multiple factors, each with its own political and administrative logic. Atishi has been one of the brightest stars in the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) since its inception, known for her innovative ideas and hands-on approach to public administration, especially in the education sector. Her work as the education minister has drawn national attention, with Delhi's government schools undergoing a transformative makeover under her leadership. Kejriwal's decision to elevate her comes at a time when AAP is facing multiple challenges. From managing Delhi's growing urban infrastructure needs to balancing the delicate relationship with the central government, the city requires fresh energy and innovative solutions. Atishi, with her administrative experience and public image as a reformer, presents a candidate who is capable of steering Delhi through these complex issues. Moreover, Kejriwal's move signals his willingness to let the younger generation of AAP leaders take charge. By elevating Atishi, he is not just preparing for Delhi's immediate future, but also laying the groundwork for the party's long-term vision, positioning AAP as a progressive and youth-centric force in Indian politics.



Atishi's rise to the position of Chief Minister brings with it a new wave of expectations. Her track record suggests that education and public welfare will remain key priorities. Delhi's residents can expect an expansion of the initiatives that have already borne fruit, such as the Mohalla Clinics, water and electricity schemes and the focus on improving healthcare and education. One of the most significant aspects of Atishi's leadership could be her ability to bring a new perspective to governance—one that is less confrontational and more collaborative. Atishi's rise to the highest political office in Delhi is a momentous event. But make no mistake, the real power still remains with Arvind Kejriwal. He is the one who would be making all the key decisions. But Atishi's rise in the party is for real. It does not matter that she would be the chief minister for only few months as Delhi elections are round the corner and her tenure would be a talking point with women voters. Besides, for Delhi, it signals a continuation of the reforms initiated over the past decade, with the added promise of new energy and ideas that could redefine the city's future. It would indeed be a test of Atishi's leadership quality as she will be under constant scrutiny, with both her supporters and detractors closely watching her every move. Her ability to navigate these pressures will be crucial in determining the success of this bold experiment by Kejriwal.

PICTALK



People perform 'pind daan' rituals at the bank of Falgu river on the first day of the Pitra Paksha, in Gaya

Ozone: The earth’s protective shield but also a threat

Ozone is a paradoxical element — it shields life from harmful UV radiation in atmosphere but is also a big pollutant on the ground

People often think of two different things when they hear the word "ozone": on the one hand, an essential shield in the atmosphere that protects life on Earth from the Sun's dangerous ultraviolet radiation; on the other, a pollutant that causes health problems and damage to the environment. Ozone is indeed a double-edged sword because its effect on human life depends on where it is and how much of it there is. The "good" ozone in the upper atmosphere is significant, but the "bad" ozone at ground level is very bad for people and the world. This dual nature needs immediate care, new ideas, and cooperation worldwide so that people can continue to live. Ozone creates the well-known ozone layer high in the stratosphere, between 10 and 30 miles (16-48 km) above the surface of the Earth. This protective layer absorbs the bulk of the Sun's harmful ultraviolet (UV) radiation UV-C and UV-B. Ecosystems would almost certainly be unable to survive as they do now without this natural shield, which exposes life on Earth to haz-



ardous radiation levels. Although life depends on the ozone layer in the stratosphere, ground-level ozone, found in the troposphere, is a hazardous contaminant. This ozone, created by sunlight-induced chemical interactions between nitrogen oxides (NOx) and volatile organic compounds (VOCs), is mainly caused by human activity, including certain chemicals, industrial processes, and automobile emissions. This ozone will affect crop productivity and ecosystem dynamics. In the mid-20th century, scientists discovered that chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) were causing the systematic depletion of the ozone layer. In response to the pressing need, a global accord, the Montreal Protocol, was

adopted in 1987 to gradually eliminate the manufacturing of chemicals that cause the depletion of the ozone layer. The main objective of this accord was to eliminate progressively chemicals that cause erosion of the ozone layer, notably chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), which are extensively used in refrigeration, aerosols, and other industrial uses. India is also a signatory to this accord. Indian industries, especially those in the refrigeration, air-conditioning, and foam production sectors, were compelled to transition to ozone-friendly alternatives. The phasing out of CFCs initially led to the adoption of hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), but attention soon shifted toward more environmentally friendly solutions, such as natural refrigerants, hydrofluoroolefins (HFOs), with lower global warming potential. Since the implementation of the Montreal Protocol, global emissions of ozone-depleting substances (ODS) have dramatically decreased. The ozone layer has shown signs of recovery, particularly over Antarctica, where the famous

"ozone hole" is gradually closing. This recovery is essential for shielding the planet from harmful UV radiation. In addition, the phase-out of CFCs and other ODS has had a measurable impact on global temperature regulation. This is significant when considering the urgency of limiting temperature rise to avoid catastrophic climate impacts. The Protocol has become a symbol of what international cooperation can achieve if people unite and work together to protect the environment. The illegal production of CFCs and incomplete phase-outs in some regions could slow progress. While ozone protects life and poses risks, its dual nature demands vigilant global action. Striking the right balance between preserving the protective ozone layer and mitigating harmful ground-level ozone is essential for humanity's and the planet's health. We can ensure a safe future only through international cooperation and innovative solutions.

(The writer is an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies; views are personal)



BIJU DHARMAPALAN

ozone hole" is gradually closing. This recovery is essential for shielding the planet from harmful UV radiation. In addition, the phase-out of CFCs and other ODS has had a measurable impact on global temperature regulation. This is significant when considering the urgency of limiting temperature rise to avoid catastrophic climate impacts. The Protocol has become a symbol of what international cooperation can achieve if people unite and work together to protect the environment. The illegal production of CFCs and incomplete phase-outs in some regions could slow progress. While ozone protects life and poses risks, its dual nature demands vigilant global action. Striking the right balance between preserving the protective ozone layer and mitigating harmful ground-level ozone is essential for humanity's and the planet's health. We can ensure a safe future only through international cooperation and innovative solutions.

(The writer is an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies; views are personal)

Showdown over Rahul’s remarks in the US

Rahul Gandhi’s recent trip to the US has reignited the debate over whether Indian leaders should criticise their government while abroad



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's recent he United States has provoked a war of words between the ruling BJP and the main opposition Congress in India. Should the Indian leaders refrain from bad-mouthing the ruling BJP while abroad? Is there a red line, and has Rahul crossed it while he was in the US? The BJP claims yes, and the Congress says no. Gandhi has taken potshots at the Indian government and PM Modi. Congress claims that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also bad-mouthed the Congress not once but continuously since he took over in 2014 and visited over 80 countries. The Congress cites many examples. Also, the BJP has misrepresented Rahul's statements. Rahul aims to engage the Diaspora through programs with the Diaspora, students, officials, and lawmakers in the US, demonstrating the strategic nature of his approach. Why does he want to woo the Diaspora? Modi also has never missed an opportunity to address the Diaspora in whichever country he visits. Rahul, too, wants to connect with the Indian American community. The influence of the Indian American community has increased. A decade ago, there was one Indian-American in the House of Representatives; now, there are five and one senator. The US has

an Indian-origin Presidential nominee Vice President Kamala Harris, and a vice-presidential candidate, JD Vance, who has an Indian wife. Education, affluence and awareness of the influence in the past two decades are behind the rise of Indian Americans, whose population is one per cent, and their representation in US Congress is now one per cent. Rahul commented on the RSS, India's democracy, Modi's China policy, and religious freedom in India, among other things. On the RSS, Gandhi said that the BJP's parent organisation believes India is "one idea", but the Congress considers it a "diversity of ideas. This criticism of the RSS, a critical ideological force behind the BJP, upset the BJP. In India, the BJP slammed Rahul's adverse comments and meeting with anti-India US Congresswoman Ilhan Omar. The BJP claims that it can be used for anti-India propaganda. Gandhi counters that she was part of the lawmaker's delegation, and how he could have declined to meet with the delegation. Rahul noted that Indian democracy has struggled for the past ten years but is improving. He also observed that 90% of India's population, including OBCs, Dalits, and Adivasis, are



IN INDIA, THE BJP SLAMMED RAHUL'S ADVERSE COMMENTS AND MEETING WITH ANTI-INDIA US CONGRESS WOMAN ILHAN OMAR. THE BJP CLAIMS THAT IT CAN BE USED FOR ANTI-INDIA PROPAGANDA

not able to take an active part in the democratic process. This has upset the BJP. While Rahul agreed with Modi's policies on Pakistan and Bangladesh, he felt Modi's China policy was flawed. Rahul pointed out, "We've got Chinese troops occupying land the size of Delhi in Ladakh. I think that's a disaster." The BJP fielded top leaders to refute Rahul's allegations, with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh leading the response. He rubbished Rahul's claim on China policy. He observed it was "extremely shameful" that the LOP is hurting the dignity of India by saying "misleading, baseless and factless things." Another controversial subject was the caste census. Rahul Gandhi supported the caste census and claimed that BJP was trying to end the reservation. Union Minister Amit Shah quickly responded that they would not allow anyone to abolish reservations or undermine the nation's security. Countering his remarks about the status of Sikhs in India, Senior Minister Hardeep Puri said, "I am a proud Sikh. I have been wearing a turban for over six decades and a kada for even longer..." The BJP takes Rahul's statements seriously, given that he is the LOP. His increased stature after leading the Bharat

Jodo' yatra and the Leader of the Opposition cannot be wished away. In the 2024 elections, much to the dismay of the BJP, Congress doubled its number. Second, after the 2024 polls, the opposition coalition INDIA was strengthened. The BJP had to form the government with the help of allies. Third, Rahul visited the US before Modi's scheduled visit on September 22. His trip was well received, which did not please the BJP. But Modi would have a grand welcome at the official and the community levels. At the end of his visit, Rahul clarified, "The fight for democracy in India is an Indian fight. It has nothing to do with anybody else. It's our problem. And we'll take care of it. We will make sure that democracy is secure." This clarification prevented the idea that he was inviting a foreign power to resolve Indian problems. There is some merit in the BJP saying dirty linen should not be wasted abroad. On an earlier occasion, foreign minister S. Jaishankar said, "I don't think taking national politics out of the country is in the national interest." But this is good for both sides, and both should follow it. (The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)



KALYANI SHANKAR

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MYANMAR: CHALLENGES FOR INDIA

Madam — Apropos of the well analysed article 'Myanmar Junta on the Blackfoot' (18th Sept), India faces multiple challenges in the existential crisis of the military junta in Myanmar for more than a decade. The worst crisis of refugee influx, the consequential fallout, unrest and instability in North Eastern states particularly Manipur and security threats from China along its North-eastern borders need top priority from security angle as diplomatic channels with the National League for Democracy or the Junta have not served our country's strategic interests. UNO does not appear and is no more an International Organisation capable of dealing with the crises in the countries having multiple stake holders. All its permanent members in Security Council have substantial stakes in all the wars and coups presently. The refugees crisis emanated from Myanmar is the most disturbing and destabilising factor for India. India is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. India has chosen not to sign the refugee conventions and protocol, and has historically cited national security interests and challenges to its sovereignty as key concerns. India, along with the governments of other South Asian countries, asserts that migration is a matter of bilateral and not multilateral relations, which should not be governed by international agreements. Sometimes it appears that refugee influx in India is a deliberate outcome of military coup in neighbouring countries. Peace and political stability in Myanmar appears a distant possibility and multiple stake holders namely China, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Myanmar itself know the vulnerability of Indian borders and some strategic areas sandwiched between some of these countries. Therefore, for the time being till political normalcy is restored in Myanmar, military options should be prioritised over diplomatic adventures.

Vinod Johri | Delhi

Atishi is the new Delhi CM



The selection of Atishi Marlena Singh as Delhi's new chief minister does not come as a surprise. Infact, any name as chief minister would not have turned heads because it is amply evident that the man holding all the aces, is still Arvind Kejriwal. Make no mistake, Kejriwal may have just returned from prison, but the clever former bureaucrat intends to turn the politically tricky situation into a massive support of strength. Since the Delhi assembly elections

are only a few months away, Kejriwal aims to divert the excise policy corruption issue by pitch-forking a party leader, with no real mass base, as the executive head of the state. However, Atishi's comparatively clean image, administrative experience and fighting spirit should come in handy for the AAP supremo who is sure to go the whole hog to retain power for the party in Delhi. That way, Kejriwal can intensely focus on the election campaign with little to answer on a "corrupt chief minister" holding on to his chair. Of course, the opposition will vociferously target the former chief minister who is perhaps the principal vote-getter for his party besides a handful of leaders like Manish Sisodia. The chief minister's seat will beckon Kejriwal if the party wins, and Atishi shall be relegated to the list of those chief ministers who held the post of chief minister for a few months.

Ganpathi Bhat | Akola

ONE HUNDRED DAYS OF MODI GOVT

Madam — For a government in power for the past 10 years now talking about its feats in 100 days is incorrect. It gives room for posing questions like why such actions were not done in the last 10 years and how just allocation of funds can be claimed as a feat and so on. If any assessment be made on the performance of the present government it should be for the period in power since 2014. Because nothing could be achieved in a short period of time like 100 days. In the case of the present government the claim on employment is not correct. Because it is only a matter of allocation of funds and announcement of a project. The working and success of the project needs to be assessed only after its completion. It is also to be noted that it is only a project to improve the skill and not a project to provide employment. Farmers' basic woes are not addressed and they continue to feel let down and the consumers also feel the same with the growing food inflation. Healthcare continues to be a commodity.

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

TRAGEDIES AT GANESH VISARJAN

Madam — Ganesh immersion in the country turns tragic in several parts of India. Similar incidents have occurred throughout the country. While immersing an idol of Lord Ganesha, devotees got swept away by the river's powerful currents. Divers recovered his body afterwards but it was a sad end to a religious celebration. In another incident in Gujarat's Gandhinagar, eight people drowned while taking a dip in the Meshwo River. It is time for the people to exercise caution during religious events like Ganesh Visarjan. This tragic series of events serves as a reminder of the importance of safety precautions during religious ceremonies. It is crucial to take necessary measures to avoid such incidents in the future. Let us not take undue risks in the name of God and pay heavy price for that. Besides, there must be adequate security arrangements by the government to avoid such accidents

Nikhil CK Maniam | Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

EMBRACING DIVINE SHELTER


God can help us succeed in life but we must seek his shelter by adhering to dharma



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

What a wonderful prospect! Yes, it is possible, if we take shelter of God and remain in it. Because God is everything. (Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad-Geeta 7.19) For that, we have to be engaged in activities according to the instructions of God. And we will benefit in many ways. How else can one remain motivated to pursue the spiritual path? In this process, God is pleased but does not benefit personally in any way, because God is 'purna' (complete in all respects). I will cite three examples and a few reasons to substantiate this. But I will begin with some of the benefits of taking shelter from God and remaining there. God's instructions promote 'dharma' (highest moral and religious principles). Because dharma is the bedrock upon which the Creation is based. God even incarnates when there is a decline in dharma. (4.7) Those, who follow dharma in their behavior are rewarded by God's Divine Authority. This is done according to the 'Karmaphala Principle', which is: "What we sow we reap." If one pleases God by spiritual practices additionally, God gets personally involved in the life of His devotee. His very first act is to begin guiding. I am experiencing it. It is simple. I face a challenge /problem. I pray for guidance and help. God gives me intuitions. As the connection with God becomes stronger, God begins helping too. This is a quantum jump because God is omnipotent. Problems get solved and life can go on smoothly. (18.58) Sometimes, we face non-cooperation from others; God even changes the hearts of people. Further progress on the spiritual path helps us to qualify for becoming 'nimitta' (instruments) of God, as Arjuna did in the Mahabharata. (11.33) God, as Karta, begins to micromanage the lives of His dear devotees. Reformation begins; because we must help ourselves. And credit for success must also come to us; God does not need it. Only rarely did God intervene directly, as Lord Krishna did to protect Draupadi from getting humiliated; no one had come forward. Similarly, Lord Krishna had to protect His devotee and friend (4.3) Arjuna after he was about to enter the fire for not being able to kill Jayadratha before sunset, as vowed him. Lord Krishna brought the sun back and Arjuna was able to kill Jayadratha before the sunset. In these two instances, though the Lord got credit, He did not gain anything, Draupadi and Arjuna gained. God has a plan for whoever takes His shelter. How did the Lord help Goswami Tulsidas? His wife opened his eyes when she told him, "You will attain success in life if you become devoted to Shri Rama instead of to me." Because Tulsidasji was at the threshold of becoming great by writing epics like Ramacharitmanasa. The conclusion is: get linked with God urgently. There is so much to gain from God, who has plenty to give. Isn't God the owner of everything? God is self-sufficient. He creates without any help from anyone. God never gets attached to anyone. If He did, God would become dependent on others to do what He must to keep the Creation going. I am gaining everything desirable. I could not have imagined what God can and does for me. The quality of my life is steadily improving. Please get started on the spiritual journey; you will never look back. *(The writer is a spiritual guide; views expressed are personal)*

Reclaim water bodies to ward off water crisis



SRIRAJ KOTA

India's lakes and wetlands, once lifeline for its cities, are vanishing at an alarming rate, driven by rampant corruption and unchecked construction




“

TODAY BENGALURU IS A PALE VERSION OF ITS ONCE ILLUSTRIOUS PAST. IN 1960 BENGALURU HAD 262 LAKES BUT TODAY ONLY 10 OF THEM HOLD WATER

Urban lakes and wetlands are an integral part of our ecosystem. They perform critical environmental, social, and economic functions as they are a source of drinking water, recharge groundwater and support biodiversity besides providing livelihoods. But the life of these indispensable water bodies is ebbing under the relentless onslaught of population, corrupt administrations, and construction mafia. A study by Wetlands International has shown that two out of every five wetlands in India have been lost in the last 30 years, and of the remaining water bodies 40% are unable to support aquatic life due to loss of water quality. But this plunder of water bodies of India did not happen overnight but over some time. Take the case of Bengaluru for instance. In the late 18th century, a British expedition tasked by Governor General Cornwallis to find an alternative route between Madras and Srirangapatna stumbled upon Bengaluru which was full of lakes and water bodies. The captain heading the expedition thereafter referred to it as the Land of Thousand Lakes in his reports. However, today Bengaluru is a pale version of its once illustrious past. In 1960 Bengaluru had 262 lakes but today only 10 of them hold water. The city saw a shocking decline in its water bodies as exploitation and population grew in equal measure. Lakes and water bodies are disappearing at an alarming pace at the city level and state level as well. According to the Union Jal Shakti Ministry report, Karnataka lost an astounding 13,000 water bodies in just one year between 2021 and 2022. This is the case with every city in India. Ahmedabad for instance had 137 lakes in 2001 but as per recent reports, construction has been seen on 65 of them now. The national capital Delhi too is being robbed of its water bodies. According to a Delhi government report, nearly half (49.1%) of Delhi's official water bodies do not exist anymore – they have either gone “missing” or have been encroached upon. The entire nation more or less presents the same depressing scenario. But recently a state government sat up, took notice, and acted. The Telangana state government's Hyderabad Disaster Response and Asset Protection Agency (HYDRAA) initiative to reclaim encroached land of water bodies in Hyderabad and surrounding areas has made national headlines. The HYDRAA team created in July this year and headed by an IPS officer was given a clear-cut mandate by the state chief minister Revanth Reddy to free the city water bodies of illegal encroachments and construction. The Full Tank Level (FTL) was kept as the parameter by HYDRAA and any construction or encroachment within 30 meters of FTL was made subject to demolition. The agency has been given a free hand and made immune to political pressures with zero tolerance being practiced even if the encroachment belongs to prominent politicians or businesspeople of the city. Notably, even the chief minister's brother was served notice for demolition. This drive conducted diligently and without bowing to any pressure was able to remove 262 unauthorised encroachments built-in water bodies, government lands, urban canals and parks in 23 locations in the city have been removed and 111.72 acres of land have been reclaimed to date. The state government has issued further instructions making it compulsory to take HYDRAA NOC before commencing any construction near lakes. The actions of HYDRAA have instilled a sense of confidence among the environmentalists not only in Telangana but also across India and are being seen as a case study in governance especially about safeguarding environmental assets such as water bodies. But as is expected with any groundbreaking initiative, the step taken by the Telangana government too has off late been soundly criticised for being inhuman due to the demolishing of houses of the poor and those who were paying loans for the same. Given this adverse feedback, the state government has issued clarifications to the effect that occupied houses will not be demolished. The HYDRAA initiative is an example and a clarion call for the rest of the nation to wake up rescue and reclaim its water bodies. This is crucial in light of reports released by the United Nations and Niti Ayog which state that water demand will reach twice the available supply, and 40 per cent of India's population will not have access to clean drinking water by 2030. To prevent a grim and parched future, the central government in collaboration with state government and local environmental groups must establish a Wetland Task Force for every state. The state-specific task force must have a clear mandate to reclaim every water body in its jurisdiction by clearing out encroachments, demolishing illegal construction and preventing changes in land use. Apart from enforcement duty, the task force must also have an enabling role that is focused on replenishing and rejuvenating the wetlands and water bodies in its jurisdiction. For instance, the task force can encourage urban households and businesses to implement rainwater harvesting practices on their premises. The water harvested can be channelled towards improving the groundwater table and recharging the aquifers. Additionally, the government can, through the task force regulate the borewells in the urban areas. Indiscriminate and unregulated drilling for water in metropolitan areas has caused the drying up of the groundwater table. The task force team can save the city's water resources by ensuring that prior permissions are taken to drill borewells. Furthermore, the task force team can install water meters to ensure that water extraction is done in a measured and quantified manner. Currently, there have been many instances where local leaders, with political affiliations “adopt” lakes and water bodies in the name of preserving them and slowly encroach the property. After that, in connivance with builder mafia construction is done on the property which is then sold to unsuspecting citizens. The wetland task force can prevent this and play a pivotal role in ensuring that no individual or commercial company is entrusted with safeguarding the lakes and water bodies as this can result in manipulation. Water bodies are India's lifelines. Reclaiming the lost ones and preserving the remaining can alone ensure a water secure future for our nation. *(The writer is a policy analyst, views expressed are personal)*


India's untapped ocean energy: A blueprint for powering the future

India's 8,000 km coastline holds the potential to generate a staggering 9.2 lakh TWh of clean energy annually



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

Akshayapatra of energy. “The Exclusive Economic Zone lying within the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal has oceanic energy potential of 9.2 lakh TWh/annum. This is the first time in the history of India the oceanic energy potential has been assessed and an atlas of this kind has been prepared,” Dr T M Balakrishnan Nair, Group Director and lead scientist, INCOIS, told The Pioneer. A bouquet of offshore renewable, offshore solar, offshore wind, wave, tidal, ocean thermal energy conversion, and salinity gradient represent the hitherto untapped potential of renewables. India's Ocean Energy Atlas has been released following the International Renewable Energy Agency's finding that the G-20 countries collectively account for 81 per cent of total renewable energy and about 100 per cent of ocean energy. India's offshore wind energy remains untapped even as countries like Denmark, Britain and China have made giant strides in this sector. Dr Nair says there is wide scope to set up renewable energy power stations to tap salinity



economy sector by providing information to fishers about potential fishing zones and sharp weather forecasts. Dr Srinivasa Kumar and his team have developed a state-of-the-art tsunami warning system with which they alert countries along the rim of the Indian Ocean. Since its inception in 1999, INCOIS has been contributing to India's blue economy through its flagship programs like Potential Fishing Zones (PFZ), Ocean State Forecasts (OSF) and Tsunami Early Warning Services (TEW). INCOIS has also been the national and regional warehouse for oceanographic data spanning in-situ platforms, satellite sensors, and model-simulated products. Taking advantage of the availability of such long-term scientific datasets, INCOIS has taken up the challenge of estimating the ocean energy potential from the Indian EEZ and prepared an Atlas for the first time in the country. The satellite data collected through hi-tech sensors about the regions where there are good catches are disseminated to fishers and this has made the job of fishermen quite easy. All they have to do is rush to the areas identified as fishing zones by the INCOIS scientists. The Integrated Ocean Energy Atlas prepared by Team INCOIS is the first of its kind in the world. Ocean energy assumes significance as scientific reports are galore about the fluctuations in solar power generation capabilities because of climate change. G M Pillai, director general, of the World Institute of Sustainable Energy (WISE), Pune, says that as of this date, solar power output is not encouraging because of changes in rain patterns. “The Rajasthan deserts could have been the powerhouse of states like Rajasthan, Punjab, Gujarat but the solar power potential has come down and the deserts are becoming evergreen garden,” said Pillai. The thorium-based nuclear reactor is yet to take off and the picture from nuclear power reactors is dismal. There was a time when former directors of the Indira Gandhi Center for Atomic Research (IGCAR) at Kalpakkam had claimed that India was the world leader in Fast Breeder Reactor technology, it all ended up as chest beating. The only hope is integrated ocean energy. India has a vast coastline of nearly 8000 km and this could offer a permanent solution to our energy needs. *(The writer is a special correspondent with the Pioneer; views expressed are personal)*

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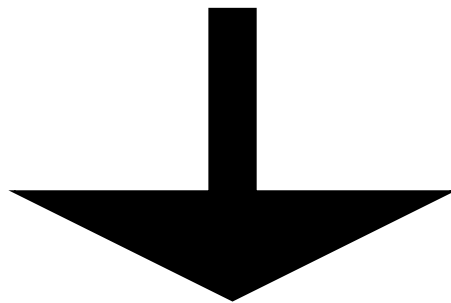
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